

I. Shakespeare and the Value of Personality
II. Shakespeare and the Value of Love

HAROLD BLOOM

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HAROLD BLOOM is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University and Berg Professor of English at New York University. He was educated at Cornell University, Cambridge University, and Yale University, where he received his Ph.D. He also holds honorary degrees from Boston College, Yeshiva University, and the University of Bologna. A recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Philosophical Society. Among his twenty-three published books are *The Visionary Company* (1961), *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (1988), *The American Religions* (1992), and *The Western Canon* (1994).

I. SHAKESPEARE AND THE VALUE OF PERSONALITY

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Karl Marx, whose visions belong to the history of Christian heresy rather than of Jewish heresy, was enough of an apocalyptic to emulate Jesus in crying out: "Let the dead bury their dead!" Emile Durkheim famously remarked that Marxism was not a social science but a cry of pain. Our current, fashionable attitudes towards literary tradition, and towards Shakespeare in particular, blend Marx and Michel Foucault, yet are mostly a cry of pain, while purporting to be one historicism or another. Inauthentic victimization may have its pleasures, but its pains are unpersuasive. Walter Benjamin, an ironically authentic victim of the Nazis, persuades us, within his context, when he remarks that every monument of civilization is also a monument of barbarism. But our context is very different, and our cheerleaders of cultural resentment scarcely earn their Marxist cries of pain. *The* great monument of our canon, and so of our civilization, is Shakespeare, and I hasten to insist that by "our" I do not mean the Western world alone. Shakespeare is the universal center of the world canon: Christian European and American white males are only a fraction of his audience. Shakespeare, the canonical sublime, cannot be judged a monument of barbarism, not a statement I make at all easily, since I have to regard *The Merchant of Venice*, in one of its salient aspects, as a very barbaric work indeed, while *Titus Andronicus*, unless (as I suspect) it was a send-up of Christopher Marlowe, is the essence of barbarism. If there is a monument of human civilization it must be Shakespeare, who is not only the canon, as I have insisted elsewhere, but the canonical sublime, the outer limit of human cognitive and aesthetic power.

The Australian poet-critic Kevin Hart remarks of Dr. Samuel Johnson: "He is one of those writers — like Dante, Goethe, and

Shakespeare —whose monumentality exceeds his canonicity.” Hart grants that the line between canonicity and monumentality is difficult to trace, and so he offers us a definition that is useful yet not altogether acceptable to me:

A monument is the rallying point for a community; it must be the focus of a large and usually diffuse cultural will, the centre of a network of imaginary relationships and real desires.

I reflect, as I read this, that the United States has no such literary monument, not even in its greatest writer, Walt Whitman, whose hermetic nuances both assure his canonicity and prohibit his monumentality. Our national sage, Emerson, is a larger and wider influence upon our culture than Dr. Johnson is upon that of the English, but Emerson too is no monument. Perhaps there never have been high cultural personalities who are rallying points for us, because we have not been a community in the European sense since about 1800, when the American Religion came to its belated birth at Cane Ridge and other titanic revival meetings. Our authentic religion is not communal, but is based upon an idiosyncratic relationship between each American and the American Christ, who is a figure neither European nor ancient Jewish. Where religion is so profoundly eccentric, there can be no cultural monuments. Even an American Shakespeare could not have achieved such status in a society where nearly everyone has a perfect and private assurance that God loves her or him upon a personal and individual basis.

English Shakespeare, as opposed to French Shakespeare (the creation of the New Historicists, feminists, and allied lemmings), is now a multicultural monument, except in the United States and in France. Shakespeare’s monumentalism seems to me rather less significant than his universal canonicity, East and West, because Shakespeare’s worldwide effect reverses Kevin Hart’s formula: the plays represent *real* relationships and *imaginary* desires, rather than the reverse, which would be more cinematic. We find it difficult as we begin to slide into the cosmos of virtual reality always to re-

member that Shakespeare's art is primarily auditory and not visual. I am so weary of badly directed Shakespeare that I would prefer to attend public readings rather than performances of the plays, if only such readings were available. The greatest of all writers addresses the inner and outer ear, as well as the inner eye, which explains how he had the audacity to compose dramas as visionary as *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* for a stage almost primitive in comparison to our theatrical craft, let alone to our cinema.

Are there, beyond language itself, any Shakespearean values? Do the inner and outer ear, and the inner eye, constitute adequate receptors for human value as such? The answer to these questions would help contribute to the defense of aesthetic value, somewhat to the exclusion of most societal demands. Plato's war against Homer is weakly echoed by all our contemporary politicizings of aesthetic concerns. If there is to be an aesthetic counterattack, Shakespeare ought to be the field of battle, since Shakespeare *is* the largest aesthetic value that we will ever know. Doubtless there are values aplenty in both human personality and human eros, and I do not pretend to know what Shakespeare's stance, as an actual human being, was towards most of those values. Pragmatically, though, personality and eros were for the poet-playwright Shakespeare primarily aesthetic values, and as such I wish to approach them. I begin here with Shakespeare as the canonical sublime in representing personalities, and I admit at the start that I am being absurdly naive. In relation to the current academic world, I am a dinosaur, and more of a Bloomian Brontosaurus than a Tyrannosaurus Rex. I have been accused of seeking to revive the nefarious A. C. Bradley, Hegelian Edwardian. But actually I am a disciple of the eighteenth-century British colonial bureaucrat Maurice Morgann, who reacted to the American Revolution, which cost him his job as secretary of the province of New Jersey, by turning to Shakespearean criticism. In 1777, he published *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*, an extended exercise I

happily commend to whatever fellow dinosaurs still exist among us.

Morgann invested much of his essay in defending Falstaff from the charge of cowardice, an imputation incessantly urged upon Falstaff by Prince Hal. As Morgann demonstrates, Falstaff is anything but a coward, and I myself would venture that what Hal calls cowardice is actually freedom, freedom from the rapacities of what Freud (or rather his translator James Strachey) called the superego. The Freudian metaphor of the *überich*, that which is above the capital letter “I,” essentially is a Punch-and-Judy puppet show, in which the censorious superego keeps beating up on the punchy ego, punishing him for supposed aggressivity, and as the wretched ego surrenders all drive, the superego hits him only the harder, while shouting even louder: “Stop being so aggressive!” Sir John Falstaff has less superego pummeling away at him than any other literary character I know, with the single exception of Francois Rabelais’s demoniac Panurge. When Prince Hal constantly berates Falstaff for being “a natural coward without instinct,” I learn something complex about the future King Henry V, but absolutely nothing about the finest comic character in all literature. Part of the value of the Shakespearean representation of personality is its incredible depth and complexity, which achieves a magnitude in Falstaff matched only by that of Hamlet. The late Sir William Empson, who was rather less in love with Falstaff than I am, gives an accurate sense of the ambiance of the role that seems to have been Shakespeare’s greatest success with his own contemporaries:

But to stretch one’s mind round the whole character (as is generally admitted) one must take him, though as the supreme expression of the cult of mockery as strength and the comic idealisation of freedom, yet as both villainous and tragically ill-used.

I hardly know in what sense Falstaff can be judged “villainous” compared to absolutely everyone else in the two parts of *Henry IV*, including the hypocritical Prince Hal and the doom-eager Hotspur, not to mention the usurping King Henry IV, and all his supporters,

and all his enemies. Empson derided those who view Falstaff as a “lovable old dear,” but is that the only alternative to seeing the great wit and pragmatist as a villain? I hesitate to select any single power out of Shakespeare’s infinite variety of powers as being foremost, but sometimes I would vote that eminence to his control of perspectivism. You identify your true self by your judgment of Shakespeare’s characters: if you are either a whoremonger or a puritan, then Cleopatra is a whore; if you are even a touch more interesting, then she is the most vital woman in Shakespeare, surpassing Rosalind and Portia. Empson was a great critic, but his (rather exotic) Chinese Communist moralism made him see Falstaff as “villainous.” Admittedly, if you thought that Mao was a great and good man, then you would not be happy with Sir John, who believed neither in men nor in causes, but only in the blessing of life itself, at the expense of all idealism or supposedly good works whatsoever.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, now absurdly undervalued both as poet and as critic, wrote a splendid book on Shakespeare (1880), in which he shrewdly compared Falstaff both to Rabelais’s Panurge and to Cervantes’s Sancho Panza, and awarded the palm to Falstaff, not just for his massive intellect but for his range of feeling and indeed even for his “possible moral elevation.” Here Swinburne anticipated A. C. Bradley, who rightly remarked that all adverse moral judgments upon Falstaff are antithetical to the nature of Shakespearean comedy. Try to envision what Moliere might have done with Falstaff, and you will go quite blank; in Molière’s vision the consciousness of vice is secondary to the realization that consciousness is all but identical with vice. Molière, despite his debt to Montaigne, was not a vitalist; Shakespeare was everything and nothing, including a vitalist and a nihilist. Sir John Falstaff is the greatest vitalist in Shakespeare, but while he is certainly not the most intense of Shakespeare’s nihilists, his strain of nihilism is extraordinarily virulent. Indeed, his nihilism seems to me Falstaff’s version of Christianity, and helps account for the

darkest element in the grand wit, his realistic obsession with rejection, massively to be realized at the end of *Henry IV Part Two*.

It is the image of rejection, rather than of damnation, that accounts for Falstaff's frequent allusions to the frightening parable of the purple-clad glutton, Dives, and poor Lazarus the beggar that Jesus tells in Luke 16:19–26:

There was a certeine riche man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared wel and delicately euerie day.

Also there was a certeine beger named Lazarus, which was laied at his gate ful of sores,

And desired to be refreshed with the crommes that fell from the riche mans table: yea, and the dogs came and licked his sores.

And it was so that the begger dyed, and was caryed by the Angels into Abrahams bosome. The riche man also dyed and was buried.

And being in hel in torments, he lift vp his eyes, and sawe Abraham a farre of, & Lazarus in his bosome.

Then he cryed, and sais, Father Abraham, gaue mercie on me, and send Lazarus that he may dippe y typ of his finger in water, and coole my tongue: for I am tormented in this flame.

But Abraham said, Sonne, remember that thou in thy life time receiuedft thy pleasures, and likewise Lazarus paines: now therefore is he comforted, and thou art tormented.

Besides all this, betwene you and vs there is a great gulfe set, so that they which wolde go from hence to you, can not, nether can they come from thence to vs.

(S. Luke Chap. 16:19-26 from the Geneva Bible)

Three times Falstaff alludes to this fierce parable; I will suggest that there is a fourth, concealed allusion when Falstaff kneels and is rejected by King Henry V, in his new royal purple, and manifestly there is a fifth when the Hostess, describing Falstaff's death in the play he is not permitted to enter, *Henry V*, assures us that Falstaff is "in Arthur's bosom," with the British Arthur substituting for Father Abraham. To be sure, Henry V allows that Falstaff is to be fed crumbs from the royal table, but the initial feeding

is held in prison, by order of the Lord Chief Justice. If we are to credit his Sonnets, Shakespeare knew what it was to be rejected, though I certainly do not wish to suggest an affinity between the creator of Falstaff and Falstaff himself. I wonder though at the affinities between Prince Hal and the Earl of Southampton, neither of them candidates for Abraham's bosom. But the more interesting matter, as always, concerns Sir John Falstaff, who is not only witty beyond all others but who also possesses a cognitive power that nearly rivals Hamlet's. What is Sir John's implicit interpretation of the parable of the rich man and the beggar?

Falstaff's first allusion to the parable is the richest and most outrageous, beginning as a meditation upon Bardolph's fiery nose, that makes him "the Knight of the Burning Lamp." The hurt Bardolph complains: "Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm," to which Falstaff makes a massive reply:

No, I'll be sworn, I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's-head or a *memento mori*. I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire and Dives that liv'd in purple; for there he is in his robes, burning, burning. If thou wert any way given to virtue, I would swear by thy face; my oath should be "By this fire, that[']s God's angel." But thou art altogether given over, and wert indeed, but for the light in thy face, the son of utter darkness. When thou ran'st up Gadshill in the night to catch my horse, if I did not think thou hadst been an *ignis fatuus* or a ball of wildfire, there's no purchase in money. O, thou art a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire light! Thou hast sav'd me a thousand marks in links and torches, walking with thee in the night betwixt tavern and tavern; but the sack that thou hast drunk me would have bought me lights as good cheap at the dearest chandler's in Europe. I have maintain'd that salamander of yours with fire any time this two and thirty years, God reward me for it!

"For there he is in his robes, burning, burning": of course we are to note that Falstaff is another glutton, but I do not believe we are to take seriously Falstaff's fear of hellfire, any more than we

are to identify Bardolph with the Burning Bush. Sir John is at work subverting Scripture, even as he subverts everything else that would constrain him: time, the state, virtue, the chivalric concept of “honor,” and all ideas of order whatsoever. The brilliant fantasia upon Bardolph’s nose does not allow us much residual awe in relation to Jesus’ rather uncharacteristic parable. What chance has the rhetorical threat of hellfire against the dazzling metamorphoses of Bardolph’s nose, which goes from a *memento mori* to the Burning Bush to a will-of-the-wisp to fireworks to a torchlight procession to a bonfire to a fiery salamander, seven amiable variants that far outshine the burning in Jesus’ parable. Falstaff, the greatest of Shakespeare’s prose-poets, leaps from metaphor to metaphor so as to remind us implicitly that the parable’s “burning, burning” is metaphor also, albeit a metaphor that Sir John cannot cease to empty out. He returns to it as he marches his wretched recruits on to the hellfire of the battle of Shrewsbury: “slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton’s dogs lick’d his sores.” Why does the allusion recur in this context? Hal, staring at Falstaff’s troop, observes: “I did never see such pitiful rascals,” prompting Falstaff’s grand rejoinder: “Tut, tut, good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder; they’ll fill a pit as well as better. Tush, man, mortal men, mortal men.” Would it be more honorable if you tossed on a pike better-fed, better-clothed impressed men? How could one state it more tellingly: Falstaff’s recruits have all the necessary qualities — food for powder, corpses to fill a pit, mortal men, who are there to be killed, only to be killed, like their betters, whose “grinning honor” Prince Hal will worship. Falstaff has drafted the poorest, like the beggar Lazarus, in contrast to the purple glutton he previously named as Dives, a name not to be found in the Geneva Bible or later in King James. It is not likely that either Shakespeare or Falstaff had read Luke in the Vulgate, where the “certain rich man” is a *dives*, Late Latin for a “rich man,” but Dives by Shakespeare’s day was already a name out of Chaucer and the common tongue. Sir John, after collecting

the bribes of the affluent to release them from service, has put together a fine crew of Lazaruses, who will be stabbed and blown up to serve the Henrys, father and son. Yet, true to his charismatic personality, Falstaff, marching with a bottle of sack in his pistol-holster, observes: "I have led my ragamufflins where they are pepper'd; there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life." All we can ask of Falstaff he has done; a mortal man, he *led* his Lazaruses to their peppering, taking his chances with them where the fire was hottest. Sir John's cognitive contempt for the entire enterprise is his true offense against time and the state; Prince Hal is never less hypocritical than when he bellows at Falstaff: "What, is it a time to jest and dally now?" while throwing at Sir John the bottle of sack the Prince has just drawn from the holster, in attempting to borrow a pistol.

Falstaff's last explicit allusion to Dives omits any mention of Lazarus, since it is turned against a tailor who has denied him credit: "let him be damn'd like the glutton! Pray God his tongue be hotter!" Since Falstaff perpetually is in want of money, neither he nor we associate the fat knight with Dives. It is a fearful irony that Sir John must end like Lazarus, rejected by the newly crowned king, in order to win admission to "Arthur's bosom," but clearly Shakespeare was not much in agreement with nearly all of his modern critics, who unite in defending the rejection of Falstaff, that spirit of misrule. They mistake this great representation of a personality not less than wholly, and I return again to Jesus' parable, for a final time. Falstaff's implicit interpretation of the text is nihilistic: either one must be damned with Dives or else be saved with Lazarus, an antithesis that loses one either the world to come or this. Emerson once said: "other world? There is no other world; here or nowhere is the whole fact." Falstaff is more than pragmatic enough to agree with Emerson, and I find nothing in Shakespeare to indicate that he himself hoped to join Falstaff in Arthur's bosom, or Lazarus in Abraham's. Falstaff is the prose-poet of the

whole fact, and I venture that for Sir John the whole fact is what we call "personality," as opposed to "character." Against time, the state, moral virtue, and the superego, Falstaff is the heroic poet of the ego, largely conscious, though necessarily in part repressed. As prime precursor, Sir John had Chaucer's Dame Alys, the Wife of Bath. The Panurge of Rabelais is an analogue, not a forerunner, while Sancho Panza is an exact contemporary. To call Panurge a personality is of course monstrously inadequate; Panurge, monster of desire, breaks beyond personality into the realm of William Blake's Giant Forms. But the Wife of Bath, Sancho Panza, and Falstaff are what we ought to mean by "personality," not so much in a dictionary sense, but as a cosmos of value, in literature as in life.

Sancho has no enemies, outside the pages of Cervantes, but Falstaff, more even than the Wife of Bath, abounds in scholarly detractors, who love Sir John rather less than they love moral virtue and its alliance with the nation-state. There are also a handful or so of literary enemies, but they are motivated by creative envy in regard to Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, who said that he felt only pity for the mind of Shakespeare when he compared it to his own, angrily called Falstaff "a besotted and disgusting old wretch." One might as accurately characterize Hamlet the Dane as "a murderous and solipsistic young wretch," if moral virtue is to be one's standard of value. The Shakespearean charismatic has little in common with the sociological charismatic of Max Weber, but shares rather more in Oscar Wilde's sense that comprehensiveness in consciousness is the sublime of value, when the representation of personality is at the center of one's concern. Shakespeare has other gorgeous triumphs: Rosalind, Iago, Cleopatra among them, but in circumference of consciousness there are no rivals for Falstaff and Hamlet. The Edmund of *King Lear* perhaps is as intelligent as Falstaff and Hamlet, yet he is all but void of affect until he sustains his death-wound, and must be judged as a negative charismatic in comparison to Sir John and the Prince of Denmark. Weber's sense

of charisma, though derived from religion, has clear affinities with Carlyle's and Emerson's exaltation of heroic genius. Institution and routine, in Weber's vision, quickly absorb the effect of the charismatic individual upon his followers. But Caesarism and Calvinism are not aesthetic movements; Falstaff and Hamlet scarcely can be routinized or institutionalized. Falstaff disdains any task or mission, and Hamlet cannot tolerate being the protagonist of a revenge tragedy. In both figures, charisma goes back beyond the model of Jesus to his ancestor King David, who uniquely held the blessing of Yahweh. Falstaff, though derided by virtuous scholars and rejected by the newly virtuous King Henry V, nevertheless retains the blessing, in its truest sense: more life. Personality, even upon its deathbed, retains its unique value. When I was fifteen, half a century ago, I saw the late Sir Ralph Richardson play Falstaff in New York City. With the rest of the audience, I saw and heard only Richardson; to this day, I cannot recall who played Hal, and I know that I saw Laurence Olivier play Hotspur in the same production only because I have since come upon a photograph of Olivier in the part. Dramatic personality becomes charismatic when it embodies a power of thought that suggests a divinity at work rather than a human. I have known a number of intelligent philosophers and a vast multitude of poets, novelists, storytellers, playwrights. No one should expect them to talk as well as they write, yet even the best of them, on their best day, cannot equal those men made out of words, Falstaff and Hamlet. One wonders: just how does the representation of cognition, in Shakespeare, differ from cognition itself? Pragmatically, can we tell the difference? One wonders again: just how does the representation of charisma, in Shakespeare, differ from charisma itself? Charisma, by definition, is not a social energy; it originates outside society. Shakespeare's uniqueness, his greatest originality, can be described either as a charismatic cognition, which comes from without before it enters group thinking, or as a cognitive charisma, which cannot be routinized. We are on the path that takes us from the personality of

Falstaff, inexhaustible yet ending in grief, to the personality of Hamlet, also inexhaustible to contemplation and ending in something that looks very like a new kind of transcendence.

Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self*, a comprehensive and trenchant study and defense of modern subjectivity, extensively cites Augustine, Luther, and Montaigne, and never once mentions Shakespeare. And yet I hear Shakespeare as an undersong throughout Taylor's book, another indication of one of the ways in which Shakespeare has assimilated us, without our quite knowing it. Shakespeare is so pervasive as the prime source of the self that it seems redundant even to notice him. I find a special fascination in Ludwig Wittgenstein's rather morose observations upon Shakespeare, now gathered together in the little volume called *Culture and Value*. Chagrined both by Shakespeare's power and by his pervasiveness, Wittgenstein finally makes the suggestion that we ought to consider Shakespeare not as a writer but as "a creator of language." I would urge, against Wittgenstein's palpable evasion, that we might more accurately regard Shakespeare as a creator of memory, particularly in that sense in which memory is crucial both for cognition and for a source of the self. I could return to Falstaff as my paradigm here but rather reluctantly I will forsake him for Hamlet, primarily because Falstaff never loses faith either in himself or in language, and so seems to emanate from a more primordial Shakespeare than Hamlet does. The Hamlet who tells us: "The readiness is all" echoes Jesus in the Geneva Bible, when poor Simon Peter falls asleep upon watch, and provokes the compassionate: "The spirit is readie but the flesh is weak." Hamlet's "readiness" has to do with our "willingness," and the Prince, like Jesus, understands that the spirit is willing and yet indeed the flesh is weak. Falstaff, acting a play-within-the-play with Hal, yields himself completely to the spirit's readiness, and then falls asleep in the manner of Simon Peter before him. We never will hear from Sir John: "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting, that would not let me sleep." Think how strange it would sound to say of

Falstaff that he thinks too well! Yet that is Hamlet's greatest malady —he thinks much too well, as Friedrich Nietzsche saw when he remarked: "that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no —true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth." The horrible truth presumably includes Nietzsche's Hamlet-like realization that what we find words for is something already dead in our hearts, so that there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking. What Falstaff finds words for is still alive in his heart, and for him there is no contempt in the act of speaking. Falstaff possesses wit lest he perish of the truth; Hamlet's wit, thrown over by him in the transition to Act V, vanishes from the stage, and so Hamlet becomes the sublime personality whose fate must be to perish of the truth,

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

Senior and Fortinbras as another great royal basher of heads. Clearly, Hamlet's sublimity is a question of personality; four centuries have so understood it. August Wilhelm von Schlegel accurately observed in 1809 that "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else," including God and language, I would add. Of course there is Horatio, whom Hamlet notoriously overpraises, but Horatio seems to be there to represent the audience's love for Hamlet. Horatio is our bridge to the beyond, to that curious but unmistakable negative transcendence that concludes the tragedy.

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

not just a question of rhetoricity or word-consciousness; it is the essence of Shakespeare's greatest originalities in the representation of character, of thinking, and of personality. Ethos, Logos, Pathos —the triple basis of rhetoric, psychology, and cosmology — all bewilder us in Hamlet, because he changes with every self-overhearing. It is a valuable commonplace that *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is an overwhelmingly theatrical play. Hamlet himself is even more self-consciously theatrical than Falstaff tends to be. Falstaff is more consistently attentive to his audience, both onstage and off, and yet Falstaff, though he vastly amuses himself, plays less *to* himself than Hamlet does. This difference may stem from Falstaff's greater playfulness; like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Falstaff is *homo ludens*, while anxiety dominates in Hamlet's realm. Yet the difference seems still greater; the counter-Machiavel Hamlet could almost be called an anti-Marlovian character, whereas Falstaff simply renders Marlowe's mode irrelevant. My favorite Marlovian hero-villain, Barabas, Jew of Malta, is a self-delighting fantastic, but being a cartoon, like nearly all Marlovian protagonists, he frequently speaks as though his words were wrapped up in a cartoonist's balloon floating above him. Hamlet is something radically new, even for and in Shakespeare: his theatricality is dangerously nihilistic because it is so paradoxically *natural* to him. More even than his parody Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*, Hamlet is a walking mousetrap, the anxious expectations that are incarnating the malaise of Elsinore. Iago may be nothing if not critical; Hamlet is criticism itself, at once a theatrical interpreter and the perspectivist of his own story. With a cunning subtler than any other dramatist's, before or since, Shakespeare does not let us be certain as to just which lines Hamlet himself has inserted in order to revise *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet speaks of writing some twelve or sixteen lines, but we come to suspect that there are rather more, and that they include the extraordinary speech in which the Player-King tells us that ethos is not the daimon, that character is not fate but

accident, and that eros is the purest accident. We know that Shakespeare acted the ghost of Hamlet's father; it would have been expedient if the same actor rendered the part of the Player-King, another representation of the dead father. There would be a marvelous twist to Shakespeare himself intoning lines that his Hamlet can be expected to have written:

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

How any audience could take in these twenty-six closely packed lines of a psychologized metaphysic through the ear alone, I scarcely know. They are as dense and weighted as any passage in Shakespeare; the plot of *The Mousetrap* does not require them, and I

assume that Hamlet composed them as his key signature, as what that other melancholy Dane, Soren Kierkegaard, called: "The Point of View of My Work as an Author." They center upon their final lines:

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

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

like that, but we need Hamlet or Falstaff to illuminate the “like that,” to more than flesh out the similes. The question becomes rather: Is life true to Hamlet, or to Falstaff? At its worst, sometimes, and at its best, sometimes, life can or may be, so that the real question becomes: Is Wittgenstein true to Hamlet, or Bloom to Falstaff?

I grant that you don't need to be a formalist or a historicist to assert that being true to Hamlet or to Falstaff is a nonsensical quest. If you read or attend Shakespeare in order to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood, then doubtless I am being nonsensical, a kind of Don Quixote of literary criticism. The late Anthony Burgess, in his *Nothing like the Sun*, a wonderful novel about Shakespeare, has the Bard make a fine, somewhat Nietzschean remark: “Tragedy is a goat and comedy a village Priapus and *dying* is the word that links both.” Hamlet and Falstaff would have said it better, but the sexual play on *dying* is redemptive of the prose, and we are well reminded that Shakespeare writ no genre, and used poor Polonius to scorn those who did. Tragedy, Aldous Huxley once essayed, must omit the whole truth, yet Shakespeare comes close to refuting Huxley. John Webster wrote revenge tragedy; Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. There are no personalities in Webster, though nearly everyone manages to die with something like Shakespearean eloquence. Life must be true to Shakespeare, if personality is to have value, is to be value. Value and pathos do not commune easily with one another, yet who but Shakespeare has reconciled them so incessantly? What after all is personality? A dictionary would say the quality that renders one a person, not a thing or an animal, or else an assemblage of characteristics that makes one somehow distinctive. That is not very helpful, particularly in regard to Hamlet or Falstaff, mere roles for actors, as formalists tell us, and perhaps players fall in love with roles, but do we, if we never mount a stage? What do we mean by “the personality of Jesus,” whether we think of the Gospel of Mark or of the American Jesus? Or what might we mean by “the personality of God,”

whether we think of the Yahweh of the J Writer or of the American God, so notoriously fond of Republicans and of Neo-Conservatives? I submit that we know better what it is we mean when we speak of the personality of Hamlet as opposed to the personality of our best friend, or the personality of some favorite celebrity. Shakespeare persuades us that we know something in Hamlet that is the best and innermost part of him, something uncreated that goes back farther than our earliest memories of ourselves. There is a breath or spark to Hamlet that is his principle of individuation, a recognizable identity whose evidence is his singularity of language, and yet not so much language as diction, a cognitive choice between words, a choice whose drive always is towards freedom: from Elsinore, from the ghost, from the world. Like Falstaff, Hamlet implicitly defines personality as a mode of freedom, more of a matrix of freedom than a product of freedom. Falstaff, though, as I intimated, is largely free of the censorious superego, while Hamlet in the first four acts suffers very terribly from it. In the beautiful metamorphosis of purgation that is Act V, Hamlet almost is freed from what is over or above the ego, though at the price of dying well before his death.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's Conradian narrator, Nick Carraway, observes that personality is a series of successful gestures. Walter Pater would have liked that description, but its limits are severe. Perhaps Jay Gatsby exemplifies Carraway's definition, but who could venture that Hamlet's personality comprises a series of successful gestures? William Hazlitt cast his own vote for inwardness: "it is we who are Hamlet." Hamlet's stage, Hazlitt implied, is the theatre of mind, and Hamlet's gestures therefore are of the inmost self, very nearly everyone's inmost self. Confronting this baffling representation, at once universal and solitary, T. S. Eliot opined that the play was an aesthetic failure, a judgment so astonishing as to make us wonder if any other work of literature possibly could be an aesthetic success. I assume that Eliot, with his own wounds, reacted to Hamlet's sickness of the spirit, certainly the

most enigmatic malaise in all of Western literature. Hamlet's own poetic metaphysic, as we have seen, is that character and fate are antithetical, and yet, at the play's conclusion, we are likely to believe that the prince's character was his fate. Do we have a drama of the personality's freedom, or of the character's fate? The Player-King says that all is accident; Hamlet in Act V hints that there are no accidents. Whom are we to believe? The Hamlet of Act V appears to have cured himself, and affirms that the readiness or willingness is all. I interpret that as meaning: personality is all, once personality has purged itself into a second birth. And yet Hamlet has little desire to survive.

The canonical sublime depends upon a strangeness that assimilates us even as we largely fail to assimilate it. What is the stance towards life, the attitude, of the Hamlet who returns from the sea at the start of Act V? Skepticism, once dominant, has been displaced by what seems to be disinterestedness or even quietism. Quietism, half a century after *Hamlet*, meant a certain Spanish mode of religious mysticism, but Hamlet is no mystic, no stoic, and hardly a Christian at all. He goes into the final slaughter-scene in the spirit of a suicide, and prevents Horatio's suicide with a selfish awareness that Horatio's felicity is being postponed, in order that the prince's own story can be told and retold. And yet he cares for his reputation as he dies; his "wounded name," if Horatio does not live to clear it, is his final anxiety. Since he has murdered Polonius, driven Ophelia to madness and to suicide, and quite gratuitously sent the wretched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off to execution, his anxiety would seem justified, except that in fact he has no consciousness of culpability. His fear of a "wounded name" is one more enigma, and hardly refers to the deaths of Claudius and of Laertes, let alone of his mother, for whom his parting salute is the shockingly cold "Wretched Queen, adieu!" His concern is properly theatrical; it is for us, the audience:

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

That seems to me a playwright's concern, proper to the revisionist author of *The Mousetrap*. Joyce's Stephen, in the Library scene of *Ulysses*, scarcely distinguishes between Shakespeare and Hamlet, and Richard Ellmann assured us that Stephen's fantasia remained always Joyce's serious reading of the play. Hamlet himself seems quite free of the audience's shock that so vast a consciousness should expire in so tangled and absurd a mesh of poisoned sword and poisoned cup. It outrages our sensibility that the Western hero of intellectual consciousness dies in this grossly inadequate context, yet it does not outrage Hamlet, who has lived through much too much already. We mourn a great personality, perhaps the greatest; Hamlet has ceased to mourn in the interval between Acts IV and V. The profoundest mysteries of his personality are involved in the nature of his universal mourning, and in his self-cure. I will not bother with Oedipal tropes here, even to dismiss them, having devoted a chapter to just such a dismissal in a book on the Western canon, where I gave a Shakespearean reading of Freud. Hamlet's spiritual despair transcends a father's murder, a mother's hasty remarriage, and all the miasma of Elsinore's corruption, even as his apotheosis in Act V far transcends any passing of the Oedipus complex. The crucial question becomes: how ought we to characterize Hamlet's melancholia in the first four acts, and how do we explain his escape from it into a high place in Act V, a place at last entirely his own, and something like a radically new mode of secular transcendence?

Dr. Johnson thought that the particular excellence of *Hamlet* as a play was its "variety," which seems to me truer of the prince than of the drama. What most distinguishes Hamlet's personality is its metamorphic nature: his changes are constant, and continue even after the great sea-change that precedes Act V. We have the perpetual puzzle that the most intensely theatrical personality in Shakespeare centers a play notorious for its anxious expectations, for its incessant delays that are more than parodies of an endlessly delayed revenge. Hamlet is a great player, like Falstaff and Cleo-

patra, but his director, the dramatist, seems to punish the protagonist for getting out of hand, for being Hobgoblin run off with the garland of Apollo, perhaps for having entertained even more doubts than his creator had. And if Hamlet is imaginatively sick, then so is everyone else in the play, with the possible exception of the audience's surrogate, Horatio. When we first encounter him, Hamlet is a university student who is not being permitted to return to his studies. He does not appear to be more than twenty years old, yet in Act V he is revealed to be at least thirty, after a passage of a few weeks at most. And yet none of this matters: he is always both the youngest and the oldest personality in the drama; in the deepest sense, he is older than Falstaff. Consciousness itself has aged him, the catastrophic consciousness of the spiritual disease of his world, which he has internalized, and which he does not wish to be called upon to remedy, if only because the true cause of his changeability is his drive towards freedom. Critics have agreed, for centuries now, that Hamlet's unique appeal is that no other protagonist of high tragedy still seems paradoxically so free. In Act V, he is barely still in the play; like Whitman's "real me" or "me myself" the final Hamlet is both in and out of the game while watching and wondering at it. But if his sea-change has cured him of the Elsinore illness, what drives him back to the court and to the final catastrophe? We feel that if the Ghost were to attempt a third appearance in Act V, Hamlet would thrust it aside; his obsession with the dead father is definitely over, and while he still regards his maligned mother as a whore, he has worn out his interest there also. Purged, he allows himself to be set up for Claudius's refined, Italianate version of *The Mousetrap*, on the stated principle of "Let be." Perhaps the best comment is Wallace Stevens's variation: "Let be be finale of seem." And yet once more, we must return to the Elsinore illness, and to the medicine of the sea-voyage.

Every student of the imagery of the play *Hamlet* has brooded on the imposthume or abscess, which Robert Browning was to

pun on brilliantly with his “the imposthume I prick to relieve thee of, —Vanity.” Hamlet himself, precursor of so many Browning *personae*, may be playing on the abscess as imposture:

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

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

II. SHAKESPEARE AND THE VALUE OF LOVE

1

Job’s sufferings have been suggested as the paradigm for Lear’s ordeal; I once gave credence to this critical commonplace, but now find it unpersuasive. Patient Job is actually not very patient, despite his theological reputation, and Lear is the pattern of all impatience, though he vows otherwise, and movingly urges patience upon the

blinded Gloucester. The pragmatic disproportion between Job's afflictions and Lear's is rather considerable, at least until Cordelia is murdered. I suspect that a different biblical model was in Shakespeare's mind: King Solomon. I do not mean Solomon in all his glory, in Kings, Chronicles, and obliquely in the Song of Songs, but the aged monarch, at the end of his reign, wise yet exacerbated, the supposed preacher of Ecclesiastes, and of the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha, as well as the putative author of the Proverbs. Presumably Shakespeare was read aloud to from the Bishops Bible, in his youth, and later read the Geneva Bible for himself, in his maturity. Since he wrote *King Lear* as a servant of King James I, famed as the wisest fool in Christendom, perhaps Shakespeare's conception of Lear was influenced by James's particular admiration for Solomon, wisest of kings. I admit that not many among us instantly associate Solomon and Lear, but there is crucial textual evidence that Shakespeare himself made the association, by having Lear allude to a great passage in the Wisdom of Solomon:

I Myself am also mortal and a man like all other, and am come of him that was first made of the earth.

And in my mothers womb was I facioned to be flesh in ten moneths: I was broght together into blood of the sede of man, and by the pleasure that cometh with slepe.

And when I was borne, I received the comune aire, and fel upon the earth, which is of like nature, crying & weping at the first as all other do.

I was nourished in swadling clothes, and with cares.

For there is no King that had anie other beginning of birth.

All men then have one entrance unto life, and a like going out.

That is the unmistakable text echoed in Lear's shattering sermon to Gloucester:

Lear. If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.

I know thee well enough, thy name is Gloucester.

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.

Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.

[Lear takes off his crown of weeds and flowers.]

Glou. Alack, alack the day!

Lear. When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

After Solomon the kingdom was divided, as it was by Lear. Yet I don't think that Shakespeare partly founds Lear upon the aged Solomon, because of the catastrophes of kingdoms. Shakespeare sought what we tend now not to emphasize in our accounts of Lear: a paradigm for greatness. These days, in teaching the play I have to begin by insisting upon Lear's foregrounding in grandeur, because my students are unlikely at first to perceive it. Patriarchal sublimity is now not much in fashion. Lear is at once father, king, and a kind of mortal god: he is the image of male authority, perhaps the ultimate representation of the Dead White European Male. Solomon reigned for fifty years, and was James I's wished-for archetype: glorious, wise, wealthy, even if Solomon's passion for women was not exactly shared by the sexually ambiguous James. Lear is in no way a portrait of James; Shakespeare's royal patron was meant to sympathize but not to empathize with the kingdom-dividing Lear. But Lear's greatness would have mattered to James: he too considered himself every inch a king. I think he would have recognized, in the aged Lear, the aged Solomon, each in their eighties, each needing and wanting love, and each worthy of love. When I teach *King Lear*, I have to begin by reminding my students that Lear, however unlovable in the first two acts, is very much loved by Cordelia, the Fool, Albany, Kent, Gloucester, and Edgar, that is to say, by every benign character in the play, just as he is hated and feared by Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Oswald, the play's lesser villains. The play's great villain, the superb and uncanny Edmund, is ice-cold, indifferent to Lear as he is even to his own father Gloucester, his half-brother Edgar, and his lovers Goneril and Regan. It is part of Shakespeare's genius not to have

Edmund and Lear address even a single word to one another in the entire play, because they are apocalyptic antitheses: the king is all feeling, and Edmund is bare of all affect. The crucial foregrounding of the play, if we are to understand it at all, is that Lear is lovable, loving, and greatly loved, by anyone at all worthy of our own affection and approbation.

Of course, whoever you may be, you can be loved and loving, and still demand more. If you are King Lear, and have ever but slenderly known yourself, then you are almost apocalyptically needy in your demand for love, particularly from the child you truly love, Cordelia. The play's foreground comprehends not only Lear's benignity, and the resentment of Goneril and Regan, weary of their being passed over for their sister, but most crucially, Cordelia's recalcitrance in the face of incessant entreaties for a total love surpassing even her authentic regard for her violently emotional father. Cordelia's rugged personality is something of a reaction-formation to her father's overwhelming affection. It is one of the many peculiarities of Shakespeare's double-plot that Cordelia, despite her absolute importance to Lear himself, is much less central to the play than is her parallel, Edgar. Shakespeare leaps over several intervening reigns in order to have Edgar succeed Lear as king of Britain. Legend, still current in Shakespeare's time, assigned to King Edgar the melancholy distinction that he rid Britain of wolves, who overran the island after the death of Lear. There are four great roles in *The Tragedy of King Lear*, though you might not know that from most stagings of the play. Cordelia's, for all her pathos, is not one of them, nor are Goneril's and Regan's of the same order of dramatic eminence as the roles of Lear and of the Fool. Edmund and Edgar, antithetical half-brothers, require actors as skilled and powerful as Lear and the Fool must have. I have seen a few appropriate Edmunds, best of all Joseph Wiseman many years ago in New York City, saving an otherwise ghastly production in which Louis Calhern, as Lear, reminded me only of how much more adequate he had been as Ambassador

Trentino in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*. Wiseman played Edmund as an amalgam of Leon Trotsky and Don Giovanni, but it worked quite brilliantly, and there is much in the play's text to sustain that curious blend.

Many readers and auditors of Shakespeare become as dangerously enthralled by Edmund as they are by Iago, yet Edgar, recalcitrant and repressed, actually is the larger enigma, and is so difficult to play that I have never once seen a passable Edgar. The title-page of the first Quarto edition of *King Lear* assigns a prominence to Edgar rarely afforded him in our critical studies:

M. William Shak-speare: His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam. . .

"Sullen" in Shakespeare has the strong meaning of melancholia or depression, a variety of madness, assumed by Edgar in his disguise as Tom of Bedlam. The Earl of Kent disguises himself as Caius, to serve Lear. Edgar, in parallel flight, abases himself, sinking below the bottom of the social scale. Why does Edgar assume the lowest possible disguise? Is he punishing himself for his own credulity, for sharing his father's inability to see through Edmund's brilliant deceptions? There is something so profoundly disproportionate in Edgar's self-abnegation, throughout the play, that we have to presume in him a recalcitrance akin to Cordelia's, but far in excess of hers. Whether as bedlamite or as poor peasant, Edgar refuses his own identity for more than pragmatic purposes. The most extraordinary manifestation of this refusal is his consistent unwillingness to reveal himself to Gloucester, his father, even as he rescues the blinded Earl from murder by the despicable Oswald, and from suicide, after the defeat of Lear and Cordelia. Only when he is on the verge of regaining his own rank, just before challenging Edmund to mortal combat, does Edgar identify himself to Gloucester, so as to ask a paternal blessing for the duel. The

recognition-encounter, which kills Gloucester, is one of Shakespeare's great unwritten scenes, being confined as it is to Edgar's narrative account, delivered to Albany after Edmund has received his death-wound. Why did Shakespeare choose not to dramatize the event?

A theatrical answer might be that the intricacies of the double-plot already seemed so substantial that Shakespeare declined to risk yet more complexity. The Shakespearean audacity is so immense that I doubt such an answer. Lear wakes up sane to be reconciled with Cordelia, a scene in which we all delight. Edgar and Gloucester reconciling, even though the intense affect kills the blind sufferer, could have been nearly as poignant a staged vision. Though we tend to assign greater prominence to the Fool, or to the frighteningly seductive Edmund, the subtitle of the play rightly guides us to Edgar, who will inherit the ruined kingdom. Shakespeare's dramatic self-denial in not writing the scene of Edgar's self-revelation to Gloucester necessarily places the emphasis more upon Edgar, who tells the tale, than upon his father. We learn even more about Edgar's personality and character than we would have known, though we know a great deal already about a role that exemplifies the pathos and value of filial love far more comprehensively than Cordelia's can, because of the necessities of Shakespeare's plot. I return therefore to the voluntary overimmersion in humiliation that Edgar compels himself to undergo.

If we could speak of a poetic rather than dramatic center to the tragedy, we might choose the meeting between the mad King Lear and blind Gloucester in Act IV, Scene VI, lines 80–183. Sir Frank Kermode rightly remarks that the meeting in no way advances the plot, though it may well be the summit of Shakespeare's art. As playgoers and readers, we concentrate upon Lear and Gloucester, yet Edgar is the interlude's chorus, and he has set the tonality of Act IV, in its opening lines, with their keynote: "The lamentable change is from the best, / The worst returns to laughter." The entry of the blinded Gloucester darkens that desperate comfort,

compelling Edgar to the revision: “the worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’” It will be the worst only when “the worst” is already dead in our hearts, so that we will find no diction appropriate for it. Gloucester, blinded and cast forth, is a paternal image suggestive enough to reilluminate even Lear’s outcast madness. Madness and blindness become a doublet profoundly akin to tragedy and love, the doublet that binds together the entire play. Madness, blindness, love, and tragedy amalgamate in a giant bewilderment,

“But what if excess of love / Bewildered them until they died?” W. B. Yeats asks in his “Easter, 116.” Whatever that meant in regard to MacDonagh and MacBride, and Connally and Pearse, Yeats’s question is appropriate to Lear himself. Love, whether it be Lear’s for Cordelia or Edgar’s for his father Gloucester and for his godfather Lear, is pragmatically a waste in this most tragic of all tragedies. Lust does no better; when the dying Edmund muses that in spite of all, he was beloved, his sudden capacity for affect superbly surprises us, but we would choose another word rather than “beloved” for the murderous passion of Goneril and Regan. In Hamlet’s play there is a central consciousness, as there is in Macbeth’s. In Othello’s play, there is at least a dominant nihilist, but Lear’s play is strangely divided. Before he goes mad, Lear’s consciousness is beyond ready understanding: his lack of self-knowledge, blended with his awesome authority, makes him unknowable by us. Bewildered and bewildering after that, Lear seems less a consciousness than a falling divinity, Solomonic in his sense of lost glory. Yahweh-like in his irascibility. The play’s central consciousness perforce is Edgar’s, who actually speaks more lines than anyone except Lear. Edmund, more brilliant even than Iago, less of an improviser and more a strategist of evil, is further into nihilism than Iago was, but no one —hero or villain— can be dominant in Lear’s tragedy. Shakespeare, *contra* historicists old and new, burns through every context, and never more than in this play. The figure of excess or overthrow never abandons Shake-

Shakespeare's text; except for Edmund, everyone either loves or hates too much. Edgar, whose pilgrimage of abnegation culminates in vengeance, ends overwhelmed by the helplessness of his love, a love progressively growing in range and intensity, with the pragmatic effect of yielding him, as the new king, only greater suffering. Edmund, desperately attempting to do some good, despite what he continues to insist is his own nature, is carried offstage to die, not knowing whether Cordelia has been saved or not. No formalist or historicist would be patient with my asking this, but in what state of self-knowledge does Edmund find himself as he dies? His sense of his own identity, powerful until Edgar overcomes him, wavers throughout the long scene of his dying. Lear and Edgar have shared enormous bewilderments of identity, which appear to be further manifestations of excessive love. Shakespeare's intimation is that the only authentic love is between parents and children, yet the prime consequence of such love is only devastation. Neither of the drama's two antithetical senses of nature, Lear's or Edmund's, is sustained by a close scrutiny of the changes the protagonists undergo in Acts IV and V. Edgar's "ripeness is all" is misconstrued if we interpret it as a stoic comfort, let alone somehow a Christian consolation. Shakespeare deliberately echoes Hamlet's "The readiness is all," itself an ironical reversal of Simon-Peter's sleepiness provoking Jesus' "The spirit is ready, but the flesh is weak." If we must endure our going hence even as our coming hither, then "Ripeness is all" warns us how little "all" is. Soon enough, as W. R. Elton observed, Edgar will tell us "that endurance and ripeness are *not* all." His final wisdom is to submit to "the weight of this sad time," a submission that involves his reluctant assumption of the crown, with the ghastly historical mission of clearing a Britain overrun by wolves.

Love, Dr. Samuel Johnson once remarked, is the wisdom of fools and the folly of the wise. The greatest critic in our tradition was not commenting upon Lear's tragedy, but he might as well have been, since his observation is both Shakespearean and pruden-

tial, and illuminates the limitations of love in the play. Edgar has become wise when the play ends, yet love is still his folly by engendering his inconsolable grief for his two fathers. The great stage of fools has only three survivors standing upon it at the end: Kent willingly soon will join his master, Lear, while the much shaken Albany abdicates his interest to Edgar. The marriage between Albany and Goneril would have been more than enough to exhaust a stronger character than Albany, and Kent is only just barely a survivor. Edgar is the center, and we can wonder why we are so slow to see that, except for Lear, it is, after all, Edgar's play. Lear's excessive love for Cordelia inevitably sought to be a controlling love, until the image of authority was broken, not redeemed, as Christianizers of this pagan play have argued. The serving love of Edgar prepares him to be an unstoppable revenger against Edmund, and a fit monarch for a time of troubles, but the play's design establishes that Edgar's is as catastrophic a love as Lear's. Love is no healer in *The Tragedy of King Lear*; indeed it starts all the trouble, and is a tragedy in itself. The gods in *King Lear* do not kill men and women for their sport; instead they afflict Lear and Edgar with an excess of love, and Goneril and Regan with the torments of lust and jealousy. Nature, invoked by Edmund as his goddess, destroys him through the natural vengeance of his brother, because Edmund is immune from love, and so has mistaken his deity.

Dr. Johnson said that he could not bear Act V of the play because it outraged divine justice and so offended his moral sense, but the great critic may have mistaken his own reaction. What the drama of *King Lear* truly outrages is our universal idealization of the value of familial love, that is to say, both love's personal and love's social value. The play manifests an intense anguish in regard to human sexuality, and a compassionate despair as to the mutually destructive nature of both paternal and filial love. Maternal love is kept out of the tragedy, as if natural love in its strongest form would be too much to bear, even for this negative sublimity. Lear's queen, unless she were a Job's wife, laconically suggesting

that Lear curse the gods and die, would add an intolerable burden to a drama already harrowing in the extreme. William Hazlitt thought that it was equally impossible to give a description either of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind. Rather strikingly, for so superb a psychological critic, Hazlitt remarks: "All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it." Hazlitt touches on the uncanniest aspect of *Lear*: something that we conceive of it hovers outside our expressive range. I think this effect ensues from the universal wound the play deals to the value of familial love. Laboring this point is painful, but everything about the tragedy of *Lear* is painful. To borrow from Nietzsche, it is not that the pain is meaningful, but that meaning itself becomes painful in this play. We do them wrong to speak of Lear's own permutations as being redemptive; there can be no regeneration when love itself becomes identical with pain. Every attempt to mitigate the darkness of this work is an involuntary critical lie. When Edgar says of Lear: "He childed as I fathered," the tragedy is condensed into just five words. Unpack that gnomic condensation, and what do you receive? Not, I think, a parallel between two innocences —Lear's and Edgar's — and two guilts —Lear's elder daughters' and Gloucester's —because Edgar does not consider his father to be guilty. "He childed as I fathered" has in it no reference whatsoever to Goneril and Regan, but only to the parallel between Lear/Cordelia and Edgar/Gloucester. There is love, and only love, between those four, and yet there is tragedy, and only tragedy, between them. Subtly, Edgar indicates the link between his own rugged recalcitrance and Cordelia's. Without Cordelia's initial recalcitrance there would have been no tragedy, but then Cordelia would not have been Cordelia. Without Edgar's stubborn endurance and self-abnegation, the avenging angel who strikes down Edmund would not have been metamorphosed out of a gullible innocent. We can wonder at the depth and prolongation of the self-abasement, but then Edgar would not have been Edgar without it. And there is no rec-

ompense; Cordelia is murdered, and Edgar despairingly will resign himself to the burden of kingship.

Critics have taken a more hopeful stance, to argue for redemptive love, and for the rough justice visited upon every villain in the play. The monsters in the deep all achieve properly bad ends: Edgar cudgels Oswald to death; the servant, defending Gloucester, fatally wounds Cornwall; Goneril poisons Regan, and then stabs herself in the heart; Edgar cuts Edmund down, as the audience knows Edgar is fated to do. There is no satisfaction for us in this slaughter of the wicked. Except for Edmund, they are too barbaric to be tolerated, and even Edmund, fascinating as he is, would deserve, like the others, to be indicted for crimes against humanity. Their deaths are meaningless, again even Edmund's, since his belated change fails to save Cordelia. Cordelia's death, painful to us beyond description, nevertheless has only that pain to make it meaningful. Lear and Gloucester, startlingly, both die more of joy than of grief. The joy that kills Lear is delusional: he apparently hallucinates, and beholds Cordelia either as not having died or as being resurrected. Gloucester's joy is founded upon reality, but pragmatically the extremes of delight and of anguish that kill him are indistinguishable. "He childed as I fathered": Lear and Gloucester are slain by their paternal love; by the intensity and authenticity of that love. War between siblings; betrayal of fathers by daughters and by a natural son; tormented misunderstanding of a loyal son and a saintly daughter by noble patriarchs; a total dismissal of all sexual congress as lechery: what are we bequeathed by this tragedy that we endlessly moralize? There is one valid form of love and one only, that at the end between Lear and Cordelia, Gloucester and Edgar. Its value, casting aside irrelevant transcendental moralizings, is less than negative: it may be stronger than death, but it leads only to death, or to death-in-life for the extraordinary Edgar, Shakespeare's survivor-of-survivors.

No one would regard *The Tragedy of King Lear* as a Shakespearean aberration: the play develops out of aspects of *Hamlet*,

Troilus and Cressida, *Measure for Measure*, and *Othello*, and clearly is prelude to aspects of *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Timon of Athens*. Only *Hamlet*, of all the plays, seems more central to Shakespeare's incessant concerns than *King Lear* is, and in their ultimate implications the two works interlock. Does Hamlet love anyone as he dies? The transcendental aura that his dying moments evoke, our sensation of his charismatic freedom, is precisely founded upon his having become free of every object attachment, whether to father, mother, Ophelia, or even poor Yorick. There is only one mention of the word "father" by Hamlet in all of Act V, and it is to his father's signet, employed to send Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern to extinction. The only reference by Hamlet to the person is when he speaks of Claudius as having killed "my king" and whored my mother. Hamlet's farewell to her is the not very affectionate: "Wretched Queen, adieu!" There is of course Horatio, whose love for Hamlet brings him to the verge of suicide, from which Hamlet saves him, but solely for the purpose of having a survivor who will clear his wounded name. Nothing whatsoever that happens in the tragedy *Hamlet* gives love itself anything except a wounded name. Love, in any of its modes, familial or erotic or social, is transformed by Shakespeare, more than by any other writer, into the greatest of dramatic and aesthetic values, yet more than any other writer, Shakespeare divests love of any supposed values of its own. The implicit critique of love, by Shakespeare, hardly can be termed a mere skepticism. Literary criticism, as I have learned from Dr. Johnson, is the art of making the implicit finely explicit, and I accept the risk of apparently laboring what may be to many among us quite obvious, once we are asked to ponder it. I also have no quarrel with Stanley Cavell's reading of *Lear*, in which the king's desire not to be known by any other, Cordelia in particular, is interpreted as "the avoidance of love." "We cannot choose whom we are free to love," a celebrated line of W. H. Auden's, may have been influenced by Freud, but Sigmund Freud, as time's revenges will show, is nothing but belated

William Shakespeare, “the man from Stratford” as Freud bitterly liked to call him, in support of that defrauded genius, the Earl of Oxford. There is love that can be avoided, and there is a deeper love, unavoidable and terrible, far more central to Shakespeare’s invention of the human. It seems more accurate to call it that, rather than reinvention, because the time before Shakespeare had his full influence upon us was also “before we were wholly human and knew ourselves,” as Wallace Stevens phrased it. Irreparable love, destructive of every value distinct from it, was and is a Romantic obsession. But the representation of love, in and by Shakespeare, was the largest literary contamination that produced Romanticism.

A. D. Nuttall, more than any other twentieth-century critic, has clarified some of the central paradoxes of Shakespearean representation. Two of Nuttall’s observations always abide with me: Shakespeare is out ahead of us, illuminating our latest intellectual fashions more sharply than they can illuminate him, and Shakespeare enables us to see realities that may already have been there but that we would not find possible to see without him. Historicists — old, new, and burgeoning — do not like it when I add to Nuttall the realization that the difference between what Shakespeare knew and what we know is, to an astonishing extent, just Shakespeare himself. He is what we know, because we are what he knew: he childed as we fathered. Even if Shakespeare, like all of his contemporaries and like all of ours, is only a socially inscribed entity, histrionic and fictive, and so not at all a self-contained author, all the better. Jorge Luis Borges may have intended a Chestertonian paradox, but he spoke a truth more literal than figurative: Shakespeare is everyone and no one. So are we, but Shakespeare is more so. If you want to argue that he was the most precariously self-fashioned of all the self-fashioned, I gladly will agree. But wisdom finally cannot be the product of social energies, whatever those are. Cognitive power and an understanding heart are individual endowments. Wittgenstein rather desperately wanted to see Shakespeare as a creator of language rather than as a creator of thought, yet

Shakespeare's own pragmatism renders that a distinction that makes no difference. Shakespeare's writing creates what holds together language and thought in a stance that neither affirms nor subverts Western tradition. What that stance is hovers still beyond the categories of our critiques. Social domination, the obsession of our School of Resentment, is only secondarily a Shakespearean concern. Domination maybe, but that mode of domination is more personal than social, more internal than outward. Shakespeare's greatest men and women are pragmatically doom-eager not because of their relation to state-power but because their inner lives are ravaged by all the ambivalences and ambiguities of familial love and its displacements. There is a drive in all of us, unless we are Edmund, to slay ourselves upon the stems of generation, in Blake's language. Edmund is free of that drive, but is caught in the closed circle that makes him another of the fools of time. Time, Falstaff's antagonist and MacBeth's nemesis, is antithetical to nature in Lear's play. Edmund, who cannot be destroyed by love, which he never feels, is destroyed by the wheel of change that he has set spinning for his victimized half-brother. Edgar, stubborn sufferer, cannot be defeated, and his timing becomes exquisite the moment he and Gloucester encounter the bullying Oswald. The best principle in reading Shakespeare is Emerson's: "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare; and even he can tell nothing, except to the Shakespeare in us." I myself deviate a touch from Emerson, since I think only Shakespeare has placed the Shakespeare in us. I don't believe I am that horrid thing, much deprecated by our current pseudo-Marxist Shakespeareans, an "essentialist humanist." As a Gnostic sect of one, I blink at a supposed Shakespeare who is out to subvert Renaissance ideology, and who hints at revolutionary possibilities. Essentialist Marxists or feminists or Franco-Heideggerians ask me to accept a Shakespeare rather in their own image. The Shakespeare in me, however placed there, shows me a deeper and more ancient subversion at work: in much of Shakespeare, but in the four high tragedies or domestic tragedies of

blood in particular. Dostoevsky founded Svidrigailov and Stavrogin upon Iago and Edmund, while Nietzsche and Kierkegaard discovered their Dionysiac forerunner in Hamlet, and Herman Melville came to his Captain Ahab through MacBeth. The nihilist questers emerge from the Shakespearean abyss, as Freud at his uncanniest emerged. I do not offer a nihilistic Shakespeare or a Gnostic one, but skepticism alone cannot be the origin of the cosmological degradation that contextualizes the tragedies *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. The more nihilistic Solomon of Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon tells us, in the latter, Apocryphal work, that “we are borne at all adventure, and we shall be hereafter as though we had never been.” The heretic John Milton did not believe that God had made the world out of nothing; we do not know what Shakespeare did not believe. Lear, as charted by W. R. Elton in *King Lear and the Gods*, is neither an Epicurean materialist nor a skeptic; rather he is, “in rejecting creation *ex nihilo* a pious pagan but a skeptical Christian,” as befits a pagan play for a Christian audience. Lear, we always must remind ourselves, is well past eighty, and his world wears out to nothing with him. As in *Macbeth*, an end-time is suggested. The resurrection of the body, unknown to Solomon, is also unknown to Lear, who dies in his evident hallucination of Cordelia’s revival from the dead.

King Lear is Lear’s play, not Edmund’s, but as I’ve continued to say, it is also Edgar’s play, and ironically the later Edgar is Edmund’s unintended creation. The sullen or assumed humor of Tom O’Bedlam is the central emblem of the play: philosopher, fool, madman, nihilist, dissembler —at once all of these and none of these. There is a horror of generation that intensifies as the tragedy grows starker, and Edgar, harsher as he proceeds, shares it with Lear. Nothing sweetens Edgar’s imagination of sexuality, whereas Edmund, icy libertine, is deliciously indifferent: “Which of them shall I take? / Both? One? Or neither?” A double-date with Goneril and Regan might faze even King Richard III or Aaron the Moor, but is second nature to Edmund, who attributes

his vivacity, freedom from hypocrisy, and power of plotting to his bastardy, at once provocation to his pride and to some uneasiness of spirit:

Why brand they us
 With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
 Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
 More composition, and fierce quality,
 Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
 Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops,
 Got 'tween asleep and wake?

That is Edmund in his “fierce quality,” not the mortally wounded man who has the continued accuracy to say, “ ’Tis past, and so am I.” Edgar, at that moment, takes an opposite view of that “lusty stealth of nature”:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
 Make instruments to plague us:
 The dark and vicious place where thee he got
 Cost him his eyes.

The dying Edmund accepts this, but it can be judged very disconcerting, since that “dark and vicious place” does not appear to be an adulterous bed but is identical with what Lear stigmatized in his madness:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
 Though women all above;
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
 Beneath is all the fiends’: there’s hell, there’s darkness,
 There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
 Stench, consumption.

Admirable son of Gloucester and admirable godson of Lear, approved avenger and future king, Edgar nevertheless emerges impaired in many respects from his long ordeal of abnegation. Not least of these impairments is his evident horror of female sexuality, “the dark and vicious place.” A high price has been exacted for the

long descent into the sullen and assumed humor of Tom O'Bedlam. The cost of confirmation for Edgar is a savage wound in his psyche, but the entire play is more of a wound than the critical tradition has cared to acknowledge. Feminist critics, and those influenced by them, at least address themselves to the rhetoric of male trauma and hysteria that governs the apparent misogyny of Lear's drama. I say "apparent" because the revulsion from all sexuality by Lear and by Edgar is a mask for an even more profound alienation, not so much from excessive familial love, as from bewilderment by such love. Edmund is brilliant and resourceful, but his prime, initial advantage over everyone else in the play is his total freedom from all familial affect, a freedom that enhances his fatal fascination for Goneril and Regan.

Are Shakespeare's perspectives in *Lear* incurably male? The only woman in the play who is not a fiend is Cordelia, whom some recent feminist critics see as Lear's own victim, a child he seeks to enclose as much at the end as at the beginning. Such a view is certainly not Cordelia's perspective upon her relationship with her father, and I am inclined to credit her rather than her critics. Yet their sense of being troubled is an authentic and accurate reaction to a play that divests all of us, male and female auditors and readers alike, of not less than everything. Dr. Johnson's inability to sustain the murder of the virtuous Cordelia is another form of the same reaction. When Nietzsche said that we possessed art lest we perish of the truth, he gave a very equivocal homage to art, and yet his apothegm is emptied out by *King Lear*, where we do perish of the truth. The Freudian, witty oxymoron of "family romances" loses its wit in the context of *King Lear*, where familial love offers you only a choice between destructions. You can live and die as Gloucester, Lear, and Cordelia do, or as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund do, or you can survive as Edgar does, a fate darker than that of all the others.

The noun "value" in Shakespeare lacks our high-mindedness: it means either an *estimation* of worth or a more speculative *esti-*

mate, both being commercial terms rather bluntly carried over into human relations. Sometimes I think that our only certain knowledge of the man Shakespeare is that his commercial shrewdness rivaled or overtopped every other author's before or since. Economy in Shakespeare extends to the noun "love," which can mean "lover" but also means "friend," or a "kind act," and sometimes "for love's sake" means for "one's own sake." Johnson, still the best of all Shakespearean critics, wonderfully tells us that, unlike every other dramatist, Shakespeare refuses to make love a universal agent:

but love is only one of many passions, and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew, that any other passion, as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity.

Johnson speaks of sexual love, rather than familial love, a distinction that Shakespeare taught Freud partly to void. Repressed incestuous desire for Cordelia, according to Freud, causes Lear's madness. Cordelia, again according to Freud, is so darkly silent at the play's opening because of her continued desire for her father. Certainly the family romance of Sigmund and Anna Freud has its effect in these rather too interesting weak misreadings. Lear's excessive love transcends even his attachment to Cordelia: it comprehends the Fool and others. The worship of Lear by Kent, Gloucester, Albany, and most of all his godson Edgar is directed not only at the great image of authority but at the central emblem of familial love, or patriarchal love (if you would have it so). The exorbitant passion or drive of familial love, both in Lear and in Edgar, is the cause of calamity. Tragedy at its most exorbitant, whether in Athens or at the Globe, must be domestic tragedy, or tragedy of blood in both senses of blood. None of us want to come away from a reading or performance of *King Lear* murmuring to

ourselves that the domestic is necessarily a tragedy, but that may be the ultimate nihilism of this play.

2

Cleopatra's is too large a role to be fitted comfortably into a coda, but I want to juxtapose the Shakespearean representation of heterosexual passion to the vision of familial love in *King Lear*. *Romeo and Juliet* is too early, being pre-*Hamlet*, and *Troilus and Cressida* is too magnificently rancid, even for my unsavory purposes. I don't know that it is at all useful to characterize the relationship between Cleopatra and Antony as mutually destructive, though Shakespeare certainly shows that it helps destroy them. Still, in their high-stakes cosmos of power and treachery, Octavian doubtless would have devoured them both anyway, at a perhaps more leisurely pace. *All for Love*, John Dryden's exuberant title, would not have done for Shakespeare's play; even *All for Lust* misses the mark. Antony and Cleopatra are, both of them, charismatic politicians, almost celebrities in our bad sense. Each of them has so great a passion for herself and himself that it becomes marvelous for them actually to apprehend one another's reality, in even the smallest degree. Both of them take up all the space; everyone else, even Octavian, is reduced to part of their audience. There is, to be sure, a ghost who never appears in this play: Julius Caesar, who alone ever reduced *them* to supporting cast, though never to mere audience. Perhaps it was from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, play and character, that Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra learned their endearing trait of never listening to what anyone else says, including one another. Antony's death-scene is the most hilarious instance of this, where the dying hero, making a very good end indeed, nevertheless sincerely attempts to give her some good advice, while she keeps interrupting, at one point splendidly responding to his "let me speak a little" with her "No, let me speak." Since his advice is quite bad anyway, as it has been throughout the play, this makes little difference except that Antony, just

this once, almost stops acting the part of Antony, Herculean hero, whereas Shakespeare wishes us to see that Cleopatra never stops acting the part of Cleopatra. That is why it is so wonderfully difficult a role for an actress, who must act the part of Cleopatra, and also portray Cleopatra acting the part of Cleopatra. I recall the young Helen Mirren doing better with that double assignment than any other Cleopatra that I have seen.

Are Antony and Cleopatra “in love with one another,” to use our language, which for once is not at all Shakespearean? Are *we* in love with one another? It was Aldous Huxley, I think, in one of his essays, who remarked that we use the word “love” for the most amazing variety of relationships, ranging from what we feel for our mothers to what we feel for someone we beat up in a bordello, or its many equivalents. Juliet and Romeo indeed are in love with one another, but they are very young, and she is astonishingly good-natured, with a generosity of spirit unmatched in all of Shakespeare. We certainly can say that Cleopatra and Antony do not bore one another, and clearly they are bored, erotically and otherwise, by everyone else in their world. Mutual fascination may not be love, but it certainly is romance in the defining sense of imperfect or at least deferred knowledge. Cleopatra in particular always has her celebrated remedies for staleness, famously celebrated by Enobarbus. Antony, also a mortal god, has his aura, really a kind of astral body, that departs with the music of Hercules, the oboes under the stage. There is no replacement for him, as Cleopatra realizes, since with his death the age of Julius Caesar and Pompey is over, and even Cleopatra is very unlikely to seduce the first great Chief Executive Officer, the Emperor Augustus.

The question therefore becomes: What is the value of mutual fascination, or of romantic love, if you want to call it that? Certainly it is less of a bewilderment, less of a vastation, than the familial love that afflicts Lear and Edgar. With monstrous shrewdness, Shakespeare modified Plutarch by having Antony abandoned by the god Hercules, rather than by Bacchus. A Dionysiac hero

cannot be consigned to the past, as Hamlet's more-than-Nietzschean career continues to demonstrate. A Herculean hero was not as archaic for Shakespeare's contemporaries as he is for us, but clearly Antony is already a belated figure. Lear and Edgar are not as exposed to the audience's perspectivism as are Cleopatra and Antony. Whore and her aging gull is a possible perspective upon them, if you yourself are a savage reductionist, but then why would you want to attend or read this play? A Dionysiac Antony would call every value, whether erotic or social, more into question than a Herculean Antony is capable of doing. If there is a critique of value in the play, it must be embodied in Cleopatra, who is raised to an apotheosis after Antony breaks apart. He ceases to be a god, and then she becomes one.

What are we to do with an Egyptian goddess, even if we are free enough of Roman reductiveness so that we do not fall into the operatic trap of seeing her as a gypsy whore? If my interpretation of *King Lear* has any imaginative accuracy, then familial love, far from being a value, is exposed as an apocalyptic nightmare. Romantic love can be said to have hastened Antony's Osiris-like dismantling, yet it would be difficult, as I have been intimating, to demonstrate it either as value or as catastrophe, on the basis of his decline and fall. But Cleopatra is altogether another story, and her story certainly involves an augmentation of value. Is it the value of love? That seems to me a most difficult question, and a true challenge to what we used to call *literary* criticism. You could argue not only that the Cleopatra of Act V is a greater actress than she was before, but also that she becomes a playwright, exercising a talent released in her by Antony's death. The part that she composes for herself is very complex, and one strand in it is that she was and still is in love with Antony, and so is more than bereft. Indeed, she marries him as she dies, which is sublimely poignant, though it may remind us of Edmund's reaction to beholding the corpses of Goneril and Regan: "All three / Now marry in an instant."

Existence, we cannot forget Nietzsche observing, is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. I would hesitate, wicked old aesthete though I be, to judge that love, for Shakespeare, is justified only as an aesthetic value, but that does seem (to me) to be the burden of *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, at least as Cleopatra rewrites it in the act where she has no rival in usurping all the space. Her would-be competitive dramatist, George Bernard Shaw, who asserted that he felt only disdain for the mind of Shakespeare when he compared it to his own, is quite cutting but weirdly off-center in his preface to his own *Caesar and Cleopatra*:

. . . I have a technical objection to making sexual infatuation a tragic theme. Experience proves that it is only effective in the comic spirit. We can bear to see Mrs. Quickly pawning her plate for love of Falstaff, but not Antony running away from the battle of Actium for love of Cleopatra.

One can grant that Shaw seizes upon one of the least persuasive episodes in Antony's degradation, but surely *Antony and Cleopatra* hardly is a tragedy as *King Lear* and *Othello* are tragedies. More even than the rest of Shakespeare, the play has no genre, and the comic spirit has a large share in it. Enobarbus gives the answer to Shaw when he calls Cleopatra a wonderful piece of work. He means Cleopatra's daemonic drive, her narcissistic exuberance, the vitality of which approaches Falstaff's. Shaw abominated Falstaff, and associated Shakespeare's Cleopatra with Falstaff, which is to make the right linkage for the wrong reason. Rosalie Colie, in her fine book *Shakespeare's Living Art*, points out that Shakespeare never once shows Antony and Cleopatra alone onstage together. Whatever it is that they share is not revealed to us: we wonder whether they would cease to be theatrical, but Shakespeare does not tell us. This cannot be a question of tact, since *Othello* and *Desdemona*, *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*, *Juliet* and *Romeo*, and so many others are left alone with one another and ourselves. It is rather an indication of Shakespeare's anxiety that by overrepresent-

ing the relationship he might lessen its cosmological suggestiveness. What we are not allowed to see, we must imagine. Cleopatra, essentially an ironic humorist, even a parodist, presumably educated Antony in laughter even as Falstaff educated Hal, with the difference that Falstaff does not trade in sexual love, and Cleopatra does.

That returns me to the matter of value, and to Cleopatra's art as dramatist in Act V. She is Antony's elegist, but not in a personal way: her lament is for lost greatness, for the agonistic sublime, for her public passion:

The crown o' th' earth doth melt. My lord!
 O, withered is the garland of the war,
 The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls
 Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
 And there is nothing left remarkable
 Beneath the visiting moon.

"The odds is gone" means that value, which depends upon distinctions, has been lost, the fallen soldier's pole having been the standard of measurement. Cleopatra's longing for a lost sublime does not mean that we have a new transcendental woman replacing the histrionic masterwork we have known. Dr. Johnson, to our initial surprise, complained that in *Antony and Cleopatra* "no character is very strongly discriminated." What could Johnson have meant, since that is not at all our experience of the play? John Bayley thinks that Johnson is right, and attributes this lack of distinctiveness to our sense that Antony is down and out from the start and to Shakespeare's supposed refusal to explore Cleopatra's inwardness. Shakespeare, I think, knew exactly what he did, and Dr. Johnson and Bayley may be victimized by the play's perspectivism. Antony certainly is past his earlier glory almost throughout the play, except for sudden revivals or epiphanies, but Shakespeare was improving upon the model of decline he had established with his own Julius Caesar. And with Cleopatra, how can we, or even Cleopatra herself, ever establish the demarcation between her in-

wardness and her outwardness? She is surely the most theatrical character in stage history, far surpassing Luigi Pirandello's experiments in the same mode. We need not ask if her love for Antony ever is love indeed, even as she dies, because the lack of distinctiveness in the play is between the histrionic and the passionate. The value of familial love in Shakespeare is overwhelming but negative; the value of passionate love in the most mature Shakespeare depends upon a fusion of theatricality and narcissistic self-regard. The art itself is nature, and the value of love becomes wholly artful.

The summit of this magnificent play comes in the interlude with the clown just before the apotheosis of Cleopatra's suicide, an interlude that sustains Janet Adelman's contention in *The Common Liar* that Shakespeare's "insistence upon scope, upon the infinite variety of the world, militates against the tragic experience." Uncanny perspectives abound throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, but the clown's is the most unnerving. He dominates the interchange with Cleopatra, as her charm first melts his misogyny and then resolidifies it when he fails to persuade her against her resolve. Few exchanges in the world's literature are as poignant and as subtle as this:

Clown. Very good. Give it nothing, I pray you, for it is not worth the feeding.

Cleopatra. Will it eat me?

How difficult it is to categorize that childlike "Will it eat me?"; perhaps Cleopatra, before mounting into death and divine transfiguration, needs a final return to the playful element in her self that is her Falstaffian essence, the secret to her seductiveness. In the clown's repetition of "I wish you joy o' th' worm," we hear something beyond his phallic misogyny, a prophecy perhaps of Cleopatra's conversion of the painful ecstasy of her dying into an erotic epiphany of nursing both Antony and her children by her Roman conquerors. Her artfulness and Shakespeare's fuse together in a blaze of value that surmounts the equivocations of every mode of love in Shakespeare, equivocations that are true lies.