

The Introversion of Stoicism: *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* followed closely upon *Julius Caesar*. The mutual involvement of the two plays is obvious. When Brutus says,

Between the acting of a dreadful thing  
And the first motion, all the interim is  
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream.  
(II.i.63-65)

Brutus is thinking about Caesar, but Shakespeare is thinking of the play to come. *Hamlet* is seen in the distance and is described before it is written. Then, conversely, *Hamlet* keeps glancing back at *Julius Caesar*. Polonius says he once played the part of Caesar and was "kill'd i' th' Capitol" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.102). He adds, "Brutus kill'd me" (*et tu, Brute, Kai sh, tenon*). Horatio remembers how before Caesar fell "the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets" (I.i.115-16). Now, as we look through northern eyes, the classical scene becomes a Gothic nightmare, a *Walpurgisnacht*.

Stoicism, also, spills over from *Julius Caesar* into *Hamlet* and becomes a subjective nightmare. Polonius's set speech of advice to his son is in part Stoic:

to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
(I.iii.78-80)

This is the doctrine of the Stoic Cato: "He that striveth with himself shall full evil agree with other men . . . is not meet for the company of other men."<sup>21</sup> But the shadow of an encroaching subjectivism is already discernible. I remember saying to my teacher when I was about fourteen, "But sir, if your nature was mendacious, and you were true to that, wouldn't that mean that you would tell lies all the time?" and was appropriately slapped down for wasting class time.

Polonius is covertly substituting a prescribed, ideal self for the self as it would appear in a straight description. Laertes is invited to conjure from nowhere a splendid version of himself, a Laertes who could not possibly

betray a friend; if he can be true to *that*, his virtue is indeed assured. This slippage from "Be true to reality" to "Be true to your version of reality" happens behind an unchanged linguistic surface. Formally the word "self" still looks like a straightforward descriptive or referential term. But the change will bear strange fruit. Proto-Romantic Rousseau in the French eighteenth century asks, "What greater good can a truly good being expect than to live in accord with his nature?"<sup>22</sup> Two pages later he explains that he derives these principles not from a "Higher Philosophy" but from the depths of his heart: "What I feel to be right is right." The reader thinks, "Can Stoicism, the anti-passion philosophy, be turning into, of all things, Romanticism?" That is exactly what is happening. As Stoicism is subjectivized, as the impersonal, rational cosmos fades, a curious internal excitement develops. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which the slow process of subjectivization is meticulously observed, became a key text for the Romantics. The *Weltschmerz* and *Ichschmerz* ("world-pain" and "I-pain") of Goethe's *Werther* is immediately reminiscent of *Hamlet*. George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* was written some three years after *Hamlet*. The play opens with the withdrawal of a neo-Stoic Providence from the fabric of the universe: "Fortune, not reason rules the state of things." When Bussy says, "Who to himself is law, no law doth need" (II.i.208), we no longer infer that this is simply a man who does not need to be told that he should stop at a red traffic light. Bussy is a wild man.

At III.ii.65f. Hamlet gazes at his friend Horatio ("more an antique Roman than a Dane," VII.341) with a kind of envy, as one who "in suffering all . . . suffers nothing," "is not passion's slave." Hamlet, lost in a new subjective darkness, sees in Horatio an innocent Stoic. But when Hamlet appropriates Stoic language to himself, all this is gone: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.249-50). Harold Jenkins in his note on this line in the Arden edition of 1982 is clear that the sentiment expressed is a Stoic commonplace and that there is no suggestion at all of ethical relativism. Certainly the observation is common, and equally certainly, it is Stoic in origin. But Jenkins's confidence is misplaced. We have seen how the exertion of reason by Roman Stoics can increasingly become a way of denying rather than truly representing reality. Brutus's pretence that he is unmoved by the death of his wife is heroic because of its manifest un-realism and is humanly forgivable for the same

reason. Normally, indeed, the commonplace observation Hamlet makes here is relatively undisturbing. In Hamlet's mouth, however, it is suddenly vertiginous.

The old Stoic was insulated from the conventions of any particular society but remained "a citizen of the world," whatever that means. Hamlet's isolation is more profound. He has been ordered by a dead man to become a bearer of death and, in consequence, to die himself. Henry V was isolated from happy courtship and from convivial friendship by his political dedication. Hamlet is cut off in a more elemental fashion from sexuality and procreation. That is why he must turn on Ophelia and repel her from his tainted, shadowy presence. Clearly the words as Hamlet utters them are pivotal between a Stoicism that retains some grip on ethical objectivism and a modern radical uncertainty. "Kidding on the level," he insists, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that Denmark is a prison. Jenkins thinks he means that that he finds the place depressing even if they don't, because he is depressed; it is not an ethical judgment. But Hamlet has been told by his dead father that Denmark is controlled by the murderer of that father. The notion of being trapped by circumstance in the ogre's castle is not far away. To exclude the ethical from consideration is absurd. Hamlet means that *he* can see that Denmark is a wicked kingdom in which he is confined. Denmark is bad. But then whimsically he allows that this could be a subjective view—others might assess the situation differently. Obviously ethical subjectivism is much more disquieting than subjectivism in the field of happiness. Epistemological relativism, doubt not about whether anything is objectively good but about whether anything can be known to be there at all, is more radical still.

Yet Hamlet is ready to push his scepticism to the point of epistemological doubt: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.254–56). Hamlet is thinking about the fallacies of experience. Empiricism, the philosophy that says that all knowledge is founded on sensory experience, was to become the dominant mode in the course of the seventeenth century, after Shakespeare's death. The question, "How do I know that I'm not dreaming?" is a chestnut of empiricism (it is indeed the point at which empiricism can mutate into its apparent opposite, scepticism). Just

as Stoicism, for all its insistence on reason, held the seeds of a strange subjectivism, so empiricism, though it begins by sounding thoroughly down to earth, had in it that which could foster immaterialist idealism. As long as "experience" means "the things we experience," this sunlit wall, that tower in the distance, all is well. But the empiricists became committed to a causal or representative account of perception. That sunlit wall is replicated in an image on the retina. The mind, it seems, has immediate access to "ideas" only, that is to images that represent (with what degree of fidelity we can never check) external things. So now "experience" refers to the private television screen, behind the eye. A shiver-of-solipsism, a fear that there may be nothing at all out there, can be felt behind the robust philosophy of John Locke: "Since the *Mind*, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but it own *Ideas*, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them."<sup>23</sup> It recurs in Hume: "Let us chace our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appeared in that narrow compass."<sup>24</sup> We wish to check that the unending show of images is true; we think we can pop outside to see. But the mind cannot leave its cell inside the head. Checking—"having a look"—can be done only via the optical apparatus we had hoped to corroborate externally. It is interesting that Hume feels the difficulty in spatial terms. The most distant heavenly bodies we can see are available to the mind only as insubstantial images too close for comfort. Hamlet says he can think that he is master of infinite space, but all this might be happening within the confines of a tiny shell. Elsewhere in the same scene his mind passes from the "firmament . . . fretted with golden fire" to a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors" (II.ii.301–3).

There is no sign that Shakespeare has worked out, ahead of history, a full causal or representative theory of perception. But he has clearly seen that the world as it appears to a suffering subject can shift and change alarmingly. The difficulty of separating dream from reality haunts him. With breath-taking cleverness Hamlet wittily transposes his "dream" to another place in the system. Instead of saying, "It is my dream that the world is foul" or "I feel that I am a wretched prisoner in darkness," he says that he could believe himself free, *but for* his bad dreams. What are the bad

dreams? The sceptical intuition itself, that nothing is real? Or, what the audience by now believes for a fact, that Denmark is a place of wickedness? By the second interpretation the bad dream is the site not of an illusion but of shocking veracity. The general effect, however, is of profound, intractable disorientation.

In *Hamlet* the concern with acting and identity that ran through the early plays reaches a climax. It is a curious experience to turn from twentieth-century critics as they laboriously excogitate, one at a time, such notions as "self-reference" and "self-fashioning" to Shakespeare himself. For Shakespeare these notions are merely preliminary approximations, the springboard for a far more complex and acute interrogation of the subject.

Hamlet envies the simple Stoic, Horatio, but there is no doubt in our minds but that Hamlet is the greater man of the two. This is odd because he is so very close to being an anti-hero, or even a clown. His very name as it is given in Saxo Grammaticus probably means "fool" or "weaking," but I do not think Shakespeare knew this.<sup>25</sup> Faced with a challenge to his honour, the murder of his father, he dithers. He hangs about in his mother's room. He jokes nervously when action is needed. He is incapable, seemingly, of a normal sexual relationship with a loving woman. It is remarkable technically that this figure should become a colossus of world literature. The very hesitations of a Hamlet loom larger in our minds than the massacres of a Tamburlaine. Richard II was one kind of player-king, Henry V perhaps another. Hamlet is not so much a player-prince as a player-avenger. Like Richard he is "playing himself," but where Richard was sustained in his role by the shining public image of the sacred king, Hamlet has been led by a ghost out of the green area of common existence into a parched desert.

We know that there was an earlier play with the Hamlet story, perhaps by Thomas Kyd. This play is lost, but we have Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, an inverted *Hamlet*, about a father avenging his son. It is likely that the earlier *Hamlet* was melodramatic and bloody. The pre-existence of this older version makes it possible for Shakespeare to engage in a virtuoso range of stylistic registers, some half-parodic. When Hamlet tells the players who visit Elsinore to avoid extravagant gestures and to speak "trippingly" (III.ii.2), we may detect a sophisticated distaste for the kind of acting Kyd's

plays actually demand. Hamlet recommends an altogether cooler manner. William Empson in a brilliant essay conjectured that when Shakespeare was invited to do a re-write of the old play he discovered a "hole" in the drama: the hero kept failing to act. This made for suspense, but meanwhile no reason for the delay was offered within the play. Shakespeare knew that he had to deal with a mildly difficult audience—one genuinely enthusiastic about the old play but no longer easily terrified—perhaps too ready to smile where they would once have gasped. Suddenly Shakespeare knew what he had to do. Instead of supplying a plausible explanation of the delay within the plot, he would make the hole in Kyd's play huge, would turn the original dramaturgical incompetence into a psychological mystery. He would have his hero marvel, aloud, at his own inaction. He now has a way to deal with the too comfortably omniscient audience. They can be given what they have paid to hear, plenty of echoes of the old revenge play, but these Kydian elements will now figure as a one-man play within the play, as a performance put on by Hamlet, as "antic disposition" or pretended madness. Now, whenever he wishes Shakespeare can wipe the complacent smile from the spectator's face with the implied challenge: "Can you understand this man? You can't, can you?" The resultant play with its strange stylistic duplicity had an enormous effect on the revenge tragedies written by later dramatists. There is a sense in which they are all "pastiche revenge tragedies" rather than "straight." That is because, after *Hamlet* had made the formal character of the genre so explicit as to be almost comic, any dramatist who hoped to appear "street-wise" was obliged to show a similar consciousness of "manner." What the later dramatists could not do was to write two plays at once, a mock-revenge and a real, terrifying, murder-answering murder. Only Shakespeare could do this.

Empson's ear was good, and his analysis of the complex stylistic orchestration of *Hamlet* masterly. But his essay had two great faults. First, he decided that once one has seen that Shakespeare's method is to daze the audience there is no point in speculating about the reasons for the hero's delay. The play is set up as a conundrum without a solution. That means that we can all relax. In fact, as we shall see, Shakespeare lays down lines of clues and suggestions, leading away from the eye into a gradually increasing obscurity. Audiences have always responded to these clues, and there

is a sense in which the critic who has decided that they should be ignored is no longer receiving Shakespeare's play. Second, Empson failed to see how the histrionic behaviour of the Prince reacts upon his own sense of self. That Hamlet should employ actorly tricks to impose upon others (as when he fixes Ophelia with his eye and walks backwards from the room) is one thing, but what are we to make of the speech beginning, "Now could I drink hot blood" (III.ii.390)? This is in the manner of Kyd. It demands a melodramatic delivery. But Hamlet is not here working on another person. He is alone. Since we know that these tragic mannerisms are a means of manipulation, we are propelled into the thought: Hamlet must be using the black-revenge style to practise upon himself. The role-playing that was a means of evading action for Richard II is in Hamlet a desperate attempt to galvanize muscles that are inert. As early as the Temple Garden scene in *I Henry VI* we saw "outside-in" motivation, the mere behaviour of a faction, the adoption of badges, metamorphosing into violent war. There we were looking at group behaviour. But there are modes of outside-in motivation that work at the level of the individual. Richard II's strutting is a way of comforting himself. Hamlet's is an essayed self-therapy.

Once more we begin with isolation. <sup>★</sup> The visiting ghost has separated Hamlet from the sustaining link with continuing life. As a result, his motivation decays. The young, ordinarily likable Hamlet we glimpse in the letter to Ophelia ("O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers," II.ii.120) has given way to one from whom all ordinary, natural relationships have been withdrawn. Normal identity, which is bound in with such relationships, has gone with them. The left-over darkened self is haunted by a single thought: "I am to kill my uncle." Hamlet watches an actor reciting a speech about Hecuba. He is amazed and also, in a way, envious when he sees a tear in the actor's eye: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?" (II.ii.559). From the outside in role-playing has created a real emotion. Hamlet therefore keeps up the Kyd style, now, when he is alone, to activate the required bloodlust.

The usual picture is that a human being has a certain nature to begin with and from this nature the expected actions will flow. Anne will give more than the others because Anne is a generous person. But the sequence can be reversed. Remember here the James-Lange theory: "We

fear, because we run."<sup>26</sup> A certain Roman Catholic chaplain to a university used to say to students who had lost their faith, "Behave as if you had it still. Hang around in churches. Do a lot of kneeling. It will seep back in from the outside." Baron von Hügel, a little chillingly, said that he embraced his child "in order to love it."<sup>27</sup> The basic notion of a walking negation that seeks a more substantial identity through role-playing is obviously close to Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism, as set out in *L'Être et le néant*. This is a chronologically scandalous thing to say, but I claim similarity only, not influence. Shakespeare has probably read Seneca and has certainly not read Sartre. But Hamlet is more like Sartre's man than he is like Seneca's.

One chronological scandal to which we have almost become accustomed by repetition is the Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's delay, as set out by Ernest Jones in his *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). The suggestion is that Hamlet sexually desires his mother at an unconscious level. When his father returns from the grave to tell him that he was murdered by Claudius and urges Hamlet to avenge the crime, Hamlet finds himself inexplicably unable to move. The reason is that Claudius, in removing the sexual partner of Hamlet's mother, did what Hamlet himself wanted done; he removed the rival. In striking Claudius, Hamlet would be striking himself, or a projection of himself. This bizarre theory, the fruit of a later age, turns out to have extraordinary purchase on the text. In particular, the play of stylistic registers supports it. A good Freudian would predict that such an Oedipally impeded hero would use the language of the super-ego (conscientious, high-minded) when speaking of his father, because the super-ego presides over the business of repression, tells us what we ought to say as distinct from what we wish. But in moments of passion he will use earthy, sexual language, as when he begins to see Claudius not as the man who removed old Hamlet but as the new lover of Gertrude. And that is exactly what we get. In the intimate context of the closet scene (the closet is the room where the Queen reads herself for bed) Hamlet praises his dead father in educated, classical language (Hyperion, Mars, Jove, Mercury), but when he switches to Gertrude's re-marriage, we have at once the authentic accent of the Freudian id: "the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / . . . honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty" (III.iv.92-94). The phrase "Hyperion to a satyr" (I.ii.140) mythically encapsulates the Freud-

ian opposition of the super-ego and the id. "Hyperion," another name for Apollo, means "travelling on high"; satyrs are libidinal creatures, hiding in undergrowth. Freud himself was willing to use classical mythology to articulate his theories. Hamlet does seem oddly arrested when praising his father, yet he can strike when Claudius has become the new rival. When Hamlet stabbed the arras in the closet scene he believed that Claudius, not Polonius, was on the other side. All this is exactly what the Freudian would predict—on the English stage in 1600–1601.

Best of all, for the Freudians, is one freak of imagery. Old Hamlet was murdered by having a poison, a "leptous distillment," poured into his ear (I.v.63–70). In Act III Hamlet says to Gertrude, "Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear" (III.iv.64). It is an odd simile. The mildewed ear in the main story of the play is old Hamlet's. In this queer synecdoche Hamlet is now at one level confounding Claudius with the dead king. Perhaps the slippage from one person to another is triggered by the words "your husband" at the beginning of the line. The Freudian reading makes all this intelligible. Hamlet's mind can slip sideways, with the image of the corrupted bodily organ, from the dead king to his brother because that brother has now become what old Hamlet used to be, the person having sexual relations with Gertrude.

The chronological scandal remains. Is there any way of mitigating it? In fact there are several. First, Freud was deeply influenced by his reading of Shakespeare. Then, Shakespeare is famous for his love of murky, undisclosed factors—"Something nasty lurking under the fine silk." Given this, it is perhaps not so very surprising that he should plant a hint of incestuous feeling in the Prince to mirror the public incest of Claudius ("Our sometime sister, now our queen," I.ii.8).<sup>28</sup> It must be added that Shakespeare never committed himself to the lunatic idea that all male infants desire to have sex with their mothers and to murder their fathers. Hamlet is a one-off, a manifestly peculiar case.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge saw Hamlet as a man paralysed by excess of thought.<sup>29</sup> It has long been almost embarrassingly evident that when Coleridge described Hamlet he was describing himself—as clear a case of unconscious projection as one could wish for. Coleridge, notoriously, could never carry through his great designs, perhaps indeed because his brain worked overtime. The case of Coleridge is therefore taken to cor-

roborate a view of the play very close to Empson's: *Hamlet* is the equivalent in literary art of a Rorschach blot—that is, it is expressly framed for maximum ambiguity so that when onlookers think they are interpreting, they are really only revealing their own nature. Presumably, once we know this we austerely cease to offer explanations of the play. Shakespeare, who has a strange ability to anticipate anything we might later think of, produces a spectacular, really uncanny anticipation of the Rorschach blot theory:

HAMLET Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

HAMLET Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS It is back'd like a weasel.

HAMLET Or like a whale.

POLONIUS Very like a whale. (III.ii.376–82)

Hamlet cruelly draws Polonius into warm, positive agreement and then his him with the emergent truth that a cloud can be made to resemble pretty well anything we like. Polonius is left stammering agreement with the last interpretation given, and we sense that he would now agree with anything. So Polonius is made a fool of, as the play *Hamlet* makes a fool of any critic who offers a single positive interpretation. But, as always with Shakespeare, there is another level. Polonius may not be the complete fool after all. He thinks Hamlet is both dangerous and mad and therefore to be "humbled."

So is Coleridge's account of the play a futile, wholly subjective affair? Not at all. Coleridge accurately seizes something that is there in the text: "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (III.i.84), "thinking too precisely on th' event" (IV.v.41). The most telling moment for Coleridge is a curiously disconcerting simile; Hamlet says that he will sweep to his revenge "with wings as swift / As meditation, or the thoughts of love" (I.v.29–30). "As swift as thought" is a common simile, for thoughts can in a second fly to the ends of the earth. But thought in the Prince of Denmark is an impediment, not a release. So Shakespeare interposes the retarding, polysyllabic word "meditation," and suddenly the phrase takes on the character of an inadvertent oxymoron. Coleridge was right. This

book is about Shakespeare as thinker. Hamlet is Shakespeare's prime example of a thinker, and thought is making Hamlet ill. It is a mistake to suppose that Hamlet's problem is weakness of will. If will is involved with wishing, then we must grant that Hamlet's will to do what must be done is huge. His malady is disjunction of the will. The very act of mental willing has assumed a strangely separate existence and has become disengaged both from the normal corroborative emotions and from action. Voluntary action is often explained as action following a movement of the mental will, but there is no such discernible succession in ordinary voluntary behaviour. G. E. M. Anscombe once observed that, just as one can stare at a matchbox in an intense and distracted way and "will" it to move, so one can "will" one's arm to move. Both matchbox and arm remain inert.<sup>30</sup> Real voluntary action—just moving one's arm to pick up a pen—is a simple thing. Reflexive consciousness in Hamlet has destroyed this ordinary simplicity. In classical philosophy, long before, the felicitous adjective "voluntary" is transformed, by an excess of abstraction, into a queerly separate noun, "will." In *Love's Labour's Lost* conscious elegance of language is seen as a pathological condition. Berowne confesses at the close, "I am sick" (V.ii.417). Perhaps in both places Shakespeare is strangely ashamed of things in himself we see as strengths. For the Shakespeare who wrote *Love's Labour's Lost* was a master of elegant language, as the Shakespeare who wrote *Hamlet* could obviously out-think all his rivals.

Empson's wish to halt all speculative criticism with the simple assertion that *Hamlet* is designed as an insoluble conundrum implicitly freezes and sanitizes a work that buzzes with possible explanations: the Existentialist Hamlet, the Freudian Hamlet, the man paralysed by excess of thought, and so on. These are not the only lines available. It is surprising that so little has been made of a possible religious reason for Hamlet's delay. Christianity forbids revenge, but Hamlet is under an obligation to avenge the murder of his father. This gives the ethical conflict on which tragedy thrives. G. W. F. Hegel observed that tragedy is not about the conflict of right and wrong but about the conflict of right and right.<sup>31</sup> In Greek tragedy the primitive ethic of pollution, linked to certain taboos, is in tension with a more developed moral understanding. Oedipus marries his mother and is therefore stained forever. But he did not know she was his mother. And so his fate is terrible, pitiable. There is nothing in English

tragedy to correspond to the taboo as it figures in Greek tragedy. Taboo is a primitive prohibition. What we do have in English tragedy is a *primitive obligation*, at odds with a more developed ethic. Revenge, at the deepest, oldest level, is something one must do. It is a matter of honour. If you do not kill the murderer of your father, you are less than a man. But the Bible says that revenge is wrong. It has been said that in all the philosophizing and questioning in *Hamlet* no one ever seems to notice that revenge is forbidden. In fact, Hamlet obviously knows that revenge is a sin. When he is listing his own faults he says, "I am very proud, vengeful, ambitious" (III.i.123-24). It may be that the ethical problem of revenge is not mentioned elsewhere in the play because it is too obvious to need stating.

The Bible gives two reasons for not taking revenge: first, because revenge should be transcended by love (Matt. 5:38), and second, because it is God's job ("Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," Rom. 12:19). In the early sixteenth century it was commonly felt that God did in fact look after the necessary acts of retaliation and that when he did so he used human beings for the purpose. Yet revenge remains forbidden to human beings. Only the grimmest theologians were happy to say that God might use John to carry out an act of revenge and that John sinned even as he carried out God's will. A devout young sixteenth-century Christian whose father had been murdered would think, "This must be left to God." In other words he would "go limp," exactly as Hamlet does. Although in the early part of the play we may begin to think of Hamlet as a brilliant Machiavel who will trap Claudius and finish him off, perhaps with some novel poison, notoriously Hamlet's glittering cleverness depends itself in vacancy, and the final killing of Claudius is something that emerges by accident from a tangle of confused circumstance. It is true that at the very last moment, when Hamlet forces the poison down the King's throat (V.ii.326), he is an agent, and we shiver. But all the rest is more reaction than action. The chaos at the human level leaves God free to ensure the proper end. It is only because of this confusion that we are able to think of Hamlet as not necessarily bound for hell. The Machiavel avengers of later Jacobean tragedy all have a whiff of brimstone about them. The play certainly makes the order of divine, over-arching causation evident to us: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (V.ii.10), "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow . . . the readiness is all"

(VII.2.19–22). Passivity in revenge is the only path left to one both honourable and Christian. As Charlemont says at the end of Cyril Tournour's *Atheist's Tragedy* (1611), "Patience is the honest man's revenge."

None of these explanations of Hamlet's delay is powerful enough to displace the others. All are relevant to the play. Plato set himself to refute those who confuse "the many beautiful things" with "beauty itself," the prior essence with its local accidents.<sup>32</sup> Hamlet, lost in the vacancy at the heart of revenge, reaches out to "the things of revenge," the gory apparatus of the old play, black clothes, skulls, blood, and poison. But Shakespeare pushes the Platonic thought further. The audience is slowly taught that it has long been confusing "the things of death" with death itself. The negation of death is so complete as to be logically unique. The poets think they are writing about death but take pusillanimous refuge in "the things" — worms, epitaphs, and winding sheets—that are so much more tractable by the mind. When Hamlet first soliloquizes on death, he sees it as a "positive negation," an "undiscover'd country" (III.i.78). It is remarkable in the face of this obvious agnosticism in the most famous of Elizabethan plays that teachers continue to assert that agnosticism was unknown in Shakespeare's day, that all believed firmly in a Christian eschatology. The much more dangerous Hamlet who returns to Denmark after his voyage no longer sees death in terms of an obscure landscape. Instead he is briskly *chosiste*. Death is subjected to an abrupt materialist reduction: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turr'd to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (VI.2.13–14). This is the last we hear of the Roman play from which *Hamlet* sprang. Great Caesar is now a lump of mud. Yet the effect of this hearty language is to make the sheer otherness, the infallibility of death more importantly present to our minds than it was in the earlier, metaphysically ruminative soliloquies. There was always an edge of hysteria to Hamlet's humour and it is there still.

When Ludwig Wittgenstein said that death is not an event in life, he went on to speak of that which lies outside the border of one's visual field.<sup>33</sup> But "border," it turns out, is a misleading word. If one is asked, "What shape is your visual field?" one has to work surprisingly hard to come up with an answer. It might be thought that nothing could be clearer, more empirically elementary, than the shape of the view we have of the visible world before our eyes. People say, "A horizontal oval . . . I think." They hesitate because they cannot check the border. As Wittgen-

stein says, our life is actually *endlos*, "endless" in the sense that our visual field is *grenzenlos*, "without limit." There is, for example, no clear blackness along the edge where the visual information gives out. There is "what we see" and "what we don't see." It is impossible to align the two.

Of course by Wittgenstein's criterion Shakespeare is guilty along with all the other poets of filling his death play with dying (dying, unlike death, is another "event in life"). But he is less guilty than most of evading the central mystery of un-being. By stressing the inadequacy of the theatrical apparatus bequeathed by Kyd (though it may successfully activate vengeful passion, it is itself unreal) and by making us feel the off-target coarseness of Hamlet's conversation with the grave-digger, Shakespeare propels us into a more fundamental bewilderment.

It is hard to think of anything in *Hamlet* of which one can be finally sure. Shakespeare knew from the first second of the play—from the first two syllables—that his task was to enlarge uncertainty. "Who's there?" are the opening words. One sentry, on the icy battlements of the castle, throws a challenge into the darkness. His words are humorously thrown back at him. The noise he heard was made, it seems, by the other sentry arriving for his spell of duty. So is there nothing to fear? Someone or something else is actually there, waiting: the spirit who may be Hamlet's dead father. He, or it, by a command to kill, destroys Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, as well as Claudius, who looks genuinely guilty. According to Protestant theory of the period the ghost cannot be a revenant, a dead person returned. When the Protestants abolished Purgatory they had nothing left beyond the grave but heaven, from which no soul would wish to return, and hell, from which no one could escape. Most people after watching *Hamlet* are pretty sure that the ghost was Hamlet's father, but one can never be completely certain. In the Folio stage directions he is always called "Ghost," never "old Hamlet." Even if he tells the truth about Claudius he could still be a devil. When the play is over, we can still ask, "Who was there?"

#### *Troilus and Cressida*: Hamlet's Play

Hamlet is a sick, clever man. *Troilus and Cressida* is a sick, clever play. So, clearly, Hamlet is the author of *Troilus and Cressida*—or, at least, *Troilus and Cressida* is the play Hamlet could have written. The sickness of the play