

9. *Hamlet*

Do not believe all you read in critical studies or hear in lectures. There are at least as many errors and lies in literary criticism as in any other human activity. My nomination for the most dishonest critical book I have read would be *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* by the Polish critic Jan Kott. In George Orwell's 1964, the hero, Winston Smith, works in the Ministry of Truth, where his job is to go through old newspapers and other public documents looking for information which no longer tallies with the party line, for example, all references to a war with a country with whom we are now in alliance. These he cuts out and throws into an incinerator which he calls 'the memory hole'. Jan Kott reads Shakespeare in much the same way, throwing into the memory hole everything which does not fit his preconceived interpretation - lines, scenes, characters, even whole plays. His account of the histories involves throwing into the memory hole both *Henry V* and the last scene of *Richard III*. His 37-page essay on *King Lear* contains not one mention of Cordelia.

In his mercifully brief chapter on *Hamlet* it is the soliloquies (along with many other things) which go into the memory hole as incompatible with the Hamlet he has conjured up:

a young rebel who has about him something of the charm of James Dean. Action, not reflection, is his forte. He is a born conspirator. 'To be' means for him to revenge his father and to assassinate the King; while 'not to be' means – to give up the fight. [52]

Because the rest of that famous soliloquy will not bear such an interpretation, but makes clear that Hamlet is talking about suicide, it must go. But why not, while you are about it, argues Kott, get rid of all the soliloquies. It then becomes much clearer that Hamlet is not given to reflection. There is a well-known saying '*Hamlet* without the prince', which means any account which leaves out the central figure or whole point of what it purports to describe. The play has become proverbial in this way because there is no other play so totally focussed on a single character. There are many Hamlets within Shakespeare's, but Kott's Hamlet is not among them.

It seems to me that the play cannot survive the loss of the soliloquies and remain Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. One might argue (and this is what I shall go on to do) that it would be possible to get closer to the heart of Shakespeare's meaning by keeping the soliloquies and throwing out the rest of the play, than vice versa!

Hamlet has eight soliloquies, a total of 220 lines. MacBeth has about the same number, but they are much shorter. The other tragic heroes have hardly any. MacBeth and Hamlet are both impelled by supernatural solicitings to kill a king. MacBeth suffers spiritually from the consequences of his act. Hamlet tries to anticipate the consequences of his. The absence of soliloquies in the other tragedies is highly significant. The primary fault of all the other tragic heroes is that they lack self-knowledge, they do not have the capacity or the will to look inside themselves. Lear 'hath ever but slenderly known himself'. All act too soon and too rashly. This is why they are so easily taken in and manipulated by others, Lear by his dog-hearted daughters; Othello by Iago ('he will as tenderly be led by Th. nose as asses are'); Antony by both Cleopatra and Octavius Caesar; Coriolanus by anyone who will play up to his pride. Hamlet's fault is the opposite: he is so given to introspection that he cannot act at all. His response to any call to action, from without or within, is 'this would be scanned', 'I'll have grounds more relative than this'.

As important as what Hamlet says in the first soliloquy is when he says it. This is by far the most important soliloquy in that it gives us our only insight into Hamlet's mind before he hears anything of the ghost or his father's murder. His only overt motives for disaffection at this stage are genuine grief for the death of his father (already expressed in the 'Tis riot alone my inky cloak' speech), resentment that Claudius has popped in between the election and his hopes, and disgust at the speed of his mother's remarriage. We must ask ourselves whether these motives adequately account for the tone and content of this soliloquy. In fact, the third of them exclusively seems to concern Hamlet here, and concerns him to the point of making him wish to commit suicide.

The soliloquy operates, as it were, backwards. That is, it begins with the consequences or symptoms of Hamlet's neurosis, not its cause. It is part of the syndrome that the cause should be so painful that Hamlet cannot bring himself to confront it, tries to push it out of his consciousness and speak only in generalities. The soliloquy is repetitive; it moves in ever-decreasing circles, failing to resist the pull into the vortex of what obsesses him. He constantly interrupts the chain of thought which is dragging him towards the centre of pain: 'Must I remember?', 'Let me riot think on' t'. He breaks off several times during the sentence which begins 'within a month', because he knows that to complete it would be to drag what he cannot contemplate into the open. But every time the sentence starts again, welling up from his unconscious. At last, after four lines, it reaches its subject - 'she' - and after yet another interruption, its verb and object, 'married with my uncle'. That sentence brings with it the intolerable image: 'To post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!', a line he can hardly speak without vomiting.

What Hamlet cannot stomach is the obscene image of his mother and his uncle making love. He returns to it when he says to his mother's face 'Nay, but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty'. Such behaviour reduces human life and love to the level of swine in Hamlet's eyes. His own flesh, being flesh of her flesh, is sullied by it. He assumes that all women are equally frail, and all men born of women are as rank and gross as Claudius. He despises his uncle, a satyr and a drunkard, capable, in his eyes, of any crime. Nevertheless, the reaction seems immature, extreme, unbalanced, hysterical. Why should anything that happens in the royal bed of Denmark corrupt 'all the uses of this world'?

It is important that Claudius is a king. If we remember the responsibilities of divine kingship as Shakespeare handled them in the history plays, particularly *Richard II*, we will see that what happens in the royal bed is by no means irrelevant to the health of the whole realm. The image of the unweeded garden relates to this. Claudius is later to be described as 'the fat weed', 'a mildewed ear blasting his wholesome brother', a 'canker of the commonwealth'. He has already corrupted Gertrude and Polonius, is later to corrupt Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Laertes. He has already poured his poison not **only** into his by-other's ear but into the whole ear of Denmark. Through Polonius the poison spreads to Ophelia; through Laertes to Hamlet. Perhaps Hamlet's prophetic soul already senses this process and traces the disease back to its source in his mother's bed.

But even this is hardly enough to explain the obsession with sex. The first soliloquy gives us another clue. His father, Hamlet tells us, had been 'so loving to my mother / That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly'. Hamlet's adulation of his father is highly idealizing. Old Hamlet, we are soon to learn, had been cut off even in the blossoms of his sin, with all his imperfections on his head. Had he been the perfect man, the god (Hyperion) Hamlet describes he would not have been in Purgatory. That idealization takes the form of ascribing to his father a love which did not descend to

bodies, which was above the corruptibility of the flesh. In comparison with such bodiless, pure, spiritualized love, his mother's had been mere nymphomania - 'Why, she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on'. Hamlet is here projecting his own fear of the flesh and sexual horror upon his parents. I suggest that he would have found the thought of his mother and his father making love little more palatable than the thought of his mother and his uncle.

So, in the Great Chain of Being, man had been seen as exactly half way between the angels and the beasts, with a body and passions scarcely to be distinguished from the higher beasts combined with angelic action and godlike reason. In these terms the challenge of being human could be interpreted in two mutually exclusive ways. The puritanical idealist would strive to repudiate everything he shared with the beasts and develop, in isolation, his god-like faculties. Others might see this as spiritual pride, rejecting the god-given creation and man's ordained place in it, and seeking instead to reconcile body and mind in a unique human wholeness.

The psychologist and mythographer Joseph Campbell recognises this as a recurring type in myth, literature and real life - the puritan. I quote from Campbell's book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

The crux of the difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious view of what life ought to

be seldom corresponds to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves or within our friends, the fulness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell.

... But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odour of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul. [122]

'Taint not thy mind' the Ghost is later to warn Hamlet. That the Ghost should go on, without punctuation, to add 'nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught' suggests that the ghost has some reason to fear that Hamlet's intense feelings in relation to his mother might well undermine the mental stability and purity of spirit which Hamlet will require for his task. What the first soliloquy shows us is a Hamlet whose mind is already tainted, and whose heart is close to breaking because there is no-one to whom he can speak of his predicament. The pressure building within him can find an outlet only in yet more soliloquies.

Given what we know of Hamlet from the first soliloquy, we see that however willing Hamlet may claim to be at the time to sweep to his revenge, a moment's thought will bring home to him that what he is being required to do is to risk his own life (and possibly damnation) in order to remove the fattest weed from a garden filled entirely with weeds. To what end? He is like a surgeon required to operate on a body which is diseased from head to foot. No wonder he complains 'O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!'

The second soliloquy is of only four lines, and of no great interest, so we'll go straight to the third, which follows immediately after the departure of the ghost.

Twice on the page before the first soliloquy and twice on the page after, it was emphasised that both Hamlet and Horatio are students at the University of Wittenberg. Wittenberg was, in 1600, the most famous university in Europe, the university of Dr. Faustus, of Luther, and of the great humanist Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in the very year *Hamlet* was written. It was, above all, a Protestant university. Protestants, of course, do not believe in Purgatory. The Protestant teaching on ghosts was that they were probably devils assuming the form of a dead person to lure a living person to damnation. Horatio had warned Hamlet not to follow the Ghost in exactly these terms. But Hamlet at that time had been convinced of the Ghost's authenticity and of his absolute obligation to follow, listen and act accordingly:

My fate cries out
And makes each petty artery in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.

As soon as the Ghost departs, so does Hamlet's resolve:

Hold, hold, my heart,
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up.

The Elizabethan theatre had never seen a ghost remotely like that of Hamlet's father. Shakespeare (who is reputed to have played the part himself) goes out of his way to convince the audience as well as Hamlet that the Ghost speaks the truth out of his deep spiritual suffering. And the ghost is Catholic. Insofar as the ghost appeals to Hamlet in Catholic terms and in terms of a medieval revenge code, Hamlet, a good renaissance Protestant, cannot respond. Insofar as the ghost appeals to him as suffering spirit and as father to son, he cannot, if he has nature in him, refuse. No wonder he is distracted. No sooner has he sworn to wipe the table of his memory clean of all but the ghost's commandment than he takes out his notebook in order to write in it the fairly trivial saw 'that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain'. As to his 'word', that he now conveniently recalls as merely remembering the ghost, not revenging him.

* * *

The 'rugged Pyrrhus' speech moves Hamlet to castigate himself for his own lack of passion. It is characteristic that Hamlet should compare himself riot with Pyrrhus, who had, without compunction, killed a king, but with the player. He castigates himself for *saying*, not doing nothing. He imagines his own far greater motivation expressing itself riot in action but in tears and horrid speech. Passionate words at last flow:

I should ha' fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!

This in turn becomes a cause for even greater self-reproach:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words

What should follow here are the lines

is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm'? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker in our nature come
In further evil?

But we must wait three acts and several deaths for those. What in fact follows is 'About my brains', and the planning of *The Mousetrap*. So the son of a dear father murdered does not yet know his course, needs grounds more relative than this. As in most of the other soliloquies, Hamlet is further from decisive action at the end than he was at the beginning.

* * *

The question Hamlet is debating in the next soliloquy is not whether or how to kill Claudius, but whether to kill himself, the same question which occupied him before he received the ghost's commandment. He identifies his antagonist not as Claudius but as 'outrageous Fortune', or as the flesh itself, heir to a 'thousand natural shocks'. The whole point of the ghost's speech had been the unnaturalness of his murder. Decisive action presents itself to Hamlet now as taking up arms against the sea, or a bare bodkin against himself. In speaking of death as an 'undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns' he is lapsing back to the Protestant orthodoxy. It seems that the 'something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood' is nothing to do with the ghost's command, but life itself. There is no mention in this whole long soliloquy of the ghost, or Claudius, or revenge, or Denmark; nothing referring to Hamlet's specific predicament. Only metaphysical speculations and generalizations which could apply equally to any man or woman, since everyone caught up in this mortal coil is liable to the whips and scorns of time.

In the previous soliloquy Hamlet had accused himself of cowardice for not killing Claudius. Now the accusation is repeated, but the enterprise of great pitch and moment which thinking too precisely on the outcome frustrates is not the killing of Claudius, but suicide, not his own suicide only, but that of the whole human race. He is deterred from it only by fear that the welcome sleep of death might be disturbed by dreams. If this is really how life presents itself to Hamlet, then one villain more or less in the world makes no difference. It seems that the more time Hamlet gives himself to think, the more that thinking disables him for his task. He is indeed sweeping to his revenge on wings as swift as meditation - meditation being in his case at best stationary, at worst backward-moving.

* * *

The Mousetrap proves nothing, since the king's distemper could as well have been caused by Hamlet's intolerable behaviour as by anything in the play. Nevertheless, Hamlet himself seems satisfied - 'I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound'. He can have no further excuse for delay. And indeed, as soon as he is left alone he talks of drinking hot blood and doing bitter business. His bosom is now firm. He discusses the use of daggers, but not on his uncle, rather on his mother. His first priority is to have it

out with her, hold up to her a mirror wherein he will make her see herself as he sees her. It almost seems that in his eyes hers is the greater crime, the mutiny of rebellious hell in a matron's bones.

It is also shocking that Hamlet, convinced finally that it is an honest ghost, is going about his task in this hellish spirit. If the ghost is honest, then it is not from hell but Purgatory. There is nothing evil about it. On the contrary, it is heaven-sent, as Hamlet acknowledges when he says:

Heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

A minister is an innocent man who is given a divine commandment and dispensation to kill in order not so much to revenge as to prevent further evil. There are many such ministers in Shakespeare, including Richmond in *Richard III*, Edgar in *King Lear* and Macduff in *MacBeth*. Nothing could be further from this soliloquy than the prayers offered up by these ministers on the eve of their sanctified killings. It seems rather as though Hamlet is offering himself as an agent of hell.

* * *

The next soliloquy confirms that Hamlet is very far from the state of grace required for a minister. The true minister trusts that no particular strength or scheming is necessary. Heaven will deliver his enemy into his hands. Now Hamlet has the perfect opportunity (again perhaps heaven-sent) to kill Claudius. Claudius, though on his knees, is not praying. But typically, Hamlet stops to think - 'that would be scanned' - and the scanning leads to a postponement of action. It seems that Hamlet can act only when he has no time to think, as in the slaughter of Polonius in the next scene.

It is no part of Hamlet's task to determine what will happen to Claudius' soul after he is dead. To presume to damn Claudius as well as kill him is to usurp the prerogative of God.

There is, perhaps, in this soliloquy, the first sign that Hamlet is beginning to enjoy the game of cat-and-mouse, is being corrupted by pursuing revenge as a private matter, rather than in the spirit of a minister. That he can relish the prospect of killing Claudius in the act of making love to his mother, brings the once-sensitive Hamlet close to Pyrrhus.

* * *

The final soliloquy expresses Hamlet's reflections on his meeting with Fortinbras' captain. Fortinbras means 'strong in the arm' (with the corollary, we might reasonably think, certainly in comparison with Hamlet, thick in the head). Hamlet accuses himself of not making full use of his reason. This is an odd charge to be prompted by the account of Fortinbras' expedition, which seems to be justifiable, if at all, not in terms of reason but purely in terms of honour, which involves acting without any proportionate cause and totally ignoring the possible consequences of one's action. Hamlet's problem can hardly be a lack of reasoning and, at the same time, 'thinking too precisely on the event', that is, the outcome. Having devoted a good deal of the play to convincing himself that he has a great argument, he now claims that when honour is involved, one ought not to need any argument

at all. This is exactly the position of Laertes, whose thoughtless actions in the name of honour lead him to become Claudius' pawn and to fight with an envenomed sword.

That the intelligent, morally scrupulous Hamlet of the beginning of the play should now set up Fortinbras as his model and example indicates the extent to which he has totally lost all moral bearings. Just beneath the surface, and attested by his language, his critical intelligence demolishes Fortinbras' action. What he really thinks of it is revealed in his use of such terms as 'even for an eggshell', 'find quarrel in a straw', 'fantasy and trick of fame', and his graphic image of fighting for a plot of land too small to bury the slain. He is desperately trying to override his own intelligence and moral sense in order to generate 'bloody thoughts' which reason would dispel.

* * *

Hamlet is absent from Denmark and from the play for the next three scenes. The Hamlet who returns in the last act is a different Hamlet, calm, assured, mature. At the beginning of the play we were told that he was a student, and he behaved like one. Now we learn that he is thirty. It is as though he has matured ten years in the few months of the play. Perhaps the clearest sign of the change in him is the absence of soliloquies for the rest of the play.

In his account to Horatio of his adventures at sea, Hamlet says that he had been forced by the extremity of his predicament to act quickly:

Or I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play.

In other words, he did not have time to soliloquize, for all the soliloquies had indeed been so many prologues to a play which had never begun. He had acted, in comparison with his previous inaction, rashly:

And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will -

In other words, Hamlet realizes, belatedly, what had been required of him all along; not that he should contrive deep plots, not debate with himself his every move and all its possible consequences, not act as though he were pursuing a private revenge like some misguided Laertes, but accept that a divinity had chosen to operate through him to cut off Claudius, the source of corruption; and that, could he hold himself alert and open to whatever promptings and opportunities that divinity would provide, his enemies would be delivered into his hands.

The soliloquies had acted as radio interference, a jamming mechanism preventing these signals being received. They had closed Hamlet's mind like a helmet within which his self-generated and tainted thoughts could only go round and round. At the eleventh hour, and too late to save many, including himself, who might have been saved, he realizes that in

such circumstances (as at the end of *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *MacBeth*) heaven is ordinant, that is, attempting to direct, through people, the course of events. As for the human agent, 'the readiness is all'.

[© Keith Sagar 2001. This essay may be quoted with due acknowledgement.]