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O T H E L L O

The character of Iago . . . belongs to a class of characters common to Shakespeare, and at the same time peculiar to him—namely, that of great intellectual activity, accompanied with a total want of moral principle, and therefore displaying itself at the constant expense of others, and seeking to confound the practical distinctions of right and wrong, by referring them to some overstrained standard of speculative refinement.—Some persons, more nice than wise, have thought the whole of the character of Iago unnatural. Shakespeare, who was quite as good a philosopher as he was a poet, thought otherwise. He knew that the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, was natural to man. He would know this as well or better than if it had been demonstrated to him by a logical diagram, merely from seeing children paddle in the dirt, or kill flies for sport. We might ask those who think the character of Iago not natural, why they go to see it performed, but from the interest it excites, the sharper edge which it sets on their curiosity and imagination? Why do we go to see tragedies in general? Why do we always read the accounts in the newspapers of dreadful fires and shocking murders, but for the same reason? Why do so many persons frequent executions and trials, or why do the lower classes almost universally take delight in barbarous sports and cruelty to animals, but because there is a natural tendency in the mind to strong excite-

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ment, a desire to have its faculties roused and stimulated to the utmost? Whenever this principle is not under the restraint of humanity, or the sense of moral obligation, there are no excesses to which it will not of itself give rise, without the assistance of any other motive, either of passion or self-interest. Iago is only an extreme instance of the kind; that is, of diseased intellectual activity, with an almost perfect indifference to moral good or evil, or rather with a preference of the latter, because it falls more in with his favourite propensity, gives greater zest to his thoughts, and scope to his actions.—Be it observed, too, (for the sake of those who are for squaring all human actions by the maxims of Rochefoucault), that he is quite or nearly as indifferent to his own fate as to that of others; that he runs all risks for a trifling and doubtful advantage, and is himself the dupe and victim of his ruling passion—an incorrigible love of mischief—an insatiable craving after action of the most difficult and dangerous kind. Our "Ancient" is a philosopher, who fancies that a lie that kills has more point in it than an alliteration or an antithesis; who thinks a fatal experiment on the peace of a family a better thing than watching the palpitations in the heart of a flea in an air-pump; who plots the ruin of his friends as an exercise for his understanding, and stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*.

—William Hazlitt

Since it is Othello's tragedy, even if it is Iago's play (not even Hamlet or Edmund seem to compose so much of their dramas), we need to restore some sense of Othello's initial dignity and glory. A bad modern tradition of criticism that goes from T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis through current New Historicism has divested the hero of his splendor, in effect doing Iago's work so that, in Othello's words, "Othello's occupation's gone." Since 1919 or so, generals have lost esteem among the elite, though not always among the groundlings. Shakespeare himself subjected chivalric valor to the superb comic critique of Falstaff, who did not leave intact very much of the nostalgia for military prowess. But Falstaff, although he still inhabited a corner of Hamlet's consciousness, is absent from *Othello*.

The clown scarcely comes on stage in *Othello*, though the Fool in *Lear*, the drunken porter at the gate in *Macbeth*, and the fig-and-asp seller in *Antony and Cleopatra* maintain the persistence of tragicomedy in Shakespeare after *Hamlet*. Only *Othello* and *Coriolanus* exclude all laughter, as if to protect two great captains from the Falstaffian perspective. When Othello, doubtless the fastest sword in his profession, wants to stop a street fight, he need only utter the one massive and menacingly monosyllabic line "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."

To see Othello in his unfallen splendor, within the play, becomes a little difficult, because he so readily seems to become Iago's dupe. Shakespeare, as before in *Henry IV, Part One*, and directly after in *King Lear*, gives us the responsibility of foregrounding by inference. As the play opens, Iago assures his gull, Roderigo, that he hates Othello, and he states the only true motive for his hatred, which is what Milton's Satan calls "a Sense of Injured Merit." Satan (as Milton did not wish to know) is the legitimate son of Iago, begot by Shakespeare upon Milton's Muse. Iago, long Othello's "ancient" (his ensign, or flag officer, the third-in-command), has been passed over for promotion, and Cassio has become Othello's lieutenant. No reason is given for Othello's decision; his regard for "honest Iago," bluff veteran of Othello's "big wars," remains undiminished. Indeed, Iago's position as flag officer, vowed to die rather than let Othello's colors be captured in battle, testifies both to Othello's trust and to Iago's former devotion. Paradoxically, that quasi-religious worship of the war god Othello by his true believer Iago can be inferred as the cause of Iago's having been passed over. Iago, as Harold Goddard finely remarked, is always at war; he is a moral pyromaniac setting fire to all of reality. Othello, the skilled professional who maintains the purity of arms by sharply dividing the camp of war from that of peace, would have seen in his brave and zealous ancient someone who could not replace him were he to be killed or wounded. Iago cannot stop fighting, and so cannot be preferred to Cassio, who is relatively inexperienced (a kind of staff officer) but who is courteous and diplomatic and knows the limits of war.

Sound as Othello's military judgment clearly was, he did not know Iago, a very free artist of himself. The catastrophe that foregrounds Shake-

speare's play is what I would want to call the Fall of Iago, which sets the paradigm for Satan's Fall in Milton. Milton's God, like Othello, pragmatically demotes his most ardent devotee, and the wounded Satan rebels. Unable to bring down the Supreme Being, Satan ruins Adam and Eve instead, but the subtler Iago can do far better, because his only God is Othello himself, whose fall becomes the appropriate revenge for Iago's evidently sickening loss of being at rejection, with consequences including what may be sexual impotence, and what certainly is a sense of nullity, of no longer being what one was. Iago is Shakespeare's largest study in ontotheological absence, a sense of the void that follows on from Hamlet's, and that directly precedes Edmund's more restricted but even more affectless excursion into the uncanniness of nihilism. Othello was everything to Iago, because war was everything; passed over, Iago is nothing, and in warring against Othello, his war is against ontology.

Tragic drama is not necessarily metaphysical, but Iago, who says he is nothing if not critical, also is nothing if not metaphysical. His grand boast "I am not what I am" deliberately repeals St. Paul's "By the grace of God I am what I am." With Iago, Shakespeare is enabled to return to the Machiavel, yet now not to another Aaron the Moor or Richard III, both versions of Barabas, Jew of Malta, but to a character light-years beyond Marlowe. The self-delight of Barabas, Aaron, and Richard III in their own villainy is childlike compared with Iago's augmenting pride in his achievement as psychologist, dramatist, and aesthete (the first modern one) as he contemplates the total ruin of the war god Othello, reduced to murderous incoherence. Iago's accomplishment in revenge tragedy far surpasses Hamlet's revision of *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*. Contemplate Iago's achievement: his unaided genius has limned this night piece, and it was his best. He will die under torture, silently, but he will have left a mutilated reality as his monument.

Auden, in one of his most puzzling critical essays, found in Iago the apotheosis of the practical joker, which I find explicable only by realizing that Auden's Iago was Verdi's (that is, Boito's), just as Auden's Falstaff was operatic, rather than dramatic. One should not try to restrict Iago's genius; he is a great artist, and no joker. Milton's Satan is a failed theologian and

a great poet, while Iago shines equally as nihilistic death-of-God theologian and as advanced dramatic poet. Shakespeare endowed only Hamlet, Falstaff, and Rosalind with more wit and intellect than he gave to Iago and Edmund, while in aesthetic sensibility, only Hamlet overgoes Iago. Grant Iago his Ahab-like obsession—Othello is the Moby-Dick who must be harpooned—and Iago's salient quality rather outrageously is his freedom. A great improviser, he works with gusto and mastery of timing, adjusting his plot to openings as they present themselves. If I were a director of *Othello*, I would instruct my Iago to manifest an ever-growing wonder and confidence in the diabolic art. Unlike Barabas and his progeny, Iago is an inventor, an experimenter always willing to try modes heretofore unknown. Auden, in a more inspired moment, saw Iago as a scientist rather than a practical joker. Satan, exploring the untracked Abyss in *Paradise Lost*, is truly in Iago's spirit. Who before Iago, in literature or in life, perfected the arts of disinformation, disorientation, and derangement? All these combine in Iago's grand program of uncreation, as Othello is returned to original chaos, to the Tohu and Bohu from which we came.

Even a brief glance at Shakespeare's source in Cinthio reveals the extent to which Iago is essentially Shakespeare's radical invention, rather than an adaptation of the wicked Ensign in the original story. Cinthio's Ensign falls passionately in love with Desdemona, but wins no favor with her, since she loves the Moor. The unnamed Ensign decides that his failure is due to Desdemona's love for an unnamed Captain (Shakespeare's Cassio), and so he determines to remove this supposed rival, by inducing jealousy in the Moor and then plotting with him to murder both Desdemona and the Captain. In Cinthio's version, the Ensign beats Desdemona to death, while the Moor watches approvingly. It is only afterward, when the Moor repents and desperately misses his wife, that he dismisses the Ensign, who thus is first moved to hatred against his general. Shakespeare transmuted the entire story by giving it, and Iago, a different starting point, the foreground in which Iago has been passed over for promotion. The ontological shock of that rejection is Shakespeare's original invention and is the trauma that truly creates Iago, no mere wicked Ensign but rather a genius of evil who has engendered himself from a great Fall.

Milton's Satan owes so much to Iago that we can be tempted to read the Christian Fall of Adam into Othello's catastrophe, and to find Lucifer's decline into Satan a clue to Iago's inception. But though Shakespeare's Moor has been baptized, *Othello* is no more a Christian drama than *Hamlet* was a doctrinal tragedy of guilt, sin, and pride. Iago playfully invokes a "Divinity of Hell," and yet he is no mere diabolist. He is War Everlasting (as Goddard sensed) and inspires in me the same uncanny awe and fright that Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden arouses each time I reread *Blood Meridian, Or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). The Judge, though based on an historic filibuster who massacred and scalped Indians in the post-Civil War Southwest and in Mexico, is War Incarnate. A reading of his formidable pronouncements provides a theology-in-little of Iago's enterprise, and betrays perhaps a touch of Iago's influence upon *Blood Meridian*, an American descendant of the Shakespeare-intoxicated Melville and Faulkner. "War," says the Judge, "is the truest form of divination . . . War is god," because war is the supreme game of will against will. Iago is the genius of will reborn from war's slighting of the will. To have been passed over for Cassio is to have one's will reduced to nullity, and the self's sense of power violated. Victory for the will therefore demands a restoration of power, and power for Iago can only be war's power: to maim, to kill, to humiliate, to destroy the godlike in another, the war god who betrayed his worship and his trust. Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden is Iago come again when he proclaims war as the game that defines us:

Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the moon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day. He loves games? Let him play for stakes.

In Iago, what was the religion of war, when he worshiped Othello as its god, has now become the game of war, to be played everywhere except

upon the battlefield. The death of belief becomes the birth of invention, and the passed-over officer becomes the poet of street brawls, stabbings in the dark, disinformation, and above all else, the uncreation of Othello, the sparagmos of the great captain-general so that he can be returned to the original abyss, the chaos that Iago equates with the Moor's African origins. That is not Othello's view of his heritage (or Shakespeare's), but Iago's interpretation wins, or almost wins, since I will argue that Othello's much-maligned suicide speech is something very close to a recovery of dignity and coherence, though not of lost greatness. Iago, forever beyond Othello's understanding, is not beyond ours, because we are more like Iago than we resemble Othello; Iago's views on war, on the will, and on the aesthetics of revenge inaugurate our own pragmatics of understanding the human.

We cannot arrive at a just estimate of Othello if we undervalue Iago, who would be formidable enough to undo most of us if he emerged out of his play into our lives. Othello is a great soul hopelessly outclassed in intellect and drive by Iago. Hamlet, as A. C. Bradley once observed, would have disposed of Iago very readily. In a speech or two, Hamlet would discern Iago for what he was, and then would drive Iago to suicide by lighting parody and mockery. Falstaff and Rosalind would do much the same, Falstaff boisterously and Rosalind gently. Only humor could defend against Iago, which is why Shakespeare excludes all comedy from Othello, except for Iago's saturnine hilarity. Even there, a difference emerges; Barabas and his Shakespearean imitators share their triumphalism with the audience, whereas Iago, at the top of his form, seems to be sending us postcards from the volcano, as remote from us as he is from all his victims. "You come next," something in him implies, and we wince before him. "With all his poetic gift, he has no poetic weakness," Swinburne said of Iago. The prophet of Resentment, Iago presages Smerdyakov, Svidrigailov, and Stavrogin in Dostoevsky, and all the ascetics of the spirit deplored by Nietzsche.

Yet he is so much more than that, among all literary villains, he is by merit raised to a bad eminence that seems unsurpassable. His only near-rival, Edmund, partly repents while dying, in a gesture more enigmatic than Iago's final election of silence. Great gifts of intellect and art alone could not bring Iago to his heroic villainy; he has a negative grace beyond

cognition and perceptiveness. The public sphere gave Marlowe his Guise in *The Massacre at Paris*, but the Guise is a mere imp of evil when juxtaposed to Iago. The Devil himself—in Milton, Marlowe, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Melville, or any other writer—cannot compete with Iago, whose American descendants range from Hawthorne's Chillingworth and Melville's Claggart through Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger on to Nathanael West's Shrike and Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden. Modern literature has not surpassed Iago; he remains the perfect Devil of the West, superb as psychologist, playwright, dramatic critic, and negative theologian. Shaw, jealous of Shakespeare, argued that "the character defies all consistency," being at once "a coarse blackguard" and also refined and subtle. Few have agreed with Shaw, and those who question Iago's persuasiveness tend also to find Othello a flawed representation. A. C. Bradley, an admirable critic always, named Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, and Cleopatra as Shakespeare's "most wonderful" characters. If I could add Rosalind and Macbeth to make a sixfold wonder, then I would agree with Bradley, for these are Shakespeare's grandest inventions, and all of them take human nature to some of its limits, without violating those limits. Falstaff's wit, Hamlet's ambivalent yet charismatic intensity, Cleopatra's mobility of spirit find their rivals in Macbeth's proleptic imagination, Rosalind's control of all perspectives, and Iago's genius for improvisation. Neither merely coarse nor merely subtle, Iago constantly re-creates his own personality and character: "I am not what I am." Those who question how a twenty-eight-year-old professional soldier could harbor so sublimely negative a genius might just as soon question how the thirty-nine-year-old professional actor, Shakespeare, could imagine so convincing a "demi-devil" (as Othello finally terms Iago). We think that Shakespeare abandoned acting just before he composed *Othello*; he seems to have played his final role in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Is there some link between giving up the player's part and the invention of Iago? Between *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Othello*, Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*, a farewell to stage comedy. *Measure for Measure's* enigmatic Duke Vincentio, as I have observed, seems to have some Iago-like qualities, and may also relate to Shakespeare's release from the burden of performance. Clearly a versatile and competent actor, but never a leading

one, Shakespeare perhaps celebrates a new sense of the actor's energies in the improvisations of Vincentio and Iago.

Bradley, in exalting Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, and Cleopatra, may have been responding to the highly conscious theatricalism that is fused into their roles. Witty in himself, Falstaff provokes wit in others through his performances. Hamlet, analytical tragedian, discourses with everyone he encounters, driving them to self-revelation. Cleopatra is always on stage—living, loving, and dying—and whether she ceases to perform, when alone with Antony, we will never know, because Shakespeare never shows them alone together, save once, and that is very brief. Perhaps Iago, before the Fall of his rejection by Othello, had not yet discovered his own dramatic genius; it seems the largest pragmatic consequence of his Fall, once his sense of nullity has passed through an initial trauma. When we first hear him, at the start of the play, he already indulges his actor's freedom:

O, sir, content you!
 I follow him to serve my turn upon him.
 We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
 Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark
 Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
 That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
 Wears out his time much like his master's ass,
 For nought but provender, and, when he's old, cashiered.
 Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are
 Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
 And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by them, and, when they have lined their coats,
 Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul
 And such a one do I profess myself.

[I.i.40–54]

Only the actor, Iago assures us, possesses "some soul"; the rest of us wear our hearts upon our sleeves. Yet this is only the start of a player's ca-

reer; at this early point, Iago is merely out for mischief, rousing up Brabantio, Desdemona's father, and conjuring up street brawls. He knows that he is exploring a new vocation, but he has little sense as yet of his own genius. Shakespeare, while Iago gathers force, centers instead upon giving us a view of Othello's precarious greatness, and of Desdemona's surpassing human worth. Before turning to the Moor and his bride, I wish further to foreground Iago, who requires quite as much inferential labor as do Hamlet and Falstaff.

Richard III and Edmund have fathers; Shakespeare gives us no antecedents for Iago. We can surmise the ancient's previous relationship to his superb captain. What can we infer of his marriage to Emilia? There is Iago's curious mistake in his first mention of Cassio: "A fellow almost damned in a fair wife." This seems not to be Shakespeare's error but a token of Iago's obsessive concern with marriage as a damnation, since Bianca is plainly Cassio's whore and not his wife. Emilia, no better than she should be, will be the ironic instrument that undoes Iago's triumphalism, at the cost of her life. As to the relationship between this singular couple, Shakespeare allows us some pungent hints. Early in the play, Iago tells us what neither he nor we believe, not because of any shared regard for Emilia but because Othello is too grand for this:

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
 He's done my office. I know not if't be true,
 But I for mere suspicion in that kind
 Will do as if for surety.

[I.iii.386–89]

Later, Iago parenthetically expresses the same "mere suspicion" of Cassio: "For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too." We can surmise that Iago, perhaps made impotent by his fury at being passed over for promotion, is ready to suspect Emilia with every male in the play, while not particularly caring one way or the other. Emilia, comforting Desdemona after Othello's initial rage of jealousy against his blameless wife, sums up her own marriage also:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man.
 They are all but stomachs, and we all but food:
 They eat us hungerly, and when they are full
 They belch us.

[III.iv.104-7]

That is the erotic vision of *Troilus and Cressida*, carried over into a greater realm, but not a less rancid one, because the world of *Othello* belongs to Iago. It is not persuasive to say that Othello is a normal man and Iago abnormal; Iago is the genius of his time and place, and is all will. His passion for destruction is the only creative passion in the play. Such a judgment is necessarily very somber, but then this is surely Shakespeare's most painful play. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are even darker, but theirs is the darkness of the negative sublime. The only sublimity in *Othello* is Iago's. Shakespeare's conception of him was so definitive that the revisions made between the Quarto's text and the Folio's enlarge and sharpen our sense primarily of Emilia, and secondly of Othello and Desdemona, but hardly touch Iago. Shakespeare rightly felt no need to revise Iago, already the perfection of malign will and genius for hatred. There can be no question concerning Iago's primacy in the play: he speaks eight soliloquies, Othello only three.

Edmund outthinks and so outplots everyone else in *King Lear*, and yet is destroyed by the recalcitrant endurance of Edgar, who develops from credulous victim into inexorable revenger. Iago, even more totally the master of his play, is at last undone by Emilia, whom Shakespeare revised into a figure of intrepid outrage, willing to die for the sake of the murdered Desdemona's good name. Shakespeare had something of a tragic obsession with the idea of a good name living on after his protagonists' deaths. Hamlet, despite saying that no man can know anything of whatever he leaves behind him, nevertheless exhorts Horatio to survive so as to defend what might become of his prince's wounded name. We will hear Othello trying to recuperate some shred of reputation in his suicidal final speech, upon which critical agreement no longer seems at all possible. If the *Funeral Elegy* for Will Peter indeed was Shakespeare's (I think this probable), then the poet-dramatist in 1612, four years before his own death at fifty-two, was much preoccupied with his own evidently blemished name.

Emilia's heroic victory over Iago is one of Shakespeare's grandest ironies, and appropriately constitutes the play's most surprising dramatic moment:

Emilia. O God, O heavenly God!

Iago. Zounds, hold your peace!

Emilia. 'Twill out, 'twill out! I peace?

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.

Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,

All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.

Iago. Be wise, and get you home.

Emilia. I will not.

[IAGO tries to stab EMILIA.]

Gratiano. Fie! Your sword upon a woman?

Emilia. O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak'st of

I found by fortune and did give my husband,

For often, with a solemn earnestness—

More than indeed belonged to such a trifle—

He begged of me to steal't.

Iago. Villainous whore!

Emilia. She give it to Cassio? No, alas, I found it

And I did give't my husband.

Iago. Filth, thou liest!

Emilia. By heaven, I do not, I do not, gentlemen!

O murderous coxcomb, what should such a fool

Do with so good a wife?

[OTHELLO runs at IAGO. IAGO stabs his wife.]

Othello. Are there no stones in heaven

But what serves for the thunder? Precious villain!

Gratiano. The woman falls, sure he hath killed his wife.

Emilia. Ay, ay; O lay me by my mistress' side.

Exit IAGO.

Gratiano. He's gone, but his wife's killed.

We are surprised, but Iago is shocked; indeed it is his first reversal since being passed over for Cassio. That Emilia should lose her worldly wisdom, and become as free as the north wind, was the only eventuality that Iago could not foresee. And his failure to encompass his wife's best aspect—her love for and pride in Desdemona—is the one lapse for which he cannot forgive himself. That is the true undersong of the last lines he ever will allow himself to utter, and which are directed as much to us as to Othello or to Cassio:

Othello. Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

Iago. Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.

[V.ii.298–301]

What is it that we know, beyond what Othello and Cassio know? Shakespeare's superb dramatic irony transcends even that question into the subtler matter of allowing us to know something about Iago that the ancient, despite his genius, is incapable of knowing. Iago is outraged that he could not anticipate, by dramatic imagination, his wife's outrage that Desdemona should be not only murdered but perhaps permanently defamed. The aesthete's web has all of war's gamelike magic, but no place in it for Emilia's honest indignation. Where he ought to have been at his most discerning—within his marriage—Iago is blank and blind. The superb psychologist who unseamed Othello, and who deftly manipulated Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, and all others, angrily falls into the fate he arranged for his prime victim, the Moor, and becomes another wife murderer. He has, at last, set fire to himself.

Since the world is Iago's, I scarcely am done expounding him, and will examine him again in an overview of the play, but only after brooding upon the many enigmas of Othello. Where Shakespeare granted Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth an almost continuous and preternatural eloquence, he chose

instead to give Othello a curiously mixed power of expression, distinct yet divided, and deliberately flawed. Iago's theatricalism is superb, but Othello's is troublesome, brilliantly so. The Moor tells us that he has been a warrior since he was seven, presumably a hyperbole but indicative that he is all too aware his greatness has been hard won. His professional self-awareness is extraordinarily intense; partly this is inevitable, since he is technically a mercenary, a black soldier of fortune who honorably serves the Venetian state. And yet his acute sense of his reputation betrays what may well be an uneasiness, sometimes manifested in the baroque elaborations of his language, satirized by Iago as "a bombast circumstance, / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war."

A military commander who can compare the movement of his mind to the "icy current and compulsive course" of the Pontic (Black) Sea, Othello seems incapable of seeing himself except in grandiose terms. He presents himself as a living legend or walking myth, nobler than any antique Roman. The poet Anthony Hecht thinks that we are meant to recognize "a ludicrous and nervous vanity" in Othello, but Shakespeare's adroit perspectivism evades so single a recognition. Othello has a touch of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in him; there is an ambiguity in both figures that makes it very difficult to trace the demarcations between their vainglory and their grandeur. If you believe in the war god Caesar (as Antony does) or in the war god Othello (as Iago once did), then you lack the leisure to contemplate the god's failings. But if you are Cassius, or the postlapsarian Iago, then you are at pains to behold the weaknesses that mask as divinity. Othello, like Caesar, is prone to refer to himself in the third person, a somewhat unnerving habit, whether in literature or in life. And yet, again like Julius Caesar, Othello believes his own myth, and to some extent we must also, because there is authentic nobility in the language of his soul. That there is opacity also, we cannot doubt; Othello's tragedy is precisely that Iago should know him better than the Moor knows himself.

Othello is a great commander, who knows war and the limits of war but who knows little else, and cannot know that he does not know. His sense of himself is very large, in that its scale is vast, but he sees himself from afar as it were; up close, he hardly confronts the void at his center. Iago's apprehension of that abyss is sometimes compared to Montaigne's; I sooner

would compare it to Hamlet's, because like one element in the infinitely varied prince of Denmark, Iago is well beyond skepticism and has crossed into nihilism. Iago's most brilliant insight is that if *he* was reduced to nothingness by Cassio's preferment, then how much more vulnerable Othello must be, lacking Iago's intellect and game-playing will. Anyone can be pulverized, in Iago's view, and in this drama he is right. There is no one in the play with the irony and wit that alone could hold off Iago: Othello is consciously theatrical but quite humorless, and Desdemona is a miracle of sincerity. The terrible painfulness of *Othello* is that Shakespeare shrewdly omits any counterforce to Iago. In *King Lear*, Edmund also confronts no one with the intellect to withstand him, until he is annihilated by the exquisite irony of having created the nameless avenger who was once his gull, Edgar. First and last, Othello is powerless against Iago; that helplessness is the most harrowing element in the play, except perhaps for Desdemona's double powerlessness, in regard both to Iago and to her husband.

It is important to emphasize the greatness of Othello, despite all his inadequacies of language and of spirit. Shakespeare implicitly celebrates Othello as a giant of mere being, an ontological splendor, and so a natural man self-raised to an authentic if precarious eminence. Even if we doubt the possibility of the purity of arms, Othello plausibly represents that lost ideal. At every point, he is the antithesis of Iago's "I am not what I am," until he begins to come apart under Iago's influence. Manifestly, Desdemona has made a wrong choice in a husband, and yet that choice testifies to Othello's hard-won splendor. These days, when so many academic critics are converted to the recent French fashion of denying the self, some of them happily seize upon Othello as a fit instance. They undervalue how subtle Shakespeare's art can be; Othello indeed may seem to prompt James Calderwood's Lacanian observation:

Instead of a self-core discoverable at the center of his being, Othello's "I am" seems a kind of internal repertory company, a "we are."

If Othello, at the play's start, or at its close, is only the sum of his self-descriptions, then indeed he could be judged a veritable picnic of souls. But his third-person relation to his own images of self testifies not to a "we are"

but to a perpetual romanticism at seeing and describing himself. To some degree, he is a self-enchanter, as well as the enchanter of Desdemona. Othello desperately wants and needs to be the protagonist of a Shakespearean romance, but alas he is the hero-victim of this most painful Shakespearean domestic tragedy of blood. John Jones makes the fine observation that Lear in the Quarto version is a romance figure, but then is revised by Shakespeare into the tragic being of the Folio text. As Iago's destined gull, Othello presented Shakespeare with enormous problems in representation. How are we to believe in the essential heroism, largeness, and loving nature of so catastrophic a protagonist? Since Desdemona is the most admirable image of love in all Shakespeare, how are we to sympathize with her increasingly incoherent destroyer, who renders her the unluckiest of all wives? Romance, literary and human, depends on partial or imperfect knowledge. Perhaps Othello never gets beyond that, even in his final speech, but Shakespeare shrewdly frames the romance of Othello within the tragedy of *Othello*, and thus solves the problem of sympathetic representation.

Othello is not a "poem unlimited," beyond genre, like *Hamlet*, but the romance elements in its three principal figures do make it a very uncommon tragedy. Iago is a triumph because he is in exactly the right play for an ontotheological villain, while the charitable Desdemona is superbly suited to this drama also. Othello cannot quite fit, but then that is his socio-political dilemma, the heroic Moor commanding the armed forces of Venice, sophisticated in its decadence then as now. Shakespeare mingles commercial realism and visionary romance in his portrait of Othello, and the mix necessarily is unsteady, even for this greatest of all makers. Yet we do Othello wrong to offer him the show of violence, whether by unselfing him or by devaluing his goodness. Iago, nothing if not critical, has a keener sense of Othello than most of us now tend to achieve:

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.

There are not many in Shakespeare, or in life, that are "of a free and open nature": to suppose that we are to find Othello ludicrous or paltry is to mistake the play badly. He is admirable, a tower among men, but soon

enough he becomes a broken tower. Shakespeare's own Hector, Ulysses, and Achilles, in his *Troilus and Cressida*, were all complex travesties of their Homeric originals (in George Chapman's version), but Othello is precisely Homeric, as close as Shakespeare desired to come to Chapman's heroes. Within his clear limitations, Othello indeed is "noble": his consciousness, prior to his fall, is firmly controlled, just, and massively dignified, and has its own kind of perfection. Reuben Brower admirably said of Othello that "his heroic simplicity was also heroic blindness. That too is part of the 'ideal' hero, part of Shakespeare's metaphor." The metaphor, no longer quite Homeric, had to extend to the professionalism of a great mercenary soldier and a heroic black in the service of a highly decadent white society. Othello's superb professionalism is at once his extraordinary strength and his tragic freedom to fall. The love between Desdemona and Othello is authentic, yet might have proved catastrophic even in the absence of the daemonic genius of Iago. Nothing in Othello is marriageable: his military career fulfills him completely. Desdemona, persuasively innocent in the highest of senses, falls in love with the pure warrior in Othello, and he falls in love with her love for him, her mirroring of his legendary career. Their romance is his own pre-existent romance; the marriage does not and cannot change him, though it changes his relationship to Venice, in the highly ironic sense of making him more than ever an outsider.

Othello's character has suffered the assaults of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis and their various followers, but fashions in Shakespeare criticism always vanish, and the noble Moor has survived his denigrators. Yet Shakespeare has endowed Othello with the authentic mystery of being a radically flawed hero, an Adam too free to fall. In some respects, Othello is Shakespeare's most wounding representation of male vanity and fear of female sexuality, and so of the male equation that makes the fear of cuckoldry and the fear of mortality into a single dread. Leontes, in *The Winter's Tale*, is partly a study in repressed homosexuality, and thus his virulent jealousy is of another order than Othello's. We wince when Othello, in his closing apologia, speaks of himself as one not easily jealous, and we wonder at his blindness. Still we never doubt his valor, and this makes it even stranger that he at least matches Leontes in jealous madness. Shakespeare's

greatest insight into male sexual jealousy is that it is a mask for the fear of being castrated by death. Men imagine that there never can be enough time and space for themselves, and they find in cuckoldry, real or imaginary, the image of their own vanishing, the realization that the world will go on without them.

Othello sees the world as a theater for his professional reputation; this most valiant of soldiers has no fear of literal death-in-battle, which only would enhance his glory. But to be cuckolded by his own wife, and with his subordinate Cassio as the other offender, would be a greater, metaphorical death-in-life, for his reputation would not survive it, particularly in his own view of his mythic renown. Shakespeare is sublimely daemonic, in a mode transcending even Iago's genius, in making Othello's vulnerability exactly consonant with the wound rendered to Iago's self-regard by being passed over for promotion. Iago says, "I am not what I am"; Othello's loss of ontological dignity would be even greater, had Desdemona "betrayed" him (I place the word between quotation marks, because the implicit metaphor involved is a triumph of male vanity). Othello all too self-consciously has risked his hard-won sense of his own being in marrying Desdemona, and he has an accurate foreboding of chaotic engulfment should that risk prove a disaster:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again.

[III.iii.90–92]

An earlier intimation of Othello's uneasiness is one of the play's subtlest touches:

For know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea's worth.

[I.ii.24–28]

Othello's psychological complexity has to be reconstructed by the audience from his ruins, as it were, because Shakespeare does not supply us with the full foreground. We are given the hint that but for Desdemona, he never would have married, and indeed he himself describes a courtship in which he was essentially passive:

This to hear
 Would Desdemona seriously incline,
 But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
 Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
 She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
 Devour up my discourse; which I, observing,
 Took once a pliant hour and found good means
 To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
 That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
 Whereof by parcels she had something heard
 But not intentively. I did consent,
 And often did beguile her of her tears
 When I did speak of some distressful stroke
 That my youth suffered. My story being done
 She gave me for my pains a world of kisses.
 She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
 That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
 I should but teach him how to tell my story
 And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed
 And I loved her that she did pity them.

[I.iii.146-69]

That is rather more than a "hint," and nearly constitutes a boldly direct proposal, on Desdemona's part. With the Venetian competition evidently

confined to the likes of Roderigo, Desdemona is willingly seduced by Othello's naïve but powerful romance of the self, provocative of that "world of kisses." The Moor is not only noble; his saga brings "a maiden never bold" (her father's testimony) "to fall in love with what she feared to look on." Desdemona, a High Romantic centuries ahead of her time, yields to the fascination of quest, if *yields* can be an accurate word for so active a surrender. No other match in Shakespeare is so fabulously unlikely, or so tragically inevitable. Even in a Venice and a Cyprus without Iago, how does so improbable a romance domesticate itself? The high point of passion between Othello and Desdemona is their reunion on Cyprus:

Othello. O my fair warrior!

Desdemona. My dear Othello.

Othello. It gives me wonder great as my content

To see you here before me. O my soul's joy,
 If after every tempest come such calms
 May the winds blow till they have wakened death,
 And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,
 Olympus-high, and duck again as low
 As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die
 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
 My soul hath her content so absolute
 That not another comfort like to this
 Succeeds in unknown fate.

Desdemona. The heavens forbid
 But that our loves and comforts should increase
 Even as our days do grow.

Othello. Amen to that, sweet powers!

I cannot speak enough of this content,
 It stops me here, it is too much of joy.
 And this, and this the greatest discords be [*They kiss.*]
 That e'er our hearts shall make.

[II.i.180-96]

From such an apotheosis one can only descend, even if the answering chorus were not Iago's aside that he will loosen the strings now so well tuned. Shakespeare (as I have ventured before, following my master, Dr. Johnson) came naturally to comedy and to romance, but violently and ambivalently to tragedy. *Othello* may have been as painful for Shakespeare as he made it for us. Placing the precarious nobility of Othello and the fragile romanticism of Desdemona upon one stage with the sadistic aestheticism of Iago (ancestor of all modern literary critics) was already an outrageous coup of self-wounding on the poet-dramatist's part. I am delighted to revive the now scoffed-at romantic speculation that Shakespeare carries a private affliction, an erotic vastation, into the high tragedies, *Othello* in particular. Shakespeare is, of course, not Lord Byron, scandalously parading before Europe the pageant of his bleeding heart, yet the incredible agony we rightly undergo as we observe Othello murdering Desdemona has a private as well as public intensity informing it. Desdemona's murder is the crossing point between the overflowing cosmos of Hamlet and the cosmological emptiness of Lear and of Macbeth.

3

The play *Hamlet* and the mind of Hamlet verge upon an identity, since everything that happens to the Prince of Denmark already seems to be the prince. We cannot quite say that the mind of Iago and the play *Othello* are one, since his victims have their own greatness. Yet, until Emilia confounds him, the drama's action is Iago's; only the tragedy of their tragedy belongs to Othello and Desdemona. In 1604, an anonymous storyteller reflected upon "Shakespeare's tragedies, where the Comedian rides, when the Tragedian stands on Tip-toe." This wonderful remark was made of Prince Hamlet, who "pleased all," but more subtly illuminates *Othello*, where Shakespeare-as-comedian rides Iago, even as the dramatist stands on tip-toe to extend the limits of his so painful art. We do not know who in Shakespeare's company played Iago against Burbage's Othello, but I wonder if it was not the great clown Robert Armin, who would have played the drunken porter at the gate in *Macbeth*, the Fool in *King Lear*, and the asp bearer in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The dramatic shock in *Othello* is that we de-

light in Iago's exuberant triumphalism, even as we dread his villainy's consequences. Marlowe's self-delighting Barabas, echoed by Aaron the Moor and Richard III, seems a cruder Machiavel when we compare him with the refined Iago, who confounds Barabas with aspects of Hamlet, in order to augment his own growing inwardness. With Hamlet, we confront the ever-growing inner self, but Iago has no inner self, only a fecund abyss, precisely like his descendant, Milton's Satan, who in every deep found a lower deep opening wide. Satan's discovery is agonized; Iago's is diabolically joyous. Shakespeare invents in Iago a sublimely sadistic comic poet, an archon of nihilism who delights in returning his war god to an uncreated night. Can you invent Iago without delighting in your invention, even as we delight in our ambivalent reception of Iago?

Iago is not larger than his play; he perfectly fits it, unlike Hamlet, who would be too large even for the most unlimited of plays. I have noted already that Shakespeare made significant revisions to what is spoken by Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia (even Roderigo) but not by Iago; it is as though Shakespeare knew he had gotten Iago right the first time round. No villain in all literature rivals Iago as a flawless conception, who requires no improvement. Swinburne was accurate: "the most perfect evil-dom, the most potent demi-devil," and "a reflection by hell-fire of the figure of Prometheus." A Satanic Prometheus may at first appear too High Romantic, yet the pyromaniac Iago encourages Roderigo to a

dire yell

As when by night and negligence the fire
Is spied in populous cities.

[I.i.74-76]

According to the myth, Prometheus steals fire to free us; Iago steals us, as fresh fodder for the fire. He is an authentic Promethean, however negative, because who can deny that Iago's fire is poetic? The hero-villains of John Webster and Cyril Tourneur are mere names on the page when we contrast them with Iago; they lack Promethean fire. Who else in Shakespeare, except for Hamlet and Falstaff, is so creative as Iago? These three alone can read your soul, and read everyone they encounter. Perhaps Iago

is the recompense that the Negative demanded to counterbalance Hamlet, Falstaff, and Rosalind. Great wit, like the highest irony, needs an inner check in order not to burn away everything else: Hamlet's disinterestedness, Falstaff's exuberance, Rosalind's graciousness. Iago is nothing at all, except critical; there can be no inner check when the self is an abyss. Iago has the single affect of sheer gusto, increasingly aroused as he discovers his genius for improvisation.

Since the plot of *Othello* essentially is Iago's plot, improvisation by Iago constitutes the tragedy's heart and center. Hazlitt's review of Edmund Kean's performance as Iago in 1814, from which I have drawn my epigraph for this chapter, remains the finest analysis of Iago's improvisatory genius, and is most superb when it observes that Iago "stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*." That prophetic insight advances Iago to the Age of Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky, an Age that in many respects remains our own. Iago is not a Jacobean Italian malcontent, another descendant of Marlowe's Machiavels. His greatness is that he is out ahead of us, though every newspaper and television newscast brings us accounts of his disciples working on every scale, from individual crimes of sadomasochism to international terrorism and massacre. Iago's followers are everywhere: I have watched, with great interest, many of my former students, undergraduate and graduate, pursue careers of Iagoism, both in and out of the academy. Shakespeare's great male intellectuals (as contrasted to Rosalind and Beatrice, among his women) are only four all together: Falstaff and Hamlet, Iago and Edmund. Of these, Hamlet and Iago are also aesthetes, critical consciousnesses of near-preternatural power. Only in Iago does the aesthete predominate, in close alliance with nihilism and sadism.

I place particular emphasis upon Iago's theatrical and poetic genius, as an appreciation of Iago that I trust will be aesthetic without also being sadomasochistic, since that danger always mingles with any audience's enjoyment of Iago's revelations to us. There is no major figure in Shakespeare with whom we are less likely to identify ourselves, and yet Iago is as beyond vice as he is beyond virtue, a fine recognition of Swinburne's. Robert B. Heilman, who perhaps undervalued *Othello* (the hero, not the play), made restitution by warning that there was no single way into Iago:

"As the spiritual have-not, Iago is universal, that is, many things at once, and of many times at once." Swinburne, perhaps tinged with his usual sadomasochism in his high regard for Iago, prophesied that Iago's stance in hell would be like that of Farinata, who stands upright in his tomb: "as if of Hell he had a great disdain." There is hardly a circle in Dante's *Inferno* that Iago could not inhabit, so vast is his potential for ill.

By interpreting Iago as a genius for improvising chaos in others, a gift born out of his own ontological devastation by Othello, I am in some danger of giving us Iago as a negative theologian, perhaps too close to the Miltonic Satan whom he influenced. As I have tried to emphasize throughout this book, Shakespeare does not write Christian or religious drama; he is not Calderón or (to invoke lesser poet-playwrights) Paul Claudel or T. S. Eliot. Nor is Shakespeare (or Iago) any kind of a heretic; I am baffled when critics argue as to whether Shakespeare was Protestant or Catholic, since the plays are neither. There are gnostic heretical elements in Iago, as there will be in Edmund and in Macbeth, but Shakespeare was not a gnostic, or a hermeticist, or a Neo-Platonic occultist. In his extraordinary way, he was the most curious and universal of gleaners, possibly even of esoteric spiritualities, yet here too he was primarily an inventor or discoverer. Othello is a Christian, by conversion; Iago's religion is war, war everywhere—in the streets, in the camp, in his own abyss. Total war is a religion, whose best literary theologian I have cited already, Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's frightening *Blood Meridian*. The Judge imitates Iago by expounding a theology of the will, whose ultimate expression is war, against everyone. Iago says that he has never found a man who knew how to love himself, which means that self-love is the exercise of the will in murdering others. That is Iago's self-education in the will, since he does not start out with the clear intention of murder. In the beginning was a sense of having been outraged by a loss of identity, accompanied by the inchoate desire to be revenged upon the god Iago had served.

Shakespeare's finest achievement in *Othello* is Iago's extraordinary mutations, prompted by his acute self-overhearing as he moves through his eight soliloquies, and their supporting asides. From tentative, experimental promptings on to excited discoveries, Iago's course develops into a tri-

umphal march, to be ended only by Emilia's heroic intervention. Much of the theatrical greatness of *Othello* inheres in this triumphalism, in which we unwillingly participate. Properly performed, *Othello* should be a momentary trauma for its audience. *Lear* is equally catastrophic, where Edmund triumphs consistently until the duel with Edgar, but *Lear* is vast, intricate, and varied, and not just in its double plot. In *Othello*, Iago is always at the center of the web, ceaselessly weaving his fiction, and snaring us with dark magic: Only Prospero is comparable, a luminous magus who in part is Shakespeare's answer to Iago.

You can judge Iago to be, in effect, a misreader of Montaigne, as opposed to Hamlet, who makes of Montaigne the mirror of nature. Kenneth Gross shrewdly observes that "Iago is at best a nightmare image of so vigilant and humanizing a pyrrhonism as Montaigne's." Pyrrhonism, or radical skepticism, is transmuted by Hamlet into disinterestedness; Iago turns it into a war against existence, a drive that seeks to argue that there is no reason why anything should be, at all. The exaltation of the will, in Iago, emanates from an ontological lack so great that no human emotion possibly could fill it:

Virtue? A fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry—why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion.

[I.iii.320–33]

"Virtue" here means something like "manly strength," while by "reason" Iago intends only his own absence of significant emotion. This prose

utterance is the poetic center of *Othello*, presaging Iago's conversion of his leader to a reductive and diseased vision of sexuality. We cannot doubt that Othello loves Desdemona; Shakespeare also may suggest that Othello is amazingly reluctant to make love to his wife. As I read the play's text, the marriage is never consummated, despite Desdemona's eager desires. Iago derides Othello's "weak function"; that seems more a hint of Iago's impotence than of Othello's, and yet nothing that the Moorish captain-general says or does reflects an authentic lust for Desdemona. This certainly helps explain his murderous rage, once Iago has roused him to jealousy, and also makes that jealousy more plausible, since Othello literally does not know whether his wife is a virgin, and is afraid to find out, one way or the other. I join here the minority view of Graham Bradshaw, and of only a few others, but this play, of all Shakespeare's, seems to me the most weakly misread, possibly because its villain is the greatest master of misprision in Shakespeare, or in literature. Why did Othello marry anyway, if he does not sexually desire Desdemona? Iago cannot help us here, and Shakespeare allows us to puzzle the matter out for ourselves, without ever giving us sufficient information to settle the question. But Bradshaw is surely right to say that Othello finally testifies Desdemona died a virgin:

Now: how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench,
Pale as thy smock. When we shall meet at compt
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl,
Even like thy chastity.

[V.ii.270–74]

Unless Othello is merely raving, we at least must believe he means what he says: she died not only faithful to him but "cold . . . Even like thy chastity." It is a little difficult to know just what Shakespeare intends Othello to mean, unless his victim had never become his wife, even for the single night when their sexual union was possible. When Othello vows not to "shed her blood," he means only that he will smother her to death, but the frightening irony is there as well: neither he nor Cassio nor anyone else

has ever ended her virginity. Bradshaw finds in this a "ghastly tragicomic parody of an erotic death," and that is appropriate for Iago's theatrical achievement.

I want to shift the emphasis from Bradshaw's in order to question a matter upon which Iago had little influence: Why was Othello reluctant, from the start, to consummate the marriage? When, in Act I, Scene iii, the Duke of Venice accepts the love match of Othello and Desdemona, and then orders Othello to Cyprus, to lead its defense against an expected Turkish invasion, the Moor asks only that his wife be housed with comfort and dignity during his absence. It is the ardent Desdemona who requests that she accompany her husband:

So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

[I.iii.256-60]

Presumably by "rites" Desdemona means consummation, rather than battle, and though Othello seconds her, he rather gratuitously insists that desire for her is not exactly hot in him:

Let her have your voice.
Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat, the young affects
In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
When she is with me. No, when light-winged toys
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and officed instrument,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation.

[I.iii.261-75]

These lines, hardly Othello at his most eloquent, exceed the measure that decorum requires, and do not favor Desdemona. He protests much too much, and hardly betters the case when he urges her off the stage with him:

Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour
Of love, of worldly matter and direction
To spend with thee. We must obey the time.

[I.iii.299-301]

If that "hour" is literal, then "love" will be lucky to get twenty minutes of this overbusy general's time. Even with the Turks impending, the state would surely have allowed its chief military officer an extra hour or two for initially embracing his wife. When he arrives on Cyprus, where Desdemona has preceded him, Othello tells us: "Our wars are done, the Turks are drowned." That would seem to provide ample time for the deferred matter of making love to his wife, particularly since public feasting is now decreed. Perhaps it is more proper to wait for evening, and so Othello bids Cassio command the watch, and duly says to Desdemona: "Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue: / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you," and exits with her. Iago works up a drunken riot, involving Cassio, Roderigo, and Montano, governor of Cyprus, in which Cassio wounds Montano. Othello, aroused by a tolling bell, enters with Desdemona following soon afterward. We are not told whether there has been time enough for their "rites," but Othello summons her back to bed, while also announcing that he himself will supervise the dressing of Montano's wounds. Which had priority, we do not precisely know, but evidently the general preferred his self-imposed obligation toward the governor to his marital obligation.

Iago's first insinuations of Desdemona's supposed relationship with Cas-

sio would have no effect if Othello knew her to have been a virgin. It is because he does not know that Othello is so vulnerable. "Why did I marry!" he exclaims, and then points to his cuckold's horns when he tells Desdemona: "I have a pain upon my forehead, here," which his poor innocent of a wife attributes to his all-night care of the governor: "Why, that's with watching," and tries to bind it hard with the fatal handkerchief, pushed away by him, and so it falls in Emilia's way. By then, Othello is already Iago's, and is incapable of resolving his doubts through the only sensible course of finally bringing himself to bed Desdemona.

This is a bewildering labyrinth for the audience, and frequently is not overtly addressed by directors of *Othello*, who leave us doubtful of their interpretations, or perhaps they are not even aware of the difficulty that requires interpretation. Shakespeare was capable of carelessness, but not upon so crucial a point, for the entire tragedy turns upon it. Desdemona and Othello, alas, scarcely know each other, and sexually do not know each other at all. Shakespeare's audacious suggestion is that Othello was too frightened or diffident to seize upon the opportunity of the first night in Cyprus, but evaded and delayed the ordeal by devoting himself to the wounded Montano. The further suggestion is that Iago, understanding Othello, fomented the drunken altercation in order to distract his general from consummation, for otherwise Iago's manipulations would have been without consequence. That credits Iago with extraordinary insight into Othello, but no one should be surprised at such an evaluation. We can wonder why Shakespeare did not make all this clearer, except that we need to remember his contemporary audience was far superior to us in comprehending through the ear. They knew how to listen; most of us do not, in our overvisual culture. Shakespeare doubtless would not have agreed with Blake that what could be made explicit to the idiot was not worth his care, but he had learned from Chaucer, in particular, how to be appropriately sly.

Before turning at last to Iago's triumphalism, I feel obliged to answer my own question: Why did Othello marry when his love for Desdemona was only a secondary response to her primary passion for him? This prelude to tragedy seems plausibly compounded of her ignorance—she is still only a

child, rather like Juliet—and his confusion. Othello tells us that he had been nine consecutive months in Venice, away from the battlefield and the camp, and thus he was not himself. Fully engaged in his occupation, he would have been immune to Desdemona's charmed condition and to her generous passion for his living legend. Their shared idealism is also their mutual illusion: the idealism is beautiful, but the illusion would have been dissolved even if Othello had not passed over Iago for promotion and so still had Iago's loving worship, rather than the ancient's vengeful hatred. The fallen Iago will teach Othello that the general's failure to know Desdemona, sexually and otherwise, was because Othello did not want to know. Bradshaw brilliantly observes that Iago's genius "is to persuade others that something they had not thought was something they had not *wanted* to think." Iago, having been thrown into a cosmological emptiness, discovers that what he had worshiped as Othello's warlike fullness of being was in part another emptiness, and Iago's triumph is to expand that part into very nearly the whole of Othello.

4

Iago's terrible greatness (what else can we term it?) is also Shakespeare's triumph over Christopher Marlowe, whose Barabas, Jew of Malta, had influenced the young Shakespeare so fiercely. We can observe that Iago transcends Barabas, just as Prospero is beyond Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. One trace of Barabas abides in Iago, though transmogrified by Shakespeare's more glorious villain: self-delight. Exuberance or gusto, the joy of being Sir John Falstaff, is parodied in Iago's negative celebrations, and yet to considerable purpose. Emptied out of significant being, Iago mounts out of his sense of injured merit in his new pride of attainments: dramatist, psychologist, aesthetic critic, diabolic analyst, countertherapist. His uncreation of his captain-general, the return of the magnificent Othello to an original chaos, remains the supreme negation in the history of Western literature, far surpassing the labors of his Dostoevskian disciples, Svidrigailov and Stavrogin, and of his American pupils, Claggart in Melville's *Billy Budd* and Shrike in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The only near-rivals to Iago are

also his students, Milton's Satan and Cormac McCarthy's Judge in *Blood Meridian*. Compared with Iago, Satan is hampered by having to work on too cosmic a scale: all of nature goes down with Adam and Eve. McCarthy's Judge, the only character in modern fiction who genuinely frightens me, is too much bloodier than Iago to sustain the comparison. Iago stabs a man or two in the dark; the Judge scalps Indians and Mexicans by the hundreds. By working in so close to his prime victim, Iago becomes the Devil-as-matador, and his own best aficionado, since he is nothing if not critical. The only first-rate Iago I have ever seen was Bob Hoskins, who surmounted his director's flaws in Jonathan Miller's BBC television *Othello* of 1981, where Anthony Hopkins as the Moor sank without a trace by being faithful to Miller's Leavisite (or Eliotic) instructions. Hoskins, always best as a gangster, caught many of the accents of Iago's underworld pride in his own preternatural wiliness, and at moments showed what a negative beatification might be, in the pleasure of undoing one's superior at organized violence. Perhaps Hoskins's Iago was a shade more Marlovian than Shakespearean, almost as though Hoskins (or Miller) had *The Jew of Malta* partly in mind, whereas Iago is refined beyond that farcical intensity.

Triumphalism is Iago's most chilling yet engaging mode; his great soliloquies and asides march to an intellectual music matched in Shakespeare only by aspects of Hamlet, and by a few rare moments when Edmund descends to self-celebration. Iago's inwardness, which sometimes echoes Hamlet's, enhances his repellent fascination for us: How can a sensible emptiness be so labyrinthine? To trace the phases of Iago's entrapment of Othello should answer that question, at least in part. But I pause here to deny that Iago represents something crucial in *Othello*, an assertion made by many interpreters, the most convincing of whom is Edward Snow. In a reading too reliant upon the Freudian psychic mythology, Snow finds in Iago the overt spirit that is buried in *Othello*: a universal male horror of female sexuality, and so a hatred of women.

The Age of Freud wanes, and joins itself now, in many, to the Age of Resentment. That all men fear and hate women and sexuality is neither Freudian nor true, though an aversion to otherness is frequent enough, in women as in men. Shakespeare's lovers, men and women alike, are very various: *Othello* unfortunately is not one of the sanest among them. Stephen

Greenblatt suggests that Othello's conversion to Christianity has augmented the Moor's tendency to sexual disgust, a plausible reading of the play's foreground. Iago seems to see this, even as he intuits Othello's reluctance to consummate the marriage, but even that does not mean Iago is an inward component of Othello's psyche, from the start. Nothing can exceed Iago's power of contamination once he truly begins his campaign, and so it is truer to say that Othello comes to represent Iago than to suggest we ought to see Iago as a component of Othello.

Shakespeare's art, as manifested in Iago's ruination of Othello, is in some ways too subtle for criticism to paraphrase. Iago suggests Desdemona's infidelity by at first not suggesting it, hovering near and around it:

Iago. I do beseech you,
 Though I perchance am vicious in my guess—
 As I confess it is my nature's plague
 To spy into abuses, and of my jealousy
 Shape faults that are not—that your wisdom
 From one that so imperfectly conceits
 Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble
 Out of his scattering and unsure observance:
 It were not for your quiet nor your good
 Nor for my manhood, honesty and wisdom
 To let you know my thoughts.

Othello. Zounds! What dost thou mean?

Iago. Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
 Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
 Who steals my purse steals trash—'tis something-nothing,
 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands—
 But he that filches from me my good name
 Robs me of that which not enriches him
 And makes me poor indeed.

Othello. By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!

Iago. You cannot, if my heart were in your hand,
 Nor shall not whilst 'tis in my custody.

Othello. Ha!

Iago. O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock

The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,

But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er

Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!

Othello. O misery!

[III.iii.147–73]

This would be outrageous if its interplay between Iago and Othello were not so persuasive. Iago manipulates Othello by exploiting what the Moor shares with the jealous God of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, a barely repressed vulnerability to betrayal. Yahweh and Othello alike are vulnerable because they have risked extending themselves, Yahweh to the Jews and Othello to Desdemona. Iago, whose motto is "I am not what I am," will triumph by tracking this negativity to Othello, until Othello quite forgets he is a man and becomes jealousy incarnate, a parody of the God of vengeance. We underestimate Iago when we consider him only as a dramatist of the self and a psychologist of genius; his greatest power is as a negative ontotheologian, a diabolical prophet who has a vocation for destruction. He is not the Christian devil or a parody thereof, but rather a free artist of himself, uniquely equipped, by experience and genius, to entrap spirits greater than his own in a bondage founded upon their inner flaws. In a play that held a genius opposed to his own—a Hamlet or a Falstaff—he would be only a frustrated malcontent. Given a world only of gulls and victims—Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, even Emilia until outrage turns her—Iago scarcely needs to exercise the full range of powers that he keeps discovering. A fire is always raging within him, and the hypocrisy that represses his satirical intensity in his dealings with others evidently costs him considerable suffering.

That must be why he experiences such relief, even ecstasy, in his extraordinary soliloquies and asides, where he applauds his own performance. Though he rhetorically invokes a "divinity of hell," neither he nor we have any reason to believe that any demon is listening to him. Though married, and an esteemed flag officer, with a reputation for "honesty," Iago is as soli-

tary a figure as Edmund, or as Macbeth after Lady Macbeth goes mad. Pleasure, for Iago, is purely sadomasochistic; pleasure, for Othello, consists in the rightful consciousness of command. Othello loves Desdemona, yet primarily as a response to her love for his triumphal consciousness. Passed over, and so nullified, Iago determines to convert his own sadomasochism into a countertriumphalism, one that will commandeer his commander, and then transform the god of his earlier worship into a degradation of godhood. The chaos that Othello rightly feared if he ceased to love Desdemona has been Iago's natural element since Cassio's promotion. From that chaos, Iago rises as a new Demiurge, a master of uncreation.

In proposing an ontotheological Iago, I build upon A. C. Bradley's emphasis on the passed-over ancient's "resentment," and add to Bradley the idea that resentment can become the only mode of freedom for such great negations as Iago's Dostoevskian disciples, Svidrigailov and Stavrogin. They may seem insane compared with Iago, but they inherited his weird lucidity, and his economics of the will. René Girard, a theoretician of envy and scapegoating, feels compelled to take Iago at his word, and so sees Iago as being sexually jealous of Othello. This is to be yet again entrapped by Iago, and adds an unnecessary irony to Girard's reduction of all Shakespeare to "a theater of envy." Tolstoy, who fiercely resented Shakespeare, complained of Iago, "There are many motives, but they are all vague." To feel betrayed by a god, be he Mars or Yahweh, and to desire restitution for one's wounded self-regard, to me seems the most precise of any villain's motives: return the god to the abyss into which one has been thrown. Tolstoy's odd, rationalist Christianity could not reimagine Iago's negative Christianity.

Iago is one of Shakespeare's most dazzling performers, equal to Edmund and Macbeth and coming only a little short of Rosalind and Cleopatra, Hamlet and Falstaff, superb charismatics. Negative charisma is an odd endowment; Iago represents it uniquely in Shakespeare, and most literary incarnations of it since owe much to Iago. Edmund, in spite of his own nature, has the element of Don Juan in him, the detachment and freedom from hypocrisy that is fatal for those grand hypocrites, Goneril and Regan. Macbeth, whose prophetic imagination has a universal force, excites our sympathies, however bloody his actions. Iago's appeal to us is the power

of the negative, which is all of him and only a part of Hamlet. We all have our gods, whom we worship, and by whom we cannot accept rejection. The Sonnets turn upon a painful rejection, of the poet by the young nobleman, a rejection that is more than erotic, and that seems to figure in Falstaff's public disgrace at Hal's coronation. Foregrounding *Othello* requires that we imagine Iago's humiliation at the election of Cassio, so that we hear the full reverberation of

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,
Yet for necessity of present life
I must show out a flag and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign.

[I.i.152–55]

The ensign, or ancient, who would have died faithfully to preserve Othello's colors on the battlefield, expresses his repudiation of his former religion, in lines absolutely central to the play. Love of the war god is now but a sign, even though revenge is as yet more an aspiration than a project. The god of war, grand as Othello may be, is a somewhat less formidable figure than the God of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but by a superb ontological instinct, Iago associates the jealousy of one god with that of the other:

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.
The Moor already changes with my poison:
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste
But with a little art upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulphur. I did say so.

Enter OTHELLO.

[III.iii.324–32]

The simile works equally well the other way round: proofs of Holy Writ are, to the jealous God, strong confirmations, but the airiest trifles can provoke the Yahweh who in Numbers leads the Israelites through the wilderness. Othello goes mad, and so does Yahweh in Numbers. Iago's marvelous pride in his "I did say so" leads on to a critical music new even to Shakespeare, one which will engender the aestheticism of John Keats and Walter Pater. The now obsessed Othello stumbles upon the stage, to be greeted by Iago's most gorgeous outburst of triumphalism:

Look where he comes. Not poppy nor mandragora
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owedst yesterday.

[III.iii.333–36]

If this were only sadistic exultation, we would not receive so immortal a wound from it; masochistic nostalgia mingles with the satisfaction of uncreation, as Iago salutes both his own achievement and the consciousness that Othello never will enjoy again. Shakespeare's Iago-like subtle art is at its highest, as we come to understand that Othello *does not know* precisely because he has not known his wife. Whatever his earlier reluctance to consummate marriage may have been, he now realizes he is incapable of it, and so cannot attain to the truth about Desdemona and Cassio:

I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue! O farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!

And, O you mortal engines whose rude throats
Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone.

[III.iii.348–60]

This Hemingwayesque farewell to the big wars has precisely Hemingway's blend of masculine posturing and barely concealed fear of impotence. There has been no time since the wedding, whether in Venice or on Cyprus, for Desdemona and Cassio to have made love, but Cassio had been the go-between between Othello and Desdemona in the play's foregrounding. Othello's farewell here essentially is to any possibility of consummation; the lost music of military glory has an undersong in which the martial engines signify more than cannons alone. If Othello's occupation is gone, then so is his manhood, and with it departs also the pride, pomp, and circumstance that compelled Desdemona's passion for him, the "circumstance" being more than pageantry. Chaos comes again, even as Othello's ontological identity vanishes, in Iago's sweetest revenge, marked by the villain's sublime rhetorical question: "Is't possible? my lord?" What follows is the decisive moment of the play, in which Iago realizes, for the first time, that Desdemona must be murdered by Othello:

Othello. Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof,
Or by the worth of man's eternal soul [*catching hold of him*]
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog
Than answer my waked wrath!

Iago. Is't come to this?

Othello. Make me to see't, or at the least so prove it
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on, or woe upon thy life!

Iago. My noble lord—

Othello. If thou dost slander her and torture me
Never pray more, abandon all remorse;
On horror's head horrors accumulate,

Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed,
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that!

[III.iii.362–76]

Iago's improvisations, until now, had as their purpose the destruction of Othello's identity, fit recompense for Iago's vastation. Suddenly, Iago confronts a grave threat that is also an opportunity: either he or Desdemona must die, with the consequences of her death to crown the undoing of Othello. How can Othello's desire for "the ocular proof" be satisfied?

Iago. And may—but how? how satisfied, my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
Behold her topped?

Othello. Death and damnation! O!

Iago. It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
To bring them to that prospect. Damn them then
If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster
More than their own. What then? how then?
What shall I say? where's satisfaction?
It is impossible you should see this
Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
As salt as wolves in pride, as fools as gross
As ignorance made drunk. But yet, I say,
If imputation and strong circumstances
Which lead directly to the door of truth
Will give you satisfaction, you might have't.

[III.iii.397–411]

The only ocular proof possible is what Othello will not essay, as Iago well understands, since the Moor will not try his wife's virginity. Shakespeare shows us jealousy in men as centering upon both visual and temporal obsessions, because of the male fear that there will not be enough time and space for him. Iago plays powerfully upon Othello's now monu-

mental aversion from the only door of truth that could give satisfaction, the entrance into Desdemona. Psychological mastery cannot surpass Iago's control of Othello, when the ensign chooses precisely this moment to introduce "a handkerchief, / I am sure it was your wife's, did I today / See Cassio wipe his beard with." Dramatic mastery cannot exceed Iago's exploitation of Othello's stage gesture of kneeling to swear revenge:

Othello. Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. Now by yond marble heaven
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

Iago. Do not rise yet. *Iago kneels.*
Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wronged Othello's service. Let him command
And to obey shall be in me remorse
What bloody business ever.

Othello. I greet thy love
Not with vain thanks but with acceptance bounteous,
And will upon the instant put thee to't.
Within these three days let me hear thee say
That Cassio's not alive.

Iago. My friend is dead.
'Tis done—at your request. But let her live.

Othello. Damn her, lewd minx: O damn her, damn her!
Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

Iago. I am your own for ever.

It is spectacular theater, with Iago as director: "Do not rise yet." And it is also a countertheology, transcending any Faustian bargain with the Devil, since the stars and the elements serve as witnesses to a murderous pact, which culminates in the reversal of the passing over of Iago in the play's foreground. "Now art thou my lieutenant" means something very different from what Othello can understand, while "I am your own for ever" seals Othello's starry and elemental fate. What remains is only the way down and out, for everyone involved.

5

Shakespeare creates a terrible pathos for us by not showing Desdemona in her full nature and splendor until we know that she is doomed. Dr. Johnson found the death of Cordelia intolerable; the death of Desdemona, in my experience as a reader and theatergoer, is even more unendurable. Shakespeare stages the scene as a sacrifice, as grimly countertheological as are Iago's passed-over nihilism and Othello's "godlike" jealousy. Though Desdemona in her anguish declares she is a Christian, she does not die a martyr to that faith but becomes only another victim of what could be called the religion of Moloch, since she is a sacrifice to the war god whom Iago once worshiped, the Othello he has reduced to incoherence. "Othello's occupation's gone"; the shattered relic of Othello murders in the name of that occupation, for he knows no other, and is the walking ghost of what he was.

Millicent Bell recently has argued that Othello's is an epistemological tragedy, but only Iago has intellect enough to sustain such a notion, and Iago is not much interested in how he knows what he thinks he knows. *Othello*, as much as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, is a vision of radical evil; *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's tragedy of an intellectual. Though Shakespeare never would commit himself to specifically Christian terms, he approached a kind of gnostic or heretic tragedy in *Macbeth*, as I will attempt to show. Othello has no transcendental aspect, perhaps because the religion of war does not allow for any. Iago, who makes a new covenant with Othello when they kneel together, had lived and fought in what he took to be an

old covenant with his general, until Cassio was preferred to him. A devout adherent to the fire of battle, his sense of merit injured by his god, has degraded that god into "an honourable murderer," Othello's oxymoronic, final vision of his role. Can such degradation allow the dignity required for a tragic protagonist?

A. C. Bradley rated *Othello* below *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* primarily because it gives us no sense of universal powers impinging upon the limits of the human. I think those powers hover in *Othello*, but they manifest themselves only in the gap that divides the earlier, foregrounded relationship between Iago and Othello from the process of ruination that we observe between them. Iago is so formidable a figure because he has uncanny abilities, endowments only available to a true believer whose trust has transmuted into nihilism. Cain, rejected by Yahweh in favor of Abel, is as much the father of Iago as Iago is the precursor of Milton's Satan. Iago murders Roderigo and maims Cassio; it is as inconceivable to Iago as to us that Iago seeks to knife Othello. If you have been rejected by your god, then you attack him spiritually or metaphysically, not merely physically. Iago's greatest triumph is that the lapsed Othello sacrifices Desdemona in the name of the war god Othello, the solitary warrior with whom unwisely she has fallen in love. That may be why Desdemona offers no resistance, and makes so relatively unspirited a defense, first of her virtue and then of her life. Her victimization is all the more complete, and our own horror at it thereby is augmented.

Though criticism frequently has blinded itself to this, Shakespeare had no affection for war, or for violence organized or unorganized. His great killing machines come to sorrowful ends: Othello, Macbeth, Antony, Coriolanus. His favorite warrior is Sir John Falstaff, whose motto is: "Give me life!" Othello's motto could be "Give me honor," which sanctions slaughtering a wife he hasn't known, supposedly not "in hate, but all in honour." Dreadfully flawed, even vacuous at the center as Othello is, he still is meant to be the best instance available of a professional mercenary. What Iago once worshiped was real enough, but more vulnerable even than Iago suspected. Shakespeare subtly intimates that Othello's prior nobility and his later incoherent brutality are two faces of the war god, but it remains

the same god. Othello's occupation's gone partly because he married at all. Pent-up resentment, and not repressed lust, animates Othello as he avenges his lost autonomy in the name of his honor. Iago's truest triumph comes when Othello loses his sense of war's limits, and joins Iago's incessant campaign against *being*. "I am not what I am," Iago's credo, becomes Othello's implicit cry. The rapidity and totality of Othello's descent seems at once the play's one weakness and its most persuasive strength, as persuasive as Iago.

Desdemona dies so piteously that Shakespeare risks alienating us forever from Othello:

Des. O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Oth. Down, strumpet!

Des. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!

Oth. Nay, if you strive—

Des. But half an hour!

Oth. Being done, there is no pause—

Des. But while I say one prayer!

Oth. It is too late.

[V.ii.77–82]

Rather operatically, Shakespeare gives Desdemona a dying breath that attempts to exonerate Othello, which would indeed strain credulity if she were not, as Alvin Kernan wonderfully put it, "Shakespeare's word for love." We are made to believe that this was at once the most natural of young women, and also so loyal to her murderer that her exemplary last words sound almost ironic, given Othello's degradation: "Commend me to my kind lord—O, farewell!" It seems too much more for us to bear that Othello should refuse her final act of love: "She's like a liar gone to burning hell: 'Twas I that killed her." The influential modern assaults upon Othello by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis take their plausibility (such as it is) from Shakespeare's heaping up of Othello's brutality, stupidity, and unmitigated guilt. But Shakespeare allows Othello a great if partial recovery, in an astonishing final speech:

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know't:
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well,
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him—thus! *He stabs himself.*

[V.ii.336–54]

This famous and problematic outburst rarely provokes any critic to agree with any other, yet the Eliot–Leavis interpretation, which holds that Othello essentially is “cheering himself up,” cannot be right. The Moor remains as divided a character as Shakespeare ever created; we need give no credence to the absurd blindness of “loved not wisely, but too well,” or the outrageous self-deception of “one not easily jealous.” Yet we are moved by the truth of “perplexed in the extreme,” and by the invocation of Herod, “the base Judean” who murdered his Maccabean wife, Mariamme, whom he loved. The association of Othello with Herod the Great is the more shocking for being Othello’s own judgment upon himself, and is followed by the Moor’s tears, and by his fine image of weeping trees. Nor should a fair critic fail to be impressed by Othello’s verdict upon himself: that he has become an enemy of Venice, and as such must be slain. His suicide has

nothing Roman in it: Othello passes sentence upon himself, and performs the execution. We need to ask what Venice would have done with Othello, had he allowed himself to survive. I venture that he seeks to forestall what might have been their politic decision: to preserve him until he might be of high use again. Cassio is no Othello; the state has no replacement for the Moor, and might well have used him again, doubtless under some control. All of the rifts in Othello that Iago sensed and exploited are present in this final speech, but so is a final vision of judgment, one in which Othello abandons his nostalgias for glorious war, and pitifully seeks to expiate what cannot be expiated—not, at least, by a farewell to arms.