THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF *HAMLET* AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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I

The Ego is constantly confronted by a world of objects to which it relates in two fundamental ways. In so far as the object is experienced as literally attractive the I is tempted to succumb to that attraction and turn away from its own being in order to lose itself in the other. This renunciation of one's own subjectivity in order to dwell in the object is the movement of objectification, and it finds its most striking expression in the phenomenon of romantic love. When, however, the object or object-world is perceived not as inviting but forbidding, when the object literally "objects" to or threatens the being of the subject rather than alluring it, the response of the I is naturally antithetical: in order to preserve its being it must now seek to overcome or even annihilate the object. This mode, in which the subject postulates and seeks to defend, even enlarge, its being at the expense of the other, is that of its own subjectification. The dialectic between these two constitutes the active and conscious life of the subject, as it constantly swings back and forth between them, contingent upon the vagaries of historical circumstance.

Both movements of the Ego, as it alternately abandons and then returns to itself, are equally necessary, furthermore, for its own preservation. In so far as the subject and its world are interdependent, the I must inevitably turn outside itself for the substance that will nourish and sustain its being, at whatever level of that being one cares to name. Nevertheless, to yield to the not-I in any systematic or absolute form is synonymous with the extinction of the I, and it hence approaches a point from which it must turn back if it wishes to maintain itself as subject. Additionally, however, the subject's self-postulation is further prompted by the inveterate inhospitality of its world and the necessity to impose oneself upon it, to subjectify it, lest failing that, one be crushed by it.

At the foundation of consciousness, therefore, we find the natural propensity of every living creature to sustain its own being, to defend it against the aggression of other creatures, to neutralize their aggression with an aggression even more potent — in short, to survive by defeating all challenges to that survival. Put in another way, the subjectivity of the subject consists in all actions that further its own self-interest in preference to the interests of the other. Facing the menace of a world whose constant expansion threatens to preclude the very existence of the subject, the subject can respond only through a ceaseless effort at its own expansion. To survive with any certainty requires not merely a perpetuation of the Ego but its enlargement, for the greater, the more powerful the I becomes, the more certain becomes its being.

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In this way self-affirmation naturally gives way to self-aggrandizement, and the innate violence that underlies the mere perpetuation of consciousness is gradually transformed into a mounting crescendo of conflict and mutual destruction. This we may regard as subjectivity at the level of nature and the struggle of each against each that nature presents. What Darwin analyzed at the level of biological evolution, others have studied in a variety of other contexts — psychological, social, economic, and so on. In its primary manifestation, therefore, subjectivity participates in the drive observable at even the simplest, animal levels to perpetuate one's own being at the expense of the being of others. It is, indeed, this very instinct for self-postulation that provides the mechanism whereby life not only endures but grows and develops in the various evolutionary configurations that mark its history. The self-insistence that defines subjectivity, as it is focused and intensified, in other words, develops inexorably in the direction of self-transcendence and the necessary appearance of novel and unanticipated forms of consciousness which overlay and qualify its primary manifestation.

In historical terms, the assertion of itself as over against its object that unites the Ego with all nature and renders it natural, and which we specified as the original and basal form of self-consciousness, is superseded around 500 B.C. in an evolutionary quantum leap that forms the origin of all subsequent religio-philosophical interpretation of being. Karl Jaspers rightly refers to this as the "Axial Period" in world history (although I shall contend shortly that the period since the Renaissance is equally definitive, crucial, and unique.)[1] It was at that time that the various systems of metaphysical and psychological dualism that give rise to the conflicts in *Hamlet* originated, devoting themselves variously to the mutual oposition of heaven and earth, reason against the passions, and pleading with humanity to align itself with the former and eschew the latter.

Like the Orphic and Samkhya thinkers of West and East and all their successors, Hamlet finds the earth and the physical body rank, gross, "sullied"; physical functions disgust him, as do women, who seem to him their peculiar expression; he is obsessed with suffering and death, and seeks to invent a method by which to escape them. The natural appetites — aggressive, erotic, digestive — sicken him, and he strives through identification with his reason to deny them ascetically. Spirit regards itself as male, rational, and divine and seeks to disengage itself form the domination of nature by denying that any authentic relation exists between them. Nature is a noisome prison, and through the repudiation of violence and sexuality he hopes to liberate himself from it. As he himself often expresses it, his higher and true self, celestial in origin, must be freed from a lower self, whose ties are with nature. But it is precisely in this fission of the self into a higher and a lower, or an inner and an outer, that we find the mainspring of that process of self-transcendence to which we have just alluded. The subject exists in constant relation to itself, and it is precisely this capacity for self-objectification and self-repudiation that enable it to exceed itself.

[1]Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 1-4.

In the classicial dualistic systems of East and West the Ego experiences a second birth. For the sake of its survival it has all along been — and continues to be — fundamentally self-centered, intent upon wrenching what it must from its world in order to meet its own felt needs, regarding the object finally as a mere means to that end. Inasmuch as all animals necessarily exhibit such an orientation and would expire if they did not, the behavior that results is necessarily animalic in character. In Shakespeare it is normally attributed to the influence of the "blood," as in *Romeo and Juliet*, just prior to the duel in which Tybalt stabs and kills Mercutio: "For now these hot days is the mad blood stirring." Elsewhere, Hamlet credits the supposed lust of his mother to a "heyday in the blood," while throughout the play Hamlet, himself bloodless in a sense, is appalled and nauseated by the "savageness in unreclaimed blood." Subjects in their natural state (Hamlet's "fools of nature") are, therefore, intrinsically bent upon their own power and pleasure, and will exert any manner of violence necessary in order to gain them.

But the subject is not only a — in this mode predatory — relation to an object, but a relation to itself as well. It is for-itself not merely with respect to the form of the other, but with respect to its own form as well. Its innate postulation of self, its insistence upon overcoming all that could constrain or limit its being, applies also to itself. At a certain point in the satisfaction of its drive for power at the level of nature, the subject is driven to recognize that it is becoming the victim of its own anxious, endless rapacity; that if the world poses one kind of threat to the autonomy of the self, the unqualified aggressiveness of its response to that threat poses still another. In order to persist in its self-affirmation, then, it must now overcome itself: a quasi-higher-self must not only cease to identify with but must now actively reject a quasi-lower-self, to whom it stands in danger of becoming enslaved. Hence a kind of civil war erupts within consciousness: the Ego now severs itself from and makes into an object, an other (Freud's "It," Latin *Id*) that which it formerly was and partially must always remain. That which consciousness was it now negates by converting it into an un-consciousness subject to the most severe and extreme forms of repression. Although it may seek to project its hatred upon some external surrogate (as with Hamlet's attitude toward women: "for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them"), these are finally mere vehicles for the hatred the higher Ego bears toward its own lower, more primary manifestation. In passing, we have here as well the real source of Hamlet's "emotion . . . in *excess* of the facts as they appear" (T. S. Eliot), which Eliot could only dismiss as "an insoluble puzzle."[2] Hamlet's brutality not only towards women but virtually everyone with whom he comes into contact reduces finally to a set of variations upon the theme of that self-hatred whereby the self through despising some previous stage in its elaboration seeks to establish and affirm a higher stage or form.

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[2]T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 25-26.

II

In the various dualistic systems the natural subject gives way to the rational subject, and while on the one hand reason purports to oppose and deny the passions, it nevertheless pursues through more refined and subtle methods precisely the same realization of selfhood previously sought by the passions. It is at this point that the authentic novelty of *Hamlet* intervenes, for it is just that insight at the core of Hamlet that makes him uniquely significant and prophetic. The dualistic nausea with nature and the exaltation of rational spirit over against it has, after all, by Shakespeare's time been extant for some two millenia. Hamlet's sickened response to "blood" offers us nothing that his Buddhist and Orphic ancestors had not already experienced and described, but there is a second, higher nausea in Hamlet and throughout Shakespeare's dramas which must be emphasized. In Hamlet and other Shakespearean tragic figures too numerous to mention there is as well a moral nausea addressed towards the enormity of human hypocrisy that runs through one play after another. Within it are contained the seeds of still another revolution in the subject's self-elaboration, for it is based on the negation of just those rational faculties which had formed the basis for the previous metamorphosis of consciousness. If the natural subject may be said to be pre-rational, Hamlet, despite all the residual encomiums on reason's behalf, is finally a consciousness that lies beyond it. *He has seen through it.*

Reason is the source of all moral behavior, but Hamlet has come to realize that men's deed everywhere "call virtue hypocrite." Similarly, the most direct expression of reason is language, and yet men speak with a "candied tongue"; their words are "most painted," like "the harlot's cheek." Even Polonius is moved to admit "when the blood burns, how prodigal the soul lends the tongue vows." But if this be true, then even virtue, even speech, and thus finally even reason itself is simply a disguise for what is finally "blood" and aims at the same goal, and aggrandizement of the I. Luther's characterization of reason as "the Devil's whore" is mirrored in Polonius' observation that "we do sugar o'er the Devil himself." The situation is not only shocking but hopeless for Hamlet: "virtue cannot so innoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it." Reason, morality, civilization itself — all of it is finally false, a mere facade, designed to trick the unwary. Hamlet can scarcely bring himself to realize the depth and pervasiveness of moral duplicity. "They fool me to the top of my bent," he exclaims in anguish. The result is, and can only be, doubt. From the first moments of the play, when he doubts the reality of his father's ghost, to the last, it is the dominant factor in his address to being. It forms the sour, persistent refrain in his letter to Ophelia, immediately before he spurns and humiliates her:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.

(II.ii.116-19)

But, of course, now that all that he took for truth has emerged as a liar, and now that he no longer loves but detests her, he is thus himself a liar and hypocrite.

A new shape of consciousness is born here under our eyes, and it is our own. Faith is the invincibility and integrity of reason and rational, that is moral, behavior, in a universe ultimately directed by the beneficient decrees of an omnipotent rational will, has crumbled before the corrosive force of just that all-inclusive doubt that is here named. It constitutes the ground of our philosophy, our science, our very consciousness itself. We arrive, thus, at still a third stage in the evolution of the subject, which we entitle the reflective consciousness. The association between the two is suggested by that sinister herald of contemporary consciousness, Dostoyevsky's Underground Man:

> To begin to act, you know, you must have your mind completely at ease and no trace of doubt left in it. Why, how am I, for example, to set my mind at rest? Where are the primary causes on which I am to build? Where are my foundations? Where am I to get them from? I exercise myself in reflection and consequently with me every primary cause at once draws after itself another still more primary, and so on to infinity. That is just the essence of every sort of consciousness and reflection.[3]

To be conscious is to reflect an object, but to reflect it without being it is already to open up the distance between them that one terms doubt.

From Descartes, the supposed father of modern philosophy, whose whole inquiry was grounded upon radical, systematic doubt, through Husserl, founder of the method of phenomenological reflection, who acknowledges openly that "the meditator executes this regress [from the world] by the famous and very remarkable method of doubt,"[4] consciousness since the Renaissance has repudiated that from which it derived its being for some two millenia prior to then. As before, this is not to say that reason has ceased to function as an element within consciousness, any more than the "blood" before that, but rather that it has slowly been reduced to a merely functional role. In our own technological society it is the subject's principal tool, but it does not direct the subject himself, nor does he identify his being with it as in previous times.

[3] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground, Poor People, The Friend of the Family*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dell Publishing, 1960), p. 38.

[4] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p. 3.

Beginning with Montaigne, whose doubts concerning reason and man's rationality are known to have influenced Shakespeare profoundly, and continuing through Hume, Kant and Freud, the limitations of *Logus* as the guiding principle of either man's being or being itself have gradually been exposed. It is no longer possible to regard it as either our own or the universal essence, and we therefore arrive once again at that moment of fission within consciousness in which, by seceding from itself and renouncing all that which it previously was, it seeks a new internal form and organization.

III

Hamlet stands at the threshold of contemporary, reflective consciousness. While on the one hand it praises reason as "noble," "godlike," and "infinite," on the other reason is dismissed as no more than a pimp ("reason panders will"). In another drama, *Troilus and Cressida,* written within a few years of *Hamlet*, we witness in an even clearer and more insidious form the scepticism regarding the rationality of human nature evidenced in *Hamlet*, as well as its social consequences. The play, set in Troy during the Trojan War, concerns the infatuation of King Priam's youngest son, Troilus, with Cressida, a lovely Trojan girl. But Shakespeare's idealized attitude toward romantic love is no longer that which animated *Romeo and Juliet*; on the contrary, that attitude has now passed even beyond doubt into a hardened cynicism. Unlike Juliet, who loved even unto death, however, Troilus is finally led to rail against his "false Cressid! False, false, false!" Elsewhere, it is charged against her that her "mind is now turned whore." But it is not only her mind but the mind itself that is incriminated, for even Troilus' mind is shattered by the spectacle of her infidelity:

> If beauty have a soul, this is not she.
> If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
> If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
> If there be rule in unity itself,
> This is not she. Oh, madness of discourse
> That cause sets up with and against itself!
> Bifold authority! Where reason can revolt
> Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
> Without revolt. This is, and is not, Cressid!
> Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
> Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
> Divides more wider than the sky and earth.
>
> (V.ii.138-49)

If the world is truly rational, then its appearance will conform to the rule of reason, but in the irrationality of Cressid's perfidy is contained that of reality itself. It revolts against the rational ideals by which it must supposedly be governed, and its falsehood in turn calls into question not only the applicability

of those ideals but the ontological status of reason itself. *If,* as the drama makes painfully apparent in a variety of ways, love is simply a euphemism for lechery and brutality be the essence of what is dignified as honor, then the mind is not merely nature's fool but its whore as well. The strange fight that occupies Troilus' soul is that which rends Hamlet as well: once the consciousness which identifies with reason begins to perceive that what passes for reason is at last mere rationalization, it revolts against itself and the first moment in still another stage of its incessant self-transcendence has arrived.

The ramifications for society at large of the post-rationalistic mind are suggested by a section from John Donne's *An Anatomie of the World,* set down scarcely a decade (1612) after the Shakespearean dramas under consideration.[5] Describing the slow decline of humanity since the Fall, he arrives at his own age:

> And now the Springs and Sommers which we see,
> Like sonnes of women after fiftie bee.
> And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to looke for it.
> And freely men confesse that this world's spent.
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seeke so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
> 'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
> All just supply, and all Relation:
> Prince, Suject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
> For every man alone thinkes he hath got
> To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
> None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.
>
> (203-18)

When "new philosphy calls all in doubt," the effect is not merely practical, in the sense that Hamlet has lost his capacity to act, but social as well. The consciousness which has lost its faith in the authority of rational norms in the sphere of belief must inevitably also disregard their representatives in society. Donne reiterates the traditional association between the sun and rational standards of thought and behavior: the sun was the celestial paradigm of orderly conduct and its annual regularities were instrumental in the gradual formation of the earliest human cosmologies. To conform to that orderliness was to participate creatively in the most fundamental structures of being-itself. As might be expected, therefore, the first expression of the new scepticism is the literal loss of intellectual orientation that results when "the sun is lost."

[5]Quoted in this connection by A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), pp. 148-49.

Yet at another level the sun is not only the supreme exemplar of universal order, but its ultimate source as well; in the last analysis that order was credited to the absolute authority the sun exercised over all that lay beneath it. If the sun should truly disappear and its authority be parceled out evenly to each of the tiny Atomies that fill the world, order would crumble and anarchy replace it. We should find ourself in a world "all in peeces, all cohaerence gone." "All Relation" — the obedience of subject to prince, son to father — would perish, for it but reproduces on earth its heavenly prototype. But when the subject can no longer find the meaning of its being in conformity to the rational authority of an Absolute Subject (witness Ferdinand's willing submission to Prospero in *The Tempest*) because doubt has volatilized that Subject, it has no alternative but to become a rule unto itself, a Phoenix, only one of which existed at any one time. Not only that, but the Phoenix existed in relation to no one save itself, its only goal being its own self-perpetuation — exactly the situation of the liberated subject as well.

The link between the self-seeking subject and the "false" subject may be illustrated most conveniently by the introductory self-description of that classic of all Shakespearean villains, Iago. His service to Othello, he informs us, is but a sham: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." He is one of those

> Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
> Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
> And throwing but shows of service on their lords
> Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats
> Do themselves homage.
>
> (I.i.50-54)

Such a person is he himself, Iago announces.

> In following him, I follow but myself.
> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
> But seeming so, for my peculiar end.
> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.
>
> (I.i.58-65)

Although the traditional ties between ruler and subject continue to be observed externally, inwardly doubt as to their legitimacy has deprived them of their force, and the subject thereby turns instead to the satisfaction of its own, private desires. An abyss opens up between the moral appearance of a Cressid, Iago, or a Claudius, and their moral reality — precisely that hypocritical contradiction upon which the higher nausea of Hamlet turned. Far more than the violent or lecherous excesses imposed upon it by the rampant domination of "blood," Iago's pithy, sniveling "I

am not what I am," is the very source and center of the spiritual illness that obsesses Shakespeare in one play after another.

In still another play of the same period, *Measure for Measure,* it is once again the appalling and finally diabolic disparity betwen the outer Angelo, so seeming-virtuous, and the lustful beast within, that causes the Duke to summarize his disgust in terms identical to Hamlet:

> Oh, what may man within him hide,
> Though angel on the outward side!
>
> (III.ii.285-86)

For the rational consciousness the irrationality of the instincts and a world ruled by them makes it a prison from which it contrives to escape; but the reflective consciousness, on the other hand, transforms the world into rather a dream, an illusion, or, at best, "mere phenomenon." It is an aesthetic production, conceived by the mind for its own delectation, less now a prison than a stage, in which "one man in his time plays many parts" (Jaques, *As You Like It*). The supreme paradox, of course, is that incessant and — for the reflective consciousness — ineluctable necessity of the subject to role-play in one situation after another, which from a moral perspective is not only objectionable but nauseating, is from another perspective the very mechanism responsible for Hamlet's chief enthusiasm and Shakespeare's very livelihood — the theater. The duplicity of consciousness, its ability to divide and overcome itself, to say, "I am not what I am," whether this be Iago in his relation to Othello, or the actor who plays at Iago in his relation to Iago, makes possible not only the hypocrisy of the subject but its capacity to transcend that hypocrisy as well. The more reflective the subject becomes, the more aware it is what what it took for its face was merely a thing, an object imposed upon it, a mask, and in the process of removing that mask establishes still another stage in its own transcendence.

In the "dark night of the soul" that marks the middle period of Shakespeare's authorship the Absolute Subject, the spring and guarantee of all rational norms, is either dead (Julius Caesar, Hamlet's father), absent (Duke Vincentio: *Measure for Measure*), or otiose (Agamemnon: *Troilus and Cressida*). In the absence of the ruler/father each individual subject/son, while outwardly professing adherence to his vanished authority, pursues his own interests as best he sees fits. The outcome is Donne's world "all in peeces, all cohaerence gone." In *Troilus and Cressida* Ulysses berates Agamemnon for his failure to rule effectively as commander of the Greek army: "The specialty of rule hath been neglected," he complains. In the chaos that ensues every rank ("Degree") of society is shaken loose from its position in the cosmic and social hierarchy, and their dislodged occupants devour each other in mutual destruction. As in Donne the capstone of the natural order is the sun, but when — as with Donne — "the sun is lost," a time of darkness must follow.

The heavens themselves, the planets and this center,
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, source, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line or order.
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other, whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil
And posts like the commandment of a king,
Sans check to good and bad. But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, with mutiny,
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate,
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture!

(I.iii.85-101)

The "raging of the sea" and "commotion in the winds" cannot but remind us of the outset of *The Tempest* and make even more apparent that the storm in question is merely the physical manifestation of a deeper disorder, both subjective and intersubjective. In that drama we have at last the re-emergence in all its power of the Absolute Subject and its tale consists in the concord wrought by the exercise of its will. Here, however, the "mutiny" that Prospero is easily able to quell, the passions that he soothes and the plots that he subverts, reign unchecked and disorder prevails. The Greek troops are in state of utter confusion: Achilles follows his own "particular will," Ajax is similarly "self-willed," and each in turn neglects his "degree" — his status, that is, in the universal hierarchy. "Oh, when degree is shaked," marks Ulysses, "the enterprise is sick!" The innate subjectivity of the subject, its postulation of itself as prior to every object, is unleashed, and the inevitable result is conflict on an unmitigated scale.

Take but degree away, untune that that string,
And hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe.
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead.
Force should be right, or rather right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,

Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, a universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat himself up.

(I.iii.109-24)

The diction may be Elizabethan but the picture of consciousness and society that it paints could not be more contemporary. "The bounded waters" that here seek to unbind themselves from the containment of their shores are the natural equivalents of the "self-willed" subjects of Agamemnon and the forerunners of all social liberation movements since the time of Shakespeare that seek to "lift their bosoms higher" than their allotted stations. Whatever may be the justice of their individual causes, when the subject, whether individual or collective, is obsessed with its own freedom, rights, and fulfillment to the total exclusion of all competing subjects, the conclusion of the process can only be the mutual destruction of all. A totally unbridled subjectivity, intent upon its own power even at the cost of the final extermination of the object, must at last become its own prey, for the very being of the subject depends upon the object.

The object is thus in part a check upon the unlimited aggrandizement of the subject, in part the stuff upon which that growth depends. As reflection eviscerates the object by casting doubt upon its authentic reality and authority, however, the subject can only withdraw into itself and therein initiate that illimitable multiplication of its own being that must inevitably prove its own victim. On the one hand, the latent aggression of the subject's self-consciousness makes it comparable to that of a wolf; as that same voracity becomes absolute and ungovernable, it can end only by devouring itself. This may be in the manner of one wolf destroying another, but it may also be likened to a sickness, a tumor, a cancer, that — as in *Hamlet* — is like a "rank corruption, mining all within," consuming even the possibility of action itself. This reminds us of Hamlet himself, but the figure of Achilles is not dissimilar:

Possessed he is with greatness
And speaks not to himself but with a pride
That quarrels at self-breath. Imagined worth
Holds in his blood such swoln and hot discourse
That 'twixst his mental and his active parts
Kingdomed Achilles in commotion rages
And batters down himself. What should I say?
He is so plaguy proud that the death tokens of it
Cry "No recovery."

(II.iii.180-88)

As in the case of Hamlet, Achilles' mind is disconnected from his will, he lives in a constant if suppressed rage, is his own worst enemy, and is sick-to-death.

Two further elements, however, are emphasized here. The first is that all of this emerges in the most immediate sense from his "pride," and the second is that that pride is rooted in the "blood." But this is only to confirm what we have all along held, that the subject's own self-insistence ("pride") stands behind and finally *is* the sickness tht pervades the "Problem Plays"; and that this same subjectivity, even when it turns dualistically against the "blood," is merely another manifestation of the aggressive self-insistence upon which the instincts, or "blood," are founded. In the extreme of subjectivity Achilles, like every other subject, "thinkes he hath got to be a Phoenix," in Donne's formulation — to be unique, different, interesting. To do "his own thing," entirely apart from the effect of this upon others, to realize his own individual potential, considered as a project quite abstracted from the welfare of the whole of which he is only a part.

Hamlet's "pale cast of thought" has drained the reality of the others that surround Achilles; even that Supreme Other, Agamemnon, is as much a ghost to him as Hamlet's dead king and father. They are all, as for Jaques, "merely players," wraithlike, irreal. The word is replaced by consciousness-of-the-world and its flesh-and-bone presentations by abstract representations — "A generation of still breeding thoughts and these same thoughts people this little world" (Richard II). Brooding alone in his tent, Achilles, like Hamlet, sits and stews and does nothing. At last, however, the Trojan Hector slays Achilles' one true love (as with Hamlet, a male, Patroclus), at which point the moribund Achilles turns upon Hector with the same sadistic coldness that Hamlet displays to one antagonist after another. Why should he not? It is not another human being he confronts, but simply another of his own mentations, a humanly-formed thought. Seeing Hector alone and unarmed, Achilles orders his Myrmidons to slaughter him with the same callous brutality as that with which Hamlet stabs the hidden Polonius. The association of the action with the absent authority of Agamemnon is signaled by its occurrence just as the sun sets: "The dragon wing of night o'erspreads the earth," and beneath its ghastly cover lies the modern urban landscape of anarchic rape, vandalism, and fatal mugging that issue from the hands of Achilles, Hamlet, Cassius, and still other monsters of reflection.

Cassius "carries anger as the flint bears fire"; when "much enforced," he "shows hasty spark and straight is cold again"; elsewhere Caesar remarks with foreboding, "I do not know the man I should avoid so soon as that spare Cassius." His characterization of Cassius applies as well to the reflective consciousness as a whole: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much, such men are dangerous." We may couple this with Hamlet's own self-characterization:

> Though I am not splenitive and rash,
> Yet have I in me something dangerous
> Which let thy wisdom fear.
>
> (V.i.284-86)

The cancerous consciousness gradually occludes the arteries of feeling, making spontaneity of any kind impossible, but though it is not and cannot be rash, it is

nevertheless dangerous in the extreme. The "lean and hungry look" suggests the aspect of Ulysses' "universal wolf," the innate and unquenchable will-to-power upon which the whole survival of the subject depends. "Power, power was what I wanted," rants the Underground Man.[6] "I cannot get on without domineering and tyrannizing over some one," he confesses; his deepest necessity is "a feeling of mastery and possession,"[7] and if he cannot achieve it directly, he will "contrive destruction and chaos" beyond measure out of spite.[8] Destruction and chaos — the stage upon which Shakespeare's most thoroughly modern dramas and modern history itself is played out.

IV

Shakespeare's solution to the impasse of his Problem Plays is presented finally in *The Tempest*, where he is finally able to overcome doubt to the extent of presenting in Prospero a ruler prepared and able to "use your authority." Even Prospero, however, must overcome unruly subjects, most notably Caliban, who sings the anthem of the liberated: "Freedom, heyday! Heyday, freedom! Freedom, heyday, freedom!" His fellow rebels, Stephano and Trinculo, soon join in:

> Flout 'em and scout 'em,
> And Scout 'em and flout 'em.
> Thought is free.
>
> (III.ii.130-2)

Flouting (mocking) and scouting (derision), the situation in which the quest for personal freedom and individual satisfaction override conformity to the demands of an absent, ineffective, or dreamlike other — these form time and again the state of mind that Shakespeare saw emerging around him and for which he had no ready antidote other than a nostalgic return to a benevolent authoritarianism that in his deepest heart he knew to be doomed. In the succeeding centuries the doubt indiginous to an awakened consciousness has consumed one authority after another. The reflective consciousness has increasingly liberated itself from adherence to all objective norms by convincing itself that their ultimate source lies in its own subjectivity. Its structure and the norms which emerge from that structure are a creation of the mind, a story one tells oneself, a drama one invents in order to impose a certain coherence upon experience: again, "All the world's a stage." The story may be justified pragmatically, may "work" at the practical level and lead to success in the achievement of a given task, but the reflective consciousness cannot be unconscious of the fact that its "truth" ceases at that point. In fact, truth as such, in any traditional sense, as a datum independent of humanity and its practical pursuits, ceases to exist. The criterion of truth in its modern sense becomes, rather,

[6]Dostoyevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[8]*Ibid.*, p.50.

expediency — a doctrine forced upon the worried Shakespeare by another principal influence upon his thought, Machiavelli.

As the subject comes to regard all external restraints upon behavior as merely his own unwitting fictions (Hamlet: "for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"), those restraints crumble and his own underlying egocentricity comes to the fore. The result is, and in principle must be, the situation that only the twentieth century has fully revealed, that of the subject run amuck: a time of radical social fragmentation and naked power struggle between nations and within them, of individualism on a scale and with an intensity unprecedented in previous history. Rhetoric regarding the freedom, rights, and privileges of individuals in no way attempts to establish that such liberty can have meaning and purchase only within an organized and harmonious society, but that the price of harmony is conformity and obedience. That each, in short, cannot exist without and requires the other. As Shakespeare has the Greeks discover outside the walls of Troy, an army of generals is no army. Ulysses' discourse on the necessity of "degree" and the catastrophic chaos that ensues in its absence envisions a prospect which Yeats echoes in our own century in retrospect, as a *fait accompli*:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

This passage from "The Second Coming" is remarkably reminiscent of *Hamlet* in various ways. We have seen him to "lack all conviction" in the most radical sense, and the way in which this handicaps his efforts to stem the "passionate intensity" of Laertes, Claudius, and other members of the "blood-dimmed tide." The "innocence . . . drowned" cannot but remind us of Ophelia's fate. In the larger sense, however, the thematic center of the drama is the inaccessibility of Hamlet the elder, the "dismantled . . . Jove" of his son's personal universe, here the center that cannot hold, the inaccessible falconer. But when the center and support of the whole is removed, it collapses into its parts, and as each follows its own self-interest freed from all restraint, the result is the series of disorders and convulsions that mark *Hamlet*.

When "the best lack all conviction," repression of the worst withers and history's pages are saturated with blood. The subject's covert aggression is ever more blatant. Hamlet's nauseating suspicion that reason, language, morality, civilization, are little more than a hypocritical mask is elevated to the rank of a formal theory of humanity. It expresses itself in the last, most pessimistic, grim, and one may even say nauseated, work of Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (published in 1930, as the storm clouds of World War II were gathering). In it

Freud wonders aloud in all his previous writings "how we can have overlooked the ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness and can have failed to give it its due place in our interpretation of life."[9] At last he now sees the truth in the Latin adage "*Homo homini lupus* [Man is wolf to man]. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? . . . It reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien. . . . In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration."[10]

As a result "in all that follows I adopt the standpoint, therefore, that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization."[11] But is not the problem that so disturbs, or even sickens, the elderly Freud here, precisely the Problem of the Problem Plays, the "rank corruption, mining all within" that pervades *Hamlet* and erupts in the rank criminality and chaos of the Trojan battleground? *Too much consciousness* dematerializes the bulwarks consciousness erects against the sea of blood from which it emerges. In order for these to function with maximum effectiveness the subject must accept them as objects, objectively given: as possessing their being independent of their appropriation by the subject. But when the subject instead absorbs them within its own subjectivity, as convenient fictions, they lose their capacity to determine or restrain action. Man is free, without stint of any sort, but it is a tumorous freedom, that can end only by devouring itself.

Shakespeare stood at the dawn of the modern age and gazed with such penetration at the shape of still unborn events that only in our century has the full power of his vision emerged. The innermost conflicts that animate his dramas have since been revealed as the deepest sources of the drama of recent history, and the tragic dimension of those dramas has been transformed into the assortment of monstrosities that plague our history. The excellence of Shakespeare's achievement at the level of literature has received more than sufficient praise; what has largely escaped attention is the subtlety of his awareness of the ultimate implications of the rebirth of the spirit that marked his time. His plays register an ever-deepening effort to cope with a crisis within consciousness that he must surely have experienced personally. More than anyone else of his time, he not only discerned the authentic trajectory of the future, but its murderous dangers and calamities as well, for these form the very warp around which his theatre is woven. Perhaps in time we will see that his continued appeal and strength as a playwright has less to do with his handling of plot, character, language, imagery, and all the mechanics of the drama than the depth of his insight into human being and the threat to that being posed by events then unfolding within its core.

[9]Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p. 67.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 58-59.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 69.

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