

Bloom

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.

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HAMLET

The origins of Shakespeare's most famous play are as shrouded as *Hamlet's* textual condition is confused. There is an earlier *Hamlet* that Shakespeare's drama revises and overgoes, but we do not have this trial work, nor do we know who composed it. Most scholars believe that its author was Thomas Kyd, who wrote the archetypal revenge play *The Spanish Tragedy*. I think, though, that Peter Alexander was correct in his surmise that Shakespeare himself wrote the *Ur-Hamlet*, no later than 1589, when he was first starting as a dramatist. Though scholarly opinion is mostly against Alexander on this, such a speculation suggests that *Hamlet*, which in its final form gave its audience a new Shakespeare, may have been gestating in Shakespeare for more than a decade.

The play is huge: uncut, it is nearly four thousand lines, and is rarely acted in its (more or less) complete form. T. S. Eliot's once-fashionable judgment that *Hamlet* is "certainly an artistic failure" (what literary work then is an artistic success?) seems to have been prompted by the disproportion between the prince and the play. *Hamlet* appears too immense a consciousness for *Hamlet*, a revenge tragedy does not afford the scope for the leading Western representation of an intellectual. But *Hamlet* is scarcely the revenge tragedy that it only pretends to be. It is theater of the world, like *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* or *Faust*, or *Ulysses*, or *In Search of Lost Time*. Shakespeare's previous tragedies only partly foreshadow it, and his later works, though they echo it, are very different from *Hamlet*, in spirit and

in tonality. No other single character in the plays, not even Falstaff or Cleopatra, matches Hamlet's infinite reverberations.

The phenomenon of Hamlet, the prince without the play, is unsurpassed in the West's imaginative literature. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Falstaff, and perhaps Mr. Pickwick approximate Hamlet's career as literary inventions who have become independent myths. Approximation can extend here to a few figures of ancient literature: Helen of Troy, Odysseus (Ulysses), Achilles among them. Hamlet remains apart, something transcendent about him places him more aptly with the biblical King David, or with even more exalted scriptural figures. Charisma, an aura of the preternatural, attends Hamlet, both within and beyond Shakespeare's tragedy. Rare in secular literature, the charismatic is particularly (and strangely) very infrequent in Shakespeare. Henry V is apparently meant to have charisma, but he vulgarizes it, even as Shakespeare's Julius Caesar did before him. Lear largely has lost it before we first encounter him, and Antony rapidly becomes a case study in its evanescence. So histrionic and narcissistic is Cleopatra that we cannot quite be persuaded by her charismatic apotheosis as she dies, and Prospero is too compromised by his hermetic magic to achieve any unequivocal charisma. Hamlet, first and last, vies with King David and the Jesus of Mark as a charismatic-of-charismatics. One could add the Joseph of the Yahwist or J Writer, and who else? There is Tolstoy's Hadji Murad, the surrogate of his creator's dreaming old age, and outrageously there is Sir John Falstaff, who offends only the virtuous, but these virtuous scholars send out so perpetual a chorus of disapproval that they have made the great wit's charisma appear dimmer than actually it is.

Hamlet's eminence never has been disputed, which raises again the hard query "Did Shakespeare know how much he had lavished upon the prince?" Many scholars have held that Falstaff got away from Shakespeare, which seems clear enough even if we cannot know whether Shakespeare had anticipated Falstaff's wild, instant popularity. *Henry IV, Part Two*, is just as much Falstaff's play as Part One is, yet Shakespeare must have known that the Fat Jack of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a mere impostor, and not Falstaff the charismatic genius. Can we envision Hamlet, even a mock

Hamlet, in another Shakespearean play? Where could we locate him; what context could sustain him? The great villains—Iago, Edmund, Macbeth—would be destroyed by Hamlet's brilliant mockery. No one in the late tragedies and romances could stand on stage with Hamlet: they can sustain skepticism, but not an alliance of skepticism and the charismatic. Hamlet would always be in the wrong play, but then he already is. Elsinore's rancid court is too small a mousetrap to catch Hamlet, even though he voluntarily returns to it, to be killed and to kill.

Yet largeness alone is not the full problem, *King Lear* is Shakespeare's widest psychic cosmos, but it is deliberately archaic, while Hamlet's is the least archaic role in all of Shakespeare. It is not just that Hamlet comes after Machiavelli and Montaigne; rather, Hamlet comes after Shakespeare, and no one yet has managed to be post-Shakespearean. I hardly intend to imply that Hamlet is Shakespeare, or even Shakespeare's surrogate. More than a few critics have rightly seen the parallel between Falstaff's relation to Hal, and Shakespeare's to the noble youth (probably the Earl of Southampton) in the Sonnets. Moralists don't want to acknowledge that Falstaff, more than Prospero, catches something crucial in Shakespeare's spirit, but if I had to guess at Shakespeare's self-representation, I would find it in Falstaff. Hamlet, though, is Shakespeare's ideal son, as Hal is Falstaffs. My assertion here is not my own; it belongs to James Joyce, who first identified Hamlet the Dane with Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, who died at the age of eleven in 1596, four to five years before the final version of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in which Hamnet Shakespeare's father played the role of the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

When we attend a performance of *Hamlet*, or read the play for ourselves, it does not take us long to discover that the prince transcends his play. Transcendence is a difficult notion for most of us, particularly when it refers to a wholly secular context, such as a Shakespearean drama. Something in and about Hamlet strikes us as demanding (and providing) evidence from some sphere beyond the scope of our senses. Hamlet's desires, his ideals or aspirations, are almost absurdly out of joint with the rancid atmosphere of Elsinore. "Shuffle," to Hamlet, is a verb for thrusting off "this mortal coil," where "coil" means "noise" or "tumult." "Shuffling," for

Claudius, is a verb for mortal trickery; "with a little shuffling," he tells Laertes, you can switch blades and destroy Hamlet. "There is no shuffling" there, Claudius yearningly says of a heaven in which he neither believes nor disbelieves. Claudius, the shuffler, is hardly Hamlet's "mighty opposite," as Hamlet calls him; the wretched usurper is hopelessly outclassed by his nephew. If Shakespeare (as I am convinced) was revising his own *Ur-Hamlet* of a decade or so before, it may be that he left his earlier Claudius virtually intact, even as his Hamlet underwent a metamorphosis beyond recognition. There is in Claudius's villainy nothing of the genius of Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth.

Shakespeare's Devil, Iago, father of Milton's Satan, is the author of the tragic farce *The Jealousy of Othello*, and *His Murder of his Wife Desdemona*. This play, by no means identical with Shakespeare's *Othello*, is only partly embedded in Shakespeare's tragedy, because Iago doesn't finish it. Frustrated by Emilia's balking of his last act, he murders her, and then refuses all interpretation: "From this time forth I never will speak word." Hamlet, an even more metaphysical dramatist than Iago, writes his own Act V, and we never are quite certain whether Shakespeare or Hamlet composes more of Shakespeare's and Hamlet's play. Whoever Shakespeare's God may have been, Hamlet's appears to be a writer of farces, and not of a comedy in the Christian sense. God, in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in Job, composes best in rhetorical questions. Hamlet is much given to rhetorical questions, but unlike God's, Hamlet's do not always seek to answer themselves. The Hebrew God, at least in the Yahwist's text, is primarily an ironist. Hamlet, certainly an ironist, does not crave an ironical God, but Shakespeare allows him no other.

Harry Levin, brooding on this, aptly described *Hamlet* as a play obsessed with the word "question" (used seventeen times), and with the questioning of "the belief in ghosts and the code of revenge." I would want to get at this obsession with questioning a little differently. Shakespeare's principal departure from the Hamlet of legend and of history is to alter, quite subtly, the grounds of action for the prince. In the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus and in the French tale by Belleforest, Prince Amleth from the start is in real danger from his murderous uncle, and cunningly

feigns idiocy and madness in order to preserve his life. Perhaps in the *Ur-Hamlet* Shakespeare had followed this paradigm, but little remains of it in our *Hamlet*. Claudius is all too content to have his nephew as heir; rotten as the state of Denmark is, Claudius has everything that ever he wanted, Gertrude and the throne. Had Hamlet remained passive, after the Ghost's visitation, then Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet himself would not have died violent deaths: Everything in the play depends upon Hamlet's response to the Ghost, a response that is as highly dialectical as everything else about Hamlet. The question of *Hamlet* always must be Hamlet himself, for Shakespeare created him to be as ambivalent and divided a consciousness as a coherent drama could sustain.

Shakespeare's first Hamlet must have been Marlovian, and would have been (as I've intimated already) an overreacher, a self-delighting counter-Machiavel, and a rhetorician whose metaphors persuaded others to action. The mature Hamlet is far more complex, outrageously so. With fascinated and (fascinating) cunning, Shakespeare did not follow his source by naming Hamlet's father Horwendil but gave father and son the same name, the name borne by Shakespeare's own (and only) son. Peter Alexander, with his customary shrewdness, notes in his *Hamlet, Father and Son* (1955) that the Ghost is a warrior fit for Icelandic saga, while the prince is a university intellectual, representative of a new age. Two Hamlets confront each other, with virtually nothing in common except their names. The Ghost expects Hamlet to be a version of himself, even as young Fortinbras is a reprint of old Fortinbras. Ironically, the two Hamlets meet as if the Edda were encountering Montaigne: the Archaic Age faces the High Renaissance, with consequences as odd as any we might expect.

The Ghost, as we come to see, is not Horwendil, but has more of the characteristics of the Amleth of Danish saga: tough, warlike, but as cunning in the attempted manipulation of his scholarly son as he was in fending off his enemies. Prince Hamlet, Renaissance wit and skeptic, reader of Montaigne and London playgoer, breaks both with the Belleforest Hamlet and the Hamlet of Shakespeare's original drama: Shakespeare, playing the Ghost's role in 1601, addresses what he might have hoped his own son

Question

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Hamnet, on the verge of manhood, to have been. The Ghost speaks of his uxorious passion for Gertrude, and we realize with a start that this refers back not to the father Horwendil but to Amleth, who in the old story is undone at last by his excessive love for his treacherous second wife. In so confounding the generations, Shakespeare gives us a hint of levels of complexity that may leave us only more baffled by the final *Hamlet*, but that also can guide us partway out of the labyrinth.

With more than Joycean wit, the Hamlet of 1588-89 becomes the father of the Hamlet of 1600-1601, and appears in the later play quite properly as the Ghost who demands an immediate revenge but receives instead the deferred blood atonement that consumes five acts and four thousand lines. As for the Ghost of 1588-89, let us call him Horwendil, and then observe that there is no room for him in 1600-1601. Horwendil the Ghost evidently was rather repetitious, and his cries of "Hamlet! Revenge!" evidently became a playgoer's joke. Hamlet the Ghost is no joke, he is Amleth the Danish Heracles, a spirit as wily as he is bloody-minded. It is Shakespeare's transcendent irony that this King Hamlet has fathered the most intelligent character in all of literature. It does not take supreme intellect and capacious consciousness to cut down Claudius, and Prince Hamlet is more aware than we are that he has been assigned a task wholly inappropriate for him. Had Hotspur or Douglas killed Henry IV, Hal would have been overqualified for the avenger's role, but he would have performed it at top speed. Henry V, compared with the Hamlet of 1601, is only a hypocrite and Machiavel!—though a superb wit, thanks to the teaching of Sir John Falstaff. Hamlet, very much his own Falstaff, has not been grafted onto a revenge tragedy. Instead, rather like Falstaff only more so, Hamlet takes up all the mental space that any play can hope to occupy. The two-thirds of the lines that Hamlet does not speak are all in effect written about him, and might as well have been written by him. "Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark" has become a proverbial joke for emptiness or insignificance. Falstaff, as I observed earlier, was Shakespeare's first great experiment in the question as to how meaning gets started. Hamlet is the perfected experiment, the demonstration that meaning gets started not by repetition nor by fortunate accident nor error, but by a new tran-

scendentalizing of the secular, an apotheosis that is also an annihilation of all the certainties of the cultural past.

About a dozen years later (from 1588-89 to 1600-1601), Shakespeare probably again acted the part of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. About all we know for sure of the first *Hamlet* is that it featured the Ghost of Hamlet's father. I suspect that Shakespeare cut the part severely in revision: on my guess, the Ghost was more important in the first play than the second because he got crowded out by the augmenting internalization of Hamlet. Not that it ever was the Ghost's play; Shakespeare was what we now call "a character actor," and perhaps was never wholehearted enough as a player to take on a protagonist's role. Why did he play the Ghost? Evidently, Shakespeare specialized in playing older men, including kings (though the only part we know for certain, besides the senior Hamlet's Ghost, is old Adam in *As You Like It*). Could there have been some personal investment in playing the Ghost? James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus thought so, in his brilliant fantasia on *Hamlet* in the Library scene of *Ulysses*, which Richard Ellmann insisted always remained Joyce's serious interpretation of the play. I think we need to start further back. How should we understand Shakespeare's naming of his own son after the Amleth of Belleforest, or rather of Hamlet the Green Man, as he had become in English folklore?

When Shakespeare was a boy, a young woman named Kate Hamlet or Hamnet drowned herself in the Avon River, near Stratford, supposedly because she was disappointed in love. What relation she might have to Ophelia is speculative, but any relation to Hamnet Shakespeare is only accidental, he hardly can have been named for her. Ostensibly, he was named for Shakespeare's friend, Hamnet or Hamlet Sadler, but any English Hamnet/Hamlet ultimately was named for the legendary Amleth, as the bookish young Shakespeare would have known. Amleth was proverbial for his trickery, for his famed idiocy, upon which his overwhelming triumph was based. Was the first *Hamlet* a tragedy at all? Did the prince die, or did that only come later, the price of his apotheosis as an intellectual consciousness? The Amleth of tradition, reported by Belleforest, marries the daughter of the king of Britain, and after that revenges his father upon his uncle.

He thus becomes a kind of British hero, and one can fantasize Shakespeare writing a first *Hamlet* with some connected hopes for his little son, then only three or four. When the mature *Hamlet* is written, Hamnet Shakespeare has been dead four years, and the ghost of the eleven-year-old certainly is not in the play. Joyce/Stephen, however, does not quite agree: for him Hamlet the Dane and Hamnet Shakespeare are twins, and the ghostly Shakespeare is therefore the father of his most notorious character.

Yet is the Ghost the author of the play? Shakespeare, with great care, even guile, gives us a father and a son totally unlike each other, in the elder Hamlet and the prince. Of King Hamlet we know that he was a formidable fighter and war leader, much in love (or lust) with his wife. Of the qualities that make the prince so remarkable, the warrior father seems to have possessed none whatsoever. How did Hamlet and Gertrude engender a son so intellectual that he cannot be contextualized, even by Shakespeare's play? Prince Hamlet actually has no more resemblance to his father than he has to his usurping uncle. Shakespeare gives Hamlet a pragmatic foster father in the king's jester, Yorick, because Hamlet is himself a nonstop joker, a step short of the most dangerous of jokers, Iago.

We do not know whether the mysterious movement from Act IV to Act V of *Hamlet* constituted Shakespeare's farewell to his own youth, but it certainly was a farewell to the Hamlet of his youth. The name Amleth derives from the Old Norse for an idiot, or for a tricky Fool who feigns idiocy. Nothing of Hamlet's "antic disposition" lingers after the graveyard scene, and even there the madness has evolved into an intense irony directed at the gross images of death. Why did Shakespeare compose the graveyard scene, since the evocation of Yorick scarcely advances the action of the play? The question has interest only if we apply it to a number of other scenes in this astonishing work, which at nearly four thousand lines is far too long for stage presentation. (One doubts that it was ever acted uncut in Shakespeare's London, though purported university performances at Oxford and at Cambridge may have been at full length.)

The possibility remains—though this is heresy to virtually all modern Shakespearians—that just this once Shakespeare wrote partly out of a purely private compulsion, knowing he would have to slash his text with

Quarto's 3,800 lines and First Folio's omission of 230 of those lines. That the First Folio contains an additional 80 lines not found in the Second Quarto may indicate that Shakespeare went on revising *Hamlet* after 1604–5, when the Second Quarto appeared. I take it that the Folio may have been Shakespeare's last acting version, though at 3,650 lines it would still have been remarkably long for the London stage. Our complete *Hamlet*, of 3,880 lines, has the virtue of reminding us that the play is not only "the Mona Lisa of literature" but also is Shakespeare's white elephant, and an anomaly in his canon.

I do suggest that Shakespeare *never* stopped rewriting it, from the early version, circa 1587–89, almost down to his retreat back to Stratford. Presumably the Second Quarto was printed directly from his manuscript, while the First Folio text was the final sense of the play that abode with his surviving fellow actors. Obsession certainly is suggested by this most personal and persistent of all Shakespeare's thirty-nine plays. Perhaps, master ironist as Kierkegaard called him, Shakespeare ironically enjoyed the peculiarity that only Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which some scholars believe to have influenced *Hamlet*, was as much a public success as *Hamlet* and the Falstaff plays. Except among scholars, *The Spanish Tragedy* is now dead; I have never seen a performance, rarely have heard of one, and doubt I could tolerate it, though I have gotten through stagings of *Titus Andronicus*. *Hamlet* has survived everything, even Peter Brook, and Falstaff's immortality transcends even Verdi's best opera. Can we surmise something of what Hamlet meant to Shakespeare?

It seems likely that no one ever will establish Shakespeare's religious sentiments, whether early in his life or late. Unlike his father, who died a Catholic, Shakespeare maintained his usual ambiguity in this dangerous area, and *Hamlet* is neither a Protestant nor a Catholic work. It seems to me indeed neither Christian nor non-Christian, since Hamlet's skepticism does not merely exceed its possible origin in Montaigne but passes into something very rich and strange in Act V, something for which we have no

the soldier's music and the rites of war, nor Horatio, who invokes flights of angels. Whose soldier was Hamlet, and why are ministering angels not inappropriate? The play ends with a highly original, quite secular point-of-epiphany, as a transcendental splendor seems to break outward from the eminence up to which the soldiers carry Hamlet's body. In the background is Horatio's startling suicide attempt, forestalled by Hamlet only so that his follower can become his memorialist, healing the prince's wounded name. Yet not Horatio, but Fortinbras, is granted the last word, which is "shoot." The volley will be part of the rites of war, celebrating Hamlet presumably as another Fortinbras. It is difficult to believe that Shakespeare is not ending with an irony wholly appropriate to Hamlet, who was not only ironic in himself but also the cause of irony in other men. Neither Horatio nor Fortinbras is an ironist, and Shakespeare abandons us, with some regret on our part, when Hamlet is not there to speak a final commentary upon what seems ironic and yet perhaps transcends irony as we have known it.

I have been arguing that what critics like Empson and Graham Bradshaw regard as "grafting problems" will not illuminate *Hamlet*, because Shakespeare was not grafting onto a Kydian melodrama but was revising his own earlier play. From J. M. Robertson until now, there have been many speculations about the *Ur-Hamlet* (whoever wrote it), but not as many about the earlier Hamlet. Even if the original play was Shakespeare's creation, the prince in 1587 or 1588 could have been only a crude cartoon compared with the Hamlet of 1600-1601. Shakespeare's problem was less that of placing his Hamlet in an inadequate context than of showing a subtler Hamlet inside a grosser one. It seems sensible to suspect that Shakespeare's first Hamlet was much more like Belleforest's Amleth: a fortunate trickster out of archaic heroism, and reflecting not so much upon himself as upon the dangers he had to evade. The second or revisionary Hamlet is not a dweller in an inadequate vehicle, but he is at least two beings at once: a folkloric survivor and a contemporary of Montaigne's. This is all to the good: Hamlet's endless charm dissolves the distinction between Saxo Grammaticus and Montaigne's *Essays*. Whether this began as Shakespeare's private joke (or in-joke?) we cannot hope to tell, but it worked, and still does.

Hamlet, by 1601, cannot strike us as a likely avenger, because his intellectual freedom, his capaciousness of spirit, seems so at odds with his

Ghost-imposed mission. This may be the right point to wonder if the idea of Shakespeare's revising his own earlier Hamlet will not help clear up a permanent puzzle of the final play. As in Belleforest, the Hamlet of Shakespeare's first four acts is a young man of about twenty or less, a student at Wittenberg University, where he wishes to return, and where his friends evidently include the noble Horatio and the ill-fated Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Laertes, of the same generation, presumably wishes to return to the University of Paris. But the Hamlet of Act V (after an interval of a few weeks, at most) is thirty years old (according to the gravedigger) and seems at least as old as the thirty-seven-year-old Shakespeare. Going back to his old play, the dramatist may have started with a Hamlet not yet come of age (like Belleforest's, and the Shakespearean *Ur-Hamlet's*), but the revisionary process may have yielded the mature Hamlet of Act V. Attached, to some degree, to the conception of Hamlet in his own earlier play, Shakespeare confidently let the contradiction stand. When he named his son Hamnet, Shakespeare himself was only twenty-one, and only twenty-five or so (at most) when he wrote his *Ur-Hamlet*. He wanted it both ways: to hold on to his youthful vision of Hamlet, and to show Hamlet as being beyond maturity at the close.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1873), Nietzsche memorably got Hamlet right, seeing him not as the man who thinks too much but rather as the man who thinks too well:

For the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence contains, while it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed. This chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an aesthetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states.

In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is

out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man.

How peculiar (though how illuminating) it might be if we tried Nietzsche's terms upon another apparent Dionysian man, the only Shakespearean rival to Hamlet in comprehensiveness of consciousness and keenness of intellect: Sir John Falstaff. Clearly Falstaff *had* once looked truly into the essence of things, long before we ever meet him. The veteran warrior saw through warfare and threw away its honor and glory as pernicious illusions, and gave himself instead to the order of play. Unlike Hamlet, Falstaff gained knowledge without paying in nausea, and knowledge in Falstaff does not inhibit action but thrusts action aside as an irrelevancy to the timeless world of play. Hotspur is accurate on this:

where is his son,

The nimble-footed madcap Prince of Wales,
And his comrades, that daft the world aside
And bid it pass?

[*Henry IV, Part One, IV.i.94-97*]

As his own Falstaff, Hamlet rarely ceases to play, even though Hamlet is so savage and Falstaff, for all his roistering, is so gentle. Marxist critics confuse their materialism with Sir John's materiality, and so see the great wit as an opportunist. Falstaff's investment, unlike Hamlet's, is in wit for its own sake. Contrast the two at their greatest, Hamlet in the graveyard, Falstaff in the tavern:

Ham. That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to th' ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder. This might be the pate of a politician which this ass now o'er-offices, one that would circumvent God, might it not?

Hor. It might, my lord.

Ham. Or of a courtier, which could say, 'Good morrow, sweet lord. How dost thou, sweet lord?' This might be my Lord Such-a-one, that praised my Lord Such-a-one's horse when a [meant] to beg it, might it not?

Hor. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Why, e'en so, and now my Lady Worm's, chopless, and knocked about the [mazard] with a sexton's spade. Here's fine revolution and we had the trick to see't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't.
[*Vi.74-91*]

Fal. O, thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint: thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal, God forgive thee for it: before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing, and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked. I must give over this life, and I will give it over: by the Lord, and I do not I am a villain, I'll be damned for never a king's son in Christendom.

[*Henry IV, Part One, I.iii.88-95*]

How can we set "before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing, and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked" against "Here's fine revolution and we had the trick to see't"? Surpassing wit against surpassing wit, but how little these wits share! Falstaff's comic genius at once turns the joke upon himself, yet also transcends that turning, by a marvelous thrust at Puritan sanctimoniousness. Falstaff's sheer joy is countered by Hamlet's uncanny gallows humor, that thrusts at once against mortality and against all our pretensions. In Falstaff's wit we hear the injunction "It must give pleasure," but in Hamlet's we hear "It must change, and there is only one final form of change."

The *Ur-Hamlet* of Thomas Kyd, that authentic ghost of Shakespeare scholarship, never has been found because it never existed. Thomas Nashe, in a blurb for his hapless friend Robert Greene, wrote an obscure passage that

has been weakly misread by most scholars, who fail to see that Nashe was attacking what he (and Greene) must have considered to be the School of Marlowe, comprising Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Kyd:

I will turne backe to my first text of Studies of delight, and talke a little in friendship with a few of our triviall translators. It is a common practise now a dayes amongst a sort of shifting companions, that rone through every Art and thrive by none, to leave the trade of *Novellit*, whereto they were borne, and busie themselves with the indevors of Art, that could scarcely Latinize their neck verse if they should have neede; yet English *Seneca* read by Candle-light yeelds many good sentences, as *Blood is a begger*, and so forth; and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of Tragicall speeches. But O grieffe! *Tempus edax rerum*, whats that will last alwayes? The Sea exhaled by dropes will in continuance bee drie, and *Seneca*, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needes die to our Stage, which makes his famished followers to imitate the Kid in *Aesop*, who, enamoured with the Foxes newfangles, forsooke all hopes of life to leape into a new occupation; and these men, renouncing all possibilities of credite or estimation, to intermeddle with Italian Translations: Wherein how poorely they have plodded, (as those that are neither provenzall men, nor are able to distinguish of Articles) let all indifferent Gentlemen that have travelled in that tongue discern by their two-pennie Pamphlets.

Here is Peter Alexander's wise comment upon this deliberate obscurity:

From this hub-bub it is hard to extract any precise information; it seems clear however that among the productions of the unscholarly dramatists is a play *Hamlet*, which seems to Nashe to owe a great deal to Seneca in translation, and further, that one of these dramatists was Kyd, for Nashe drags in the name regardless of the fact that neither Aesop nor Spenser (to whose *Shepheard's Calendar*, the May

eclogue, he is referring) supplies an adequate parallel to the situation now being described. To conclude from this, as many do, that Kyd was the author of the early *Hamlet* is an assumption that the text does not justify and that later evidence makes questionable. Nashe is referring to 'a sort' that is a group, of writers; that Kyd was one of them and a *Hamlet* one of their productions is as far as this deliberately teasing passage can by itself take us.

On the basis of this I want to propose a new shape to our vision of Shakespeare's career. Leeds Barroll, in his *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years* (1991), usefully cautions us against dating Shakespeare's plays by supposed topical allusions, and suggests instead that the later Shakespeare composed only when theaters were available, and alternated, therefore, between lying fallow and then engaging in astonishing bursts of rapid writing, including the supreme feat of producing *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in just fourteen consecutive months.

Barroll also calls into question the scholarly myth of Shakespeare's "retirement" into Stratford subsequent to *The Tempest* in 1611, when the playwright was only forty-seven. Shakespeare lived another five years and, aided by John Fletcher, wrote three more plays by 1613 (*Henry VIII*, the apparently lost *Cardenio*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*). In his fiftieth year, Shakespeare evidently refused further labor for the theater, and doubtless we can regard him as retired during the last two and a half years of his life. What killed Shakespeare at fifty-two we don't know, though one contemporary source suggests that the immediate cause was a Stratford drinking binge with two old friends, Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, which seems in character for the amiable Falstaffian Shakespeare. Tradition speaks also of a previous long illness, which may have been venereal, again likely enough. Perhaps augmenting disease weakened the professional will to compose. Whatever the reason for cessation, Barroll's point stands: *The Tempest* was not a valedictory work, and Shakespeare never wrote better than in his portions of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which only accidentally became a final work. Somewhat in Barroll's spirit, I propose a similar (though more radical) revision in our sense of Shakespeare's beginnings as a playwright. The

Ur-Hamlet would seem to have been composed no later than early 1589, and perhaps in 1588. It preceded, then, all of apprentice Shakespeare, including the three parts of *Henry VI* (1589-91), *Richard III* (1592-93), and *Titus Andronicus* (1593-94). We simply do not know when Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, but it may have been anytime from 1588 to 1592. I have never understood why and how Shakespeare scholars could consider that *The Spanish Tragedy* was a serious influence upon *Hamlet*. Popular as it was, *The Spanish Tragedy* is a dreadful play, hideously written and silly; common readers will determine this for themselves by starting to read it. They will not get much past the opening, and will find it hard to credit the notion that this impressed Shakespeare. The more rational supposition is that Shakespeare's first *Hamlet* influenced *The Spanish Tragedy*, and that any effect of Kyd's squalid melodrama on the mature *Hamlet* was merely Shakespeare's taking back of what initially had been his own.

Probably no one ever will be able to prove that Peter Alexander was right in his argument that Shakespeare wrote the *Ur-Hamlet*, but circumstantial evidence reinforces Alexander's surmise. When Shakespeare joined what became the Lord Chamberlain's men in 1594, the three plays newly added to the group's repertory were *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Hamlet*, and at no time did the company stage *The Spanish Tragedy*, or anything else by Kyd. We cannot know what, besides the Ghost, was part of the first *Hamlet*, but pre-*Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare is not exactly post-Falstaffian Shakespeare, and I doubt that we would be much intrigued by earliest *Hamlet*. Shakespeare must have been chagrined when he went back to what could have been his very first play, as I have noted, contemporary references indicate that the Ghost's outcry of "Hamlet! Revenge!" had become a matter for general derision. More interesting is the question as to just what had attracted Shakespeare to the *Hamlet* story.

Hamlet's first chronicler was Saxo Grammaticus, in his twelfth-century Latin *Danish History*, available in a Parisian edition from 1514 on. Shakespeare is not likely to have read Saxo, but he certainly began with the French storyteller Belleforest's *Histoire Tragique*, the fifth volume of which (1570) contained Hamlet's saga, elaborated from Saxo's story. The heroic Horwendil, having slain the King of Norway in single combat, wins

Gerutha, the daughter of the King of Denmark, who bears him Amleth. Horwendil's jealous brother Fengon murders Horwendil and incestuously marries Gerutha. Amleth, to preserve his life, pretends to be mad, resists a woman sent to tempt him, stabs a friend of Fengon's hidden in Gerutha's bedchamber, berates his mother into repentance, and is sent off by Fengon to be executed in England. On the voyage, Amleth alters Fengon's letter and thus sends his two escorting retainers to their deaths. Returning home, Amleth kills Fengon with the usurper's own sword, and then is hailed as king by the Danish populace.

Belleforest's Amleth, except in this plot pattern, does not much resemble Shakespeare's Hamlet, and we can assume that Hamlet resembled the savage source less and less as Shakespeare revised. Whatever it was that first attracted Shakespeare to the figure of Amleth/Hamlet began early, because in 1585 the playwright named his infant son Hamnet, presumably with some reference to the Danish hero. Since I firmly believe Peter Alexander to be correct in assigning the *Ur-Hamlet* to Shakespeare, the question of what attracted Hamnet's father to the plot and character before the start of his writing career takes on considerable importance.

Belleforest's Amleth has a certain exemplary resourcefulness; he is hard to kill, persists in his project of revenge, and finally achieves the throne of Denmark. That toughness does not seem enough to name one's only son for, and one feels that we may be missing something.

Belleforest's Amleth, despite his handicaps, carries a primitive or Northern version of the blessing, the spirit of "more life," which pragmatically becomes his freedom. Shakespeare may have perceived in Amleth a Northern version of the biblical King David, a charismatic hero who must begin by enduring considerable travail on his way to the throne and the Blessing. Yet King Saul is no Fengon, and the biblical David is far closer to Shakespeare's Hamlet than he is to the legendary Amleth, whose wit and bravery are authentic but grotesque, with Eddic mythology hovering in the background. Shakespeare, always sensitive to suggestions of a lost social status, may have named his son Hamnet as a kind of talisman of family restoration, taking Amleth as a model of persistence in the quest for familial honor and of vindication of the relation between fathers and sons.

We surely can assume that Shakespeare's first Hamlet of 1588-89 was very close to Belleforest's Amleth, a Senecan or Roman avenger in a Northern context. Inwardness in Shakespeare's plays does not assume its characteristic strength before the comic triumph of Falstaff, though there are poignant traces of it in Bottom, and a grotesque, ambivalent version of it in Shylock. We need not suppose that Shakespeare's Ur-Hamlet was a transcendent intellectual. After Falstaff, Hal, and Brutus, Shakespeare chose to make a revisionary return to his own origins as a dramatist, perhaps in commemoration of his son Hamnet's death. There is a profoundly elegiac temper to the matured *Hamlet*, which may have received its final revisions after the death of Shakespeare's father, in September 1601. A mourning for Hamnet and for John Shakespeare may reverberate in Horatio's (and the audience's) mourning for Hamlet. The mystery of Hamlet, and of *Hamlet*, turns upon mourning as a mode of revisionism, and possibly upon revision itself as a kind of mourning for Shakespeare's own earlier self. At thirty-six, he may have realized that a spiritual culmination was upon him, and all his gifts seemed to fuse together, as he turned to a more considerable revisionary labor than he attempted before or after.

Marlowe had long since been exorcised; with the *Hamlet* of 1600-1601, Shakespeare becomes his own precursor, and revises not only the Ur-*Hamlet* but everything that came after it, through *Julius Caesar*. The inner drama of the drama *Hamlet* is revisionary: Shakespeare returns to what was beyond his initial powers, and grants himself a protagonist who, by Act V, has a relation to the Hamlet of Act I that is an exact parallel to the playwright's relation to the Ur-*Hamlet*. For Hamlet, revisioning the self replaces the project of revenge. The only valid revenge in this play is what Nietzsche, theorist of revision, called the will's revenge against time, and against time's "It was." "Thus I willed it," Shakespeare is able to imply, even as *Hamlet* becomes an implicit model for Nietzsche's *Towards a Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche's most Shakespearean realization is pure Hamlet: we can find words only for what already is dead in our hearts, so that necessarily there is a kind of contempt in every act of speaking. The rest is silence, speech is agitation, betrayal, restlessness, torment of self and of others. Shakespeare, with *Hamlet*, arrives at an impasse still operative in the high comedy of *Twelfth Night*, where Hamlet's inheritor is Feste.

There is no "real" Hamlet as there is no "real" Shakespeare: the character, like the writer, is a reflecting pool, a spacious mirror in which we need must see ourselves. Permit this dramatist a discourse of contraries, and he will show us everybody and nobody, all at once. We have no choice but to permit Shakespeare, and his Hamlet, everything, because neither has a rival.

Anne Barton makes the point that *Hamlet* owes at least as much to Shakespeare's previous plays as it does to the Ur-*Hamlet*. Even if Peter Alexander was right (as I insist) and the Ur-*Hamlet* was one of those prior works, *Hamlet* and Hamlet are more indebted to the *Henry IV* plays and Falstaff than to an embryonic Hamlet. Inwardness as a mode of freedom is the mature Hamlet's finest endowment, despite his sufferings, and wit becomes another name for that inwardness and that freedom, first in Falstaff, and then in Hamlet. Even the earliest Shakespeare, in the *Henry VI* plays, shows the inward impulse, though he is too crude to accomplish it. Marlowe could not help Shakespeare to develop an art of inwardness (although Barabas is a wonderful monster, the only stage role I perpetually long to essay). Chaucer could and did: Chaucer's Pardoner is a human abyss, as inward as Iago, or as Edmund. The Wife of Bath provided a paradigm for Falstaff, and the Pardoner might have done as much for Iago. But there is no Chaucerian figure who could help in shaping Hamlet, not as we now see him, though the irony of the Hamlet of 1600-1601 has Chaucerian elements in it. These ironic components help inform the odd effect that Graham Bradshaw compares to Pirandello: Hamlet can seem an actual person who somehow has been caught inside a play, so that he has to perform even though he doesn't want to. Bradshaw, because he himself is caught in the bad tradition that Kyd wrote the Ur-*Hamlet*, relates this odd sensation to the Globe audience's reaction to watching Hamlet trapped in Kyd's old potboiler. The Pirandellian effect (not to mention the Beckettian, as in *Endgame*) is greatly enhanced if Shakespeare's new protagonist is trapped inside Shakespeare's earliest play, now blasted apart to admit the fiercest inwardness ever achieved in a literary work.

The idea of *play* is as central to Falstaff as the idea of *the play* is to Hamlet. These are not the same idea: Falstaff is infinitely more playful than Hamlet, and the prince is far more theatrical than the fat knight. The new Hamlet is self-consciously theatrical; the old one presumably was (as Brad-

shaw says) immersed in melodramatic theatricality. We can say that Hamlet the intellectual ironist is somehow conscious that he has to live down his crude earlier version. Indeed, we might say that there is a peculiar doubling: Hamlet contends not only with the Ghost but with the ghost of the first Ghost as well, and with the ghost of the first Hamlet. That out-Pirandello Pirandello, and helps explain why Hamlet, who questions everything else, scarcely bothers to question revenge, even though pragmatically he has so little zest for it.

But that is typical of Hamlet's consciousness, for the prince has a mind so powerful that the most contrary attitudes, values, and judgments can co-exist within it coherently, so coherently indeed that Hamlet nearly has become all things to all men, and to some women. Hamlet incarnates the value of personality, while turning aside from the value of love. If Hamlet is his own Falstaff (Harold Goddard's fine formulation), he is a Falstaff who doesn't need Hal, any more than he needs poor Ophelia, or even Horatio, except as a survivor who will tell the prince's story. The common element in Falstaff's ludic mastery and in Hamlet's dramaturgy is the employment of great wit as a counter-Machiavel, as a defense against a corrupted world.

We do not know how playful Shakespeare himself was, but we do know his plays, and so again we can find him more readily in some of Hamlet's observations than we can in Falstaff's. We cannot envision Falstaff giving instructions to the actors, or even watching a play, since reality is a play to Sir John. We delight in Falstaff's acting of King Henry IV and then of Hal, but we would gape at Falstaff acting Falstaff, since he is so at one with himself. One of our many perplexities with Hamlet is that we never can be sure when he is acting Hamlet, with or without an antic disposition. Mimesis, or the player's imitation of a person, is a concern for Hamlet, but could not be a problem for Falstaff. Hal, despite his brutality to Falstaff, which is inconceivable in Hamlet (contemplate Hamlet rejecting Horatio), shares in Hamlet's mimetic interests—he, too, calls for plays-within-the-play—though with a hypocrisy that Hamlet would have scorned. But had he become king, Hamlet would not have been a wittier Fortinbras, which is to say a Henry V. As his own Falstaff, Hamlet presumably would have entered

the higher mode of play that is art. We return to the paradox that Hamlet could write *Hamlet*, while Falstaff would find redundant the composing of a Falstaffiad. Falstaff is wholly immanent, as overflowing with being as Iago and Edmund are deficient in it. As I have remarked, Falstaff is how meaning gets started. Hamlet, as negative as he is witty, blocks or baffles meaning, except in the beyond of transcendence.

Auden, a Christian wit who greatly preferred Falstaff to Hamlet, found in Falstaff "a comic symbol for the supernatural order of Charity," a discovery that makes me very uneasy, since Auden goes so far as to find Christlike implications in the world-rejected Falstaff. You can prefer Don Quixote to Hamlet, as Auden also does, if you wish to follow Kierkegaard's choice of the apostle over the genius. It does seem odd, though, that Auden tugs Falstaff away from genius to apostle, because there are no apostles in Shakespeare. Kierkegaard, as witty and as melancholy a Dane as Hamlet, is not a very Shakespearean character, because Kierkegaard indeed was an apostle. Auden, refreshingly, was not, and truly was Falstaffian enough in spirit to be forgiven his abduction of Sir John for the Christian order of Charity.

Are there any other figures in Shakespeare who are as autonomous as Falstaff and Hamlet? A panoply of the greatest certainly would include Bottom, Shylock, Rosalind, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, and Prospero. Yet all of these, though they sustain meditation, depend more upon the world of their plays than do Falstaff and Hamlet. Falstaff surely got away from Shakespeare, but I would be inclined to judge that Shakespeare could not get away from Hamlet, who was built up from within, whereas Falstaff began as an external construction and then went inward, perhaps against Shakespeare's initial will. Hamlet, I surmise, is Shakespeare's will, long pondered and anything but the happy accident that became Falstaff. If anyone in Shakespeare takes up all the space, it is these two, but only Hamlet was destined for that role. Usurping the stage is the only role he has; unlike Falstaff, Hamlet is not a rebel against the idea of time and the idea of order. Falstaff is happy in his consciousness, of himself and of reality; Hamlet is unhappy in those same relations. Between them, they occupy the center of Shakespeare's invention of the human.

It is a peculiarity of Shakespearean triumphalism that the most original literary work in Western literature, perhaps in the world's literature, has now become so familiar that we seem to have read it before, even when we encounter it for the first time. Hamlet, as a character (or as a role, if you prefer), remains both as familiar, and as original, as is his play. Dr. Johnson, to whom *Hamlet* scarcely seemed problematical, praised the play for its "variety," which is equally true of its protagonist. Like the play, the prince stands apart from the rest of Shakespeare, partly because custom has not staled his infinite variety. He is a hero who pragmatically can be regarded as a villain: cold, murderous, solipsistic, nihilistic, manipulative. We can recognize Iago by those modifiers, but not Hamlet, since pragmatic tests do not accommodate him. Consciousness is his salient characteristic; he is the most aware and knowing figure ever conceived. We have the illusion that nothing is lost upon this fictive personage. Hamlet is a Henry James who is also a swordsman, a philosopher in line to become a king, a prophet of a sensibility still out ahead of us, in an era to come.

Though Shakespeare composed sixteen plays after *Hamlet*, putting the work just past the midpoint of his career, there is a clear sense in which this drama was at once his alpha and his omega. All of Shakespeare is in it: history, comedy, satire, tragedy, romance—one starts to sound like Polonius if one wants to categorize this "poem unlimited." Polonius only meant that such a poetic drama need not adhere to Ben Jonson's neoclassical sense of the unities of time and place, and *Hamlet* ironically destroys any coherent idea of time even more drastically than *Othello* will do. But "poem unlimited," as Shakespeare seems to have known, is the best phrase available for the genre of the completed *Hamlet*, which both is and is not the prince's tragedy. Goethe, whose *Faust* owed rather too much to *Hamlet*, is the best teacher as to what a "poem unlimited" might be. The daemonic apocalypse that is the Second Part of *Faust* is scandalously unlimited, and yet loses much of its aura when juxtaposed too directly with *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's "poem unlimited," I suggest, is as personal, capricious, arbitrary as the Sec-

ond Part of *Faust*, and is weirdly more capacious even than Goethe's weird work. The "lost" *Ur-Hamlet* was doubtless as much Shakespeare's revenge tragedy as *Titus Andronicus* or *Julius Caesar* was (if one wants to regard that play as *The Revenge of Mark Antony*), but the triumphal *Hamlet* is cosmological drama of man's fate, and only masks its essential drive as revenge. We can forget Hamlet's "indecision" and his "duty" to kill the usurping king-uncle. Hamlet himself takes a while to forget all that, but by the start of Act V he no longer needs to remember: the Ghost is gone, the mental image of the father has no power, and we come to see that hesitation and consciousness are synonyms in this vast play. We might speak of the hesitations of consciousness itself, for Hamlet inaugurates the drama of heightened identity that even Pirandello and Beckett could only repeat, albeit in a more desperate tone, and that Brecht vainly sought to subvert. Brecht's Marxist impulse is now also only a repetition, as in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which seeks to demonstrate that there are no single individuals as such, but achieves authentic pathos only when the hero-villain Roy Cohn takes the stage, as isolated as any tormented consciousness in Hamlet's tradition.

We hardly can think about ourselves as separate selves without thinking about Hamlet, whether or not we are aware that we are recalling him. His is not primarily a world of social alienation, or of the absence (or presence) of God. Rather, his world is the growing inner self, which he sometimes attempts to reject, but which nevertheless he celebrates almost continuously, though implicitly. His difference from his legatees, ourselves, is scarcely historical, because here too he is out ahead of us, always about to be. Tentativeness is the peculiar mark of his endlessly burgeoning consciousness; if he cannot know himself, wholly, that is because he is a breaking wave of sensibility, of thought and feeling pulsating onward. For Hamlet, as Oscar Wilde saw, the aesthetic is no mystification, but rather constitutes the only normative or moral element in consciousness. Wilde said that because of Hamlet, the world had grown sad. Self-consciousness, in Hamlet, augments melancholy at the expense of all other affects.

No one ever is going to call Hamlet "the joyous Dane," yet a consciousness so continuously alive at every point cannot be categorized sim-

cause his transcendence finally triumphs, even though pragmatically he is the agency of eight deaths, his own included. A stage left empty except for the colorless Horatio, the bully boy Fortinbras, and the fop Osrlic is the final consequence of the pragmatic Hamlet.

Shakespeare's shrewdness in composing Hamlet as a dance of contrasts hardly can be overpraised, even if the result has been four centuries of misreadings, many of them highly creative in themselves. Red herrings abound in the inky seas of Hamlet interpretation: the man who thinks too much, who could not make up his mind, who was too good for his task, or his world. We have had High Romantic Hamlet and Low Modernist Hamlet, and now we have Hamlet-as-Foucault, or subversion-and-containment Hamlet, the culmination of the French Hamlet of Mallarmé, Laforgue, and T. S. Eliot. That travesty Hamlet was prevalent in my youth, in the critical Age of Eliot. Call him neo-Christian Hamlet, up on the battlements of Elsinore (or of Yale), confronting the Ghost as a nostalgic reminder of a lost spirituality. Manifestly, that is absurd, unless you take the Eliotic line that the Devil is preferable to a secular meaninglessness. Auden was wiser in seeing Hamlet (with some distaste) as the genius of secular transcendence, which is fairly close to Shakespeare's enigmatic intellectual, himself more subtly corrupt than the rotten court and state that dismay him. That doubleness of attitude, both secular and transcendent, is Shakespeare's own, throughout the Sonnets, and is strangely more personal in Hamlet than in the splendidly rancid triad of *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. Falstaff may have been dearer to Shakespeare (as he should be to us), but Hamlet evidently was more a personal matter for his creator. We may surmise that Hamlet is Shakespeare's own consciousness (with some reservations) without fearing that we are those horrid entities, the High Romantic Bardolaters.

Hamlet will not do anything prematurely; something in him is determined not to be overetermined. His freedom partly consists in not being too soon, not being early. In that sense, does he reflect Shakespeare's ironic regret at having composed the *Ur-Hamlet* too soon, almost indeed at his own origins as a poet-playwright? Whether or not we are to believe that Hamlet wrote the Player King's great speech (III.ii.186-215), does it per-

ply as "melancholy." Even at its darkest, Hamlet's grief has something tentative in it. "Hesitant mourning" is almost an oxymoron, still, Hamlet's quintessence is never to be wholly committed to any stance or attitude, any mission, or indeed to anything at all. His language reveals this throughout; no other character in all of literature changes his verbal decorum so rapidly. He has no center: Othello has his "occupation" of honorable warfare, Lear has the majesty of being every inch a king, Macbeth a proleptic imagination that leaps ahead of his own ambition. Hamlet is too intelligent to be at one with any role, and intelligence in itself is decentered when allied with the prince's ultimate disinterestedness. Categorizing Hamlet is virtually impossible; Falstaff, who pragmatically is as intelligent, identifies himself with the freedom of wit, with play. One aspect of Hamlet is free, and entertains itself with bitter wit and bitterly intended play, but other aspects are bound, and we cannot find the balance.

If the play were Christian, or even un-Christian, then we could say that Hamlet bears the Blessing, as David and Joseph and the wily Jacob carry it away in the Bible. Hamlet, more than Falstaff or Cleopatra, is Shakespeare's great charismatic, but he bears the Blessing as though it were a curse. Claudius ruefully tells us that Hamlet is loved by the Danish populace, and most audiences have shared in that affection. The problem necessarily arises that the Blessing is "more life into a time without boundaries," and while Hamlet embodies such a heroic vitalism, he is also the representative of death, an undiscovered country bounded by time. Shakespeare created Hamlet as a dialectic of antithetical qualities, unresolvable even by the hero's death. It is not too much to say that Hamlet is Shakespeare's own creativity, the poet-playwright's art that itself is nature. Hamlet is also Shakespeare's death, his dead son and his dead father. That may sound fanciful, but temporally it is factual. If you represent both your author's living art and his prospect of annihilation, you are likely to play the most equivocal and multivalent of roles, a hero-villain's. Hamlet is a transcendental hero, as much a new kind of man as the Book of Samuel's King David was, and Hamlet is also a new kind of villain, direct precursor of Iago and Edmund, the villain-as-playwright, writing with the lives of others as much as with words. It might be better to call Hamlet a villain-hero, be-

haps have the same relation both to *The Murder of Gonzago* and to the *Ur-Hamlet*? Its negations undo everything. It might be a commentary, then, on Shakespeare's wry debacle in his premature *Hamlet*. To read (and attend) the mature *Hamlet* as a revisionary work is to take up something of the stance of Hamlet himself as self-revisionist. How charming the ironies of literary history might have seemed to Shakespeare! I suspect that Shakespeare's first *Hamlet* preceded and helped to spark Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, so that Shakespeare was both the inventor and the great revisionist of revenge tragedy. It is another lovely irony that Ben Jonson, starting out as an actor, went on to play Hieronimo the avenger in *The Spanish Tragedy*, a drama for which he later composed revisions. Shakespeare played the Ghost of Hamlet's father at the Globe (and perhaps also the Player King). Did he grimace at having played the Ghost in the *Ur-Hamlet*, with his derision-provoking "Hamlet! Revenge!"?

Revisionism, in *Hamlet*, can be viewed very differently if Shakespeare is revising not that mythical play, Kyd's *Hamlet*, but Shakespeare's own earlier *Hamlet*. Self-revision is Hamlet's mode; was it imposed on him by Shakespeare's highly self-conscious confrontation with his own botched beginning as a tragic dramatist? Aside from the parody aspects of *Titus Andronicus*—its send-ups of Kyd and Marlowe—there is also a recoil in this charnel house of a play from any sympathetic identification with anyone on stage. The Brechtian "alienation effect" evidently was learned by that grand plagiarist from *Titus Andronicus*, whose protagonist estranges us from the start by his ghastly sacrifice of Tamora's son followed by his butchery of his own son. Any playgoer or reader is likely to prefer Aaron the Moor to Titus, since Aaron is savagely humorous, and Titus savagely dolorous.

I suspect that Shakespeare wrote in response not only to Marlowe and Kyd, but also to his own sympathy for his first Hamlet, a presumably wily avenger. Part of the definitive Hamlet's mystery is why the audience and readership, rather like the common people of Denmark in the play, should love him. Until Act V, Hamlet loves the dead father (or rather, his image); but does not persuade us that he loves (or ever loved) anyone else. The prince has no remorse for his manslaughter of Polonius, or for his vicious

badgering of Ophelia into madness and suicide, or for his gratuitous dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their undeserved deaths. We do not believe Hamlet when he blusters to Laertes that he loved Ophelia, since the charismatic nature seems to exclude remorse, except for what has not yet been done. The skull of poor Yorick evokes not grief, but disgust, and the son's farewell to his dead mother is the heartless "Wretched Queen, adieu." There is the outsize tribute to the faithful and loving Horatio, but it is subverted when Hamlet angrily restrains his grieving follower from suicide, not out of affection but so as to assign him the task of telling the prince's story, lest Hamlet bear forever a wounded name. There is indeed a considerable "case against Hamlet," urged most recently by Alistair Fowler, but even if Hamlet is a hero-villain, he remains the Western hero of consciousness.

The internalization of the self is one of Shakespeare's greatest inventions, particularly because it came before anyone else was ready for it. There is a growing inner self in Protestantism, but nothing in Luther prepares us for Hamlet's mystery; his real interiority will abide: "But I have that within which passes show." Perhaps learning from his first *Hamlet*, Shakespeare never directly dramatizes Hamlet's quintessence. Instead, we are given the seven extraordinary soliloquies, which are anything but hackneyed; they are merely badly directed, badly played, badly read. The greatest, the "To be or not to be" monologue, so embarrassed director and actor in the most recent *Hamlet* I've attended, Ralph Fiennes's travesty, that Fiennes mumbled much of it offstage and came on only to mouth the rest of it as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, this soliloquy is the center of *Hamlet*, at once everything and nothing, a fullness and an emptiness playing off against each other. It is the foundation for nearly everything he will say in Act V, and can be called his death-speech-in-advance, the prolepsis of his transcendence.

It is very difficult to generalize about Hamlet, because every observation will have to admit its opposite. He is the paradigm of grief, yet he expresses mourning by an extraordinary verve, and his continuous wit gives the pragmatic effect of making him seem endlessly high-spirited, even as he mourns. Partly this is the result of a verbal energy that rivals Falstaff's.

Sometimes I amuse myself by surmising the effect, if Shakespeare had confronted Falstaff with Prince Hamlet rather than Prince Hal. But as I have cited earlier, Harold Goddard charmingly says Hamlet is his own Falstaff, and trying to imagine Falstaff as Horatio is dumbfounding. And yet Falstaff now seems to me Shakespeare's bridge from an *Ur*-Hamlet to Hamlet. It was because he had created Falstaff, from 1596 to 1598, that Shakespeare was able to revise the Hamlet (whether his own or another's) of circa 1588 into the Hamlet of 1600–1601. As Swinburne noted, Falstaff and Hamlet are the two most comprehensive consciousnesses in Shakespeare, or in anyone else. Each figure allies the utmost reach of consciousness with what W. B. Yeats praised in William Blake as "beautiful, laughing speech." The difference is that Falstaff frequently laughs with a whole heart, with faith both in language and in himself. Hamlet's laughter can unnerve us because it issues from a total lack of faith, both in language and in himself. W. H. Auden, who seems rather to have disliked Hamlet, made perhaps the best case against the prince of Denmark:

Hamlet lacks faith in God and in himself. Consequently he must define his existence in terms of others, e.g., I am the man whose mother married his uncle who murdered his father. He would like to become what the Greek tragic hero is, a creature of situation. Hence his inability to act, for he can only "act," i.e., play at possibilities.

That is monstrously shrewd: Hamlet might like to be Oedipus or Orestes but (*contra* Freud) he is not at all similar to either. Yet I find it difficult to conceive Hamlet as "a creature of situation," because others scarcely matter to this hero of interiorization. That is why there is no central scene or passage in *Hamlet*. As the freest artist of himself in all of Shakespeare, Hamlet never knows what it might mean to be imprisoned by any contingency, even when imposed upon by the Ghost. Though he protests that he is not free, how can we believe that (or anything else) from a consciousness that seems to overhear itself, even when not bothering to speak? Since Hamlet baffles us by altering with nearly every phrase he utters, how can we reconcile his metamorphoses with his being "a creature of situation"? Auden subtly says that Hamlet would *like* to become

such a creature, and so presumably does *not*, even though his desire reduces him to an actor or player. But is he so reduced? Richard Lanham concludes that Hamlet's self-consciousness cannot be distinguished from the prince's theatricality, like Auden's contention, this is difficult to refute, and very painful (for me anyway) to accept. Iago and Edmund (in *King Lear*) are great and murderous players; Hamlet is something else, though pragmatically he is quite murderous. A play in which the only survivors are Horatio, Fortinbras, and Osric is bloody enough for anyone, and cannot be particularly playful. The Hamlet of Act V has stopped playing; he has aged a decade in a brief return from the sea, and if his self-consciousness is still theatrical, it ensues in a different kind of theater, eerily transcendental and sublime, one in which the abyss between *playing* someone and *being* someone has been bridged.

That returns us to where the matured Hamlet always takes us, to the process of self-revision, to change by self-overhearing and then by the will to change. Shakespeare's term for our "self" is "selfsame," and *Hamlet*, whatever its first version was like, is very much the drama in which the tragic protagonist revises his sense of the selfsame. Not self-fashioning but self-revision; for Foucault the self is fashioned, but for Shakespeare it is given, subject to subsequent mutabilities. The great *topos*, or commonplace, in Shakespeare is change: his prime villains, from Richard III on to Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth, all suffer astonishing changes before their careers are ended. The *Ur*-*Hamlet* never will be found, because it is embedded in the palimpsest of the final *Hamlet*. Mockery, of others and of himself, is one of Hamlet's crucial modes, and he so mocks vengeance as to make it impossible for us to distinguish revenge tragedy from satire. Hamlet comes to understand that his grief and his comic genius are at odds, until both are subdued at sea. He is neither funny nor melancholy in Act V: the readiness or willingness is all. Shakespeare, disarming moral criticism, thus absolves Hamlet of the final slaughter. The deaths of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet himself are all caused by Claudius's "shuffling," unlike the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Those earlier deaths can be attributed to Hamlet's murderous theatricality, to his peculiar blend of the roles of comedian and avenger. But even Claudius is not slain as an act of vengeance—only as the final entropy of the plotted shuffling.

There is, then, no case to be made against Hamlet in his death scene,

and this revisionary release is experienced by the audience as a transcendental music, with Horatio invoking angelic song and Fortinbras the rites of war. Is it wholly fanciful to suggest that Shakespeare, revising himself, also knows an order of release from his mourning for his own son Hamnet? The late Kenneth Burke taught me to ask, always, What is the writer trying to do for himself or herself by writing this work? Burke primarily meant for oneself as a person, not as a writer, but he genially tolerated my revision of his question. He taught me also to apply to *Hamlet* Nietzsche's powerful aphorism: "That which we can find words for is something already dead in our hearts; there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking." Nothing could be closer to Hamlet, and farther away from Falstaff. What Falstaff finds words for is still alive in his heart, and for him there is no contempt in the act of speaking. Falstaff possesses wit lest he perish of the truth; Hamlet's wit, thrown over by him in the transition to Act V, vanishes from the stage, and so Hamlet becomes the sublime personality whose fate must be to perish of the truth. Revising Hamlet, Shakespeare released himself from Hamlet, and was free to be Falstaff again.

There is something different about the finished *Hamlet* (to call it that), which sets it apart from Shakespeare's three dozen other plays. This sense of difference always may have been felt, but our record of it begins in 1770, with Henry MacKenzie's emphasis on Hamlet's "extreme sensibility of mind." For Mackenzie, Hamlet's was "the majesty of melancholy." Dr. Johnson seems to have been more moved by Ophelia than by Hamlet, and rather coldly remarked that the prince "is, through the whole play, rather an instrument than an agent." That is an observation not necessarily contrary to what the German and English Romantics made of Hamlet, but Johnson is light-years from Hamlet Romanticized. In our overenthusiastic embrace of the Romantic Hamlet, the hero of hesitation who dominates criticism from Goethe and Hazlitt through Emerson and Carlyle, and on to A. C. Bradley and Harold Goddard, we have been too ready to lose our apprehension of Hamlet's permanent strangeness, his continued uniqueness despite all his imitators. Whatever his precise relation to Shakespeare might have been, Hamlet is to other literary and dramatic characters what

Shakespeare is to other writers: a class of one, set apart by cognitive and aesthetic eminence. The prince and the poet-playwright are the geniuses of change; Hamlet, like Shakespeare, is an agent rather than an instrument of change. Here Dr. Johnson nodded.

In a lifetime of playgoing, one can encounter some samenesses among Lear, Othello, and Macbeths. But every actor's Hamlet is almost absurdly different from all the others. The most memorable Hamlet that I have attended, John Cielgud's, caught the prince's charismatic nobility, but perhaps too much at the sacrifice of Hamlet's restless intellectuality. There will always be as many Hamlets as there are actors, directors, playgoers, readers, critics. Hazlitt uttered a more-than-Romantic truth in his: "It is we who are Hamlet." "We" certainly included Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, and in a later time, Joyce and Beckett. Clearly, Hamlet has usurped the Western literary consciousness, at its most self-aware thresholds, gateways no longer crossable by us into transcendental beyonds. Yet most of us are not imaginative speculators and creators, even if we share in an essentially literary culture (now dying in our universities, and perhaps soon enough everywhere). What seems most universal about Hamlet is the quality and graciousness of his mourning. This initially centers upon the dead father and the fallen-away mother, but by Act V the center of grief is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere, or infinite.

Shakespeare of course had his own griefs, rather more in 1600-1601, when *Hamlet* was completed, than in 1587-89, when perhaps it was first tentatively composed. Still, if his major mourning was for the child Hamnet Shakespeare, it was transmuted beyond recognition in Hamlet's sorrows. Part of Hamlet's fascination is his *carelessness*; though an absolutely revisionary consciousness, he seems, throughout Act V, to be carried on a flood tide of disinterestedness or quietism, as though he is willing to accept every permutation in his own self but refuses to will the changes. Shakespeare, as a playwright, has his own kind of apparent carelessness, yet like Hamlet's this is more an open stance toward change than it is an artlessness. The parallel is there again between the universal-but-scattered Hamlet, and the dramatist fully achieving universality by returning to an earlier work, perhaps an earliest effort, that had defeated him. *Hamlet*, so far

as I can tell, always had been Shakespeare's idea of a play, his play, and it seems no accident that the successful revision of *Hamlet* opened Shakespeare to the great tragedies that followed: *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*. There is a savage triumphalism in Hamlet's nature, at least before Act V, and the prince's tragic apotheosis seems to have released a certain triumphalism in Shakespeare the poet-dramatist. Hamlet somehow has gotten it right in the high style of his death, and Shakespeare clearly at last has gotten *Hamlet* (and Hamlet) right, and has liberated himself into tragedy.

Shakespeare's only son and his father were both dead when the mature *Hamlet* was composed, but the play does not seem to me any more obsessed by mortality than is the rest of Shakespeare, before and after. Nor does Hamlet seem as preoccupied with death as many other Shakespearean protagonists; his are, as Horatio finally observes, "casual slaughters." If *Hamlet* differs from earlier Shakespeare (including a possible first *Hamlet*), the change inheres in change itself, because Hamlet incarnates change. The final form of change is death, which may be why we tend to think of *Hamlet* as having a highly individual relationship with death. We have to be bewildered by a dramatic character who changes every time he speaks and yet maintains a consistent enough identity so that he cannot be mistaken for anyone else in Shakespeare.

Attempts to surmise the shape of the *Ur-Hamlet* almost always founder on the assumption that Kyd was the author, and so the play is seen as another *Spanish Tragedy*. Since the play was Shakespeare's, and his first, our best clues are in the earliest Shakespeare, excluding comedy: the tetralogy of the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, and also *Titus Andronicus*, which may have been Shakespeare's parodistic rebellion against that fiercely Marlovian tetralogy. Only two characters are memorable in these five plays: Richard, and Aaron the Moor in *Titus*, and both are versions of Barabas the Machiavel, hero-villain of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. My guess is that the young Shakespeare, overwhelmed by the two parts of *Tamburlaine*, both on stage by late 1587, began his *Hamlet* in 1588 as an imitation of *Tamburlaine*, and then absorbed the grand shock of *The Jew of Malta* in 1589, and

so went on to finish the *Ur-Hamlet* under the shadow of Barabas. Aaron the Moor (as I have shown) is manifestly a knowing travesty of Barabas, and though many scholars would disagree with me on this, all of *Titus Andronicus* seems an outrageous send-up of Marlowe. The hero Hamlet, even in 1600-1601, is very much a hero-villain, anticipating Iago, and in 1588-89 he is likely to have imitated the wiliness of Barabas, though in a legitimate quest for self-preservation and revenge.

Was Shakespeare's first *Hamlet* a tragedy? Did Hamlet survive triumphantly, as he does in the old stories, or did he die, as he did in 1601? We cannot know, but I suspect this first *Hamlet* could have been called *The Revenge of Hamlet*, rather than *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Except for Hamlet's end, there may have been little enough difference in the plots of the first and the final *Hamlet*; the great difference would have been in the character of Hamlet himself. In 1588-89, he could have been little more than a Marlovian cartoon, akin to Richard III and Aaron the Moor. In 1600-1601, Hamlet is the heir of Shakespearean inwardness, the culmination of the sequence that began with Faulconbridge the Bastard in *King John*, Richard II, Mercutio, Juliet, Bottom, Portia, and Shylock, and reached a first apotheosis with Falstaff. Henry V, Brutus, and Rosalind then prepared for the second apotheosis with Hamlet, which in turn made possible Feste, Malvolio, Iago, Lear, Edgar, Edmund, Macbeth, Cleopatra, Imogen, and Prospero. Our sense that Hamlet is far too large for his play may result from the enormous change in the protagonist, and the relatively smaller changes in the plot of the first four acts. Act V, though, probably has very little resemblance to what it was in 1589, which again may help explain why sometimes it seems a different play from the first four acts.

Harry Levin noted that "the line between the histories and the tragedies need not be quite so sharply drawn as it is by the classifications of the Folio." The definitive *Hamlet* is indisputably tragedy, by any definition; Hamlet's death has to be described as tragic. Since the Amleth of folklore and chronicle was a trickster, a Fool feigning idiocy in order first to survive,

revised Hamlet, are comic creations, and I argue elsewhere in this book that Shylock and Henry V are among them. Hamlet is himself a great comedian, and there are elements of tragic farce in the tragedy *Hamlet*. Yet Hamlet, almost throughout the play, insists upon regarding himself as a failure, indeed as a failed tragic protagonist, which was how he may have begun, for Shakespeare. The all-but-universal illusion or fantasy that somehow Hamlet competes with Shakespeare in writing the play may well reflect Shakespeare's struggle with his recalcitrant protagonist.

What does it do to our vision of Shakespeare if we conceive of him as having begun his writing career with what he and the better sort considered as failed *Hamlet*, and then as having achieved aesthetic apotheosis with another *Hamlet*, a dozen or so years later? In one sense, very little, since we still would have a Shakespeare who had to develop, rather than just unfold. Yet it does make a difference if Shakespeare founded his mature *Hamlet* upon what he judged as an earlier defeat. There is, then, another ghost in the play, the wraith of the first Hamlet. We love too much the partial truth of a purely commercial Shakespeare, who took the cash and let renown go; like his good friend Ben Jonson, Shakespeare understood that the highest art was hard work, so he and Jonson had to challenge the ancients, while yet following in their tracks. Great comedy came fairly easily to Shakespeare, and Falstaff may have descended upon him like a revelation. But *Hamlet* and *King Lear* resulted from fierce revisionary processes, in which an earlier self died and a new self was born. Of that new being, we have the evidence only of Shakespeare's plays after *Hamlet*, a series of achievements from which unmixed comedy has been banished. If Hamlet dies as a sacrifice to transcendent powers, the powers were altogether Shakespeare's own, or rather became his, in exchange for Hamlet's tragic disinterestedness.

"Denmark's a prison" Hamlet says, yet no one else in all Shakespeare seems potentially so free as the crown prince of Denmark. I have remarked already that of all Shakespeare's "free artists of themselves" (Hegel), Hamlet

and then to win back his kingdom, it took a considerable twist to convert him into a tragic hero, and I doubt that Shakespeare, at no more than twenty-five, was capable of so decisive a swerve away from Marlowe. We might envision a revenge history, with strong comic overtones, in which a very young Hamlet outwits his enemies and at last burns down the court at Elsinore, thus ending happily, unlike the usurper Richard III and his fellow Machiavels, Barabas the Jew and Aaron the Moor. But like Richard III and Aaron, this first Hamlet would have owed as much to Barabas as to Tamburlaine. The debt to Barabas would be in a brazen self-delight, shared with the audience. To Tamburlaine, the debt would be a rhetoric, an aggressivity of high language, that itself was a mode of action, a "poetical persuasion" perfectly capable of converting or overcoming enemies.

Richard III and Aaron the Moor retain something of their sinister appeal for us, though they fall short of Barabas, in zest and sublime outrageousness. Perhaps the first Hamlet would have seemed rather problematical to us, since he must have been heroic (as in Belleforest) but with something of the northern uncanniness of the ferocious protagonists of Edda and saga. Tamburlaine's heaven-storming audacity and the cunning of Barabas could have blended quite effectively into that uncanniness. What probably was lacking was not less than nearly everything we associate with Hamlet: the central consciousness that has illuminated us these past four centuries. The final Hamlet is post-Falstaffian, and also comes after Rosalind and Brutus, all precursors of the prince's intellectual power. Hamlet the wily trickster may have had something Puckish about him; the Hamlet who battles supernal powers more than he does Claudius, and who knows that the corruption is within him as much as in the state of Denmark, has progressed well beyond wit and self-delight. Nothing sounds odder than the notion that *Hamlet*, in whatever form, began as Shakespeare's first play, because the enigmatic masterwork of 1601 seems more a finality than a revised point of origin.

Hamlet, as a character, bewilders us because he is so endlessly suggestive. Are there any limits to him? His *inwardness* is his most radical originality; the ever-growing inner self, the dream of an infinite consciousness, has never been more fully portrayed. Shakespeare's great figures, before his

is the freest. Shakespeare's play figuratively is at once bondage and liberation for its tragic protagonist, who sometimes feels he can do nothing at Elsinore, and also fears doing much too much, lest he become a Nero and make Gertrude into Agrippina, at once mother, lover, and victim. There is a bewildering range of freedoms available to Hamlet: he could marry Ophelia, ascend the throne after Claudius if waiting was bearable, cut Claudius down at almost any time, leave for Wittenberg without permission, organize a coup (being the favorite of the people), or even devote himself to botching plays for the theater. Like his father, he could center upon being a soldier, akin to the younger Fortinbras, or conversely he could turn his superb mind to more organized speculation, philosophical or hermetic, than has been his custom. Ophelia describes him, in her lament for his madness, as having been courtier, soldier, and scholar, the exemplar of form and fashion for all Denmark. If *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is "poem unlimited," beyond genre and rules, then its protagonist is character unlimited, beyond even such precursors as the biblical David or the classical Brutus. But how much freedom can be afforded Hamlet by a tragic play? What project can be large enough for him? Ending Claudius does not require the capacity of a Hamlet, and revenge palpably is in any case insufficient motive for the central hero of Western consciousness. What was Shakespeare to do with a new kind of human being, one as authentically unsponsored as Hamlet is?

Nietzsche, in Hamlet's shadow, spoke of the will's revenge upon time, and upon time's: "It was." Such a revenge must revise the self, must grant it what Hart Crane called "an improved infancy." Hamlet's infancy, like everyone else's, could use considerable improvement. The prince evidently will go to his death having kissed Yorick the king's jester, his substitute father, rather more often than he is likely to have kissed Gertrude or Ophelia, let alone his awesome warrior-father. "Take him for all in all," Hamlet's judgment upon his father, implies some considerable reservations, though we do not doubt that Hamlet shall not look upon King Hamlet's like again. Whose son was Hamlet? How far back in time did Gertrude's "incest" and "adultery" begin? Since the play refuses to say (though in its earlier version it may have been less ambiguous), neither we nor Hamlet knows. Claudius

has, in effect, adopted his nephew as his son, even as the Roman emperor Claudius adopted Nero when he married Nero's mother, Agrippina. Is Hamlet, on whatever level, fearful that to kill Claudius is to kill his natural father? That is part of Marc Shell's subtle argument in his *Children of the Earth* (1993): "What is really unique about Hamlet is not his unconscious wish to be patricidal and incestuous, but rather his conscious refusal to actually become patricidal and incestuous." Gertrude dies with Hamlet (and with Claudius and Laertes), but it is remarkable that Hamlet will not kill Claudius until he knows that he himself is dying, and that his mother is already dead.

A. D. Nuttall, amiably dismissing those who insist that Hamlet is not a person but a sequence of images, remarked that "a dramatist faced with an entire audience who austere repressed all inferences and bayed for image-patterns might well despair." Going a touch beyond Nuttall, I would suggest that Shakespeare's art from the 1600-1601 *Hamlet* on to the end depended upon a more radical mode of inference than ever before employed, and not just by dramatists. Hamlet's freedom can be defined as *the freedom to infer*, and we learn this intellectual liberty by attending to Hamlet. Inference in Hamlet's praxis is a sublime mode of surmise, metaphoric because it leaps ahead with every change in circumstance, and inference becomes the audience's way to Hamlet's consciousness. We sound his circumstances, trust his drives more than he does, and we thus surmise his greatness, his difference from us both in degree and in kind. Hamlet is much more than Falstaff and Prince Hal fused into one; he adds to that fusion a kind of inferential negation that Iago and Edmund will turn into the way down and out, but that in Hamlet abandons the will, and so is free.

Hamlet now seems no more fictive than Montaigne; four centuries have established both as authentic personalities, rather in the same way that Falstaff appears to be as historical a reality as Rabelais. Western culture, if it is to survive its current self-hatred, must become only more Hamlet-like. We have no equally powerful and influential image of human cognition pushed to its limits; Plato's Socrates comes closest. Both think too well to survive. Socrates, at least in Montaigne, almost becomes a pragmatic alternative to Jesus. Hamlet's relation to Jesus is enigmatic;

Shakespeare, as always, evades both faith and doubt. Since the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, like the Yahweh of the J Writer, is a literary character now worshiped as God (I speak only pragmatically), we have the riddle that Hamlet can be discussed in some of the ways we might employ to talk about Yahweh, or Socrates, or Jesus. University teachers of what once we called "literature" no longer regard dramatic and literary characters as "real"; this does not matter at all, since common readers and playgoers (and common believers) rightly continue to quest for personality. It is idle to warn them against the errors of identifying with Hamlet, or Jesus, or Yahweh. Shakespeare's most astonishing achievement, however unintended, is to have made available in Hamlet a universal instance of our will-to-identity. Hamlet, to some of us, offers the hope of a purely secular transcendence, but to others he intimates the spirit's survival in more traditional modes. Perhaps Hamlet has replaced Plato's and Montaigne's Socrates as the intellectual's Christ. Auden disagreed, and preferred Falstaff for that role, but I cannot see the defiant Sir John, in love with freedom, as atoning for anyone.

The largest enigma of Hamlet is the aura of transcendence he emanates, even at his most violent, capricious, and insane moments. Some critics have rebelled against Hamlet, insisting that he is, at best, a hero-villain, but they blow the sand against the wind, and the wind blows it back again. You cannot demystify Hamlet; the sinuous enchantment has gone on too long. He has the place among fictive characters that Shakespeare occupies among writers: the center of centers. No actor that I have seen—not even John Gielgud—has usurped the role to the exclusion of all others. Is this centrality only a back-formation of cultural history, or is it implicit in Shakespeare's text? Hamlet and Western self-consciousness have been the same for about the last two centuries of Romantic sensibility. There are many signs that global self-consciousness increasingly identifies with Hamlet, Asia and Africa included. The phenomenon may no longer be cultural, in the sense that rock music and blue jeans constitute international culture. Hamlet, the prince more than the play, has become myth, gossip matured into legend.

As with Falstaff, we can say more aptly what Hamlet is not than what

he is. He ends a quietist rather than a man of active faith, but his passivity itself is a mask for something inexpressible, though it can be suggested. It is not his earlier nihilism, which foregrounds the play, and yet it is hardly a purposiveness, even in playing. The stage, at the close, is strewn with clues as well as corpses. Why does Hamlet care about his posthumous reputation? He is never more passionate than when he commands Horatio to go on living, not for pleasure and despite the pain of existence, only in order to ensure that his prince not bear a wounded name. Not until the end does the audience matter to Hamlet; he needs us to give honor and meaning to his death. His story must be told, and not just to Fortinbras, and it must be reported by Horatio, who alone knows it truly. Does Horatio then understand what we do not? Hamlet, as he dies, loves nobody—not father or mother, Ophelia or Yorick—but he knows that Horatio loves him. The story can only be told by someone who accepts Hamlet totally, beyond judgment. And despite the moral protests of some critics, Hamlet has had his way. It is we who are Horatio, and the world mostly has agreed to love Hamlet, despite his crimes and blunders, despite even his brutal, pragmatically murderous treatment of Ophelia. We forgive Hamlet precisely as we forgive ourselves, though we know we are not Hamlet, since our consciousness cannot extend as far as his does. Yet we worship (in a secular way) this all-but-infinite consciousness; what we have called Romanticism was engendered by Hamlet, though it required two centuries before the prince's self-consciousness became universally prevalent, and almost a third century before Nietzsche insisted that Hamlet possessed "true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth," which is the abyss between mundane reality and the Dionysian rapture of an endlessly ongoing consciousness. Nietzsche was fundamentally right; Horatio is a stoic, Hamlet is not. The audience, like its surrogate, Horatio, is more or less Christian, and perhaps far more stoic than not. Hamlet, toward the close, employs some Christian vocabulary, but he swerves from Christian comfort into a Dionysian consciousness, and his New Testament citations become strong misreadings of both Protestant and Catholic understandings of the text. Had he but time, Hamlet says, he could tell us—what? Death intervenes, but we receive the clue in his next words: "Let it be."

"Let be" has become Hamlet's refrain, and has a quietistic force uncanny in its suggestiveness. He will not unpack his heart with words, since only his thoughts, not their ends, are his own. And yet there is something far from dead in his heart, something ready or willing, strong beyond the weakness of flesh. When Jesus spoke kindly to the sleep-prone Simon Peter, he did not say that the readiness was all, since Jesus's stance was for Yahweh alone, and only Yahweh was all. For Hamlet there is nothing but the readiness, which translates as a willingness to let everything be, not out of trust in Yahweh but through a confidence in a final consciousness. That consciousness sets aside both Jesus's Pharisaeic trust in the resurrection of the body, and also the skeptical reality principle of annihilation. "Let be" is a setting aside, neither denial nor affirmation. What Hamlet could tell us is his achieved awareness of what he himself represents; a dramatist's apprehension of what it means to incarnate the tragedy one cannot compose.

Falstaff, in Shakespeare's lifetime, seems to have been more popular even than Hamlet; the centuries since have preferred the prince not only to the fat knight but to every other fictive being. Hamlet's universalism seems our largest clue to the enigma of his personality; the less he cares for anyone, including the audience, the more we care for him. It seems the world's oddest love affair; Jesus returns our love, and yet Hamlet cannot. His blocked affections, diagnosed by Dr. Freud as Oedipal, actually reflect a transcendental quietism for which, happily, we lack a label. Hamlet is beyond us, beyond everyone else in Shakespeare or in literature, unless indeed you agree with me in finding the Yahweh of the J Writer and the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark to be literary characters. When we reach Lear, we understand that Hamlet's beyondness has to do with the mystery of kingship, so dear to Shakespeare's patron, James I. But we have trouble seeing Hamlet as a potential king, and few playgoers and readers tend to agree with Fortinbras's judgment that the prince would have joined Hamlet Senior and Fortinbras as another great royal basher of heads. Clearly, Hamlet's sublimity is a question of personality; four centuries have so understood it. Au-

gust Wilhelm von Schlegel accurately observed in 1809 that "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else"—including God and language, I would add. Of course there is Horatio, whom Hamlet notoriously overpraises, but Horatio seems to be there to represent the audience's love for Hamlet. Horatio is our bridge to the beyond, to that curious but unmistakable negative transcendence that concludes the tragedy.

Hamlet's linguistic skepticism coexists with a span and control of language greater even than Falstaff's, because its range is the widest we have ever encountered in a single work. It is always a shock to be reminded that Shakespeare used more than 21,000 separate words, while Racine used fewer than 2,000. Doubtless some German scholar has counted up just how many of the 21,000 words Hamlet had in his vocabulary, but we scarcely need to know the sum. The play is Shakespeare's longest because Hamlet speaks so much of it, and I frequently wish it even longer, so that Hamlet could have spoken on even more matters than he already covers. Falstaff, monarch of wit, nevertheless is something short of an authorial consciousness in his own right; Hamlet bursts through that barrier, and not just when he revises *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*, but almost invariably as he comments upon all things between earth and heaven. C. Wilson Knight admirably characterized Hamlet as death's ambassador to us; no other literary character speaks with the authority of the uncovered country, except for Mark's Jesus. Harry Levin pioneered in analyzing the copiousness of Hamlet's language, which utilizes the full and unique resources of English syntax and diction. Other critics have emphasized the mood shifts of Hamlet's linguistic decorum, with its startling leaps from high to low; its mutability of cognition and of affect. I myself always am struck by the varied and perpetual ways in which Hamlet keeps *overhearing himself speak*. This is not just a question of rhetoric or word consciousness; it is the essence of Shakespeare's greatest originalities in the representation of character, of thinking, and of personality. Ethos, Logos, Pathos—the triple basis of rhetoric, psychology, and cosmology—all bewilder us in Hamlet, because he changes with every self-overhearing.

It is a valuable commonplace that *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is an overwhelmingly theatrical play. Hamlet himself is even more self-

consciously theatrical than Falstaff tends to be. Falstaff is more consciently attentive to his audience, both on stage and off, and yet Falstaff, though he vastly amuses himself, plays less to himself than Hamlet does. This difference may stem from Falstaff's greater playfulness; like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Falstaff is *homo ludens*, while anxiety dominates in Hamlet's realm. Yet the difference seems still greater; the counter-Machiavel Hamlet could almost be called an anti-Marlovian character, whereas Falstaff simply renders Marlowe's mode irrelevant. My favorite Marlovian hero-villain, Barabas, Jew of Malta, is a self-delighting fantastic, but being a cartoon, like nearly all Marlovian protagonists, he frequently speaks as though his words were wrapped up in a cartoonist's balloon floating above him. Hamlet is something radically new, even for and in Shakespeare: his theatricality is dangerously nihilistic because it is so paradoxically *natural* to him. More even than his parody Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*, Hamlet is a walking mousetrap, embodying the anxious expectations that are incarnating the malaise of Elsinore. Iago may be nothing if not critical, Hamlet is criticism itself, the theatrical interpreter of his own story. With a cunning subtler than any other dramatist's, before or since, Shakespeare does not let us be certain as to just which lines Hamlet himself has inserted in order to revise *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet speaks of writing some twelve or sixteen lines, but we come to suspect that there are rather more, and that they include the extraordinary speech in which the Player King tells us that ethos is not the daemon, that character is not fate but accident, and that eros is the purest accident. We know that Shakespeare acted the ghost of Hamlet's father; it would have been expedient if the same actor rendered the part of the Player King, another representation of the dead father. There would be a marvelous twist to Shakespeare himself intoning lines that his Hamlet can be expected to have written:

Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth but poor validity,
Which now, the fruit unripe, sticks on the tree,
But fall unshaken when they mellow be.
Most necessary 'tis that we forget

To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt.
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.
Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament;
Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident.
This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change,
For 'tis a question left us yet to prove,
Whether love lead fortune, or else fortune love.
The great man down, you mark his favorite flies;
The poor advanc'd makes friends of enemies;
And hitherto doth love on fortune tend:
For who not needs shall never lack a friend,
And who in want a hollow friend doth try
Directly seasons him his enemy.
But orderly to end where I begun,
Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown:
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

[III.ii.183-209]

How any audience could take in these 26 closely packed lines of a psychologized metaphysics through the ear alone, I scarcely know. They are as dense and weighted as any passage in Shakespeare; the plot of *The Mousetrap* does not require them, and I assume that Hamlet composed them as his key signature, as what that other melancholy Dane, Kierkegaard, called "The Point of View of My Work as an Author." They center upon their final lines:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown:
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

Our "devices" are our intended purposes, products of our wills, but our fates are antithetical to our characters, and what we think to do has no relation to our thoughts' "ends," where "ends" means both conclusions and harvests. Desire and destiny are contraries, and all thought thus must undo itself. Hamlet's nihilism is indeed transcendent, surpassing what can exist in the personages of Dostoevsky, or in Nietzsche's forebodings that what we can find words for must be already dead in our hearts, and that only what cannot be said is worth the saying. Perhaps *that* is why Shakespeare bothered Wittgenstein so much. Rather oddly, Wittgenstein compared Shakespeare to dreams: all wrong, absurd, composite, things *aren't like that*, except by the law that belonged to Shakespeare alone, or to dreams alone. "He is *not* true to life," Wittgenstein insisted of Shakespeare, while evading the truth that Shakespeare had made us see and think what we could not have seen or thought without him. Hamlet emphatically is *not* true to life, but more than any other fictive being Hamlet makes us think what we could not think without him. Wittgenstein would have denied this, but that was his motive for so distrusting Shakespeare: Hamlet, more than any philosopher, actually makes us see the world in other ways, deeper ways, than we may want to see it. Wittgenstein wants to believe that Shakespeare, as a creator of language, made a heterocosm, a dream. But the truth is that Shakespeare's cosmos became Wittgenstein's and ours, and we cannot say of Hamlet's Elsinore or Falstaff's Eastcheap that things aren't like that. They *are* like that, but we need Hamlet or Falstaff to illuminate the "like that," to more than flesh out the similes. The question becomes rather: Is life true to Hamlet, or to Falstaff? At its worst, sometimes, and at its best, sometimes, life can or may be, so that the real question becomes, is Wittgenstein true to Hamlet, or Bloom to Falstaff?

I grant that you don't need to be a formalist or a historicist to assert that being true to Hamlet or to Falstaff is a nonsensical quest. If you read or attend Shakespeare in order to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood, then doubtless I am being nonsensical, a kind of Don Quixote of literary criticism. The late Anthony Burgess, in his *Nothing Like the Sun*, a wonderful novel about Shakespeare, has the Bard make a fine, somewhat Nietzschean remark: "Tragedy is a goat and comedy a village Priapus and

dying is the word that links both." Hamlet and Falstaff would have said it better, but the sexual play on *dying* is redemptive of the prose, and we are well reminded that Shakespeare writ no genre, and used poor Polonius to scorn those who did. Tragedy, Aldous Huxley once essayed, must omit the whole truth, yet Shakespeare comes close to refuting Huxley. John Webster wrote revenge tragedy; Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. There are no personalities in Webster, though nearly everyone manages to die with something like Shakespearean eloquence. Life must be true to Shakespeare if personality is to have value, is to *be* value. Value and pathos do not come easily with each other, yet who but Shakespeare has reconciled them so incessantly? What, after all, is personality? A dictionary would say the quality that renders one a person, not a thing or an animal, or else an assemblage of characteristics that makes one somehow distinctive. That is not very helpful, particularly in regard to Hamlet or Falstaff, mere roles for actors, as formalists tell us, and perhaps players fall in love with roles, but do we, if we never mount a stage? What do we mean by "the personality of Jesus," whether we think of the Gospel of Mark or of the American Jesus? Or what might we mean by "the personality of God," whether we think of the Yahweh of the J Writer or of the American God, so notoriously fond of Republicans and of neo-conservatives? I submit that we know better what it is we mean when we speak of the personality of Hamlet as opposed to the personality of our best friend, or the personality of some favorite celebrity. Shakespeare persuades us that we know something in Hamlet that is the best and innermost part of him, something uncreated that goes back farther than our earliest memories of ourselves. There is a breath or spark to Hamlet that is his principle of individuation, a recognizable identity whose evidence is his singularity of language, and yet not so much language as diction, a cognitive choice between words, a choice whose drive always is toward freedom: from Elsinore, from the Ghost, from the world. Like Falstaff, Hamlet implicitly defines personality as a mode of freedom, more of a matrix of freedom than a product of freedom. Falstaff, though, as I intimated, is largely free of the censorious superego, while Hamlet in the first four acts suffers very terribly from it. In the beautiful metamorphosis of purgation that is Act V, Hamlet almost is freed

from what is over or above the ego, though at the price of dying well before his death.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's Conradian narrator, Nick Carraway, observes that personality is a series of successful gestures. Walter Pater would have liked that description, but its limits are severe. Perhaps Jay Gatsby exemplifies Carraway's definition, but who could venture that Hamlet's personality comprises a series of successful gestures? William Hazlitt, as I've said, cast his own vote for inwardness: "It is we who are Hamlet." Hamlet's stage, Hazlitt implied, is the theater of mind, and Hamlet's gestures therefore are of the inmost self, very nearly everyone's inmost self. It was in confronting this baffling representation, at once universal and solitary, that T. S. Eliot rendered his astonishing judgment that the play was an aesthetic failure. I assume that Eliot, with his own wounds, reacted to Hamlet's sickness of the spirit, certainly the most enigmatic malaise in all of Western literature. Hamlet's own poetic metaphysics, as we have seen, is that character and fate are antithetical, and yet, at the play's conclusion, we are likely to believe that the prince's character was his fate. Do we have a drama of the personality's freedom, or of the character's fate? The Player King says that all is accident; Hamlet in Act V hints that there are no accidents. Whom are we to believe? The Hamlet of Act V appears to have cured himself, and affirms that the readiness or willingness is all. I interpret that as meaning personality is all, once personality has purged itself into a second birth. And yet Hamlet has little desire to survive.

The canonical sublime depends upon a strangeness that assimilates us even as we largely fail to assimilate it. What is the stance toward life, the attitude, of the Hamlet who returns from the sea at the start of Act V? Hamlet himself veers dizzily between being everything and nothing, an alternation that haunts our lives as much as it does our literature. Like Shakespeare, Hamlet takes up no stance, which is why comparisons of either to Montaigne have been so misleading. We know what we mean when we speak of Montaigne's skepticism, but we tend to mean both too much and too little when our emphasis is on Hamlet's skepticism or Shakespeare's. There is no absolutely accurate term (or terms) for Hamlet's attitudes toward life and death in Act V. One can try them all out—stoicism, skepticism, quietism, nihilism—but they don't quite work. I tend to favor

"disinterestedness," but then find I can define the word only with reference to Hamlet. Quietism, half a century after *Hamlet*, meant a certain Spanish mode of religious mysticism, but Hamlet is no mystic, no stoic, and hardly a Christian at all. He goes into the final slaughter scene in the spirit of a suicide, and prevents Horatio's suicide with a selfish awareness that Horatio's felicity is being postponed in order that the prince's own story can be told and retold. And yet he cares for his reputation as he dies; his "wounded name," if Horatio does not live to clear it, is his final anxiety. Since he has murdered Polonius, driven Ophelia to madness and to suicide, and quite gratuitously sent the wretched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off to execution, his anxiety would seem justified, except that in fact he has no consciousness of culpability. His fear of a "wounded name" is one more enigma, and hardly refers to the deaths of Claudius and of Laertes, let alone of his mother, for whom his parting salute is the shockingly cold "Wretched Queen, adieu." His concern is properly theatrical; it is for us, the audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act . . .

That seems to me a playwright's concern, proper to the revisionist author of *The Mousetrap*. Joyce's Stephen, in the Library scene of *Ulysses*, scarcely distinguishes between Shakespeare and Hamlet, and as I have noted, Richard Ellmann assured us that Stephen's fantasia remained always Joyce's serious reading of the play. Hamlet himself seems quite free of the audience's shock that so vast a consciousness should expire in so tangled and absurd a mesh of poisoned sword and poisoned cup. It outrages our sensibility that the Western hero of intellectual consciousness dies in this grossly inadequate context, yet it does not outrage Hamlet, who has lived through much too much already. We mourn a great personality, perhaps the greatest; Hamlet has ceased to mourn in the interval between Acts IV and V. The profoundest mysteries of his personality are involved in the nature of his universal mourning, and in his self-cure. I will not bother with Oedipal tropes here, even to dismiss them, having devoted a chapter to just such a dismissal in a book on the Western canon, where I gave a Shake-

spearean reading of Freud. Hamlet's spiritual despair transcends a father's murder, a mother's hasty remarriage, and all the miasma of Elsinore's corruption, even as his apotheosis in Act V far transcends any passing of the Oedipus complex. The crucial question becomes, How ought we to characterize Hamlet's melancholia in the first four acts, and how do we explain his escape from it into a high place in Act V, a place at last entirely his own, and something like a radically new mode of secular transcendence?

Dr. Johnson thought that the particular excellence of *Hamlet* as a play was its "variety," which seems to me truer of the prince than of the drama. What most distinguishes Hamlet's personality is its metamorphic nature: his changes are constant, and continue even after the great sea change that precedes Act V. We have the perpetual puzzle that the most intensely theatrical personality in Shakespeare centers a play notorious for its anxious expectations, for its incessant delays that are more than parodies of an endlessly delayed revenge. Hamlet is a great player, like Falstaff and Cleopatra, but his director, the dramatist, seems to punish the protagonist for getting out of hand, for being Hobgoblin run off with the garland of Apollo, perhaps for having entertained even more doubts than his creator had. And if Hamlet is imaginatively sick, then so is everyone else in the play, with the possible exception of the audience's surrogate, Horatio. When we first encounter him, Hamlet is a university student who is not being permitted to return to his studies. He does not appear to be more than twenty years old, yet in Act V he is revealed to be at least thirty, after a passage of a few weeks at most. And yet none of this matters: he is always both the youngest and the oldest personality in the drama, in the deepest sense, he is older than Falstaff. Consciousness itself has aged him, the catastrophic consciousness of the spiritual disease of his world, which he has internalized, and which he does not wish to be called upon to remedy, if only because the true cause of his changeability is his drive toward freedom. Critics have agreed, for centuries now, that Hamlet's unique appeal is that no other protagonist of high tragedy still seems paradoxically so free. In Act V, he is barely still in the play; like Whitman's "real me" or "me myself" the final Hamlet is both in and out of the game while watching and wondering at it. But if his sea change has cured him of the Elsinore illness, what drives him back to the court and to the final catastrophe? We feel that

if the Ghost were to attempt a third appearance in Act V, Hamlet would thrust it aside, his obsession with the dead father is definitely over, and while he still regards his maligned mother as a whore, he has worn out his interest there also. Purged, he allows himself to be set up for Claudius's refined, Italianate version of *The Mousetrap*, on the stated principle of "Let be." Perhaps the best comment is Wallace Stevens's variation: "Let be be finale of seem." And yet once more, we must return to the Elsinore illness, and to the medicine of the sea voyage.

Every student of the imagery of the play *Hamlet* has brooded on the imposthume, or abscess, which Robert Browning was to pun on brilliantly with his "the imposthume I prick to relieve thee of,—Vanity." Hamlet himself, precursor of so many Browning *personae*, may be punning on the abscess as imposture:

This is th'imposthume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies.

Elsinore's disease is anywhere's, anytime's. Something is rotten in every state, and if your sensibility is like Hamlet's, then finally you will not tolerate it. Hamlet's tragedy is at last the tragedy of personality: The charismatic is compelled to a physician's authority despite himself; Claudius is merely an accident; Hamlet's only persuasive enemy is Hamlet himself. When Shakespeare broke away from Marlovian cartooning, and so became Shakespeare, he prepared the abyss of Hamlet for himself. Not less than everything in himself, Hamlet also knows himself to be nothing in himself. He can and does repair to that nothing at sea, and he returns disinterested, or nihilistic, or quietistic, whichever you may prefer. But he dies with great concern for his wounded name, as if reentering the maelstrom of Elsinore partly undoes his great change. But only in part: the transcendental music of cognition rises up again in a celebratory strain at the close of Hamlet's tragedy, achieving the secular triumph of "The rest is silence." What is not at rest, or what abides before the silence, is the idiosyncratic value of Hamlet's personality, for which another term is "the canonical sublime."