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THE
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THE
DREAM OF LEARNING

AN ESSAY ON
THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING
HAMLET AND KING LEAR

BY
D. G. JAMES

OXFORD
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POESY IS AS A DREAM OF LEARNING

De Augmentis Scientiarum

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PREFACE

THIS essay consists of lectures delivered at Oxford in February 1950 at the invitation of the Faculty Board of English. I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude for the kindness both of the invitation and of the hospitality I received on my visits to Oxford.

The lectures are printed substantially as they were delivered. I have made a number of small changes; and I have printed passages which lack of time forbade me to speak.

The topic of these lectures is in every sense a great one; and I hardly know whether the drastic limits placed upon my treatment of it were to be welcomed or deplored. No doubt they were both. But I could proceed only by trying to concentrate on certain major matters; and I trust that I have not, by unavoidable selectiveness and brevity, unduly abused my theme and my authors*.

I wish to express my thanks to three friends: Mr. R. L. Brett, Dr. Stephan Korner, and Mr. Glynne Wickham. Mr. Brett and Dr. Korner have read the proofs and made valuable suggestions; Mr. Wickham has read part of the proofs, and I am very much in the debt of a lecture of his on *Troilus and Cressida*. What error and misjudgement remains is certainly not their fault. I am also grateful to H. M. C. James for checking and improving my rendering of some passages from the *Apology*.

D. G.J.

BRISTOL, February 1951

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I

THE NEW LEARNING

I

I PROPOSE in what follows to make some observations on Shakespeare and on Bacon. The names of Shakespeare and Bacon have frequently been put alongside each other; they have even been run into each other in a simple but surprising equation. But I need not say that I shall be content to leave them secure in their respective identities and that my remarks will issue in no neat mathematical proposition. I have nothing to offer in the way of cryptograms and palindromes; but the topic to which I address myself provides the occasion, whether I seize it or not, of considerably greater excitement.

For my purpose I shall confine myself, for the greater part, to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and to Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. I do this partly in order to provide myself with limits of discourse, though these, in all conscience, are wide enough, and encompass deep and intractable territory. I do so also because these three writings were composed within the space of some five years; and this is enough to startle the imagination and to originate reflection on matters of some importance.

Before proceeding, I wish to clear out of the way two possible misunderstandings. Bacon's concern was to lay down the foundations of scientific knowledge, and he

saw in what he was doing a great and immediate hope for mankind. This prevailing concern and urgent hope clearly distinguish his work from that of most speculative philosophers. Bacon was above all an eloquent visionary of new fields of exploration which lay to the hand of natural philosophy. Therefore, to speak of him together with Shakespeare is not to engage in any implied comparison of the essences of philosophy and of poetry. If we may think of Shakespeare as the poet *par excellence*, we may not think of Bacon as wholly typifying the genius and method of philosophy. Further, Shakespeare was not a philosophical poet: there is in his work no system, exposed or half-exposed, of what may rightly be called a philosophy; and for this reason, I shall not be engaged in comparing his 'beliefs' with Bacon's. Therefore, if I can at all speak of comparing Shakespeare with Bacon, it can only be because of certain peculiar features belonging to them as dramatist and philosopher respectively, or because the phase of human history in which they were set gave to their writings, the ones dramatic, the others in a broad sense philosophical, certain qualities which invite observation and comparison.

To compare Shakespeare and Bacon is not, by implication, to compare poetry with philosophy. It is still more true that to compare them is not to compare poetry with science. As a scientist Bacon was a failure; he made no contributions to scientific knowledge; the progress of science in his time was in other hands than his. Certainly, he sensed the possibility of great accessions of scientific knowledge; but he largely misconceived the

ways in which they might be come by. He was seized by a vision of new knowledge which would also be new and untold power for mankind, and he communicated a corresponding excitement; but his intellectual excitement was mixed with emotions, prospects, beliefs, and ambitions which do not properly and necessarily belong to science. It is dangerous and misleading vaguely to represent Bacon as the spokesman of science: his concern for a great increase in scientific knowledge went along with, amongst other things, philosophical beliefs which are not implied by the nature of science, and which he was at no great pains to expound and defend by any rigorous philosophical method. He was, by nature and endowment, more a poet than a scientist or a philosopher; and this shows itself in his writings. Therefore, in what follows, in speaking of him and of Shakespeare, I shall not be employed in comparing science and poetry whether implicitly or explicitly. My business is only to say something of the geniuses of two great writers, and of the visions of things to which they came.

2

I can begin at least with something on which I think there is not likely to be disagreement. In the days when Shakespeare and Bacon were writing there was no clear and secure intellectual tradition to sustain them and in which they might compose. Shakespeare was no Dante to derive his formulations from a St. Thomas; and Bacon was no Duns Scotus to criticize and modify a St. Thomas. I do not mean of course that Bacon's doctrines

can be explained without regard to the history of later medieval philosophy; it is certain that they cannot. For when Chaucer died in 1400 the ground was well prepared for a new and different kind of philosophizing; in Chaucer's lifetime philosophers were demolishing the mastery of the European mind by Aristotle. Dryden wrote to Dr. Charleton that

The longest Tyranny that ever sway'd
Was that wherein our Ancestors betray'd
Their free-born *Reason* to the *Stagirite*,
And made his Torch their universal Light;

but in fact the tyranny was not so long lived; and already in the fourteenth century there were thinkers who signified an oncoming change. The Dunces might be reviled in the time of the Renaissance; but Ockham, who died when Chaucer was a boy often, is the greatest single portent, in philosophy, of a new age of investigation to come. This new age in the history of science and philosophy may be said to begin, if we are to give a date to it, about 1600. In that year *Hamlet* was being written, and *King Lear* and *The Advancement of Learning* were to follow in a few years' time. The young philosopher of Wittenberg and Francis Bacon almost together take the stage of modernity; they are the embodiments and the prophecies of the world we still inhabit.

But between the death of Ockham in 1350 and our year of 1600 lay 250 years of decline, sterility, and confusion; that is, if we have regard to philosophical thought. Other matters were engaging men's attentions in literature, art, religion, government. But in philo-

sophical reflection the new world was slow to be born. The First Book of *The Advancement* tells a vivid enough story: Bacon had hard things to say about the Universities; he himself at Cambridge had been expected to stomach long-putrid intellectual food; and it is not surprising that, as the sixteenth century came to its end, scepticism was frequent: Montaigne was at once a symptom and a maker of a disposition to scepticism. There were, indeed, those willing enough to be conservative, if with differences, of the old high tradition: the First Book of Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* had drawn on classic medieval philosophy. But in this state of affairs men's minds lay open to curious influences. That Plato should have a new lease of influence was natural, and few will deplore it; but the Occult won earnest students, and the Hermetic books, the lore of the Cabala, and the writings of Cornelius Agrippa deeply engaged men's attention and were to make much of the poetry of a writer as late as Henry Vaughan unintelligible except in their light. And throughout the sixteenth century the scientific movement grew: Vesalius, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe; in our year of 1600, Gilbert published his work on magnetism.

To describe this state of affairs further is no part of my purpose. But into this world, and into this now Protestant England, Francis Bacon came in 1561, and, three years after him, Shakespeare. They were born, I have said, into no active intellectual tradition; and if the world was still awaiting new philosophical formulations, it also seemed slow, in England at least, to move in

certain other ways. In literature, allegory died hard. In the eighties and nineties Spenser could still give it full employment, if only just in time; in drama, the transition from the Morality to what we call Drama proper was slow, chequered, and laborious; and, indeed, when we survey the body of English renaissance drama, or even the body of Shakespeare's work, it seems clear that the tradition of allegory in drama was by no means wholly thrown off. In science it was only the last year of the century which saw the publication of the first great scientific work in English. But the new eye for the particular was being opened; and its vision was strong in Bacon and in Shakespeare. Only, with their new vision, they yet contemplated different things, and their minds moved in different directions and to different ends.

3

Certainly, we must see Bacon and Shakespeare as issuing from a single great movement of the human spirit towards what Bacon calls the Enclosures of particularity⁵. I said earlier that to compare Shakespeare and Bacon is not to compare, in the ordinary course of things, a poet and a philosopher; and the reason for this in part is that Bacon was not in the first place a philosopher as we ordinarily understand the word. To the theory of knowledge he gave little enough attention. He gave as little to metaphysics. Here he was in the full line of descent from what medieval philosophy in its last great days had come to: demonstration in metaphysics and divinity was hardly possible. Here, at least. Bacon seems

to speak like a child of William of Ockham; here, he seems to inherit an attitude which the intervening centuries had not destroyed but somehow subtly nourished; here, if we wish to speak in the fashion of Macaulay, Bacon was the medlar-like fruit of a medieval philosophy which was ripe only when it was rotten with decay. 'To delight', says Bacon, 'in the spacious liberty of generalities, as in a champain region' can only be to 'the extreme prejudice of knowledge';¹ *his* delight, and increasingly the delight of his fellow men, was in the Enclosures of particularity'. What excited his mind was the prospect of the vast and unexplored tracts of the natural world. The ship of the mind had in the past fallen upon the shores and flats of final causes; only Democritus, of classical philosophers, won Bacon's clear praise: he did not suppose a mind or reason informing the frame of things, and was therefore well fitted to inspire investigation of the natural world; we might now close our Aristotle and open our Lucretius.

But it cannot be too much emphasized that Bacon was no materialistic philosopher. It was one thing to remove the thought of final causes from the action of the mind engaged in investigating the natural world; it was another to deny that revelation had disclosed to us the ultimate truth about the world; it was also another to deny that both final and physical causes had both their validity; and in this, Bacon's point of view reminds us

¹ *Advancement*, n. viii. i. Quotations from *The Advancement* are made from the edition of W. Aldis Wright, Clarendon Press, 1868, impression of 1926. Quotations from other works of Bacon are from the edition of Ellis and Spedding, 1857-74.

of things being said in our own time. He acknowledged both kinds of cause; and the one did not invalidate the other. He might have understood, indeed perhaps he anticipated, the remark of a modern philosopher that if all possible scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would still not be touched at all; and his remark: ^CI request men not to suppose that ... I wish to found a new sect in philosophy. For this is not what I am about',¹ has a contemporary ring in our ears. He was concerned with *method*, to ensure a new kind of understanding, which was the right study of nature; and final causes could only get in the way of this learning. We cannot confidently say that Bacon was unaware of the limits of the new learning he proposed, however far it advanced.

And yet Bacon was not content to confine himself to method; he was not, after all, clear as to what he was about. For one thing, he believed, if without any notable vigour and conviction, in the possibility of metaphysic. He is emphatic enough that final causes are in physic 'impertinent. Nay, they are indeed but *re-moraes* and hindrances to stay and slug the ship from further sailing; and have brought this to pass, that the search of the physical causes hath been neglected and passed in silence.'² But he also asserts that it is the necessary duty of metaphysic to concern itself with final causes; they are 'well inquired and collected in metaphysic'. The teleology of nature must be studied by metaphysic, and from it the existence of God can be

¹ *Novum Organum*, i. cxvi, vol. 4 of the Philosophical Works.

² *Advancement*, n. vii. 7.

established. He is indeed aware of a certain danger to religion from natural science; he says that 'in the entrance of philosophy, when the second causes, which are next unto the senses, do offer themselves to the mind of man, if it dwell and stay there, it may induce some oblivion of the highest cause'; but, he goes on, 'when a man passeth on further, and seeth the dependence of causes, and the works of Providence, then, according to the allegory of the poets, he will easily believe that the highest link of nature's chain must needs be tied to the foot of Jupiter's chair'.¹

It is necessary to say this in any account of Bacon's thought. Still, it is also true that the general bent and direction of his thought was to make little enough of the scope and power of natural theology; and there is little in his work of the metaphysic of final causes. For much the bigger part, religion is in Bacon's mind an affair of faith to which metaphysic makes little contribution; and reason and faith have small and slight enough connexion in his writings. What may properly be said to be knowledge is of God's creatures and works. Some of these creatures are indeed human; but even their humanity lies beyond rational investigation. The life they share with the animals is material and will suffer scientific inquiry; the life they do not share with the animals we can truly apprehend only in revelation's light; and still more, the knowledge of God himself is properly only a faith and a wonder which comes of revelation. It is true that Bacon offers us, if perfunctorily,

¹ *Ibid.* i. i. 3.

a natural theology for a bridge between rational knowledge and faith; but it is a slight bridge which can bear little weight; and I think we may fairly say in general that Bacon places religion outside the life of reason. Reason must look principally, if not entirely, to the physical world and to physical causes. Here it is truly at home; and Bacon was less concerned to come by a philosophy of nature than by a partial but fruitful investigation of it.

It is natural to think that this intellectual scheme reflects the interests and predilections of Bacon's mind; it issues from his prevailing concern. Where a man's treasure is, there will his head be also: it is not easy for philosophy to resist the play of sensibility and passion. Kant prescribed limits to the office of the understanding, and did so from a certain fear and alarm which arose in response to the Enlightenment and to two centuries of scientific discovery; but Bacon, early in the seventeenth century, prescribed such limits in order to ensure a conquest of the natural world which still seemed at best in the balance. Bacon wished to overrun new territories; Kant was anxious to safeguard old ones. Certainly, we cannot say that Bacon was not religious; but he seems always to take heaven too much for granted and the world for something too much to be won.

4

Bacon's thought everywhere stumbled forward; in no respect did it advance on a clear and straight path. His mind was rich, daring, and catholic; it had a prophetic

grandeur; but it was also uncertain. How uncertain his mind remained I can illustrate further and in a way which will, I think, throw a light back on what I have said of his view of final and physical causes. There can be no doubt that in Bacon we see the now familiar mechanistic interpretation of nature; it is not indeed clearly and fully expounded; but it is there. It is there in Bacon's exposition of what he calls the 'forms' of simple natures. He allows, as I said, that metaphysic may concern itself with final ends; but he is more concerned that it should concern itself with formal ends. It is here that he shows his essential modernity and his vision of things to come. Metaphysic, he says, must concern itself with *Forms*; and it is here, in the way he employs this term, that we see, more sharply and clearly than anywhere else, the point at which the medieval and renaissance is finished and the modern begins. With a certain contempt he wrests the word 'form' out of the hands of scholastic philosophers and puts it into the hands of modern science. 'To me . . .', he says in *The Advancement* (n. vii. 2), 'it seemeth best to keep way with antiquity *usque ad aras* and therefore to retain the ancient terms, though I sometimes alter the uses and definitions'; and now, in changing the 'use and definition' of the word 'form', the essence of the proposed advancement is to be found. The old forms are 'figments of the mind', he says in the *Novum Organum* (i. li); but there are new forms to which we must look; and these new forms are part of the proper study of metaphysic. But this department of metaphysical inquiry turns out

to be not metaphysical at all, but a part of what we call physics. The knowledge of the old forms was the ascent of the soul to the suprasensual; the knowledge of the new forms is the key to the mastery of the natural world. He goes on to say: 'It may be thought ... a strange and harsh thing that we should at once and with one blow set aside all sciences and all authors; and that too without calling in any of the ancients to our aid and support, but relying on our own strength'; but he adds, 'new discoveries must be sought from the light of nature, not fetched back out of the darkness of antiquity'. He says again, in a crucial passage in *The Advancement* (n. vii. 5):

But it is manifest that Plato, in his opinion of ideas, as one that had a wit of elevation situate as upon a cliff, did descry *that forms were the true object of knowledge*; but lost the real fruit of his opinion, by considering of forms as absolutely abstracted from matter, and not confined and determined by matter; and so turning his opinion upon theology, where-with all his natural philosophy is infected. But if any man shall keep a continual watchful and severe eye upon action, operation and the use of knowledge, he may advise and take notice, what are the forms, the disclosures whereof are fruitful and important to the state of man.

Here is the voice of modernity as it gives farewell to the Plato of Greek philosophy, of the Christian tradition and of renaissance speculation. No doubt the voice and influence of Plato will recur again in later years, and the Cambridge Platonists will reply to Hobbes before the century is out; but it will be on the whole an unavailing protest against a stronger intellectual impetus.

But what are the new 'forms' of things to ascertain which is that part of metaphysic of which he speaks with more ease and confidence than when he speaks of that other part of metaphysic which treats of final causes? They are (to quote now from the *Novum Organum*), the 'configurations [of matter] and changes of configuration, and simple action, and law of action or motions; for forms are figments of the human mind, unless you will call those laws of action forms' (i. li). Here and elsewhere in Bacon's writings is the decisive, the palmary idea: the true forms of things are patterns and laws of motion. The variety of the universe we know falls away, and all things become expressible in terms of patterns of movement. Bacon is not, it is true, in perfect possession of his idea; he is stumbling towards it and reaching out only; but in a number of passages and in the discussion which opens the Second Book of the *Novum Organum*, the thought is declaring itself. He is well on the way to the distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of matter; and the coloured and sounding world is fading into material configurations. It is little wonder that Democritus won Bacon's approval; there had been a discovery of the truth, after all, in the 'darkness of antiquity'; and the 'light of nature' was only rediscovering a truth which in its bare essentials was in the mind of Democritus and Lucretius. But now the light of nature was to hold; soon Hobbes, Descartes, and Newton will be at work; and the mechanistic interpretation of nature will change the world. Here, in this matter, Bacon is modern. He comes early and is uncertain;

but he had at least adumbrated one of the leading ideas of the new world.

And yet, in saying all this, my purpose is to illustrate less Bacon's certainty than his uncertainty. The new world is being born; but it could hardly spring fully armed from the head of Bacon or of anyone else. Nowhere in Bacon's writings do we find certainty of touch, the fully formed idea, the fashioned conclusion. It is a commonplace that Bacon, with all his discussion of scientific method and induction, clean missed certain crucial features of scientific investigation; his method as he propounded it was fruitless; it was not along these lines that science in fact was to advance; Galileo, Gilbert, and Harvey, working men of science, might have told him much that he had no grasp of; and if his method would not do, his doctrines, even where, as I have said, they were in all truth prophetic of what was to come, were not clearly seen and held. But it is not only this. There are times in Bacon's writings when he seems to put himself at a remove from his doctrine of the forms of things and the mechanistic understanding of nature. The late Professor Whitehead in his famous book *Science and the Modern World*¹ quoted from Bacon's *Sylvit Sylvarum*, written in the last years of his life, a passage on which Professor Whitehead made a remarkable observation; and there are other passages like it. This is the passage:

It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception: for when one body is applied to another, there is a kind of election to embrace

¹ Cambridge, 1936, impression of 1937, p. 53.

that which is agreeable, and to exclude or repel that which is ingrate; and whether the body be alterant or altered, evermore a perception precedeth operation; for else all bodies would be alike one to another. And sometimes this perception, in-some kind of bodies, is far more subtile than sense: so that sense is but a dull thing in comparison of it: we see a weather glass will find the least difference of the weather in heat or cold, when we find it not. And this perception is sometimes at a distance, as well as upon the touch; as when loadstone draweth iron; or flame naphtha of Babylon, a great distance off. It is therefore a subject of a very noble enquiry, to enquire of the more subtile perceptions; for it is another key to open nature, as well as the sense; and sometimes better.

But Professor Whitehead's comment, whatever we may think of it, is hardly less surprising than the passage itself. 'I believe', he says, 'Bacon's line of thought to have expressed a more fundamental truth than do the materialistic concepts which were then being shaped as adequate for physics'; and Mr. Whitehead might have said — 'then being shaped by Bacon himself and others'. The whirligig of time brings in its revenges. Mr. Whitehead was not ill-equipped to pronounce on the nature of the physical World in the light of the long history of classical mechanics and of the ferment of the physics of our own day; and he declares that Bacon is nearer the final truth of things when he talks after the fashion of renaissance vitalism than when he talks like a prophet of the mechanistic science of the succeeding centuries. I am not at all concerned to argue that this is so. My purpose now is only to emphasize the great shifts of perception in

Bacon's mind, his precarious hold upon the new idea, the ease with which he falls back on current and typical renaissance modes of thought which liked to see the universe everywhere animated, and the scene of a universally diffused life.

5

But there is another thing to remark¹ about the passage from Bacon which Professor Whitehead quoted. It is not only that Bacon spoke of 'all bodies whatsoever' as having 'perception' and 'election'; he adds that if it were not so, 'all bodies would be alike one to another'. Bacon will not now, in this passage, willingly envisage a world in which all things are 'alike' to one another; instead, he sees things as individual and organic; and Professor Whitehead, rightly or wrongly, approved of this doctrine of things. Only, we must recall that other strain in Bacon of which I have spoken, in which he speaks, like a true fashioner and prophet of modernity, of the laws of matter in motion as the true forms of things; and then we see that there his imagination is moved by the vision of a universe in which all things *are* alike one to another, ultimate atoms of matter, unchanging, unaffected by the other units to which it bears the most complete resemblance. We see in Bacon the parting of the ways; his view is now on one road, and now on another, and he is uncertain which to take. But his successors will have less uncertainty.

¹ It was remarked by the late Professor A. E. Taylor in his British Academy lecture on Francis Bacon, 1926.

Now this epochal moment we must see against its background, which stretches far into the past. The movement from the apogee of scholastic philosophy in St. Thomas, through Scotus to the nominalism of Ockham and his followers, was a movement which removed the supernatural beyond rational discourse and brought thought to earth; but it had done so only to help our later modern centuries to be disposed to think that the earth was composed of bodies entirely like one another. When Bacon was writing *The Advancement*, Hamlet had not long before made his bow before his audience—and it was to prove a large one; and Lear was soon to make his appearance. But men from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries were to be frightened by the thought that a Hamlet and a Lear were indeed idols of the theatre, a mere show which contrived to hide the puppet-strings and the back-stage realities. A great continental philosopher of the eighteenth century, aided by Romantic poetry, was to allay this fear; at least, for a time. Today, Romanticism and the English empirical temper have alike laboured to produce a philosophical climate in which an English philosopher can coolly speak about what he calls the 'bogy of mechanism'. But we shall see, no doubt, whether the bogy will be laid as neatly as is now thought; metaphysical ghosts are not perhaps exorcised so easily; and the fearful imagination of man may continue, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, to prey upon life.

However that may be, I said that we see Bacon coming near to the modern mechanistic notions of nature;

but he saw that in that case all things would be alike to one another; and there remained in his mind the sense of things as having 'perception' and 'election', keeping, thereby, their peculiar identities. This illustrates the recoil, in Bacon's mind, from abstraction; his imagination did not go on to grasp firmly a world which lent itself to mathematical treatment; instead, it clung to a mode of apprehension that would ordinarily be called more poetical. Certainly, Shakespeare's poetry is full of things having 'perception' and 'election'; it is full of what is sometimes called the 'personal metaphor'. The rivers are proud and burst their continents; the daffodil comes before the swallow dares and takes the winds with beauty; an envious sliver breaks; the blood peeps through scars; the flame of the taper bends to perceive the enclosed lights of the eyes of Imogen. Without this kind of thing, Shakespeare's poetry would be a very different affair. But is it wholly or merely fancy? Once, indeed, we see Shakespeare's mind arresting itself in the course of apprehension like this. Everyone knows the lines describing Cleopatra in the barge; but I venture to quote some of them:

Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes . . .

... she did lie

In her pavilion—cloth of gold, of tissue—
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature . . .

. . . and Antony,
Enthroned i' the market place, did sit alone,
Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too
And made a gap in nature.

How beautifully Shakespeare's fancy turns back upon itself here and makes the implied rebuke to itself of a piece with the poetry! No doubt it was not the new science which had first announced that nature abhors a vacuum; but I think it is true to say that we see here in Shakespeare something of the same strain of conflicting apprehensions which we have observed in Bacon.

6

It is not necessary for my purpose to speak of the detail of Bacon's method and of his notions of how the great result was to be brought about. They have been sufficiently expounded; so have their faults, limitations, and misunderstandings, when they have been judged in the light of how physical science has in fact proceeded. I need here only look briefly to the feeling and imagination which animated what Bacon thought and wrote about human knowledge. He believed that the world of the *New Atlantis* was within our grasp; it could be wrought, and soon; and its coming would be a kind of rebirth of human life. Here is the centre, the urgent, passionate motive of Bacon's thought. The Fall was in all truth the consequence of man's pride; he had aspired to a forbidden knowledge; in seeking rational knowledge of God he had sought to be like God; he had paid the

penalty; and his days had become few and evil. This Bacon declares in the opening pages in *The Advancement*; it was the starting-point and theme of all he had to say. 'It was', he says, 'the proud knowledge of good and evil, with an intent in man to give law unto himself, and to depend no more upon God's commandment, which was the form of the temptation.'¹ But now, let us call off the assault of our reason upon heaven and direct it to the earth. We may not have rational understanding of God; we may have understanding and mastery of his creatures. Reason was clouded and lost in metaphysical heights; it would shine with pristine purity in the plains of natural science. The supernatural called to be obeyed; the natural called to be commanded. Heaven lay indeed beyond man's mind; but the earth lay at his feet, and might, in some respects at least, be again the paradise of Adam. The Kingdom of Man lay about us for the getting; and 'the entrance into the Kingdom of Man, founded on the sciences, [is] not much other', he said, 'than the entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, whereinto none may enter except as a little child',² with, that is, the understanding freed from 'idols'. The true role of reason did not lie in philosophy; it lay in the sciences which have no other end than that 'human life be endowed with new discoveries and powers'. 'Truth therefore and utility are here the very same things', he says. He had 'no entire or universal theory to propound'; his purpose was to try whether he could not 'in very fact

¹ i. i. 3.

^a *Novum Organum*, i. Ixviii.

lay more firmly the foundations, and extend more widely the limits, of the power and greatness of man'.

This was the vision which was in the mind of Bacon at the outset of modernity. But it was no mere vision or vague aspiration. It could be realized soon. A few generations of inquiry and the task of natural science could be accomplished and the new world be born. Here was Bacon's brave new world. Bacon wrote the *New Atlantis* in 1624. He did not finish it. His chaplain Rawley tells us that he left it in order to press on with his investigations. The new world was not something to write about; it was something to bring about, and soon. We may dislike the flattery which Bacon addresses to the King in the first pages of *The Advancement*; in writing it, he may well have had his own advancement in view; but he had also the advancement of learning in view; and for both, the King's goodwill was decisive. Bacon no doubt was ambitious for office; but he was more ambitious for mankind and its release from brief and wretched days; his pity for mankind is abundantly shown in his writings; and it was open to James, or so Bacon believed, to become the chief architect of a work which would bring in a new world and the Kingdom of Man.¹

7

In the years when these things were being cogitated and written down, Shakespeare was writing his greatest plays. Shakespeare could hardly not have known of Bacon: Essex was so illustrious a man, and his

¹ *Ibid.*, i. cxvi.

conspiracy and death such momentous events, that Shakespeare must at the least have heard of this friend of Essex and of the role he played in his trial. A famous performance of *Richard II*, at a crucial time in Essex's life, brought Shakespeare and the players near to the conspiracy; they did not suffer for it in any way; but they must have heard and talked of Bacon; it is natural to think that Shakespeare read over an account of Essex's treason, published in 1601, which Bacon had drafted; and if there is any good cause to believe that the figure of Essex went into the making of Hamlet, Bacon and Shakespeare each set down on paper, at very much the same time, their renderings of this strange and unstable man. But however that may be, the accession of James was to bring changes for them both. The Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, and they were to play at Court more frequently than in the reign of Elizabeth. Bacon was knighted on the accession, and then, after anxious and industrious years, was to become Solicitor-General in 1607. Early in the first years of the King's reign Bacon had composed *The Advancement* he was anxious to engage the King's interest in the Great Design; and in October 1605 **^{was} published. In that year, in that autumn it seems likely, when Robert Catesby and others were entertaining certain alarming notions, *King Lear* was composed; it was acted at Court at Christmas 1606. Did a copy of *The Advancement* come into Shakespeare's hands at this time? and did Sir Francis Bacon see the performance of *Lear* at Court? In earlier Elizabethan years he had tried his hand at

writing for masque and revel; and in what he then wrote the new knowledge and the new means to power were already a theme. Did he think that this play, enacted in these later, Jacobean times, was beneath his notice? Or, if he saw it, he perhaps saw it as an image of human misery, of the sorrows of mankind and of our life wherein we wear out days few and evil; and he may have hurried home to draft or redraft one of his directives for a new and happier world. 'But it is not good', he said in *The Advancement*, 'to stay too long in the theatre.'

8

And yet, when we compare Bacon with Shakespeare, we are not, I think, comparing a mind naturally and chiefly intellectual and analytical, with a mind naturally poetical. Bacon's mind sheered off from the labour of philosophical analysis; nor was his mind of the scientific quality which was being exhibited and laboriously employed by the makers of scientific method and discovery in his own time. He was naturally impassioned and imaginative; he was quick, in the words he used of King James but which are really a description of himself, to 'take flame and blaze from the least occasion presented, or the least spark of another's knowledge delivered'.¹ He himself distinguished between the mind apt in resemblances, lofty and discursive, and the mind apt in distinctions, steady and acute; and he belonged himself to the first sort. He left off the writing of the

¹ *Advancement*, i, 'To the King'.

New Atlantis to push on with 'Natural History'; but he knew his way about in Atlantis better than in his scientific investigations, where he easily got himself lost. He knew what he wanted, and showed us Atlantis; he could not even apply his own rules for getting there. Dean Church said of him that his mind was 'keenly sensitive to all analogies and affinities, impatient of a strict and rigid logical groove, but spreading as it were tentacles on all sides in quest of chance prey, and quickened into a whole system of imagination by the electric quiver imparted by a single word, at once the key and symbol of the thinking it had led to'.¹ There could hardly be a better description of the quality of Bacon's mind than this. It is in the light of this that we can best understand his love of the aphorism and his dislike of a show of system and completeness; in its light also, we understand the role of images in his writing. He was unwilling, he said, to let the intellect fly up from the senses: Shakespeare's thought was steeped in the senses; Bacon's was never far from them. This helps to explain why in philosophy, as a theorist of science, as an investigator, he fell short. He could not carry his imaginative thought into the detail and trial of analytical labour; he had little head for mathematics; and he could not depart so far from his images without stumbling or losing vitality and clarity. For the same reason, he could not, like Descartes, withdraw himself from the world; brooding and puzzling in front of a stove would not facilitate his kind of thinking. Hobbes

¹ R. W. Church, *Bacon*, London, 1884, edition of 1888.

was content to be a dependent of a noble family; Bacon must move between the Court, York House, and his splendid Manor of Gorhambury. He was to be Lord Chancellor; but he had worked at his profession of the law reluctantly and against the grain; he was a better and happier Lord Chancellor than he was a working lawyer. He could write of the new science like a Lord Chancellor; we cannot say with any accuracy that he contributed to scientific knowledge. He needed the stimulus of great scenes, great affairs, of wide vistas and splendid prospects to release the peculiar power of his ample mind.

9

It is therefore of great interest to consider the tragedies of Shakespeare in the light of the 'flame and blaze' of Bacon's mind. I said earlier that there was no strong intellectual frame within which Shakespeare's mind could move and work; and the greatest thinker of his time in England was principally concerned to lay the foundations of natural philosophy. Besides, Bacon made of Christian faith something beyond, or nearly beyond, reason; he asserted faith, but withheld intellectual support from it; and the time was not yet ripe for the appearance of metaphysical systems (such as, in effect, Hobbes's was) which were secular in feeling and intention. As it was, Bacon left philosophy at best to a precarious and ghostly existence between the two worlds of faith and natural science: it did not bridge the two worlds.

Shakespeare, then, worked in a time of intellectual uncertainty and philosophical barrenness which Bacon did little enough to mitigate. But besides, if Shakespeare could not draw upon a strong philosophical system or tradition, he also did not write as a man of faith. He may have died a Papist; he did not write as a Christian. This seems certain. He writes without a philosophy; and we cannot say that his writings are Christian writings. And yet he conducted a poetic and dramatic exploration of human experience which is without parallel for both depth and range in the world's history.

Again, I have said that Bacon inherited a disinclination to philosophy as we ordinarily understand it; what excited his mind were the prospects of investigating the natural world; what he wanted was philosophy made 'natural'; he was above all a gossamer of 'natural philosophy', and far less a practitioner in philosophy proper. Bacon indeed speaks of human nature in *The Advancement* and in the *Essays*; and he does so with insight and sagacity. But it is not for this that he is mostly interesting to us; and his mind was chiefly fixed on the natural world. But Shakespeare's was chiefly fixed on the human; the material he treated was human conduct and character, idiosyncrasy, goodness and evil, wrought into pattern after pattern as play succeeded play; and it cannot be denied that in those plays of his with which we are specially concerned there is exhibited a sense of the mystery of man's relationship to the universe: Hamlet is a perplexed, even distracted, intellectual; and in *Lear*, even more powerfully, the universe's nature and man's

destiny in it become the almost declared theme and substance of the play.

I am not of course proposing to argue that we ought to regard Shakespeare as a philosopher; that certainly we must not do. Coleridge somewhere spoke of Shakespeare's 'most profound, energetic and philosophic mind'; and Mr. Eliot has remarked, and rightly, that 'philosophic' is not the right word; he added that we must try to find a word to put in its place, but that the right word has in fact not yet been found. No one indeed will deny that Shakespeare was a man of thought, and of profound and energetic thought; but few will assert, with any scrupulous regard to language, that he was a man of philosophic thought. Still, a great work of art is—or so I should say—a work of reason; for the universe of reason is not, I take it, exhausted by mathematics, science, and philosophy; and if we argue that this is so, we must see in Shakespeare's plays a rational treatment, by the greatest man who has appeared in our civilization, of human conduct and human destiny. Accordingly, we have this situation: Bacon, the philosopher, declined the traditional tasks of philosophy; he turned his rapt mind to the envisagement of scientific progress and its great consequences; his prospect was of the natural world understood and then controlled. He saw himself as redirecting philosophy back into the paths from which Socrates had led it: 'When Socrates had drawn down philosophy from heaven to earth, moral philosophy became more fashionable than ever, and diverted the minds of men from the philosophy of

nature', he says in *Novum Organum* (i. Ixxix). But Shakespeare was aware—he could not fail to be aware, and shows unmistakable signs of being aware—of the new naturalism; still, his meditation was of man and his destiny not as something to be decided apparently in any measure by a command of the physical world. At least, to speak for a moment of the last plays, in the brave new world of Shakespeare there is no hint of a Salomon's House, such as we find in the *New Atlantis*. There is indeed, to compare with the Father of Salomon's House, Prospero, with his 'science' and learning. Still, Bacon's spokesman speaks of libraries and devices and experiments; Prospero breaks his staff and gives up his power. The scientists of Salomon's House will plumb all depths and unknown places; Prospero is content to drown his book where plummet never reached nor ever will. In the *New Atlantis* we hear of 'the enlarging of the bounds of human Empire'; on the island of Prospero we hear of the great globe itself dissolving and leaving not a rack behind. To say this is to look on into the 'Romances', which are not my concern now; but if we consider the work of Shakespeare as a whole, we find in it neither a manifest faith nor any concern with the understanding of the physical world. Neither of Bacon's requirements are here. But also, we have not here a philosophy. And yet we have, in spite of this, an incomparable exploration of, we may even say investigation into, human life, its nature, mystery, and destiny.

This is a situation of interest and importance. Bacon and Shakespeare are the greatest figures in the early

days of our civilization, and both were men of imagination. What Bacon signified for the future of mankind we know. He stands at the threshold of modernity, and pronounces, like a Lord Chancellor indeed, the new idea of science. The idea was not, in any ultimate sense, original to him; the scientific movement was under way, and would certainly have continued had he never lived. Still, he was prophetic; and as the century wore on he was to be increasingly a light and an inspiration to English science. His method would not do; but the drive and passion of his mind did not die with him; they increased in power and scope. He did not see, he could hardly foresee, that faith could not be left, if it was ultimately to survive, in the crowned but undefended isolation from the life of reason in which he put it; but he rightly sensed the immense power which lay to our hand in scientific inquiry. Faith may have declined; the power of science has grown in ways and in a measure beyond even Bacon's dream.

But if the significance of Bacon is clear, we may find it hard to define and declare the significance of Shakespeare. It is to this large and difficult matter that I shall try, for what my attempt will be worth, to address myself in later chapters, and this I shall try to do by speaking chiefly of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Presumptuous as my intention may be, it is not, I think, in itself supererogatory. Shakespeare has indeed come to greater fame in later days than Bacon; and everyone, no doubt, would acknowledge that he was the greater man. But does he, in fact, signify more to us than Bacon, and has

he had, and has he, a greater influence on us than Bacon and what Bacon signified? Bacon speaks the twofold gospel of sheer faith and of natural philosophy; Shakespeare writes without faith and without philosophy, and with no apparent concern with science. What is it then which he may be said to have done, and what does it come to, that we acknowledge that he is not only greater than Bacon, but also the greatest man of our civilization? The knowledge Bacon wanted was also power, as he declared; and time has justified him. But what kind of knowledge did Shakespeare provide, if indeed he provided knowledge at all? and if, in any sense, he provided knowledge, is it of a kind which also may be said to be power?

10

We may or may not know the answers to these questions. But Bacon thought he knew them. To him the role of reason was clear, and he undertook to provide the rules for its employment. But he was also clear about the role of the imagination: poetry, he says in *The Advancement*, has 'reference' to the imagination (II. i. I). Now imagination, he says, also in *The Advancement*, is ordinarily an agent of the reason and in that measure serves knowledge. But it may not itself provide knowledge; no science 'fitly pertains to the imagination'; 'as for poesy, it is rather a pleasure or play of the imagination, than a work or duty thereof (n. xii. i); that is to say, in poetry the imagination does not even serve knowledge; here, it is cut right away from it. There is a

passage in the *De Augmentis* (3. i) where he says of history that it walks upon the earth and that it acts as a guide rather than a light; but Poesy, he says, is 'as a dream of learning; a thing sweet and varied, and that would be thought to have in it something divine; a character which dreams likewise affect'. Reason, that is to say, provides an advancement of learning; poetry is as a dream of learning merely, and is sweet and varied.¹

What Bacon says in *The Advancement* (n. iv. 2) about poetry is well known. It is, he says, a 'feigned history'; 'poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality, and delectation';^c and therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth

¹ But there is a feature of what Bacon has to say about poetry which calls for remark. He speaks in *The Advancement*, and at greater length in *De Augmentis*, of '*Paraboliſcal Poetry'. In *The Advancement* (II. iv. 3) he says that 'Alluſive or Paraboliſcal [Poetry] is a narration applied only to expreſs ſome ſpecial purpoſe or conceit*'; and this ſentence, in the Latin tranſlation, becomes '. . . historia cum typo, quae intellectualia deducit ad ſenſum*', typical history which brings to the ſenſes objects of the intellect. He diſtinguiſhes between two kinds of paraboliſcal poetry, both of which he declares to be ſuperior to other forms of poetry. The firſt kind is uſed for illuſtration; the ſecond 'for an infoldment'. By the firſt he means a deliberate form of teaching, as in allegory and fable; by the ſecond he means poetry in which 'the ſecrets and myſteries of religion, policy and philoſophy are involved in fables and parables', where 'involved*' means indeed wreathed or entwined inextricably. It is this ſecond kind of paraboliſcal poetry 'quae intellectualia deducit ad ſenſum*'; it is myth; and Bacon clearly beholds it as more important than the other fabular form of poetry. It is ſtrange, and of deep intereſt, that Bacon ſhould ſee this ſo clearly; but he nowhere, ſo far as I know, is diſpoſed to look at any narratives other than very primitive ones in this light. It is true that his interpretations of Greek myths are prepoſterous. But that is another matter.

buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things'. Poetry is the child of our desires; and, like religion, it can have no place in the life of reason. To this, and to other passages like it, I shall have occasion to return from time to time. In the meantime, we observe that Bacon is declaring, in effect, that *King Lear*, or anything like it, does not buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things. It is at best a dream of learning; and Bacon was concerned with the advancement of learning.

II

THE NEW DOUBT

I

IN trying to speak of *Hamlet*, I give myself some comfort by saying at once that I shall be content to play the role of a Teucer to the Ajax of Mr. Granville-Barker. Mr. Granville-Barker concluded his essay on *Hamlet* with these words:

In England, for the best part of a century before *Hamlet* was written, and for sixty years after, the finer issues of the spiritual revolution which the Renaissance had begun were obscured by secular discord, persecution, and civil war; and the ensuing peace left them hardened into formula. To the popular mind thus distressed and coarsened, the finer issues implicit either in play or character might well make small appeal. Nor would they be likelier to touch the conscience of the positive eighteenth century. Not till it was waning, and many men had come to find their set creeds unsatisfying, till they began to ask the old essential questions once again, to have a better answer if they might, did the *Hamlet* of spiritual tragedy come by his own; then to become, indeed, the typical hero of a new 'age of doubt'. It was as if Shakespeare, so alive to the spirit of his own time, had been in this mysteriously attuned besides to some

prophetic soul

Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

While our age of doubt endures and men still cry despairingly 'I do not know...' and must go on uncomforted, the play will keep, I should suppose, its hold on us. If a new age of faith

or reason should succeed, or one for a while too crushed by brute reality to value either, Hamlet may then be seen again simply as the good Polonius saw him.¹

In these, as I believe, profound words, is the essence of what I have to say. I am not, I trust, unmindful of all the work which has gone to exhibiting to us the Elizabethan Hamlet; but those who have illuminated the play by historical research have not themselves been unmindful that Hamlet was not merely contemporary with his age; and the mind of Shakespeare is not, I take it, expressible as a function of a number of features of the age in which Shakespeare lived. The historian must accept the creativeness of the rare and great mind as itself a brute fact, and as a major brute fact; there is no resolving it away; it is peculiar, unique, and inexplicable; it is creative both of itself and of its civilization. The apparently simple category of cause and effect does not apply here; in such a mind, the facts and features of its age are material worked upon and transfigured into expressive symbols. Indeed, the symbol is not a statement or even a translation of the fact; instead, the fact emerges into clear light in the form of the symbol which alone is the full because significant fact. Thus, *Hamlet* better helps us to understand the Elizabethan uncertainty about ghosts than books written by lesser contemporaries of Shakespeare whose study of these things is far more partial and abstract than Shakespeare's treatment of them in his play.

I am not here chiefly concerned with these matters.

¹ *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Third Series, London 1937, third impression, 1944, PP- 328-9.

I wish only to suggest that we may go too far in seeing Shakespeare as one *behind* whom we must look in order to understand him; we may rightly look to what came after. There is much, indeed, in Bacon which was of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance; but the core of him was what we can only call modern; he was one of the first of the moderns; his vision of things was creative of, and is better understood in the light of, what came after him; and what makes Bacon important and gives to him his splendid literary powers is, I venture to say, his modernity. What was of the Middle Ages in him and of the Renaissance, is, of course, of deep interest to us; but it is not this which makes him loom so large, which indeed gives him his peculiar greatness, and secures for him the attention and admiration of all succeeding generations. And so it is, I think, with Shakespeare. He was, in all truth, as Mr. Granville-Barker says, greatly alive to the spirit of his own time; but he, like Bacon, was prophetic, though of different things. The 'finer issues of the spiritual revolution' of his time are still our issues; it is Hamlet as a figure expressive of modernity which holds our rapt contemplation; he, too, is one of the first, and is perhaps the greatest, of the moderns. The spirit of Bacon is still potently alive; so is Hamlet's. We read, in a nineteenth-century poet, that we are

Light half-believers of our casual creeds,
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,
Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill'd;
For whom each year we see

Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
 Who hesitate and falter life away,
 And lose tomorrow the ground won today;

and it is natural to acknowledge that Arnold's description of us is true enough. But Arnold's lines, fine as they are, are a poetry of brief statement; Shakespeare's play is the detailed image, the elaborately wrought symbol, of this unresolved distress of modernity. Our modern world, at its outset, beheld itself here, here defined, and in that measure created; here it has continued to behold itself; this play, far more than any other work of art or philosophy, has held our fascinated study. Bacon, I have said, was prophetic; and yet he looked to a conclusive event, an absolute achievement through knowledge which was also power. But Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, was also, I have said, prophetic; but he saw uncertainty, ignorance, failure, and defeat. I do not say he saw, even in *Hamlet*, only these things; but that he saw at least these things, we cannot deny. Bacon looked to unquestioning religious faith and to natural philosophy; but Hamlet certainly had no unquestioning faith; he had no philosophy, natural or other; and his problems were hardly to be resolved by the use of scientific method, or knowledge, or experiment.

2

I cannot, within my limits, proceed to a systematic study of the play *of Hamlet*: I must move discursively, but not, I trust, evasively.

I have suggested where, as it seems to me, the centre

of the play lies. Some have seen Hamlet as congenitally indisposed to action: Goethe and Coleridge saw him largely in this way. But in fact, the play forbids this; and Ophelia's description of Hamlet is no doubt intended to suggest to us a difference between the Hamlet we see now and the Hamlet of earlier days. He had been the courtier, the soldier, and the scholar,

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion, and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers . . .^x

But now he is quite, quite down. New circumstances have arisen, and in them he is distracted, uncertain of his way, unable to resolve an intolerable state of things; and the play presents this man in this condition, what he does and what happens to him. This indeed is not all it does; but this it does chiefly.

To see Hamlet as merely a perplexed mind, an uncertain intellect, would be grossly to simplify; no play could be enacted out of such abstracted matter. Hamlet is a man of strong passion, if he is also one of weak will; but the weakness of his will and the strength of his feelings, whether of contempt and disgust for Claudius or of admiration for Horatio, are of a piece with his intellectual condition; and if I appear to speak of Hamlet as of some ghostly and bloodless intellectual, it will not be in entire forgetfulness of the rest of him. Nor, if I appear to lift Hamlet out of the play and seem to offend against a canon of contemporary criticism,

¹ Quotations from Shakespeare are made from the *Arden* editions.

shall I forget the risks I am running. I must indeed ask forbearance for what cannot, within the scope at my disposal, be a full-length study of the play; I shall proceed with what I acknowledge to be a limited purpose in view; I only think that nothing that I say is in the last resort at odds with any full consideration of the play as a work of dramatic art.

Now we have, in the first place, to see Hamlet as a man uncertain of his duty in the circumstances in which he finds himself. Ought he to murder the murderer of his father and the seducer of his mother? That is the question:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them? To die,—to sleep . . .

I am not unaware that I am plunging into, to say the least, debated territory. But it is better, I think, for me to declare myself at once and make clear where, on this battlefield, I stand and fight; and Mr. Granville-Barker would, I am sure, forgive me if for the moment I make Dr. Johnson my Ajax; he stands four-square, if shot at, in this as in his other battles. His interpretation of this soliloquy seems to me incomparably the best yet offered. The thought of the soliloquy is not, at the outset, of suicide at all, but of personal immortality: whether we are to be or not to be, to live or in truth to die; and in the context of this thought, which recurs at the conclusion of the lines I quoted (. . . and by opposing end them?

To die,—to sleep ...), Hamlet asks whether it be nobler to suffer the slings of fortune or to take arms against troubles and end them. Hamlet's mind is moving fast: we may read the 'that is the question' as referring both backwards and forwards; and the two questions, Whether we shall live or die? and, Whether it is nobler to suffer or to take arms against our troubles? are tied up with each other and are in Hamlet's mind quite inseparable. Certainly, the thought of suicide occurs later with the talk of a bare bodkin making a quietus for us; this is one way of taking arms against a sea of troubles; and then Hamlet's thought turns at once, again, to death and a life to come. He had spoken first of taking arms against others with the chance that he be killed; and his mind had passed at once to the thought of what might come in another world than this. Now he speaks of killing himself; and now, again, his mind turns to what would come in another world.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time . . .
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear . . .
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will . . .?

We do offence to the speech, or so it seems to me, unless we see Hamlet contemplating first, the killing of others with perhaps, then, his own death, and second, a suicide; both are ways of taking arms against a sea of troubles; and the taking arms in either form is seen against the fearful background of a world to come

in which condign punishment may be inflicted by a righteous God. What kind of an eternity will the taking up of arms, whether against others or oneself, bring one? Therefore the overriding question is, Whether 'tis nobler . . .? This we must know; for God, if there be a God, may punish us through eternity for a wrong choice. There is the intrinsic ethical question,—Which is in itself nobler? But Hamlet ties up this question along with the thought of eternal sanctions imposed by God. If there were no after-life it would not matter, or matter less, which line he took; but he cannot here, upon this bank and shoal of time, jump the thought of a life to come. There is, then, an ethical question; there is also a metaphysical and religious question; and to neither does he know the answer.

I only emphasize here, in passing, Hamlet's fearful imagination of a life after death. I venture to think we often underrate this. Here, indeed, we need to remember how close these Elizabethan days were to the Middle Ages; here we must hold our modernity in restraint. If we need to illustrate further that in this matter Hamlet was not fetching excuses for delay, we may look at lines Shakespeare wrote in another play a few years later. In *Measure for Measure* the Duke has urged Claudio to be absolute for death: the afflictions of life make death sweet. Later in the same scene, Isabella has told Claudio that 'the sense of death is most in apprehension'. But the reply of Claudio, given indeed to Isabella but coming in effect as a reply both to her and to the Duke, is dreadful in its imagination:

mind that Shakespeare was the first to make him a member of a university; and *Hamlet* was acted before the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. (We may also recall, with alarm, that Polonius had been a member of a university; some will further note, and with still greater alarm, that he had clearly, when at the university, been a member of the Dramatic Society.) But my point is that *Hamlet* is not a tragedy of excessive thought; so far as we are to see the cause of Hamlet's destiny in intellectual terms, it is a tragedy not of excessive thought but of defeated thought. Hamlet does not know; and he knows of no way of knowing. And then comes the line,

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;

resolution is sicklied o'er, and enterprise loses the name of action. It is hard to know what it is right to do; and we do not know whether in fact we live after we die, and in a universe in which a moral order asserts itself. No doubt Shakespeare had to be careful how he expressed the issues which confronted Hamlet. But the plain issue was, Does God exist or not? What was at stake in Hamlet's mind was nothing less than the greatest which confronts our mortal minds.

'Conscience does make cowards of us.' There has been, I am aware, much dispute as to what the word means here. For my part, I find not the least difficulty in believing that the word carries both its usual meaning and that of 'reflection and anxious thought'. It is a platitude of Shakespeare study that Shakespeare could, with wonderful ease, charge a word with two or three meanings at once; there is hardly a page of Shakespeare

which does not illustrate this; and, in any case, the word 'conscience' means for us all both a command to do what is right and anxious reflection as to what is, in fact, the right thing to do. If I had to choose (what I feel under no compulsion whatever to do) between the two meanings proposed, I should unhesitatingly choose the former and usual meaning. A. C. Bradley was cross (in a footnote) with the *Oxford Dictionary* for giving its authority to construing 'conscience' in this passage as meaning 'moral sense or scrupulousness'; and he declares that 'in this soliloquy Hamlet is not thinking of the duty laid upon him at all'. But how then can he begin to explain the lines,

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . .
Or to take arms . . .?

It is precisely his duty Hamlet thinks of, and of his duty, which he finds it hard to decide, in relation to a possible world to come; and the difficulty of knowing what is right, and the uncertainty of our last destiny, together puzzle and arrest the will. Conscience requires that we do what is right; but then, what *is* right or wrong in these circumstances? Anxious reflection discloses no clear conviction; nor does it provide knowledge of a world to come. This is the moral and metaphysical uncertainty in which Hamlet finds himself. He does not know and cannot find out. Conscience makes demands; but it also provides no clear moral or metaphysical sense. Until he finds himself in this climacteric condition, life has gone on smoothly enough; but now, and suddenly, he knows that he lacks the insight, or the

knowledge, or the faith, which will steady him, and carry him forward in a single and continuous course of action. In this, Hamlet knows he is different from Horatio, whose calm and steadily appointed way of life we are expected to admire. Horatio is precisely one who in suffering all, suffers nothing; he has accepted the first alternative Hamlet had proposed to himself: 'whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows ...' Horatio has, we are expected to understand, decided that it is nobler so to suffer, and he has taken the buffets and the rewards of fortune with equal thanks; he knows his line and he is steady in it. Hamlet has not decided; and hence his peculiar distress.

It is very important to observe the play here on the word 'suffer', Horatio is one who suffers everything and suffers nothing. What does this mean? I take it to mean, in the first sense, that Horatio accepts equally the fortunes and misfortunes of life; he embraces his good fortune with restraint and he endures his misfortunes. Therefore, in the second sense, he suffers nothing; he is not put out or mastered by circumstance; he is master of himself and of circumstance; he sustains a steady and imperturbable calm. In the one sense of the word, he takes what comes, without rebellion against it; he does not oppose it to end it; he is thus passive. But in the other sense, he is precisely not passive, but pre-eminently active and creative in his life. Such a steadiness and even tenour, in a philosophy of 'suffering', Hamlet does not possess. Horatio is one who, in suffering all, suffers nothing; Hamlet is one who, in suffering nothing, suffers

everything. He is active where Horatio is passive, and passive where Horatio is active. His passivity is of the wrong sort; he is blown about by every gust of passion. But it is the same when he is active: his activity, like his passivity, is an affair of passion merely. Judgement is not in it. He is passion's slave, played on like a pipe, lapsed in time and circumstance, unaccountable, now listless, now violent.

But we must remark how Hamlet speaks of Horatio; he does so in words of passionate admiration. His election had sealed Horatio for himself because in suffering all, Horatio suffered nothing; and it is the man who is not passion's slave whom he would wear in his heart's core. How clearly he would be like Horatio! And yet, in the face of what has happened, ought he to be like Horatio? or ought he not to take up arms against his troubles, and violently end them and perhaps thereby himself? He did not know. The ghost had given Hamlet specific instructions to contrive nothing against his mother:

. . . leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

But ought he perhaps to leave Claudius to heaven also? When his guilt was proved beyond any doubt, Hamlet still did not kill him; he left him alone, giving a reason, plausible enough in Hamlet's eyes, in the eyes of his audience, and in our eyes, and yet inhabiting a middle region between sincerity and insincerity. We are told that in explaining why he does not there kill the King,

Hamlet was sincere; it was a belief of the time. But it was certainly not universal. Claudius at least could have told him it was nonsense; Claudius has made just clear to us what was necessary if he, Claudius, was to win heaven. And could a Hamlet who half his time believed neither in heaven nor hell, sincerely and with a whole mind say these things? He leaves Claudius, and goes off to rage at his mother.

Conscience, says Hamlet, makes cowards of us; we are made afraid by it; and who of us does not know that this is true? In the soliloquy in Act IV (How all occasions do inform against me) the same thought is uppermost. God has given us capability and god-like reason; we may, Hamlet certainly does not, live in a bestial oblivion of it. What he charges himself with is excess of scruple in employing it in his moral difficulties, thinking too precisely on the event; his scruples, he says, are craven; or at least they are one part wisdom and three-quarters cowardice:

A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward.

He is disposed to upbraid himself for letting all things sleep; but he also acknowledges, even in his bitter reproachment of himself, that he is at least one-quarter wise in thinking precisely on the event: he could not do other than think precisely on such momentous issues. But then, if his precise thinking issues in no results, no assured decision, no clear path of duty, how can he be other than afraid of doing one thing rather than the

other? He has cause and will and strength and means to do it; yes, all these he has; but has he the conscience to do it? That is the question; and conscience makes cowards of us. But where is a resolution of this distress to come from? From thinking precisely on the event? Apparently not; Hamlet is a thinker and has thought enough. Then let him plunge, and do what no doubt most people would expect of him; he talks fustian at himself about greatly finding quarrel in a straw when honour's at the stake; and this in future will be his line. But will it? Of course not. It is better to have three-quarters cowardice and one quarter wisdom than four quarters of bravado and tomfoolery; and Hamlet knows this well enough. But where and how will he find escape from this proper and rightminded cowardice? This is his problem; and it is, I suppose, everybody's problem.

I am aware that I may well be manifesting a deplorable cocksureness in all this. But at least I shall make clear what I intend; and I confess to some impatience with what seems to me the present-day willingness to give up Hamlet for a mystery. Now it is true, no doubt, that we must not see the play as merely an affair of the character of its hero. But few of us will deny that Hamlet's procrastination is the major fact in the play and that it was intended by Shakespeare to be so. But are we really to find his procrastination a mystery and to leave it a mystery? Is there really anything mysterious about a man who has come to no clear and practised sense of life, and who in the face of a shocking situation which quite peculiarly involves him, shuffles,

deceives himself, procrastinates, and in his exasperation cruelly persecutes the person he loves best in the world? Is this beyond our understanding? If we fail to understand it, is it not only because it is all so near to us and not because it is far off in Elizabethan times? Conscience, Hamlet said, makes cowards *of us all*. He was thinking of himself not as the exception, but as the rule.

3

Even if what I have said is true, it may still be replied that I am building up too much from the great soliloquies of Acts III and IV. There is much before, between, and after these speeches; there is indeed, round about them, the play as a whole. But I trust I may be allowed to make a few observations in further defence of what I have been saying. A. C. Bradley declared that it was only late in the play that Shakespeare gives any ground for thinking that Hamlet doubted what his duty was. In Act v, Scene ii, he has been speaking of his uncle, and he asks:

. . . is *t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

Certainly, the question is asked; and here at least (as Bradley tacitly acknowledges) 'conscience' means conscience and no mistake; and with the thought of conscience comes again the thought of a world after this one—'is't not to be damned .. .?' But certainly, if this were all we had to go on, it would not be a great deal;

it comes too late in the play. I have spoken of two of the soliloquies, those of Acts III and IV. Of the soliloquy in Act IV (How all occasions) and of that in Act II (Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I) Bradley remarks that in them Hamlet bitterly reproaches himself for the neglect of his duty. When he reflects on the possible causes for this neglect he never mentions among them a moral scruple.¹ In fact I think, as I have suggested, that this, so far as it refers to the soliloquy in Act IV, is not true: it is thinking too precisely on the event which is there put down for the cause of the delay. But leaving that aside, we have to take account of the circumstances in which these two speeches are made. The first is made immediately after the players have shown him their paces; the second after Fortinbras has marched through against Poland. The player and the soldier come upon him—how could they else?—as deep and bitter reproaches. Nothing could be more natural than this: the player and the soldier move easily and naturally into their appointed actions; they suffer no arrest or inhibition; and Hamlet is filled with shame when he thinks of himself. What then could be truer, in any delineation of human nature, than that his mind should then, in face of those whose inner lives get so little in the way of their duties, turn to the second of his great alternatives, to taking arms against a sea of troubles and, as Mr. Granville-Barker says, to 'brute capacity for deeds of blood'? These are not occasions of mere reflection; the shame of his helplessness goads him towards

¹ *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, second edition, 1920, p. 97.

the more violent of the two choices. But in between these two soliloquies comes, in Act III, the soliloquy which every schoolboy knows by heart and which the world has always put down for the essence of Hamlet. Here he is under the stress of no immediate instigation which would merely rouse his blood and allay his judgement. Here he comes quietly on and speaks; and that very night the play is to be performed at Court. We are in a part of the play where the time-sequence of the action is given with unmistakable clarity. Hamlet had agreed with the player, when arranging to have *The Murder of Gonzago* performed, that it should be the following night; and early in the scene in which Hamlet speaks the great soliloquy it has been made clear that the play is to be performed that night. There has been previously, as Mr. Granville-Barker remarked, 'a spell of timelessness'; and now the carefully defined temporal sequence is 'used', said Mr. Granville-Barker, 'to validate the dramatic speed, even as was timelessness to help slow the action down' and give a vague impression of inaction and delay. The tension tightens; Hamlet may have no doubt in his heart of the King's guilt; but soon there will be proof; and then, if ever, Hamlet must make his decision. At this point, Hamlet comes on and speaks his speech; and the purpose of this speech must be above all to define the issues. If, after the play-scene, he is not to act, we must be given fair reason: we must understand it; and the reason is as I have tried to expound it. This soliloquy is therefore central; on this, if on anything, the play turns. In the anguish of uncertainty which he here

expresses he sees Ophelia and speaks his cruellest words to her. Then the play-scene; then a lifting of the tension in a measure, as he talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Then he is summoned to his mother and it is of his mother he thinks. It is midnight and he could drink hot blood; but still it is of his mother he thinks, not of his uncle. He goes to his mother but alights upon the King as he goes. But he does not kill him; he shuffles out of it and talks off his exasperation to his mother. But all is over. Very soon he will be in effect a prisoner, on his way to England. It is indeed, as he goes, that he hears of Fortinbras; and he ends his long soliloquy with,

Oh, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

But he had said something like this after hearing the Player; he had afterwards had his proof and his chance; and nothing had come of it. He may say what he likes about his thoughts being bloody; but this they will never be. 'My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth'; but was his thinking precisely on the event 'worth nothing'? It was at least one-quarter wisdom; and Hamlet, storm as he will at himself, will not throw up that wisdom for mere thoughts and deeds of blood. As Mr. Granville-Barker said, here is the end of a movement—the second movement—of the play. A new movement will begin; but Hamlet will not design and accomplish its ending. Someone else will do that.

I suggest, therefore, that it is not only what a careful inspection of the speech discloses that we have to take

into account; there is also the crucial position of the speech in the action of the play as a whole. And to this I add that we must see this speech as close to, indeed as of a piece with, the conversation with Horatio in which Hamlet declares the quintessence of Horatio's mind and character which he so admires. This conversation occurs later in the third act and immediately before the play-scene; the moral and intellectual confusion of Hamlet, and then the calm and impregnable bearing of Horatio, are driven hard home as the inner spiritual setting of the ensuing climax of the play.

But it is not only this. Everywhere in this play there is uncertainty and doubt; everywhere also there is incalculable and almost incredible conduct. In belief as in conduct nothing is firm and clear. If we look to belief: the ghost may be an honest ghost; he may be the devil; he may be an illusion. Man has an immortal soul; he is also the quintessence of dust. Death may be a nothing, or a sleep, or its world may contain a heaven and a hell. It may be right to leave criminals to the action of heaven; it may also be right to find quarrel in a straw when honour (whatever that may be) is at the stake. There may be a God to point his canon at self-slaughter; but also there may not be, and only, in his place, a congregation of vapours. And if we look to the conduct of others: a brother can murder his brother whose wife he has seduced, and he can smile and be a villain. A loving wife will betray her husband and promptly marry again with no obvious compunction; and before these two a Court will cringe and crawl.

Ophelia will apparently play in with the others. Of clarity of belief and clarity of conduct there is nothing. The world has crumbled to shifting sand; there is nothing which is firm and no one on whom to rely. Except indeed Horatio, who in suffering all suffers nothing; who has made a choice; and him Hamlet wears in his heart's core, ay, in his heart of heart.

4

But can we, before we go further, say anything which is at all clear about the fundamental ethical issue which confronted Hamlet? I think it is possible to do so; and to do so in the first place in terms of an opposition, with which Hamlet plays a good deal, between 'blood' and 'judgment'. Hamlet has said to Horatio that he suffers nothing in suffering all; and he goes on to say that they are blessed

Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave . . .

'Blood', here, is the same as 'passion', and together are opposed to 'judgment', a word which is frequent in Shakespeare's plays of this time. In the first Act, Laertes tells Ophelia to regard Hamlet's favours as 'a fashion, and a toy in blood'; Hamlet tells his mother that at her age

The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble,
And waits upon the judgment; and what judgment
Would step from this to this?

And then again, he says of himself, in the soliloquy in the fourth Act,

How stand I then,
That have . . .
Excitements of my reason and my blood . . .

The opposition of these two is frequent and clear. Besides, the King speaks of Ophelia in her madness as

Divided from herself and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts;

and this chimes in with Hamlet's

What is a man,
If the chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused.

It is clear that what is of the blood is animal and is opposed to judgement, which is reason; and Hamlet in one place declares that reason is from God and god-like.

Now we observe that Hamlet, in the soliloquy in the fourth Act, speaks of 'excitements of my reason and my blood': both his reason and his blood are roused, he says; and in the mood in which he finds himself after hearing of Fortinbras, he implies that both his reason and his blood require that he takes arms. But in the speech to Horatio he speaks of blood and judgement, which are also passion and reason, being so well commingled in Horatio that he is neither a pipe for fortune to play upon nor a slave of passion; this is part and parcel, apparently, of Horatio's power to suffer all and to suffer nothing; and Horatio is also

as just a man
As e'er his conversation coped withal.

In order to try further to illumine this pair of terms, I turn for a moment from *Hamlet* to *Troilus and Cressida*. A little later I shall try to offer something in the way of justifying my turning to this play. But I look now, without apology, to the scene in *Troilus* where Hector, Troilus, Helenus, and Paris discuss the whole matter of the cause and Tightness of the Trojan War. Shall they return Helen to the Greeks? And Hector begins the debate by saying that

modest doubt is call'd
The beacon of the wise, the tent that searches
To the bottom of the, worst.

Modest doubt is the beacon of the wise and tents into the depths, and Hector denies that it can be reasonable to decline to give up Helen. It is Troilus who replies: he passionately denies that the 'worth and honour' of a King can be weighed against 'fears and reasons'. What he calls 'honour' and 'greatness' are infinite; 'reasons' are but so many miserable counters. Helenus comes out on the side of Hector; and Troilus turns on him to say,

Nay, if we talk of reason,
Let's shut our gates and sleep: manhood and honour
Should have harehearts, would they but fat their thoughts
With this cramm'd reason: reason and respect
Make livers pale and lustihood deject,

where 'respect' means 'anxious consideration'.

Then, when Hector declares that Helen is not worth holding, and Troilus replies by asking

What is aught but as 'tis valued?

Hector in turn replies that

. . . value dwells not in particular will;
 It holds his estimate and dignity
 As well wherein 'tis precious of itself
 As in the prizer.

Value, that is to say, is not something arbitrarily placed by the individual or 'particular will' upon an object or act; it is something there to be discovered, and presumably by reason.

I cannot now follow in close sequence this remarkable debate; I quote again only Hector's words to Troilus which occur later in the scene:

... is your blood
 So madly hot that no discourse of reason,
 No fear of bad success in a bad cause,
 Can qualify the same?

and Troilus replies that the reasons of Hector and the ravings of Cassandra

Cannot distaste the goodness of a quarrel
 Which hath our several honours all engag'd
 To make it gracious.

But the purpose and issue of this debate is clear: reasons, discourse of reason, modest doubt, 'respect' are set over against honour, blood, dignity, glory; the one side proclaims reason and modest doubt, the other declares that these 'make livers pale and lustihood deject'. I see here the fundamental issue which also agitates Hamlet. Fortinbras and Troilus hold, in these matters, the same role: when honour's at the stake they act against all

considerations of reason and modest doubt. Hamlet does not do so; he cannot do so; and at the lowest estimate, his not doing so has one-quarter part of wisdom. He cannot forbear to place the check of reason and judgement upon passion, blood, and honour. He wants a just commingling of the two; the sheer mastery of himself by unreflecting blood will not serve. But no doubt

reason and respect
Makes livers pale and lustihood deject.

It is this which, I think, lies at the centre of the play; and with this great ethical issue is joined the questioning of last things of which I have spoken earlier.

5

I have looked to *Troilus and Cressida* for light on *Hamlet*. I look now briefly, beyond Shakespeare's own work, for further light. Bacon had certainly read Montaigne, and there is much that might be said on that subject. But it seems certain to me that Shakespeare also had read Montaigne before writing *Hamlet* and *Troilus*. I cannot now attempt to give chapter and verse; but the evidence that can be compiled is, it seems to me, decisive. It is not, however, necessary for my purpose to prove that this is so: I wish only to mention briefly those things in which Shakespeare in these plays manifests a mind deeply concerned with matters discursively treated by Montaigne.

There is of course Montaigne's scepticism. But it is not of this only that, recalling what I have just been

saying, I think now. Everybody knows that it has frequently been thought, and reasonably enough, that some lines in the soliloquy in Act III derive from an essay in the Third Book; in that essay Montaigne gives a loose version of some passages which occur in the *Apology of Socrates*; and, if we are at all right in thinking that Shakespeare read these pages, it is striking to reflect that here at least he encountered a version of a part of the *Apology*. I shall quote soon a few sentences from the *Apology*, not as in Montaigne's version, but in a close translation; I do so in order further to emphasize, what is my main thesis, that the play of *Hamlet* has for its soul and centre a passionate and deeply reflective concern with the problem of conduct; and if this is so, it is natural to bring together in our minds Shakespeare and Socrates. Socrates, we know, declared that he turned away from natural philosophy to concern himself with conduct; we have seen that Bacon wished to turn the energies of human inquiry back into natural philosophy; in *Hamlet* we see Shakespeare writing one of his greatest plays, after reading an essay by Montaigne in which Socrates is exhibited as the model and pattern of human wisdom.

You do not speak wisely ... if you think a man of any worth should weigh the risks of life against the risks of death. What he should consider is only whether what he does is right or wrong, and is the action of a good or a bad man. . . . For, my friends, to fear Death is only to think yourself wise when you are not; it is to think you know when in fact you do not know. For no one can be sure that Death is not the greatest of all benefits; but men fear it in the firm belief that it is the greatest of all evils. But is it

not the most contemptible kind of ignorance to think you know when you do not? . . . For to be dead is one of two things: either it is as good as being nothing, so that a dead man has no consciousness of anything; or it is, as people say, a transition and a moving of the soul's abode from here to another place.

Now if to be dead is to be unconscious and, as it were, a sleep in which dreams do not appear, how wonderful a benefit Death becomes! Let a man compare a night in which he sleeps without dreaming with other nights and days of his life. Then let him reflect carefully and declare how many of those days and nights he has passed to more advantage and more pleasantly than his night of dreamless sleep. I think that, whether he is a private citizen or the great Persian King himself, he would find that he could count them on one hand. Now if Death were a dreamless sleep, *I* certainly would count it a great gain: the whole of time would then be no longer than a night. But if, instead, Death is a change of abode from here to another place, and if it is true, as we are told, that all the dead are there, what greater boon can there be . . . ? For if a man on coming to the other world escapes from so-called judges and finds real judges . . . is his change of abode of no account? . . . But you, my judges, must be of good hope when you think of Death. Have in mind this one truth: that nothing evil can befall a good man in life or in death; and the Gods are never unmindful of him.

I have quoted these passages from the *Apology*, not as they are given in Montaigne, but in a close translation, because I venture to think we shall better understand Shakespeare's play by a reading of Plato than by indulging the naturalistic temper of our time and seeking therefore to see Shakespeare only as a professional

playwright, who dealt cleverly with intractable material or contrived merely to stretch out a play for the appointed time. Socrates spoke these words near to his death; Hamlet spoke his words with death, as he might well think, not far off. Socrates knew his line; he knew where he stood; and he was ready. Shakespeare exhibits Hamlet as a man seeing indeed the issues, and with his imagination complicated by centuries of Christian eschatology, but not knowing his line or where he stood; he was not ready. He could not keep his mind in a pious and cheerful agnosticism of what came after; and he could not do so because he swayed between the clamour of a traditional moral code which might be only the clamour of blood, passion, and revenge, and the calm demands of what might be true judgement and reason. What he should do was not clear to him, in the face of his dreadful situation; and not knowing this, he could not calmly face the prospect of a world to come. By Socratic standards he fell short and was lost; he was not enough of a philosopher, after all.

He falls short by the standards of Socrates; and he falls short by the standards of Montaigne, who holds up Socrates for a paragon of virtue and wisdom. The burden of much of Montaigne's writing is the folly of passion which masters conduct.

I know how to deal in publike charges without departing from my selfe. This sharpnesse and violence of desires hindreth more then steade the conduct of what we undertake, filling us with impatience to the events, either contrary or slow, and with bitternesse and jealousy towards those

with whom we negotiate. Wee never governe that thing well wherewith we are possessed and directed. . . . He that is besotted with this violent and tyrannicall intention doth necessarily declare much indiscretion and injustice. The violence of his desire transports him. . . . Philosophic wills us to banish choller in the punishment of offences; not to the end revenge should be more moderate, but contrary, more weighty and surely set on.... When my wil gives me to any party, it is not with so violent a bond that my understanding is thereby infected. . . . See why that man doth hazzard both his honour and life on the fortune of his rapier and dagger; let him tell you whence the cause of that contention ariseth: he cannot do so without blushing, so vaine and frivolous is the occasion.¹

And later, in the essay in which passages from the *Apology* are rendered, Montaigne illustrates from his own experience what he means when he says: 'I am a man that willingly commit my selfe unto fortune, and carelessly cast my selfe into her armes'; and then he concludes his essay by saying that 'ordinary judgements are exasperated into punishment by the horror of the crime; And that enmildens mee. The horror of the first murder makes me feare a second; And the uglinesse of one cruelty induceth me to detest all maner of imitation of it. To me, that am but a plaine fellow . . . may that concerne which was reported of Charillus . . . : "He must needs be good, since he is so to the wicked."' ² Montaigne says elsewhere that the two extremes of men are the philosophers who have attained to 'noble Stoical

¹ World's Classics edition₂ of Florio's translation, 1904-6, iii. pp. 293-306.
² Ibid., pp. 365-6.

impassibility', and the simple and, as he calls them, 'rurall men'; the middle region, he says, 'harboureth stormes';¹ and these storms are storms of intellectual doubt and speculation which are mingled with strong and violent emotions. Hamlet is a man having a sense of the high stoical impassibility; he beholds it lived by Horatio; and Horatio he wears in his heart's core. But he is also moved, and naturally, by the passions of disgust and revenge; what they say may be right; 'is't not perfect conscience to kill him with this arm?' He does not rise to the demands of philosophy; he cannot sink into passion; he inhabits a middle region where philosophy and passion, judgement and honour, reason and blood, annul each other and leave him, for all essential purposes, helpless and angry, passive and violent.

6

This I take to be Hamlet; and we see him in a world of distress which does not appear in the philosophy of his contemporary Bacon. Bacon enjoined natural philosophy and complete religious faith. It is hard to see how natural philosophy could have helped Hamlet; and he had failed to come by that other kind of philosophy which might rule his conduct. But are there signs that, in his troubles, he turned to faith?

The name of God is indeed sometimes on his lips; and once, in the closet scene with his mother, he tells her that what she had done

¹ World's Classics edition of Florio's translation, 1904-6, iii, p. 308.

As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words . . .

Now I do not think there are any grounds whatever for seeing Horatio as a Christian; he seems nearer to Stoicism; and it is natural to think that that just commingling of blood and judgement, the philosophy of right suffering, which animates Horatio and is so admired by Hamlet in him, is vaguely a Stoicism. Certainly, also, Hamlet exhibits no touch of piety or devotion; he does not turn, or show signs of turning, to supernatural power for light or strength. Once indeed, in the conversation with Horatio which immediately precedes the fencing, he quotes, or almost quotes, the Gospels: 'there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow'; he seems here to suggest that his fate is in the hand of a God who knows and loves him. But this comes late in the play; there is not a hint of this earlier; and besides, and even more important, the Hamlet who speaks in these lines is a defeated Hamlet who has given up the struggle. All's ill indeed about his heart; but we are clearly given to understand that he is resigned to death and foresees it coming soon. This is not the Hamlet who had earlier struggled with his conscience and urged himself, now with shame, now with exasperation, into some line of action. Then, as he was then, we must see him as fundamentally secular, and not inclined to faith and to belief that he might find succour in religion. The struggles of Hamlet within himself and with his conscience were the struggles of the secular soul, reared indeed in

'sweet religion' but looking to it now not at all for help and deliverance. This is, I think, a fact of interest to us. In the bedroom scene Hamlet says to his mother:

Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker.

Hamlet himself may or may not have had something to repent; some may think his treatment of Ophelia, however much we may understand his terrible exasperation, was of this kind; but he certainly had good reason to avoid what was to come. However this may be, Hamlet seems to enjoin religion on others; there is no sign that he sought it in his own troubles.

Still, we also observe that Christianity is not excluded from the play. Claudius turns, in desperation, to the hope of divine pardon and absolution. I believe that not enough attention—or indeed, weight—is given to this remarkable soliloquy of Claudius. Claudius is a murderer of his brother and a seducer of his brother's wife. His guilt is finally disclosed. Then, in his desperation and alone, not now maintaining a restrained and clever imposture, but alone, he speaks the lines:

Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven . . .

Coleridge truly remarked about this speech that it 'marks the difference between crime and guilt of habit' Claudius's enormous wickedness is the source and beginning of all the trouble which the play sets forth. But he, too, has a conscience; and conscience makes

cowards of us all. Claudius has no illusions about the issue that confronts him. He must either go on in crime or, for expiation and forgiveness, give up his crown, his own ambition, and his queen. Which shall it be? He knows that, as Coleridge again says, 'not what you have done, but what you are, must determine'. Soon Hamlet will come by. Both of them are at the turning-point; both of them will either cease from their divided wills or be carried helplessly by time and circumstance to their disastrous ends. Hamlet has declared that conscience makes a coward of him; and he will soon prove it to the uttermost when he excuses himself from killing Claudius then. But Claudius, too, in his way, is conscience's coward. He at least knows what is required of him. Here he is different from Hamlet. If they are both conscience's cowards, there is also a difference: Hamlet does not know what is required of him; but Claudius cannot rise to what his conscience clearly requires. Out of these, their respective situations, both will shuffle. 'There, is no shuffling', says Claudius; but he kneels to his prayers with a weak 'All may be well': it is a faint hope and not a resolve. Then Hamlet, as Claudius prays, does *his* shuffling; he utters a resolve indeed, to kill him when he is drunk, asleep, or in his rage; but we know there is nothing in it. And Claudius, rising, says only what we expected: 'words without thoughts never to Heaven go'. Could there be a clearer comment on Hamlet's talk of sending the soul of Claudius to Heaven as he prays?

My point now is chiefly that here, in this speech of

Claudius, we see the promptings of religion. Shakespeare does not exclude Christianity from the play and from the soul of Claudius; nowhere do we see it touching or inclining the soul of Hamlet. Hamlet seems to be entirely without the faith which Bacon enjoined.

7

If I have been at all right in my interpretation of Shakespeare's intention in his handling of the Hamlet story, one thing we might fairly expect: that in attempting so bold and masterful a project he would encounter one quite peculiarly great difficulty. He was using an old, crude, and violent story; he was turning it to a majestic usage, controlling and amending it, so far as he could, to convey the tragedy of a man caught in ethical and metaphysical uncertainties. How could he hope to convey, beyond question and doubt, the fundamental issues which were involved? He makes of Horatio a philosopher who has succeeded in life where Hamlet has failed. Might we not have expected that Horatio and Hamlet would be shown in colloquy and debate, and that Hamlet might have confided to Horatio, of all people, the source and character of his disquietude and dismay? We might indeed. But, in fact, such a scene we have in *Troilus and Cressida*, where the Trojans talk after the fashion I outlined earlier; and it is because no such debate occurs in *Hamlet* that I thought it reasonable to turn to that scene, in a play written only a little later. But there is no such thing in *Hamlet*. It may well be that the play was already too

long; had Shakespeare resorted to such debate the play would certainly have gone beyond bounds; his difficulty, we may be sure, was to keep the play short enough, not to make it long enough. He resorted therefore to making Horatio the image and model of philosophy, but also to keeping him strangely in the background. It was the soliloquies that had chiefly to bear the burden; but these again he would need to handle carefully and variously; a philosopher coming on and holding philosophical dialogue with himself from time to time could easily ruin the play. Of the four great soliloquies occurring in turn in the first four Acts (I use the Act-division for convenience), the first comes hard upon the opening Court-scene; it is in every way dramatic, and essential in the exposition. The second, coming at the end of the next Act, is inspired and aided by the previous acting of the players: it shows Hamlet, as I said earlier, violent in exasperation, impatient with himself, and at once promising action; it, too, is entirely dramatic. The fourth and last also is aided by a contrast, this time with Fortinbras; and again Hamlet is violent, and the violence of his feeling could hold the stage; at least it had a fair chance of doing so, even if the speech was probably cut in acting. But the third is much the least dramatic in any obvious sense; it reacts to or from no preceding scene, and Hamlet is quiet and subdued; he is responding to no immediate stimulus; his talk is wholly generalized and reflective; here is Hamlet as detached as he has it in him to be. Shakespeare risked only one such soliloquy, and a lot had to be got over; as I

have said, he placed it carefully and in the crucial place when the tension of the play is at last mounting; and there, in the midst of this mounting tension, he gives us a quiet Hamlet, conversing with himself and speaking, if what I have said has any truth, what everybody has always judged to be the heart of the play. Of course I do not wish to exaggerate the role of the soliloquies, or to reduce Hamlet to a string of monologues. But the soliloquies had to carry a heavy burden, the secret, passionate and intellectual Hamlet; and if they could not make all clear, we need not be surprised. It is true enough that Shakespeare was writing, after all, a play. If we remember this, we may well be amazed that he conveyed, as it seems to me, so clearly, his momentous and profound intention.

III

POETIC EXPERIMENT

1

HAMLET is one of the first plays of Shakespeare's tragic period if we take 1600 as marking its beginning. The tender and joyful secularity of much of his earlier writing has ended; there are difficult plays now: *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*; and of these plays *Hamlet* is the greatest: it has enthralled generations of readers and spectators. Now *Hamlet*, I ventured to say, is an image of modernity, of the soul without clear belief losing its way, and bringing itself and others to great distress and finally to disaster.

I have now to speak of the tragedies proper, or rather of *King Lear*. *Hamlet* is the greatest of its group; *King Lear* is the greatest of *its* group; and the group to which *King Lear* belongs is different, in ways I do not propose to speak of in a generalizing fashion, from those of the *Hamlet* group. I shall speak only of some of the differences between *Hamlet* and *King Lear*; and they are not, I think, hard to discover.

2

The chief difference between *Hamlet* and *King Lear* is, I think, this. In *Hamlet* we see, predominantly, a mind faltering before the wickedness of men and women and before the difficulties of conduct and all its huge

implications. In *King Lear* we see, chiefly, the wickedness itself. It is true enough that Lear's own mind does more than falter: it collapses. Still, I say that it is not chiefly the mind of Lear we observe and study, but the world's savagery as it overwhelms it. In *Hamlet* we see the weakened mind; in *King Lear* we see the world in its power breaking a mind. It is to be observed that in *Hamlet* we see little enough wickedness. Claudius is a hideous, if distressed, criminal. But he has committed his dreadful crime before the action of the play; and if he is subtle in his continuing villainy, he is capable, I think we cannot deny it, of forbearance, love even, and the cry for pity. He too delays and holds off; he is not, as we see him in the play, quick to violence; he has to be driven hard, in the course of the action, before he will take arms against *his* troubles. Gertrude is feeble enough, but hardly plainly evil; Ophelia is pathetic; Laertes passionate, ebullient, and foolish. But if in *Hamlet* we see little enough of the fierce working of human evil, we see enough of it in *King Lear*. Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, Oswald we see in their lusts of cruelty and anger. Therefore we can say that *Hamlet* shows us the reception of an ascertained evil by a mind; *King Lear* shows us the evil, continuing and terrible, in its actual and physical onset upon a mind. Hamlet's is a soul in which wickedness is imaged with all its consequences for thought and feeling; Lear's is a soul which will not receive that image. It rejects it, incredulously; but the wickedness falls upon it, not as an image, but as a succession of shattering blows.

This difference between the two plays is shown in other ways. It is shown in a comparison of Hamlet and Lear as men. Hamlet is young, thoughtful, philosophical, disposed to reflection; Lear is old, unreflective, rash, extrovert. Hamlet is highly sensitive; Lear is crass. Hamlet, one might have expected, had a mind sufficiently trained and philosophical to bear the ills of life; in fact, he was not philosophical enough. But we do not expect, we have no reason to expect, that Lear can withstand the onslaught of suffering; we know that he will be helpless, and he is. Or again, Hamlet reflects much, but hardly knows what to do; Lear knows, or thinks he knows, what to do, and without a moment's reflection. The one yields a tragedy, I will not say, of excessive reflection, but of abundant reflection which has issued in no settled principles of practice or belief; the other gives us a tragedy of unreflective desire, noble and ignoble.

But the difference between the two men is shown also when we consider their stories. Hamlet remains, in spite of much that he does, passive; he is borne along on a stream of events; he does not, eventually, change; and disaster overtakes him. Towards the end of the play, in the scene with Horatio before the duelling, he seems indeed to have come to a calm of mind; but it is only a calm of defence, which helps him to accept what he has not had the strength of mind to prevent. He remains, at bottom, the same all through; there is little development in him; he does not acquire efficacy; he becomes increasingly a 'story' to be told in a 'harsh world'.

But with Lear it is different. His world is harsh enough; but at the end he is not, to himself or anyone else, a sad 'story'. We see Lear at the end with clear eyes; but we are also looking at the dead Cordelia. But Lear has changed much before he comes to this point. He has learnt, if you will, lessons which Hamlet, with all that his philosophy dreamed on, did not learn. Hamlet's very intellectuality keeps him at a certain remove from experience; Lear's thoughtlessness plunges him into it. Hamlet plays, or half-plays, at being mad; and he gets little or nothing out of it. Lear becomes mad in all truth; but he comes out of his madness a changed man. Hamlet will exclaim, in his brilliant way, 'O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a King of infinite space'; but the time comes when Lear says:

Come, let's away to prison;

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage . . .

Hamlet was talking brilliantly; Lear is saying something which he feels with profound sincerity.

I put the same point in another form. Hamlet's mind is naturally thoughtful, speculative, imaginative. We are constantly made aware of the play of his great mind; the other characters we see for the bigger part *as affecting him* in the range and subtlety of his emotion and thought. Even Horatio remains a curiously shadowy and undefined figure; he appears comparatively little, does little, speaks little; it is what Hamlet feels about him that is at the centre. The other characters mostly inhabit life at far lower levels; a Laertes, Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, are

simple people unable to reach up to Hamlet or to begin to understand him. Hamlet is everywhere isolated, alone in his thought; and his world of despair, doubt, speculation, is something of which the others have no sense. His problems, his questions, are his; he is encircled away from the common humanity, even of a Court. He out-tops its knowledge and ascent to him is out of the question; he is a rare and estranged spirit. But Lear is an ordinary enough fellow; he is no intellectual; he is at the level of the other characters in all essentials, if we exclude Cordelia and Edgar; he is in their world. And upon all of them the great problem of life presses; the last and metaphysical question is not only Lear's, with his

Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?

It is Kent's with his

It is the stars,

The stars above us, govern our conditions . . . ;

and Gloucester's, with his

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;

They kill us for their sport. . . ;

and Edgar's, with his

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours

Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee;

and Albany's

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits

Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,

It will come,

Humanity must perforce prey on itself

Like monsters of the deep.

Are there Gods, and are they just? This and other questions had pressed upon Hamlet but upon him only; it presses upon many in *King Lear* whose minds confront the mystery of the world. But again in *Hamlet* we see a mind putting high ethical and metaphysical questions; but *King Lear* is a question, or rather a number of questions; and one of the questions is

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life
And thou no breath at all?

The question is asked about Cordelia. It was not asked about Ophelia. Ophelia dies in, so to speak, a not unpleasing poetical description; the impact of her death is softened to us. The recent film of *Hamlet* distressed us, I think, in its delineation of the death of Ophelia; but was it so far, in the falsity we felt in it, from the Queen's speech which describes it in the play? And then, later, Ophelia is the topic of a lot of ranting over her grave. But Cordelia is carried on, dead, warm from her hanging; there is here no fine gauze of poetry to beautify her in her death. Thou art the thing itself.'

Finally, it is to be noticed, we can hardly not notice, that when the struggle in *Lear* is over and the true sense of life becomes clear in him, he asks forgiveness of Cordelia. He had felt shame at seeing her again, a sovereign shame, Kent says: and later Lear says he'll kneel down and ask of her forgiveness. I cannot forbear to remark that we see here some measure of the greater spiritual profundity of *King Lear* when we compare it with *Hamlet*. It is, I think, clear that Lear asks for forgiveness and that Hamlet, by contrast, seeks to excuse himself. I confess

that Hamlet's speech to Laertes at the outset of the fencing scene always strikes me as more than faintly disagreeable. His speeches as he had stood in Ophelia's grave jar us keenly, I think; it may have been that forty thousand brothers with all their quantity of love could not make up the sum of Hamlet's love for Ophelia; *we*, no doubt, may fairly find excuses for Hamlet's treatment of her; but in fact he had hardly *shown* her the love of one brother, to say nothing of forty thousand. And when now he tells Laertes,

What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet;
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away . . .
Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it,

I think it difficult not to reflect that Hamlet is getting away with it very lightly indeed. Later, when Laertes is dying and asks Hamlet for forgiveness—the word 'forgiveness' is on Laertes' lips, not on Hamlet's—he declares that his and his father's death come not upon Hamlet. Hamlet is again let off lightly; and nothing is said, at this stage, about Ophelia.

In saying this, I am not, I trust, so foolish as to want to try to score off Shakespeare. We may say, but on reflection are not likely to persist in saying, that here at least Shakespeare's sense of moral values, ordinarily so keen and delicate, deserts him; or if we say so, we shall remember that Shakespeare was contriving a play with a very unusual hero. Hamlet holds our sympathy well

enough until the play-scene; Shakespeare's difficulty was to hold our sympathy for him in these later stages of the play where it becomes clear that Hamlet is to show little enough heroism. The escape from the ship is an aid, but hardly enough; in the major issue of the play Hamlet is not heroic, and to keep him built up enough as a tragic hero was not easy; it must have been one of Shakespeare's most difficult tasks. We shall not therefore grudge him his skill in building up the legend of the sweet prince as the play moves to its end; and after all, Hamlet himself, because of things standing thus unknown to others in the play, had to help to contrive the image of the wounded name and the sad story in a harsh world. Besides, on further reflection, we shall, if we are wise, not be censorious about Hamlet's conduct; his distraction was genuine, even if he was hardly mad.

Still, we may fairly remark that Hamlet was treated more gently than Lear; Lear's suffering, when all is said and done, was far greater than Hamlet's. We may allow that Lear was more the originator of his troubles than Hamlet of his; but it remains true, and beyond question, I think, that Lear evokes from us more pity than Hamlet. Hamlet has, at the end of the play, to win our pity by more than a touch of self-pity; Lear wins our pity because he has gone through a fire which has purged him of what, earlier in the play, had indeed been a disposition to feel pity for himself. Hamlet excuses himself, and we are willing enough for him to do so; Lear only asks to be forgiven.

It is, I think, in some such way or ways, that we see the difference between *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. *Hamlet* explores a mind arrested in dubiety before the awful problem of life; *King Lear* explores life itself. In *Hamlet* life itself is shifted off into some distance; it is misted o'er with the pale cast of thought; it loses its sting, its demand, its peremptoriness; it is arrested as far as possible in order to give play to the arrest in Hamlet's mind. But in *King Lear* it is not so. Shakespeare has turned from the torturing image to the masterful, brutal reality; and what, when he does so, does he chiefly see, and what is its prevailing pattern?

3

I wish now to refer to the well-known statement by Bacon on the subject of poetry in *The Advancement of Learning* (ll. iv. 2). '. . . Because', says Bacon, 'true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence'; and therefore poetry 'was ever thought to have some participation of divinenees, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things'. These famous words naturally send our minds forward to similar observations of Johnson and to the strictures he passed on Shakespeare in this point of view.

Now in the year in which *The Advancement* was

published, *King Lear* was being written; and *King Lear* clearly shows Bacon's statement for untrue. No one will say of *King Lear* that it submits 'the shows of things to the desires of the mind'; this is precisely what it does not do; and if we want a witness we have only to call up Dr. Johnson. But if *King Lear* does not do what a neo-classical theory of poetry requires, what does it do, and what is its justification?

The answer is that it represents a great labour of knowledge: not indeed of understanding but of perception. Bacon requires of us a submissive faith, a strenuous natural philosophy, and a belief that poetry satisfies the desires of the mind to which reality is submitted. Shakespeare has no blind faith; he does not exhibit natural philosophy for important; and he writes poetry which does not satisfy the desires of the mind but offends them instead. We ordinarily believe that in *King Lear* Shakespeare is doing something very important; and this important thing is something for which Bacon makes no allowance in his scheme of knowledge and art. Now what is at stake here is whether or not we allow the imagination as a form of genuine knowledge. I am aware that I am here nearing very large matters which embrace nothing less than the structure of human knowledge. But we cannot, I take it, if we are committed to believing that literature is important, fail to argue that poetry is not chiefly an affair either of the intellect or of the emotions; we must say that it issues from a peculiar labour of knowing; and we must declare that the merits of any literary work belong to it as an act of knowledge.

A play such as *King Lear* exhibits human life as it is known by its author; our judgement on it is necessarily a judgement on its veracity, on its rendering of the features of things. It is not a matter of submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; it is a matter of seeing things as they really are; and if things are not conveyed as they really are by the poet, the play, whatever else it may be, is a bad play. Now we all believe no doubt that *King Lear* is one of the greatest works of literary art, if not the greatest, ever composed; its creator is with Homer and Dante: a trinity of the greatest writers; and Shakespeare, we say, is the greatest writer our modern civilization has had. Now if we all think so, Shakespeare must, or so it seems to me, show things more as they really are than all other modern writers. Here, we say, life is more fully rendered than in any other modern works; here, we say, the secular imagination of modern Europe has reached the top of its bent. We therefore take *King Lear*, to say the least, seriously, as a contribution to human knowledge; and this in spite of the fact that it is not an expression of faith, nor a work of metaphysic, nor a piece of natural philosophy. Besides, it does not set out to please our desires or seek to submit the shows of things to them; it has nothing to do with what we happen to want; it is a genuine exploration of experience and the issue of a labour of knowledge. Now Bacon declares that reason, unlike imagination, buckles and bows the mind unto the nature of things; but we declare that Shakespeare's imagination in *King Lear* also buckles and bows the mind

unto the nature of things, and that he is certainly not titillating agreeable or other emotions. And if this is so, we need to acknowledge that the imagination is a part of the life of reason, and that it may proceed with all the impersonality, the bleak labour of discovery, which animates the scientist or the philosopher; it has its own rational life; and the only desire which masters it is the desire, shared by saint, philosopher, and scientist, to see things as they really are.

Now because Shakespeare was a poet and not a philosopher, the question is not, What did he believe or declare? but What did he see and show? He was not explicating and theorizing, but merely labouring to see more clearly and to show what he saw. And here, we have to judge Shakespeare's greatest play with its inevitable claim to be a just rendering of mortal life, when life is seen not through the eyes of faith or of the intellect, but merely through the eyes of the most powerful secular imagination the world has yet known. Shakespeare's mind had no prepossessions; his imagination was pure and disinterested; and I do not know therefore that there can be any historical labour more important for us than to try to raise our minds to the height, not of his great argument in *King Lear*, for he had none; but to the height of his bleak and merely exploratory vision.

4

It is important to take account of where *King Lear* falls in the body of Shakespeare's writings. I shall say a word about *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* in a moment.

But if *Hamlet* is what I have said, we observe in it the moment of doubt, uncertainty, and arrest. In it Shakespeare exhibits an intellectual man in his peculiar distresses and all that went with them; it is something an aspect of which we see in Montaigne and of which we see an aspect in Descartes. We must remember, as I said, that it was Shakespeare who first made Hamlet a member of a university, and that the play was performed before the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Here, in the figure of Hamlet, much of the intellectual doubt of the Renaissance is embodied. But Montaigne resolved his problems by being a Catholic; and Descartes who, a few years after Shakespeare died, was to set about resolving his doubt, did so by the methods of philosophy, or so he believed. But how is the imagination which retains its autonomy to proceed? Its way cannot be the way of faith, nor the way of philosophy; it has to remain itself; and doing so, it can only advance by extending and sharpening its vision. The mind may not stay in its irresolution, perplexity, and dismay; it also may not, by any summary act, remove them. There is only one thing to do: to look again, but not now at the distressed mind but at the world which distresses it. In *Hamlet* we see the world in the glass of the mind; in *King Lear* we see the mind, or seek to see it, in the glass of the world.

It may be said that I am making a rash assumption, namely, that Shakespeare imaged himself in the person and mind of Hamlet. But in fact I do not do this; for the creator transcends the created. But I add that I cannot forbear to believe that the writing of *Hamlet* was an

event, and one of great importance, in the growth of Shakespeare's mind; I do not see how anyone can doubt this; Shakespeare's plays were, after all, works of art and not mechanical contrivances. The writing of *Hamlet* was an extension of his knowledge of human life and, I do not doubt, of himself; nor do I doubt that its writing was an enablement of his writing of the later tragedies. It is true that all we quite certainly have is the plays; but not to see them related together, as part of the history of their author's mind, seems to me quite impossible.

In *King Lear*, then, Shakespeare's eyes turn to behold more fully what had caused Hamlet's dismay and reluctance, to see more clearly than Hamlet had seen or been able to see; and if this is so, we might expect that now his imagination, keeping its autonomy indeed, should yet seek such compromise with the intelligence as its sovereignty could rightly suffer. Shakespeare has turned from Hamlet's mind to see more clearly, in other plays as well, but for our purposes chiefly in *King Lear*, what it was before which Hamlet had stumbled. The great question of *Hamlet*,

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . .
Or to take arms . . . ?

will also be the great question which gives purpose to the play of *King Lear*. But it will be answered, if at all, not by speculation and thinking precisely on the event, but by a labour of perception. Shakespeare turns, with a question which is not upon his lips but in his eyes; and his eyes, and not his or Hamlet's thought, must be the

instruments of discovery. He will not resolve, but behold. But, in what manner is possible to perception which will not suffer itself to be over-intellectualized, he must yet probe and test; he must abstract and classify and separate out; he must simplify in something of the manner of an experimenter; he must deal drastically with his material; he must play boldly, in violence; he must put things to the encounter and commit himself to the extreme; he must not squint at his object, mitigate, and soften down. There is much here that could be said on the infinitely delicate compromises and adjustments to which the imagination and the intelligence may come; and it would of course be absurd to suggest that the one can ever operate without the other, or that they are in their essences set over against each other. I am suggesting only that when Shakespeare has come to the phase in his writing of which I am now speaking, and which is most clearly illustrated in *King Lear*, a new balance of power between them is effected and a subtle reaccommodation; and in this balance and accommodation the intelligence is given more play than formerly. But it is also firmly held and its exercise finely controlled and obscured; it is a free ally, but is also jealously watched. For Shakespeare has a purpose now; he is consciously engaged in a task of imaginative discovery; and the intelligence must yield every possible tittle of support which does not also, in the sum, threaten the imagination's integrity. Like the scientist or the philosopher he has an aim; he also, and pre-eminently, remains an artist; he also becomes, and hereby, a still greater artist.

He will push the powers of art to their last encounter; and he will use, in it, a dangerous support. The material, which is the material of life in its extremes, will be intractable enough; he will also risk an uneasy and difficult alliance.

What I mean in speaking in this way will, I trust, become clearer when I say how this readjustment and alliance shows itself in *King Lear*. It shows itself in what I shall call for the present a form of allegory; but in an allegorizing which is cunningly obscured and controlled, so that we hardly know it for what it is. The old Morality is not dead; it survives into Shakespeare's greatest work to become a powerful instrument of discovery. I will not try to estimate its scope and play in Shakespeare's earlier work; but it seems to emerge unmistakably in *Airs Well* and then in *Measure for Measure*; and here, in these two plays, we are even uncomfortably aware of it; or perhaps better, we feel it must be there in order to give the plays a coherence which, in a naturalistic point of view, they do not possess; but if we turn to find it, it escapes us. There is here in these plays little of a solution of the problem of how to accommodate allegory to the requirements of naturalism; and neither as naturalistic nor as allegorical pieces do they come near to satisfying us. And yet Shakespeare was moving forward; in these two plays he is approaching his greatest period; he has not acquired the new reaccommodation of imagination to intelligence, of creation to purpose, of naturalism to allegory, which he must have if he is to fulfil the highest requirements which can be placed upon the art of

literature; but he is experimenting and learning; and soon the solution is reached: we are at the phase where *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* come quickly.

My business is with *King Lear*. But I cannot forbear to speak for a moment at large about these three plays. I call attention to the presence in all of them of a kind of play of good against evil which is, I will not say wholly new because we have to remember *Airs Well* and *Measure for Measure*, still, in the main, a new feature of his writing: I mean, the appearance now of figures of extreme evil or figures of extreme good or of both. There is a concern now with pure and unmitigated evil; and over against this there is spiritual beauty of such magnitude and proportion as we have not encountered before in the plays. I remarked earlier that Shakespeare must in these plays 'commit himself to the Extreme'; the words are a quotation from some notes of Keats on *Paradise Lost* and Keats says that had not Milton been able to desert 'poetical Luxury' and so 'commit himself to the Extreme', he could never have risen to the creation of Satan. There was working in Milton, said Keats, 'that same sort of thing as operates in the great world to the end of a Prophecy's being accomplished'; and he adds, 'Therefore he devoted himself rather to the ardours than the pleasures of Song'. So it was with Shakespeare; he is now engaged in what I can only call a poetical experimentation with life by the creation of extreme simplicities of both good and evil. This he has to carry on now, and succeeds in carrying on; but he has to do so in a spirit of temporization with the requirements of representational

drama. I am not concerned to argue that something of the tradition of the morality play lived on in Shakespeare alone of the playwrights of the time; I remark only that there came a time in Shakespeare's life when he falls back on it after writing many plays in which he had felt and shown less need of it. I add that he comes to employ it extensively now only under the compulsion of a personal need and as a means of experiment and discovery; and that the tradition of the Morality and of allegory was not so dead as not to be able to give aid to what he now sought to do. Only, it will be active in his writing as a hidden method personal to his needs; it will be subtly renewed, incorporated, and controlled in plays which belong naturally enough to Jacobean England.

The first of the group of plays in which *King Lear* occurs is *Othello*; and in *Othello* there is Iago, who is sheerly evil. There has been much discussion of Iago and many attempts to explain him. The point, as I take it, about Iago is that there is no explaining him; Shakespeare removed the obvious motive for Iago's conduct which was in the source-book; Iago is what Hamlet called the 'canker of our mortal nature'; he is the pride of man; and the evil which he is, seeks only to seize and overcome the place where Othello must either live or bear no life. He is the inexplicable but indisputable evil which is in our mortal nature; and it is Iago, and nothing less than Iago, that Shakespeare's plays have now, and unceasingly, to take account of. There is no going back now. By removing any obvious motive for Iago's conduct,

Shakespeare has so far approached, by allegory, a metaphysical, but no less poetical, inspection of human life; by conducting a drastic process of abstraction, he has confronted himself and us with the major and brute fact of evil: he has shown us evil itself. Like a scientist he has simplified, for the sake of experiment; like a philosopher he is confronted, willy-nilly, with high metaphysical issues from which he cannot now withdraw; the issue is joined; but he is still, and above all, a poet. He is a scientist experimenting by and through his creation; he is a philosopher speculating in terms of human beings of his own making; but he is nowhere any less the poet. Some of these creations, these human beings of his, stand indeed at the very limits of the human; they are of a dazzling purity either of good or of evil; they reach beyond flesh and blood to brilliant spiritual significances, abstractions, and principles; they exhibit in their action a metaphysical combat of cosmic powers. And yet, in this metaphysical action, they are no mere ballet of bloodless categories, but bear about them the warm and breathing beauty of the flesh.

5

In the light of what I have just said and for a conclusion before going on to speak of *King Lear*, I must recoil upon myself and my use of the word 'allegory' in speaking of this phase of Shakespeare's writing. I have tried indeed to soften it down in my employment of it, and to suggest that in these plays it is so obscure or employed with such care as not to interfere with Shake-

spare's great gifts in the creation of highly individual character. But the fact is that it is better not to use the word at all; for so long as we use the word and intend a serious and accurate use of it, we imply a certain dichotomy between intellect and imagination; but that such a dichotomy exists in these plays I have been at some pains to deny. For where there is allegory, there is an explicit conceptual scheme accompanying and explaining what is exhibited in story; and there is certainly no such scheme anywhere explicit here. What we have, or so it seems to me, in these great tragedies, is a state of affairs in which any conceptual schemes, any mere significances, never quite break out from the presented situations; they are strictly implicit; they are held, if only barely, in solution; and they are not precipitated in our apprehension of the plays. That is to say, the state of affairs is strictly one of symbolism, not of allegory; one of 'involvement', not of explication. There is indeed a certain tension between what is imaginative and what is intellectual; but the tension never comes to a break; it never snaps the mind into two and concurrent apprehensions. We are never merely concerned with meanings. What is exhibited is charged with meaning; but it does not *carry* it. Now this state of affairs, which is not one of allegory proper, is yet one in which intellectual formulation is nearly breaking out from the imaginative unity of the play; the imagination only just succeeds in keeping its supremacy; the ally pressed into service is all but in revolt, but is always just held; and it is in works like *Othello* and *King Lear* where there is an almost

intolerable tension of this kind, and where the artistic consciousness comes near to breaking and to losing its autonomy, that we are aware of the very highest artistic power; it is precisely then that imaginative power needs to be strongest. I only ask therefore that in what follows this may be remembered; we are dealing here with an adjustment so delicate and walk so fine an edge, that words, which are better instruments of analysis than synthesis, are apt to be poor instruments in discussions of this kind'

In order to illustrate the point I have been trying to make, I have referred briefly to *Othello* and there only to Iago; and it would be agreeable to speak, at greater length, of it and of *Macbeth*. But I have enough to do in speaking of *King Lear*; *King Lear* will provide more than enough matter for my purposes: it illustrates, more clearly than the other tragedies, what I have in mind, as I shall try to show at a later stage.

6

Before completing my comparison of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, I wish to emphasize a matter to which so far I have referred only in passing. I have taken it as certain that Shakespeare's imagination in these plays was a secular imagination; and here, in *King Lear*, we see the place where Shakespeare's secular imagination puts itself, without any illusion, under the greatest possible strain. In earlier compositions Shakespeare's secularity had a full and comparatively easy play; but the time came, and was bound to come, when it would be put hardly to

the test. It came to work only in great labour and difficulty; it came to be called to great undertakings; and there was bound to be stumbling and vacillation. Suddenly, after *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* comes *Hamlet*; and then, after what we now call 'the dark comedies', come the tragedies of which *King Lear* is the chief. After *Hamlet* Shakespeare pushes on, trusting to his imagination as an agency of truth; and he will not at all abate his imagination's secularity. Shakespeare is precisely not a religious dramatist; he is committed to being loyal to his art; he must not make any facile surrender to faith; he will not feign 'the successes and issues of actions more just', as Bacon said, 'in retribution, and more according to revealed providence'; his job is to discover and see and show; and what he discovers and sees he will bring home to us as truth which does not stand upon external testimony but is carried alive into the heart. In *King Lear*, more than anywhere else, his imagination takes the greatest strain: Lear will be locked out in the storm, Gloucester blinded, the Fool forgotten, Cordelia hanged from a beam: poetry will not here come between us and the object.

We have to remember, no doubt, that the renaissance drama of England is a treatment of human life by a spirit of secular humanism; it obviously is not, in any considerable extent, a religious treatment. Early in its greatest days Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* indeed accommodates the spirit of his play to Christianity; but *Doctor Faustus* is not, I think we would agree, a religious play; and in few other places does anything approaching a

religious or Christian ethos manifest itself in renaissance drama: renaissance drama was, by and large, created and sustained by men whose imaginations, as shown in their writings at least, were free of any religious prepossessions. Drama had in all truth moved out of the Church; it had undertaken its own exploration of human life which owed little, in its spirit, to the Church's teaching. I am aware that there is a problem and a difficulty here. We cannot fail to ask why so notable an effort of the imagination as these dramatists put forth seems to be so removed from Christianity. It is true, no doubt, that their moral values could not have been what they were, had they not been reared in a Christian country; still, I think it is true to say that a clearly religious and Christian sensibility rarely appears; and it is a question whether strong puritan feeling or the censorship can explain it. I do not myself think that they can; and there is here a large and difficult problem which embraces the whole character of the Renaissance. But however that may be, on the evidence of the plays themselves, and of these only we can speak confidently, these men clearly did not think as Christians. In this sense their imaginations were free, subject only to a not fierce censorship. Bacon's imagination was free to contemplate the coming to a mastery of the physical world, and his Christianity was not to interfere with this new investigation; what Christianity the renaissance dramatists possessed did not seem, by and large, to have interfered with their investigation of human nature.

When we look especially at Shakespeare, all this

remains, I think, true; and I have said that in *King Lear* his secular imagination is at its strongest and most determined. How determined it was, we can see if we look at the old play of *King Leir*. Here, for once, is a play, lately acted, as the 1605 Quarto declares, the tone of which is unmistakably one of Christian piety. Leir's dead Qjueen is 'possest of heavenly joys'; Cordelia has a Christian sanctity; Leir himself acknowledges that he has offended against the majesty of God; and the blessing which he finally gives to Cordelia is

The blessing, which the God of *Abraham* gaue
Vnto the trybe of *Juda*.

Now this biblical and Christian ethos is a new thing in the history of the story of Lear; it is not to be found in any of the earlier versions.

That Shakespeare knew this earlier play there can, I think, be no doubt whatever. Here, at least, I must take it for granted. What I wish to emphasize is that Shakespeare, in devising his version of the story, carefully declined to give it anything approaching a Christian setting: he puts the story back, where it had always earlier belonged, in a remote Celtic past; and the gods of the play become Apollo and Jupiter. I am not now concerned to argue, what I think would be extravagant, that there is nowhere in the play implicit Christian feeling; what seems certain is that it was Shakespeare's fully conscious decision not to give to the story any fraction of a Christian context. The play's action is terrible in all conscience; but there is no crumb of Christian com-

fort in it. When all allowance has been made for censorship, which seems in any case to have been on the lookout only for political effrontery and profanity, Shakespeare's intention seems clear. In a play as recent as *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare had put into Isabella's mouth the words,

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;
And He that might the vantage best have took,
Found out the remedy;

in *King Lear* there is nothing like this; Shakespeare had ruled out the chance of any one of his characters talking after this fashion. Now this, I think, we have need to bear in mind.

7

I wish now to make an approach to *King Lear* by way, once more, of comparison with *Hamlet*.

There is a feature of Lear's personality which has always impressed me and which I cannot fail to feel is at the centre of Shakespeare's intention in this play. It is the sense, which Lear frequently conveys, that the source of his children's evil is in himself. This thought, which on occasion he pronounces clearly enough, he yet holds uncertainly; he falls away from it; and he falls away from it into violent expostulation and anger. Before speaking further of this, I give these quotations in illustration.

In the course of the great scene where Lear and Kent arrive at Gloucester's castle to find Kent in the stocks, Lear, having spoken tenderly to Goneril, goes on:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
 Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
 Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
 A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,
 In my corrupted blood.

And then he goes on, now tenderly, with
 But I'll not chide thee;
 Let shame come when it will . . .
 I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot . . .

Again, in the storm on the Heath he declares that it is a judicious punishment that discarded fathers should come to this. 'Twas this flesh begot those pelican daughters/ Now this sense of guilt, sometimes clearly stated but then also forgotten, is an important power in the distress and conflict of Lear's mind; and it is something which, so long as it lasts, profoundly affects his attitude to Goneril and Regan. As I suggested in giving my first quotation, it mitigates his strong anger and causes him to desist from judgement:

 But I'll not chide thee . . .
 I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
 Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove.

This forbearance, or at least this wish to forbear, is something we must take account of; along with his violent anger and the still more violent curses he invokes upon his daughters, there goes a vague enough feeling of guilt and a sense, vague enough also, of a moral life and quality which he ought himself to come by. It is easy enough, and no doubt natural enough, to call Lear selfish, impulsive, and crass; but this is not the whole

truth about him; and Shakespeare makes clear that it is not. It is easy enough to say that when Lear speaks his words excusing Cornwall, on arriving at the castle of Gloucester, he is merely deceiving himself with wishful thinking. Again, it is easy to say that when Lear, on his journey to the castle of Gloucester, says 'I did her wrong', he is referring to Cordelia; but it is, I suggest, better to think he is referring to Goneril on whom he had a little earlier called down a dreadful curse. For we cannot fail to remark how often he calls out for 'patience'. 'I can be patient', he says in one place; in another, 'You heavens, give me that patience, patience, I need!'; and Kent mildly upbraids him with,

Sir, where is the patience now
That you so oft have boasted to retain?

He needs patience, and he knows it, however vaguely and intermittently. Now by 'patience' we mean, first, the power to suffer with calmness and composure; and secondly, forbearance with the faults of others; and it is these things which Lear has often boasted to retain. He has indeed 'boasted' to retain them; but he has at least felt the wish to retain them, and he is patient, or at least tries to be patient, when he is disposed to acknowledge that his daughters' evil is also his own.

This is one side of Lear; the other is anger, condemnation, rage, judgement, the invocation of a curse; underlying all these is self-justification: the thought of himself as the 'old kind father, whose frank heart gave all'; and accompanying them is the impulse to self-pity.

This is the other side; but against it there struggle the wish for 'patience', the sense of others both in their faults and needs, and the rejection of self-pity. This is Lear's conflict; it brought on his madness; but it is only because these things had struggled in him that he could recover from his madness; the changed man that Lear became was only the victory, however aided by Cordelia, of something in him which had always been there; and Cordelia could only aid him because, if he had the nature of Goneril in him, he also had something of the nature of Cordelia. It is no miracle which is wrought in Lear; he has genuinely grown to what he has become at the end of the play. The issue has been between anger and judgement on one side, and patience and forgiveness on the other.

I am conscious that what I have been saying is very obvious. But I am anxious to emphasize the moral issue which animates the play; I am also anxious to emphasize that it is also the moral issue which animates the play *of Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, I said, the issue lay between blood and judgement, passion and reason, being fortune's slave and suffering nothing in suffering everything. Now this issue Hamlet contemplated; it held him in suspense; it exceeded his powers of decision. Hamlet was neither a man of passion and blood, nor of judgement and reason; he could not make up his mind which of them to be; therefore the conflict between them is not joined in him; and that is the source of his exasperation. Therefore we find him now whipping up passion in himself after seeing an actor or Fortinbras; and now declaring

that the man who is not passion's slave he will wear in his heart's core. But both the life of passion and the life of reason escape him; he enters neither upon one nor the other; he is not even now the man of passion and now the man of reason; he is standing off from life and will put nothing to the test. Therefore to the conflict as it exists in Hamlet's mind there can be no solution, for the reason that it is not a realized conflict at all; it is a conflict contemplated and intellectualized, not suffered; Hamlet precisely sheers off from it; and events must carry him to disaster. He knows indeed that life cannot be lived like that; he is hesitating and faltering life away; and he comes to any calm only when he has given up making a choice, and when he knows that death is near.

But this same conflict between blood and judgement, passion and reason, anger and patience, is in all truth the conflict of *King Lear*; here it is truly joined and works like a fierce fire through the play. Lear is unintrospective and unreflective; but in him the opposing forces are fighting; the struggle is on, unobjectified, but suffered. Lear is now in a towering rage or calling down terrible curses; and he is now crying to Heaven to give him patience, the patience he needs. He is from the beginning a slave of passion; but he also has moments when the ideal of patience shines before him, and then, briefly, he will speak and feel the words of patience; he cries out for what he knows is the only escape from the madness of anger and hate; and there is no danger, in him, of a pale cast of thought misting the course or outcome of action. He is not indeed delivered wholly

from this conflict; the old Lear is not entirely transfigured in the new one we see in Act V; but he has at least advanced far in patience. I may therefore sum up the argument of my comparison between the two plays, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, thus: in *Hamlet* the question is put, and by Hamlet,

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer . . . ?

but if the question is asked, it is not answered. The question is not asked, in so many words, in *King Lear*; but it is answered. Besides, there is no mistaking what the answer is; to the question of Hamlet, Lear himself in a measure, Cordelia and Edgar completely, provide the answer. In whatever disaster and gloom *King Lear* closes, that answer is given; and it is clear and unmistakable.

IV

POETIC DISCOVERY

1

I HAVE said that at the stage to which Shakespeare has now come in the writing of his tragedies, he will, in varying degrees, in what manner is possible to perception which will not suffer itself to be over-intellectualized, probe and test, abstract and separate out, simplify in something of the manner of an experimenter, deal drastically with his material; and I said that these processes are most clearly shown in *King Lear*. I wish now to illustrate this in some detail, and in that way make clearer what I intended. As in speaking of *Hamlet*, I cannot proceed to a full study of the play.

Let me give first, before turning to speak of the play as a whole, a simple and obvious illustration of the kind of thing I have in mind, by referring to Shakespeare's way of presenting Cordelia to us. In the first scene Cordelia is led away by the King of France to become his Queen. It will be remembered that Cordelia has rejected Burgundy: 'I shall not be his wife.' France then speaks and declares, in a moving speech, that he will have her. Cordelia does not reply. It is Lear who replies: 'Thou hast her, France, let her be thine . . .'; and then, with Lear and the others gone, Cordelia and France remain behind with Goneril and Regan. But in the conversation that follows, Cordelia speaks to her

sisters; she speaks not a single word to France. France says, 'Come, my fair Cordelia'; and they are gone. There is not a word from Cordelia which expresses her feeling for the man she accepts for a husband. There is nothing here which even begins to correspond with the scene in the old play which shows the wooing of Cordelia by France and her loving acceptance of him. Whatever the role of Cordelia in the play is to be, we are not to see her as a lover and a wife. Then, late in the play, France and Cordelia come with their army; but, as everybody knows, and by what Mr. Granville-Barker called the clumsiest lines in the play, France is bundled back again home. But why? Because, again, Cordelia must not come in the role of a wife; her role is other, and wholly other, than this; Shakespeare has intentions which the presence of France would drastically interfere with. But why, in that case, did Shakespeare send over the King of France at all? The answer is not, I think, difficult to find. Shakespeare had to choose between two things: either the King of France (whom we certainly have been led to think of as a loving husband) must send Cordelia with an army to England and stay in France himself for reasons of state, or he must come over with her and be urgently recalled. Between these two there was little to choose. He decided so far to stick to the old story as to bring over the King of France, in that measure raise our expectations of a happy issue of the battle, and then to imagine a state of affairs in France which required his summary return. But what is certain is that Cordelia's life as a wife and queen are

strangely shut out from the play. It is her relation to her father which is alone relevant; and for this reason and in this measure, Cordelia is drastically simplified and, as we may say, dehumanized.

2

But I turn now to look at the play as a whole; and I shall speak of the play's beginning, and then of its ending.

The division of the kingdom has frequently been regarded as a serious fault in *King Lear*; we must grant Shakespeare this incredible scene, it is said, in order that he may get started. But in fact this violent and outrageous beginning served Shakespeare's purpose well enough: it cuts away from our imaginations any sense of the preceding life of Lear and his family; it makes the beginning of the play as absolute as may be; and Shakespeare gives us very little which helps to make the scene we see continuous with what had gone before. The play begins with more of the abrupt, unquestioning beginning of a fairy story than of a play which is to satisfy naturalistic requirements: 'Once upon a time there was a very old and foolish King; and he had two wicked daughters who hated him and one good one who loved him. . . .' We do not begin from the normality of any previous family life with its typical graces, suppressions, subtle deceptions, forbearances; the family begins here; here it is what it is; from here it must move; what has been in the past is nothing and nowhere. In the old play Lear's wife had but recently died; and the frequent

mention of her ties the present with the past. In Shakespeare's play, Lear has had no wife, and his daughters no mother. The old play shows us Goneril and Regan, before the division of the kingdom, speaking of Cordelia with envy and malice; but there is nothing like this in the new play. In *King Lear* the family begins with what it is shown to be in the first scene, with all its absolute simplicities. In this respect there is no play of Shakespeare comparable with *King Lear*; only a little inspection of *Macbeth* and *Othello* shows its difference here from them. It is true that we learn that Lear loved Cordelia most and that Lear had ever but slenderly known himself; but these are little more than pieces of information which, in any case, are barely necessary; nowhere is the past conjured up for us and entertained as something out of which this state of affairs had or could have grown. No doubt Shakespeare was helped by his audience's familiarity with the story. But what is more important is that Shakespeare was content with, he wanted, a highly simplified situation. I have said that he abstracted from his characters; he was no less content to abstract the present from the past; he simplifies drastically by declining to try to make the opening scene begin even to look like a piece of history.

But then, it is not only this. Shakespeare brought in a sub-plot, the beginnings of which are even more incredible. No good purpose will be served by my recounting the perplexities and absurdities of the scenes showing Edmund's deception of his father. Here again the past must be carved away; here too, as in the main plot, we

must connive at the making of as absolute a beginning as may be; we start with something which is cut clean away from the fine and elaborate tissue of the continuing life of a family. Now these things, the first stages in the two stories of Lear and Gloucester and their children, are no doubt big enough faults in the play. But we must assume that they are faults about which Shakespeare had no illusions; they were necessary for what he wanted to do; if these things were faults, they were yet the conditions of the success of his play. Shakespeare then, by its beginning, lifts the play out of history, out of the context of the past; and this is part and parcel of his intention for his characters. The children of these fathers have not grown out of a preceding human situation; they flare out and occur as the eternal powers which play for place and mastery in the human soul. We have not seen them nor imagined them as members of a family life; they are not and will not be clothed in the normality of the trivial or unultimate things which make up so much of living.

We find a similar state of affairs if we look to the play's ending. The reader will recall that Albany, to whom the succession would normally fall, declines any claim to the throne: it is for Kent and Edgar to rule in the realm, he says. But Kent has a journey to go: his master calls him; and Edgar goes on to speak the last four lines of the play which are as weak as they are obscure. I am aware that it has been held by some editors, who follow the Quarto, that these lines are properly Albany's. I cannot believe this; and assuming that

the lines are Edgar's, we can only marvel at so wretched an ending for this greatest of plays. I think we must, on reflection, decide that Shakespeare wishes us to understand that Edgar accepts the throne; but Edgar goes on to speak a line which, if it means anything, means that he prophesies his own early death.

In the face of this ending we must, I think, believe that Shakespeare was embarrassed by the close of his play; and it is clear, or it seems so to me, that he was disinclined, if not averse, to giving us any clear sense of Edgar's assumption and exercise of royal power. That is to say, the ending of the play is not, so far as Shakespeare could with any propriety contrive it, an end which looks on to a succeeding order and condition. Fortinbras succeeds Hamlet, Malcolm Macbeth: sanity and justice are restored. But in *King Lear* we are given little of the feeling of this. The play at its end at most looks dimly ahead beyond itself as, at its beginning, it had not looked back to what had gone before. Shakespeare does not choose to set it in an imagined history; it is more like a fable which is told or an image which occurs and fades. Its final note is anticipated death, and not renewed and continuing life.

3

Before I go on to look at the content, or some of the content, of the plot, I wish to remark briefly on an aspect of Shakespeare's play which is closely connected with what I have been saying. I mean the unusual vagueness of what I may call the spatial and temporal

ordering of the plot of *King Lear*. Bradley has written at some length on this matter; and I shall refer to it only in passing. But it is, unless I am mistaken, a most significant feature of the play, and of a piece with what I conceive to be its prevailing purpose. We are given, for example, no idea of where, in Britain, Lear, or again Albany and Goneril, live; and it is very hard, if indeed it is possible, to get clear about the movements of characters in the play to the homes of Cornwall and Gloucester; afterwards, we have a vague movement of everybody to Dover; and we have little more. It is the same with time: it is very difficult to arrive at any clearly defined temporal sequence, and hard therefore to believe that we are required to imagine one. None of the great tragedies is comparable to *King Lear* in these respects. There are periods indeed, in *Hamlet*, when there occurs what Mr. Granville-Barker calls a 'timelessness' which accords well enough with the inaction which the play exhibits; but there prevails far more of this in *King Lear*, where 'timelessness' has far less strict dramatic appropriateness. This consistent disregard for time and space cannot, I suppose, be an accident; it is one of the ways in which the quality of Shakespeare's imagination in this play is shown; it must be explained in the same way as we explain (if we can) the temporal features of the play's beginning and end; and all must be explained by certain other features of the play of which I shall now go on to speak. Before doing so, I call to mind certain remarks of Coleridge about Spenser: he speaks somewhere of the 'marvellous independence and true

imaginative absence of all particular space and time in the Faerie Queene'. I should not myself say that there is anything necessarily truly imaginative in the mere absence of particular space and time; but I quote Coleridge's remark to suggest that, if we are at all justified in seeing in *King Lear* some approach to an 'allegory', we might expect such a treatment of time and space as we do, in fact, find in it.

4

I look now to another striking feature of the plot, which may be illustrated from the stories of Edgar and Kent. Edgar, it will be remembered, declines to disclose himself to his father where the plot provides no obvious reason why he should not do so; and if the plot provides no reason why he should not do so, Edgar's compassionate human nature provides reason enough why he should. On meeting his blinded father, Edgar could well have disclosed himself, would in all nature have disclosed himself, given Gloucester comfort and succour, and saved his life. In Sidney's version there is no hiding of the son's identity; but in *King Lear* the reconciliation of father and son is withheld by what Edgar later acknowledged for a fault in himself; and we hear only from Edgar of how Gloucester died on hearing of the truth and after much terrible and unnecessary suffering. Edmund had deceived Gloucester; why must Edgar now also deceive him? What must now deny to father and son the joy they may have in each other, except for a last, heartbroken, fleeting moment? Why must common

human nature be so gratuitously and brutally outraged? For we must reflect that Gloucester, led by Edgar, and above all in the cliff scene, is an even more poignant and inexpressibly pitiable figure than when he staggered blinded from the knives of Cornwall; and this is not required by the plot and is strictly unnecessary: it only heaps misery on both Gloucester and Edgar. The natural flow of Edgar's love and forgiveness is brutally stopped to increase his and his father's suffering. Now if I am right in this, we can only conclude that this situation exhibits an intention essential to Shakespeare's imagination of the play.

Consider again now Kent. Here, if you will, is the common stuff of human nature: a man loyal, generous, rash, loving. But why does not Kent, at the opening of the storm and before Lear's madness sets in, disclose himself to Lear? Again, the plot does not at all forbid it; and again, Kent makes himself known to Lear only at the end when Lear is too far gone in grief and desperation to do more than take the barest note of him. Had Kent acted on what must have been his most natural impulse, he would not indeed have averted the main tragedy; but he could and would have brought comfort and companionship to the lonely and distraught Lear.

Now in the face of what I have said of Edgar and Kent, it is natural to say that we have to consider what, when we set ourselves to apprehend Shakespeare's masterpiece, we are undertaking to do. It is not, as I have said, a question of understanding an argument;

it is a question of rising to a difficult perception offered by Shakespeare's most mature tragic art. Now if we think so, we shall not put down these things I have spoken of as mere faults; and we shall be no more disposed to shrug our shoulders, to leave them for a mystery, to take a note of them and leave a question-mark after them. They were, we must suppose, integral to Shakespeare's intention when he wrote the play; they must become integral to ours when we read it or see it. Shakespeare will not allow us to imagine Cordelia in the human context of wifehood and queenship; he also will not allow the goodness of Edgar and Kent the comfort they may give and receive in the world's conflict. Against the pure wickedness of Cornwall and Edmund the beneficence of Edgar and Kent are not allowed to work with any mitigation; they are held firmly and unnaturally in much helplessness and suffering which are gratuitous and beyond the requirements of the plot.

5

I have said that Shakespeare will not allow Edgar and Kent to mitigate the suffering which the play exhibits; by the silence to which he condemns them he adds indefinitely to their sufferings and to the sufferings of Lear and Gloucester; and the plot, taken as a whole, does not require this. But if we turn to the large outline of the plot, we come upon a third illustration, to add to what I have said of Kent and Edgar, and perhaps the most striking of the three, of the kind of improbability which may be seen as a gross fault or may, again, be

construed as a sign of Shakespeare's intention in the play. I mean, Edmund's inexplicable delay in telling the others of the instructions he has given to kill Lear and Cordelia. Edmund is now defeated; he has played his adventurer's game and lost. In playing it he has some little sympathy from us; he is not in the same class as Cornwall, Goneril, and Regan; he had some reason, they had not; and when he says 'Yet Edmund was beloved', we warm to him in pity. Now, with the game lost, he acknowledges the justice of his fate; he hears the story of his father's death which, he says, moves him to do good. But he knows that he has given orders to execute his victims instantly; and it is incredible that he has forgotten. Why does Shakespeare suffer him to speak only when he is expressly asked by Albany where Lear and Cordelia are? Shakespeare clearly gives us to understand that Edmund is changed, despite of his own nature; why do not common pity and compunction act in him? We may feel exasperation with Albany and Edgar at delaying at this time in a long colloquy; but we are more mystified by Edmund. Here too, then, a natural and generous impulse, even in Edmund, is forbidden; what good there came to be in him came to nothing in the plot's design. The silences of Edgar and Kent occasioned much and unnecessary suffering; the silence of Edmund is even more inexplicable; but it is also more catastrophic. It brings to nothing what Kent and the others had been indeed suffered to do.

6

It will be remembered that my concern is to illustrate the practice of Shakespeare's purposive, abstractive imagination as it works in the tragedies and above all in *King Lear*; and to show how Shakespeare deals hardly with his material to gain certain special ends. That in Cornwall, Goneril, and Regan he creates characters simple and abstract in their evil is clear; there is no useful purpose served by speaking of them in this point of view. But I have been anxious to call attention chiefly to another major feat of abstraction in the play, which also rejects the requirements of naturalism, to say nothing of poetic justice; and all three examples I have given, of Edgar, Kent, and Edmund, show Shakespeare removing virtue away from efficacy and power over the course of events. Lear must go on suffering uncomforted by the knowledge of Kent's presence, and Gloucester by the knowledge of Edgar's; and when Edmund at last repents, he is checked from influencing the course of the plot. On the one side, therefore, is surpassing good, and on the other extreme evil; but the scales are hopelessly weighted on one side; against the wickedness of Cornwall, Goneril, and Regan, what beneficence human nature is shown to possess is not allowed to issue in action; it is kept as far as may be in silence and suffering. Here, it will be seen, the simplification which Shakespeare conducts is not only in the characters themselves; it is, so to speak, in the control of the plot by the characters. The characters of Goneril, Regan, and

Cornwall are, indeed, simple. The characters of Edgar, Kent, and Edmund are not; but they are controlled by a plot which holds them, and therefore also Lear and Gloucester and Cordelia, in almost unrelieved suffering, and then brings them to their deaths.

Here, or so it seems to me, is the main abstraction which Shakespeare seems determined to conduct throughout the play: the forcing apart, I mean, of character from circumstance, of virtue from happiness and then of virtue from life itself. In the world which Shakespeare is now rendering, merit is made as powerless as possible and is then destroyed. Therefore', Bacon had said, 'poetry feigns [actions] more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence'; but, as I have said, this is precisely what Shakespeare was not doing; indeed he set himself at all costs, including the cost of clear faults and absurdities, *not* to do so. The play seems to be designed to exhibit suffering and helpless virtue, whether it be the virtue of a Kent, the uncertain virtue of a Lear, or the transcendent virtue of an Edgar and a Cordelia. None of them may come to any happiness. Gloucester and Lear are given, before they die, and by an irony, only a kind of heartbroken joy. Kent and Edgar indeed survive; only, as I said, Kent speaks of imminent death, Edgar of death not long delayed. For them also, life may not go on.

7

I wish further to emphasize this primary feature of the play by taking account of events in the story which,

as the reader will have noticed, I have hitherto ignored; and I can, I think, illustrate in another and very different way what I have in mind. I am looking principally not to character but to plot; and when we consider the plot as a whole, we can see without any great trouble that it has a major flaw in addition to those I have pointed out. I quote Mr. Granville-Barker who, speaking of the play after the third Act, says¹: 'The rest of the play must be pitched in a lower key... The thing stays by comparison pedestrian. . . . The chief fact to face, then, is that for the rest of the play, the best will be incidental and not germane to the actual story. The producer, therefore, must give his own best attention to Albany, Goneril, and Regan and their close-packed contests, and to the nice means by which Edgar is shaped for a hero ... If he will take care of this, the marvellous moments will tend to take care of him.' So Mr. Granville-Barker: 'the best will be incidental and not germane to the actual story.' In other words, the soul of the play and the body of the plot have fallen apart; they have indeed to be made to look as if they have not; but they have, all the same; the 'marvellous moments' are 'not germane to the actual story'. To say nothing of the deaths of Goneril and Regan and to speak only of the most vital things in the plot, the combat of Edgar and Edmund, and then the battle, seem somehow to mean nothing to us. The duel is indeed made as stagy as may be; Mr. Granville-Barker spoke (a little

¹ *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, First Series, London 1927, third impression of 1940, pp- 151-2.

uneasily, I suggest) of the 'nice means whereby Edgar is shaped for a hero'; but are they 'nice'? The combat is nearer to being a piece of hollow stage trumpery. Compare it, as Bradley urged us to do, with the duel in *Hamlet*. Everything turns on the battle; but was there ever such a battle so perfunctorily and shoddily treated? Compare it, as again Bradley urged us to do, with the battle in *Macbeth*', it is obvious that, like the duel, it has no life in it. But when Lear, or Lear and Cordelia, are on, the scenes surpass anything even in Shakespeare.

What is the cause of this state of affairs? We may say, no doubt, as Bradley does, that because of the double plot Shakespeare has too much on his hands, and that we are wearied by all that is going on. But this is not, I think, the real reason, or certainly the whole reason; it hardly explains our attitude to the decisive fighting that occurs. I suggest that the reason lies deeper than this: deeper in Shakespeare's imagination and in ours. But it is also simple enough. Edgar has to be made into a fighting man, Cordelia into the leader of an army; and it simply will not do. Shakespeare could not take it; we cannot take it. The Cordelia and the Edgar whom we know are one thing; the Cordelia and the Edgar who fight battles and engage in combats are another; and they cannot be reconciled. The souls of Cordelia and Edgar are not in the stage figures who in battle and combat thus serve the purposes of a plot which a dramatist has to get on with and bring to a conclusion. In Cordelia and Edgar Shakespeare is contemplating figures of spiritual perfection who cannot move, with

any substance of reality, at this level of the plot's working. Who can see Cordelia (or Lear, for that matter, in the state to which he has now come) at the head of an army, whether the army she leads be victorious or defeated? And the whole bent and direction of Edgar's spiritual bearing is away from this kind of thing; make him do this, and whether *he* be victorious or defeated, he is no longer Edgar. Mr. Granville-Barker says that Edgar is 'nicely shaped' for a hero; but how may Edgar be rightly submitted to this kind of treatment? Hamlet no doubt needed to be nicely shaped into a hero; but not Horatio, if Horatio was indeed what Hamlet said he was. Shakespeare had no heart to do this kind of thing; if he had, and had he wished to shape Cordelia nicely for a heroine, or Edgar for a hero, he would, and no doubt could, have made the battle and the combat real enough to make us hold our breaths; but had he contrived to do this, Cordelia and Edgar would have been other than they are earlier in the play; they might have become a 'heroine' and a 'hero'; but they would then have been less important to us than they are.

The reader will recall that my argument has been that Shakespeare contrives to allow his virtuous characters as little influence on the course of events as possible; he holds them in a kind of silent and helpless suffering. But now, at the place in the play to which we have now come, Cordelia and Edgar, types of spiritual perfection if ever there were such, are suddenly required to take arms against their troubles. Hitherto they have been figures of patience; they have suffered the slings and

arrows of outrageous fortune; Edgar is indeed an Horatio, not spoken of and described merely, but manifested in the detail of life; and Cordelia will be cast down only for Lear's sake: for herself she could out-frown false fortune's frown. But now Cordelia must lead an army against her sisters and Edgar fight his brother; they have now, in all conscience, to take a hand in the plot. But in doing so, they become stage-figures and not what they have been. They become no longer images of suffering; whether they are victorious or defeated is neither here nor there; they no longer ring true. Here again, therefore, as in the illustrations I have given earlier, character and plot are ill-adjusted to each other. Formerly Kent and Edgar were forbidden to do much they might have done for Lear and Gloucester; this is unnatural and inexplicable; and their suffering and the suffering of Lear and Gloucester is thereby increased indefinitely. Now, late in the play, Cordelia and Edgar are required to do things no less unnatural. In either case, plot and character are irreconcilable; in either case, our apprehension of character is offended by the course of the action in which it is set.

8

I must now ask, Why does this come about? Why is the plot of *Lear* so unsatisfactory in the way I have tried to explain? What explains this severance of character and circumstance? I quote A. C. Bradley: 'When I regard *King Lear* strictly as drama, it appears to me, though in certain parts overwhelming, decidedly inferior as a whole

to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*'; and I cannot doubt that Bradley is right. But we must understand the cause of its comparative failure; and its cause lies in just this ill-adjustment of plot to character and character to plot of which I have been speaking. Only, we must assume, I think we can do no other, that Shakespeare knew what he was doing. I part company from A. C. Bradley only when he is content to leave the improbabilities, inconsistencies, and the rest as things due to Shakespeare's carelessness; they must, or so it seems to me, arise from the workings of Shakespeare's imagination here, which for its purposes is willing to manhandle plot and character and wrest them sharply apart. Bradley is willing to believe, in the face of the play's improbabilities and therefore, as he thinks, carelessness of design, that the Fool was forgotten not by Kent and the others, but by Shakespeare. But if I have been at all right in what I have said, the Fool is at the centre of the play's imagination: his virtue is pitiable in its helplessness; he, like others, is an image of helpless and suffering love; he exerts no influence upon the course of events; the course of events passes him by.

For the truth is, or so it seems to me, that in this play Shakespeare is little enough concerned with strict dramatic plot or with character in the ordinary sense. He is, above all, concerned to exhibit certain moral ideas or states, imaginatively apprehended indeed, yet still ideas of evil and of good. His imagination sifts out these essences. To Evil he gives the initiative, the force, the driving power of the plot. Over against it he sets

Good; but he forbids it, so far as he may, to interfere with and control the action and consequences of Evil; it is made silent and patient; it is suffering love; it has little influence upon the executive ordering of the world; it merely *is* and suffers; it is not what it does but what it is, as it is shown in a Cordelia and an Edgar, that we contemplate. Evil drives on, dynamic and masterful, but to its own destruction; Good is still, patient, and enduring, but is also destroyed; no limit, not even that of death, is put to what it must endure.

Now that this is so is, I think, shown by the way in which we ordinarily think of the play. It is truer of *King Lear* than of the other tragedies, that we think above all of certain scenes: the plot is comparatively dim to us. We think of Cordelia's silence before Lear; Lear on the heath and in the storm; then, in the last two Acts, what Mr. Granville-Barker calls the 'marvellous moments' which look after themselves; and these, like those earlier, are scenes of pity and suffering. In comparison with these, the course of the plot with its combats and battles engages little enough of our attention. What Shakespeare was concerned above all to contemplate were the figures of suffering; around these figures in their suffering the plot swirls its tragic way. But it is the figures themselves that hold our minds; and where Edgar and Cordelia are suddenly changed into martial shapes and take, or try to take, a strong hand in the direction of affairs, they interest us little; they are no longer at the play's centre. The play then is one which exhibits, above all in Cordelia and Edgar, 'patient merit', to use

Hamlet's phrase; and Shakespeare's mind is not dwelling now on the spirit of Hamlet, but of Horatio.

Hamlet, the reader will remember, had asked,

. . . who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love . . .

. . . and the spurns

That patient merit of the unworthy takes . . . ?

The answer is provided by *King Lear*: Cordelia and Edgar are indeed such figures of 'patient merit', and all these things they undergo. Besides, there is no question for them of finding a quietus with a bare bodkin. Who, Hamlet had asked,

. . . would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

but for the dread of something after death and other possible ills that we know not of? To this also Shakespeare gives the answer in *King Lear*\ here the figures of patient merit have nothing of this fear of death. The problems of living which Hamlet had posed seem not to be problems for them; they have come to a sense of life in which they do not occur; and similarly death does not come as a problem and as a source of fear. It comes differently as something somehow natural; and to endure it crowns the detachment and disinterestedness of their lives. 'Bear free and patient thoughts', says Edgar:

Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.

This is the centre of Shakespeare's perception of life in his greatest play; and it will not do to speak of pessimism and gloom in the face of it; the crass opposites of pessimism and optimism have no relevance here. There could be no question of Cordelia's being brought, with the play, to some happy ending; to give her some thirty years of life in this world would have been as silly as to give us some assurance of temporal immortality for her in another. She, and through her Shakespeare, had come to a sense of life, and therefore of death, in which the soul makes no demand either of life or death. It is here, in all truth, that we may rightly say, *The rest is silence.*

9

I must turn, in conclusion, before summing up my argument, to discuss again, but briefly, a matter I referred to in the preceding chapter. I said there that Shakespeare's imagination in the tragedies was secular; that he had no argument to illustrate; and that he was animated only by a wish to see things as they really are. In the light of what I have been now saying, this still seems to me to be true. Shakespeare's powers never penetrated, or so I think, so far as in *King Lear* to the limits of human experience; and in thus rendering human life and the place and role in it of death, the question whether it is a Christian play cannot, it seems to me, naturally arise. Certainly, there are signs that Christian belief was moving in Shakespeare's mind in the course of its composition. There is Albany's speech:

If that the Heavens do not their visible spirits.
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself
Like monsters of the deep;

or again, Cordelia takes on once a kind of supernatural beauty, where she is described to Kent before she reappears again after her long absence; or again, we feel sometimes that Shakespeare's imagination almost sees her as a figure of redemptive grace, redeeming the world's evil which is embodied in her sisters; or again, when she says,

And wast thou fain, poor father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw?

I find it difficult not to believe that here there was moving in Shakespeare's mind the story of the Prodigal, and that he half-saw the roles of parent and child reversed in his own story. Above all, because the play shows the extreme suffering of love and its apparently hopeless defeat, it seems to come near to Christian belief and feeling. Still, I think that to erect an argument on these things is mistaken. It is certain that a mind such as Shakespeare's, of such depth, and power, and candour, could not fail to be influenced in his perception of things by Christianity; a candid and thoughtful mind cannot divest itself of what it is reared in. But I have emphasized that Shakespeare set himself to divest his play of any framework of Christian belief and deliberately denied

himself any occasion for its expression. If the labour and study of his imagination seem to come near at times to Christianity, that is hardly surprising; if his mind was indeed as great as we ordinarily believe, we should hardly expect otherwise. Still, to see the play as issuing from a mind of confirmed Christian sensibility is, I think, not to look fairly at the play as a whole; and indeed, the play's importance for us consists, I would venture to say, chiefly, in its coming from a mind free of antecedent and determining belief, and conducting, with all its great power and insight, a candid exploration of our human experience. Besides, we certainly cannot say that it brings us to a state of belief; instead, it confronts us with mystery in the face of which there is nothing to be said. It exhibits the limits merely of our human experience as they are reached by souls of surpassing excellence and beauty. These are also the limits of secular art. In plays which are to follow soon, Shakespeare seems indeed not to accept these limits, and to try to trespass beyond them. This is not the occasion to speak of the last plays. Yet, in spite of what I have just been saying, I will say that it is a mistake to see the last plays as entirely new things having no connexion with what has gone before; and of what has gone before, it is to *King Lear* that we may most profitably relate them. I add only that I follow Bradley in saying that we shall better understand Prospero's most famous speech in the light of *King Lear* and *King Lear* in the light of Prospero's speech.

10

I have now to sum up the argument of what has gone before and to look back to the questions which I put at the end of the first chapter. Bacon, I said, proposed the means of coming to a kind of knowledge which could, he thought, be decisive for human destiny; but the question was, Did Shakespeare provide *knowledge*? and if he did, was it knowledge which was also a power? I said, further, that it is clear to us what Bacon proposed; and what he signified has had an influence in our civilization which can hardly be exaggerated. But we may ask whether the influence of Shakespeare has been comparable in weight and importance?

I have argued that Shakespeare indeed provided knowledge, and that the works of the imagination do not fall outside the life of reason. I have implied that to restrict the rational activity of the mind to the investigation of the natural world will not do; and that if we are the disciples of Bacon in this matter, we are badly astray and must sooner or later get ourselves hopelessly lost. We are perhaps here more the followers of Bacon than we realize. More times than I care to think of, we see poetry spoken of as an affair of emotion, philosophy and science as affairs of the reason; but if we speak like this, we are seriously mistaken. Shall we say that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are products of *emotion*, and not, in some important, even profound, sense, a product of the reason; that if we want reason, we shall go to scientists and philosophers, and that if we want emotion

we shall go to Shakespeare? We can find enough emotion, presumably, in a hundred and one ways; and if the works of Shakespeare are chiefly or wholly emotional, there are other and better means of employing our time than in reading them. If we speak (as we often do) of these things in this way, I do not see that we can fairly explain, still less justify, the importance we attach to the study and the teaching of Shakespeare. Besides, I am convinced that this is not an affair of words merely and of indifferent nomenclature. The words we use in these matters exhibit a philosophy of life, or at least, a whole set of assumptions which we do not stop to examine. Bacon at least declared where he stood; he put poetry in its place; he knew what its place was; but we have reason to be careful lest we are his disciples without having, also, his clear-headedness and forthrightness.

Now Bacon indeed wrote his *Essays*, which have to do with human nature; but, in spite of their accomplishment and shrewdness, their limitations are clear enough; and they are parerga to his main labours. But Shakespeare turned his mind principally to human nature. He had indeed, in the last resort, nothing to *say* about it and its destiny; he *showed* it only, in a number of dramatic patterns; each play is a symbol of his vision of life; he is concerned, in the way of a poet, to make manifest the truth of things; and as he goes on, the symbols become more expressive and less translatable; more and more they render their great object as it really is.

I have spoken of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, which are, I

suppose, Shakespeare's two greatest plays. I have tried to exhibit them in relation to each other; and the progression from one to the other is, or so I think, of deep interest. In *Hamlet*, indeed, Shakespeare's interest is not in a 'character'; we go wrong if we think so; it is chiefly in the state into which a thoughtful and intellectual man is cast in the face of life: Hamlet is without a clear sense of life, and the answers to his many questions are not forthcoming; wearied out with perplexities and contrarities, he yields up moral questions, and therefore initiative, in despair. My words recall Wordsworth at a crucial period of his life. He had been, he says, 'perplexed with impulse, motive, right and wrong . . . what the rule and what the sanction'; and seeking proofs and not finding them, he lost all feeling of conviction. Then he recalled, out of his childhood, landscapes that were frightening and visionary; and from them he drank, he says, as at a fountain, and restored his imaginative powers. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare turns the labouring mind into material for artistic composition; the scholar and the thinker is put to the test; the imagination sees and, as it were, declares his failure; but the poet must go on in the way of discovery which his gifts permit and require; and I have used *King Lear* to exhibit Shakespeare now dealing boldly and even violently with his material in order that he may thereby see more clearly. And what in *King Lear* does he chiefly see? Evil certainly, from which he promises the world no escape; but also, and principally, the wholly good, suffering indeed, but also altogether proof against all that is brought against it.

This suffering he savagely surrounds with all that evil and mischance can bring; but it never declines from its standards of complete disinterestedness. To exhibit this, Shakespeare has dealt hardly with his story; and for my part, I cannot doubt that he has dealt thus hardly with his material in order, at all costs, to communicate beyond doubt the perception of values to which he has now come. *King Lear* is, so far, if you will, didactic. I only add that he is not here letting his emotions rip; we shall be more disposed to say that he is rendering life as it really is; here, we shall say, is the truth and secret of things. It is, indeed, a painful enough secret; we behold it in the hanging of Cordelia by the world's wickedness; or rather, we behold it in the life and death of Cordelia, who could truly say:

For thee, oppressed King, am I cast down;
Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown.

The father of whom she speaks is the father of Goneril as well as of herself; and he has stumbled his way through the storm from Goneril to her.

This is what Shakespeare finally saw in his greatest play; and this perception is his great bequest to us. It is indeed a very different bequest from Bacon's who looked ahead a few generations to a New Atlantis brought about by the play of reason as he conceived it. I have said indeed, and we need to remember, that it is certainly not just to Bacon to see him as utilitarian merely, and to write off for insincere his professions of religious belief. The drive of his mind was certainly not

irreligious. But it was not also chiefly religious; and the demi-Paradise he looked for came more easily to an imagination which had not, for all the shrewdness that went with it, contemplated human nature as long and as deeply as Shakespeare's. The reason, as it acted in Shakespeare's less interested mind, saw evil still, and suffering; but he also saw a certain power in human nature to overcome the world and to make the world fade in our imaginations and leave not a rack behind.

These are the two visions which came, early in our civilization, to two great men. The vision of the one has been eagerly, unbrokenly pursued and with momentous consequences. The vision of the other has had less good fortune, and this is not surprising. Two centuries and more passed before it was possible to see *King Lear* on the English stage. This kind of thing is unthinkable now. But we are also largely committed to a way of thinking which relegates the play from being taken, in the last resort, seriously; like Bacon, we have a map, but, too frequently nowadays, suffer to appear on it only those territories which are, or may be, charted by certain prescribed methods; what lies beyond this we declare beyond our powers of cartography, and a pretty game for any man's guesses.

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