Harold Bloom

The Anatomy of Influence

Literature as a Way of Life

Copyrighted material

Copyright © 2011 by Harold Bloom. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Yale University Press books may be purchased in quantity for educational, business, or promotional use. For information, please e-mail sales.press@yale.edu (U.S. office) or sales@yaleup.co.uk (U.K. office).

Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and set in Emigre Filosofia type by Duke & Company, Devon, Pennsylvania. Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bloom, Harold.
The anatomy of influence : literature as a way of life / Harold Bloom.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-300-16760-3 (alk. paper)
1. Literature—Appreciation. 2. Literature—Philosophy. 3. Authors and readers. 4. Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.). 5. Bloom, Harold. I. Title.
PN81.B5449 2011
801′.3—dc22 2010042456

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

Praeludium ix

THE POINT OF VIEW FOR MY WORK AS A CRITIC

Literary Love 3

Sublime Strangeness 16

The Influence of a Mind on Itself 25

SHAKESPEARE, THE FOUNDER

Shakespeare's People 35

The Rival Poet: *King Lear* 48

Shakespeare's Ellipsis: *The Tempest* 62

Possession in Many Modes: The Sonnets 78

Hamlet and the Art of Knowing 87

Milton's Hamlet 94

Joyce . . . Dante . . . Shakespeare . . . Milton 109

Dr. Johnson and Critical Influence 126

Copyrighted material

THE SKEPTICAL SUBLIME

Anxieties of Epicurean Influence: Dryden, Pater, Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, Whitman, Swinburne, Stevens 133
Leopardi's Lucretian Swerve 162
Shelley's Heirs: Browning and Yeats 172
Whose Condition of Fire? Merrill and Yeats 194

WHITMAN AND THE DEATH OF EUROPE IN THE EVENING LAND

Emerson and a Poetry Yet to Be Written 209
Whitman's Tally 218
Death and the Poet: Whitmanian Ebbings 235
Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction of the Romantic Self 248
Near the Quick: Lawrence and Whitman 255
Hand of Fire: Hart Crane's Magnificence 266
Whitman's Prodigals: Ashbery, Ammons, Merwin, Strand, Charles Wright 294

Coda 334
Acknowledgments 337
Credits 338
Index 341

Copyrighted material

PRAELUDIUM

When I began writing this book, in the summer of 2004, I intended an even more baroque work than it has become. My model was to be Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), a thousand-page labyrinth that has dazzled me since I was young. My hero and mentor Dr. Samuel Johnson read Burton to pieces, as did my late friend Anthony Burgess and a living friend, Angus Fletcher, who is my critical guide and conscience.

But Burton was my undoing. Even before a debilitating series of mishaps and illnesses, I could not sustain the challenge. Traces of Burton's marvelous madness abide in this book, and yet it may be that all I share with Burton is an obsessiveness somewhat parallel to his own. Burton's melancholy emanated from his fantastic learning: he wrote to cure his own learnedness. My book isolates literary melancholy as the agon of influence, and perhaps I write to cure my own sense of having been overinfluenced since childhood by the greatest Western authors.

In this, my final reflection upon the influence process, I offer commentary on some thirty writers, half of them British, more than a third American, and a few continental. They do not seem to me arbitrary choices: I have written about all of them before, in widely scattered books and essays, but I strive here to render my appreciations fresh and not reliant upon earlier formulations.

Five of these chapters are centered on Shakespeare, and since he is a presence throughout, probably a third of the book is given to him. There are three

Copyrighted material

chapters on Walt Whitman, but he also is widely present in many more, so that another considerable segment is his. What I have to say about both poets has little to do with any currently fashionable accounts of them. Shakespeare plainly is the writer of writers, and his influence upon himself has become my obsessive concern. Walt Whitman, in the four centuries of New World literature in any Western language—Spanish, English, Portuguese, French, Yiddish—is the strongest and most original writer of the Evening Land, as D. H. Lawrence first recognized. His inner solitude echoes Shakespeare's Edgar and has companions in Dr. Johnson, Lord Byron, and such Lucretian disciples as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Walter Pater, Giacomo Leopardi, and Wallace Stevens. Solitaries in this book also include Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Joyce, Lawrence, the occult seers W. B. Yeats and James Merrill—who ultimately lived only from within—and my personal hero of American poetry, the Orphic Hart Crane.

Fifty-five years of teaching imaginative literature at Yale have taught me better than I myself am capable of teaching others. That saddens me, but I will go on teaching as long as I can because it seems to me a three in one with reading and writing. I had great teachers: M. H. Abrams among the living, Frederick A. Pottle among those departed. I have learned from talking to poets, some of whom are discussed here and some who are not. In one's eightieth year, it is difficult to separate learning from teaching, writing from reading.

Literary criticism, as I learned from Walter Pater, ought to consist of acts of appreciation. This book primarily is an appreciation, on a scale I will not again attempt. In his conclusion to *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* Burton urges: "Be not solitary, be not idle." Samuel Johnson says the same. We all fear loneliness, madness, dying. Shakespeare and Walt Whitman, Leopardi and Hart Crane will not cure those fears. And yet these poets bring us fire and light.

New Haven, Connecticut
July 31, 2010

Copyrighted material

The Point of View for My Work as a Critic

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

the palpable elements of plutocracy, oligarchy, and mounting theocracy that rule our state? How do we address the self-inflicted catastrophes that devastate our natural environment? So large is our malaise that no single writer can encompass it. We have no Emerson or Whitman among us. An institutionalized counterculture condemns individuality as archaic and depreciates intellectual values, even in the universities.

These observations serve only as speculative foreground to the belated realization that my curious revelations about influence came in the summer of 1967 and then guided me in a stand against the great awakening of the late sixties and early seventies. *The Anxiety of Influence,* published in January 1973, is a brief, gnomic theory of poetry as poetry, free of all history except literary biography. It is a hard read, even for me, because it is tense with anxious expectations, prompted by signs of the times, which it avoids mentioning. Faith in the aesthetic, in the tradition of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, is the little book's credo, but there is an undersong of foreboding, informed by the influence of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud. I did not consciously realize this then, but my meditation upon poetic influence now seems to me also an attempt to forge a weapon against the gathering storm of ideology that soon would sweep away many of my students.

Yet *The Anxiety of Influence* was more than that for me, and evidently for many others worldwide these past forty-five years. Translated into languages I cannot read as well as those I can, it stays in print abroad and at home. This may be because it is a last-ditch defense of poetry, and a cry against being subsumed by any ideology. Opponents accuse me of espousing an "aesthetic ideology," but I follow Kant in believing that the aesthetic demands deep subjectivity and is beyond the reach of ideology.

Creative misreading was the prime subject of *The Anxiety of Influence,* and is no less the issue of *The Anatomy of Influence.* But more than forty years of wandering in the critical wilderness have tempered the anxious vision that descended upon me in 1967. The influence process always is at work in all the arts and sciences, as well as in the law, politics, popular culture, the media, and education. This book will be long enough without addressing the nonliterary arts, even if I were more versed in music, dance, and the visual arts than I am. Obsessed with imaginative literature, I trust my insights with regard to it, but know little of the law or of the public sphere. Even in the university I am isolated, except for my own students, since I am a department of one.

Copyrighted material

I have looked backward once already, in the preface to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, which centers upon Shakespeare and his relation to Marlowe. There I acknowledged Shakespeare's Sonnet 87, "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possession," for giving me what have become critical keywords: *misprision, swerving,* and *mistaking.* Sonnet 87 is an exquisitely modulated lament for the loss of homoerotic love but fits extraordinarily well the situation of our belatedness in culture.

The Anatomy of Influence offers a different look back. Spanning an abundance of authors, eras, and genres, it brings together my phase of thinking and writing about influence (mostly from 1967 through 1982) with my more public reflections of the first decade of the twenty-first century. I strive here for a subtler language that will construe my earlier commentary for the general reader and reflect changes in my thinking about influence. Some of these changes have been prompted by shifts in the general climate of criticism and some by the clarity that comes from a long life lived with and through the great works of the Western canon.

Influence anxiety, in literature, need not be an affect in the writer who arrives late in a tradition. It always is an anxiety *achieved* in a literary work, whether or not its author ever felt it. Richard Ellmann, the preeminent Joyce scholar and a dear friend I continue to miss, asserted that Joyce suffered no anxiety of influence, even in regard to Shakespeare and Dante, but I recall telling Ellmann that Joyce's personal lack of such anxiety was, to me, not the issue. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* manifest considerable belatedness, more in relation to Shakespeare than to Dante. Influence anxiety exists between poems and not between persons. Temperament and circumstances determine whether a later poet *feels* anxiety at whatever level of consciousness. All that matters for interpretation is the revisionary relationship between poems, as manifested in tropes, images, diction, syntax, grammar, metric, poetic stance.

Northrop Frye insisted that great literature emancipated us from anxiety. That idealization is untrue: greatness ensues from giving inevitable expression to a fresh anxiety. Longinus, critical formulator of the sublime, said that "beautiful words are in very truth the peculiar light of thought." But what is the origin of that light in a poem, play, story, novel? It is *outside* the writer, and stems from a precursor, who can be a composite figure. In regard to the precursor, creative freedom can be evasion but not flight. There must be agon, a struggle for supremacy, or at least for holding off imaginative death.

For many years before and after *The Anxiety of Influence* was first published,

Copyrighted material

literary scholars and critics were reluctant to see art as a contest for the foremost place. They seemed to forget that competition is a central fact of our cultural tradition. Athletes and politicians, of course, know no other enterprise, yet our heritage, insofar as it is Greek, enforces this condition for all of culture and society. Jakob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche inaugurated the modern recovery of Greek agon, and it is now accepted by classical scholars as a guiding principle of Greek civilization. Norman Austin, commenting upon Sophocles in *Arion* (2006), observes that "ancient poetry was dominated by an agonistic spirit that has hardly ever seen its equal. Athlete competed with athlete; rhapsode with rhapsode; dramatist with dramatist, with all the competitions held as great public festivals." Western culture remains essentially Greek, since the rival Hebrew component has vanished into Christianity, itself indebted to the Greek genius. Plato and the Athenian dramatists had to confront Homer as their precursor, which is to take on the unvanquishable, even if you are Aeschylus. Our Homer is Shakespeare, who is unavoidable yet is better avoided by dramatists. George Bernard Shaw learned that wisdom rather slowly, and most dramatists attempt to evade the author of *King Lear.*

My emphasis on agon as a central feature of literary relationships nevertheless encountered considerable resistance. Much seemed to depend on the idea of literary influence as a seamless and friendly mode of transmission, a gift graciously bestowed and gratefully received. *The Anxiety of Influence* also inspired certain marginalized groups to assert their moral superiority. For decades, I was informed that women and homosexual writers entered no contest but cooperated in a community of love. Frequently I was assured that black, Hispanic, and Asian literary artists too rose above mere competition. Agon was apparently a pathology confined to white heterosexual males.

Yet now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. In the wake of French theorists of culture like the historian Michel Foucault and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the world of letters is most often portrayed as a Hobbesian realm of pure strategy and strife. Bourdieu reduces Flaubert's literary achievement to the great novelist's almost martial ability to assess his literary competitors' weaknesses and strengths and position himself accordingly.

Bourdieu's now fashionable account of literary relationships, with its emphasis on conflict and competition, has an affinity with my theory of influence and its emphasis on agon. But there are fundamental differences as well. I do *not* believe that literary relationships can be reduced to a naked quest

Copyrighted material

for worldly power, though they may in some cases include such ambitions. The stakes in these struggles, for strong poets, are always *literary.* Threatened by the prospect of imaginative death, of being entirely possessed by a precursor, they suffer a distinctively literary form of crisis. A strong poet seeks not simply to vanquish the rival but to assert the integrity of his or her own writing self.

The rise of what I shall call the New Cynicism (a cluster of critical tendencies which are rooted in French theories of culture and encompass the New Historicism and its ilk) causes me to revisit my previous account of influence. In this, my final statement on the subject, I define influence simply as *literary love, tempered by defense.* The defenses vary from poet to poet. But the overwhelming presence of love is vital to understanding how great literature works.

The Anatomy of Influence reflects on a wide range of influence relationships. Shakespeare is the Founder, and I start with him, moving from Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare to Shakespeare's influence on writers from John Milton to James Joyce. Poets writing in English after Milton tended to struggle with him, but the High Romantics always had to make a truce with Shakespeare as well. Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats in very different ways had to work out a relationship in their poetry between Shakespeare and Milton. As we shall see, Milton's defense against Shakespeare is highly selective repression while Joyce's is total appropriation.

I keep returning to Shakespeare in the chapters that follow not because I am a Bardolator (I am) but because he is inescapable for all who came after, in all nations of the world except France, where Stendhal and Victor Hugo went against their country's neoclassical rejection of what was regarded as dramatic "barbarism." Shakespeare is now the truly global writer, acclaimed, acted, and read in Bulgaria and Indonesia, China and Japan, Russia and where you will. The plays survive translation, paraphrase, and transmemberment because their characters are alive and universally relevant. That makes Shakespeare a special case for the study of influence: his effects are too large to be coherently analyzed. Emerson said that Shakespeare wrote the text of modern life, which prompted me to the widely misunderstood assertion that Shakespeare invented us. We would have been here anyway, of course, but without Shakespeare we would not have seen ourselves as what we are.

Throughout this book I frequently contrast Shakespeare's presence with that of Walt Whitman, the Evening Land's answer to Old Europe and Shakespeare.

Copyrighted material

Whitman, except for the egregious Edgar Allan Poe, is the only American poet who has a worldwide influence. To have engendered the poetry of D. H. Lawrence and Pablo Neruda, of Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Mayakovsky is to be a figure of rare variety, quite unlike the one found in weak readings of our national bard. I identify strong influences on Whitman—Lucretius, Shakespeare, and Emerson among them. And I go on to chart Whitman's influence on later writers, beginning with Stevens, Lawrence, and Crane, and culminating in poets of my own generation: James Wright, Amy Clampitt, A. R. Ammons, Mark Strand, W. S. Merwin, Charles Wright, John Ashbery, and others.

The large contours of this book are chronological: its four sections proceed from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. But there are multiple crossings over time and space as well. Shelley appears in several chapters as a strong influence on Yeats, Browning, and Stevens, and as a somewhat reluctant skeptic too. Whitman, who appears in many chapters, comes in at least two key guises. He is *the* poet of the American Sublime, but he is an important representative of the Skeptical Sublime, and as such he appears alongside Shelley, Leopardi, Pater, Stevens, and the more covert Lucretians John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Milton, and Tennyson. The structure of literary influence is labyrinthine, not linear. In the spirit of the passage from Tolstoy that serves as an epigraph to this book, I seek here to guide readers though some of the "endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art."

As *The Anatomy of Influence* is my virtual swan song, my desire is to say in one place most of what I have learned to think about how influence works in imaginative literature, particularly in English but also in a handful of writers in other tongues. Sometimes in the long nights I experience as I recover slowly from my various mishaps and illnesses, I ask myself why I have always been so obsessed with problems of influence. My own subjectivity from the age of ten on was formed by reading poetry, and at some now forgotten time I began to puzzle at influences. The first I recall included William Blake on Hart Crane, Milton and Wordsworth on Shelley, Walt Whitman on T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, Keats on Tennyson. Gradually I realized how to transcend echoes and allusions, and to find the more crucial matter of the transmission of poetic stances and vision. Yeats was a particular problem for me since his relation to Shelley and Blake was palpable but his deepest longings were so contrary to theirs.

My ways of writing about literary influence have been widely regarded as relying upon Freud's Oedipus complex. But that is just wrong, as I have explained before, to little avail. Freud's Hamlet complex is far closer, or even

Copyrighted material

Empedocles and then on what is most mysterious in Socrates. The psyche is the empirical self or rational soul, while the divine daimon is an occult self or nonrational soul. From Hellenistic times through Goethe, the daimon has been the poet's genius. In speaking of the poet-in-a-poet, I mean precisely his daimon, his potential immortality as a poet, and so in effect his divinity. It is fitting that a new perspective on Homer is opened up by considering the daimon, since the psyche in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is both breath and double. Before Shakespeare, Homer was *the* poet proper. By choosing the daimon against the psyche as the inward poet, my intent is purely pragmatic. The question is, Why is poetry *poetry* and not something else, be it history, ideology, politics, or psychology? Influence, which figures everywhere in life, becomes intensified in poetry. It is the only true context for the strong poem because it is the element in which authentic poetry dwells.

Influence stalks us all as influenza and we can suffer an anguish of contamination whether we are partakers of influence or victims of influenza. What remains free in us is the daimon. I am not a poet, but I can speak of the reader-in-the-reader and also as a daimon who deserves to be appeased. In our age of the screen—computer, television, movie—the new generations grow up seemingly bereft of their daimons. I fear that they will develop new versions of the daimonic, and that a visual culture will end imaginative literature.

In *A Defence of Poetry,* Shelley set a pattern for thinking about influence that I have consciously followed from *The Anxiety of Influence* through *The Anatomy of Influence.* What does Shelley mean by *influence* in this famous passage?

> For the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results.

Like Shakespeare, by *influence* Shelley means inspiration. In the penultimate sentence of the *Defence,* poets are made identical with "the influence which is moved not, but moves." Shelley was the most idealistic of the major poets in the language, yet he knew from experience the double nature of influence: love for the poetry of Wordsworth and a strong ambivalence toward a poem like "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." From *Alastor* on to *The Triumph of Life,*

Copyrighted material

Shelley struggled with his own strong misreading of Wordsworth, a highly creative mistaking that gave us the "Ode to the West Wind" and other supreme lyrics.

But why "misreading"? I recall many cavils during the 1970s and since that accused me of favoring dyslexia, as it were. Silly seasons always are with us. There are strong misreadings and weak misreadings, but correct readings are not possible if a literary work is sublime enough. A correct reading merely would repeat the text, while asserting that it speaks for itself. It does not. The more powerful a literary artifice, the more it relies upon figurative language. That is the cornerstone of *The Anatomy of Influence,* as of all my other ventures into criticism. Imaginative literature *is* figurative or metaphoric. And in talking or writing about a poem or novel, we ourselves resort to figuration.

For many years my late friend and colleague Paul de Man and I would argue as we walked together. More often than not the dispute turned upon de Man's conviction that he had found the truth about criticism, which was that it must take up an epistemological or ironic stance in regard to literature. I answered that *any* perspective we adopted toward figurations would itself have to be figurative, as his philosophical mode clearly was. To practice criticism, properly so-called, is to think poetically about poetic thinking.

The glory and danger of highly figurative language is that we never can be certain how to confine either its possible meanings or its effects upon us. When my personal favorite and first love among the poets, Hart Crane, gives us "peonies with pony manes" ("Virginia" in *The Bridge*) we are initially delighted by the accurate wit, though we might then wonder at the elevation of a flower into an animal. This upward metamorphosis on the scale of being is a feature of the Blakean apocalypse, and the influence of William Blake felt here is throughout Crane. Crane was a far more intelligent person than generally he is taken to be, and he had a mystical and occult side, hence his readings in P. D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* and his deep interest in myths of Plato's lost Atlantis. *The Bridge* reads very differently if its true models are Blake's visionary epics. Crane had immersed himself in Blake, and also in S. Foster Damon's *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols,* which he obtained from Damon's brother-in-law, the wonderful poet John Brooks Wheelwright. Brooklyn Bridge itself, the founding emblem of Crane's brief epic, takes on a different aura in a Blakean context. The Blakean relationship does not limit its meaning but rather charts one path through the literary labyrinth.

* * *

Copyrighted material

No one writing about anxiety, even if it is more textual than human, can evade Sigmund Freud, though I have spent a lifetime trying. I prefer the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard on anxiety to Freud, but Anna Freud mapped the mechanisms of defense, and my accounts of influence are indebted to her. Anna's father defined anxiety as *angst vor etwas,* or "anxious expectations."

Freud's theory of the mind or soul, after a century or so, is alive and valuable while his scientism is quite dead. I urge us to regard him as the Montaigne or Emerson of the twentieth century. The best-informed history of psychoanalysis is George Makari's *Revolution in Mind,* just published as I write these pages. Makari concludes by rightly judging psychoanalysis as the leading modern theory of the mind, citing its ideas of defense and inner conflict. Since I define influence here as literary love tempered by defense, Freud is an inevitable presence in this book; yet he is only one presence among many.

Defense (*Abwehr*) is an agonistic concept in psychoanalysis, but it is a dialectical one as well and thus a splendid fit for any theories of influence. We fall in love, and for a time we have no defenses, but after a while we develop an arsenal of apotropaic gestures. We are animated by a drive that wants us to return to the ego's narcissistic investment in itself. So too with poets. Possessed by all the ambivalence of Eros, the new but potentially strong writer struggles to ward off any totalizing attachments. Most powerful of the Freudian defenses is repression, seen as evolving from a social concern (incest taboo) to become part of biological endowment. That of course is a figuration, and even Freud at times could literalize one of his own metaphors.

This book charts varieties of defense, from repression to appropriation, through many different literary relationships, from John Milton through James Merrill. It is preoccupied throughout with our two towering precursors, Shakespeare and Whitman—with both the defenses they employed and those they engendered in others. But between Shakespeare and Whitman there are many paths, some of which will be familiar, some not. Shakespeare's unprecedented triumph over Marlowe; Milton's humbling defeat by Hamlet; the Epicurean skeptic Lucretius's uncanny power over generations of faithful and faithless poets alike; James Merrill's lifelong agon with Yeats; Whitman's still scarcely credited impact on the American anglophiles Henry James and T. S. Eliot; Giacomo Leopardi's miraculous possession of Dante and Petrarch, and on to John Ashbery's noble return to Whitman.

There are many candidates for Freud's best book, yet I favor his 1926 revision of his earlier theory of anxiety, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety.* Here

Copyrighted material

Freud gets free of his weird contention that all anxiety ensues from repressed desire and substitutes the fecund notion that anxiety is a signal of danger, related to the infant's terror at its own helplessness.

A potentially strong poet is hardly helpless, and she may never receive a signal of anxiety in regard to the literary past; but her poems will tally them.

Copyrighted material

SUBLIME STRANGENESS

I vividly recall, with mingled affection and amusement, my first essay written for William K. Wimsatt, Jr., returned to me with the ringing comment, "You are a Longinian critic, which I abhor!" Much later, gossip reached me that my fierce former teacher had abstained from voting on my tenure, telling his colleagues, "He is an eighteen-inch naval gun, with tremendous firepower but always missing the cognitive target."

The single treatise we have from the more properly named Pseudo-Longinus properly should be translated "On the Heights." But by now we are unable to do without *On the Sublime,* even though *sublime* as a word remains bad currency. So too is *aesthetic,* which Pater (after its popularization by Wilde) wanted to restore to its ancient Greek sense of "perceptive."

To be a Longinian critic is to celebrate the sublime as the supreme aesthetic virtue and to associate it with a certain affective and cognitive response. A sublime poem transports and elevates, allowing the author's "nobility" of mind to enlarge its reader as well. To be a Longinian critic, for Wimsatt, however, was to flout a key tenet of the New Criticism, the tradition of which he was himself a fierce proponent.

The New Criticism was the reigning orthodoxy when I was a graduate student at Yale, and for many years after. Its messiah was that push me–pull you the Pound/Eliot, and its defining feature was a commitment to formalism. The meaning of the so-called "critical object" was to be found only within the object

Copyrighted material

is muted in comparison to the full-blown paradoxes of Longinus's modern heirs. From Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant, William Wordsworth to Percy Bysshe Shelley, the sublime is at once magnificent and fraught. Burke's "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" (1757) explains that the greatness of the sublime object induces both delight and terror: "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime." Sublime experience is a paradoxical coupling of pain and pleasure. For Shelley, the sublime is a "difficult pleasure," an overwhelming experience whereby we forsake simple pleasures for ones that are almost painful.

The late-nineteenth-century critic Walter Pater contributed to theories of the sublime in his pithy description of Romanticism as the adding of strangeness to beauty. "Strangeness" for me is *the* canonical quality, the mark of sublime literature. Your dictionary will give you assurance that the word *extraneous,* still in common use, is also the Latin origin of *strange:* "foreign," "outside," "out of doors." Strangeness is uncanniness: the estrangement of the homelike or commonplace. This estrangement is likely to manifest itself differently in writers and readers. But in both cases strangeness renders the deep relation between sublimity and influence palpable.

In the case of the strong reader, strangeness often assumes a temporal guise. In his wonderful essay "Kafka and His Precursors," Jorge Luis Borges evokes the uncanny process by which the novelist and essayist Franz Kafka seems to have influenced the poet Robert Browning, his precursor by many decades. What is most *strange* in such Borgesian moments is not that the prior poet appears to have written the new poem. It is that the new poet appears to have written the prior poet's poem. Examples of this kind of chronological reordering, in which a strong poet appears miraculously to have preceded his or her precursors, abound in the pages that follow.

Freud's influence on our idea of the sublime is one example of this Borgesian reversal. The sublime from Longinus to Romanticism and beyond is subsumed by Freud's bold apprehension of *das Unheimliche* (from Friedrich Schelling), such that the Sage of Vienna becomes the parental fount to which "the Uncanny" returns. Whether Freud triumphs over literary critical tradition here or is subsumed by it is ambiguous to me. But you cannot reformulate the sublime in the twentieth century, or now in the twenty-first, without wrestling Sigmund, whose Hebrew name, Solomon, suited him far better since he was not at all Wagnerian and very much a part of Hebraic wisdom, "Weisheit the rabbi"

Copyrighted material

as Stevens hinted at naming him. "Freud's eye was the microscope of potency," Stevens said with memorable grimness, and the magnificent last stand of the American Sublime in *The Auroras of Autumn* is as Freudian as it is Emersonian-Whitmanian. Longinus, Kant, Burke, and Nietzsche are all Freud's heirs.

For a strong writer, strangeness *is* the anxiety of influence. The inescapable condition of sublime or high literature is agon: Pindar, the Athenian tragedians, and Plato struggled with Homer, who always wins. The height of literature commences again with Dante, and goes on through Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, and Pope. Implicit in Longinus's famous celebration of the sublime—"Filled with delight and pride we believe we have created what we have heard"—is influence anxiety. What is my creation and what is merely heard? This anxiety is a matter of both personal and literary identity. What is the me and the not-me? Where do other voices end and my own begin? The sublime conveys imaginative power and weakness at once. It transports us beyond ourselves, provoking the uncanny recognition that one is never fully the author of one's work or one's self.

More than half a century ago, I lunched occasionally in London with the learned Owen Barfield—solicitor, historian of consciousness, literary critic, visionary, and author of two permanent books, *Poetic Diction* (1928) and *Saving the Appearances* (1957). Though both of us accepted Pater's definition of Romanticism as the adding of strangeness to beauty, I am forever indebted to Barfield for his codicil to Pater: "It must be a strangeness of *meaning.*" This in turn led Barfield to a useful distinction: "It is not correlative with wonder; for wonder is our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate of understanding less than we had thought. The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of *consciousness* from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the mere word 'contact' implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand: aesthetic imagination when we do."

Shakespeare, when you give yourself completely to reading him, surprises you by the strangeness which I take to be his salient quality. We *feel* the consciousness of Hamlet or Iago, and our own consciousness strangely expands. The difference between reading Shakespeare and reading nearly any other writer is that greater widening of our consciousness into what initially must seem a strangeness of woe or wonder. As we go out to meet a larger consciousness, we metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that

Copyrighted material

sets aside moral judgment, while wonder transmutes into a more imaginative understanding.

Kant defined the sublime as that which defies representation. To which I would add that the turbulence of the sublime needs representation lest it overwhelm us. I began this book by speculating that the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* wrote to cure his own learnedness and that I too write to cure a sense of having been overly influenced since childhood by the great works of the Western canon. My critical forerunner Samuel Johnson also viewed writing as a defense against melancholy. The most experiential of poets, Johnson feared "the hunger of the imagination" and yet yielded to it when he read the poetry he loved best. Preternaturally active, his mind courted depressiveness whenever indolent and required labor to achieve freedom. That is quite unlike the many-minded Shakespeare, the remorseless Milton, or the genial Pope. Among poets, Johnson's temperament most resembled that of Lucretius, the Epicurean materialist of whom the Christian moralist disapproved, or Leopardi, a visionary of the abyss who would have filled the great English classicist with dread.

Pater was for me the most important critic after Johnson, and like Johnson he wrote and thought about literature in a literary way. Pater's aesthetic, essentially also my own, is Lucretian through and through; it is deeply concerned with the effects of the work upon its reader: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me?* What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?" Pater freed the word *aesthetic* from German philosophy, restoring the ancient Greek meaning of *aesthetes,* "one who perceives." Perception and "sensation" are the governing terms of Pater's criticism. Seeing is thinking for Pater the Epicurean, which accounts for his "privileged moments," which Joyce's Stephen Dedalus named "epiphanies."

Death, hardly the mother of beauty in Lucretius—who in his *De rerum natura* urged us not to bother about death since we will never experience it—is something like that for Pater, self-quarried as he was out of the odes of John Keats, and out of his favorite Shakespearean play, the be-absolute-for-death *Measure for Measure.* He quotes Victor Hugo's "Men are all condemned to death with indefinite reprieves," and this observation moves him to his most notorious eloquence:

Copyrighted material

> We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of this world," in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.
>
> ["Conclusion," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1868)]

Pater silently steals "art for art's sake" from Swinburne's 1862 review of Baudelaire. Yet like most of Pater, this motto has been largely weakly misread from 1873 to the present. Anything misunderstood through four generations has its own sanction, though I would point out that both Wilde's witty "nature imitates art" and Lawrence's moralizing "Art for Life's sake" are vulgarizations of the subtle aesthetic critic. What Pater analyzes is the *love* of art for the sake only of quickening and enhancing consciousness. We live by and in moments raised in quality by aesthetic apprehension, and they have no teleology, no transcendent value. Epicureanism scarcely could be purer.

My reflections on influence from the 1970s on have focused on writers of imaginative literature, especially poets. *The Anatomy of Influence* will do the same. But influence anxiety, an anxiety in expectation of being flooded, is of course not confined to poets, novelists, and playwrights—or to teachers or cobblers or whom you will. It is a problem for critics as well. When I first addressed these issues, I nonetheless confined my remarks to readers and poets: "Every good reader properly *desires* to drown, but if the poet drowns, he will become only a reader." Decades later I am acutely aware that for the critic as for the poet, representation may be the only defense. Poetry and criticism each in its own way involves coming to terms with the overwhelming flood of images and sensations that Pater called phantasmagoria. Both Johnson and Pater experimented with different genres of writing, but both made their mark primarily as critics. For each, literature was not merely an object of study but a way of life.

Copyrighted material

In my own judgment Johnson remains the major literary critic in all of Western tradition. Even a glance at a good comprehensive collection of his writings shows the variety of the genres he attempted: poetry, brief biographies, essays of all kinds, book reviews, lexicons, sermons, political tracts, travel accounts, diaries, letters, prayers, and an invention of his own, the bio-critiques in *The Lives of the English Poets.* Add the drama *Irene* (a failure) and the novella *Rasselas* (a grand success), and something of Johnson's restless, rather dangerous energies can be intuited.

Johnson should have been the great poet after the death of Pope until the advent of Blake, but an authentic awe of Pope inhibited him. Johnson abandoned his poethood, praising Alexander Pope as perfect in judgment, invention, and verbal style. And yet Johnson knew better, so far as judgment and invention were concerned: Homer, Shakespeare, Milton . . . It is not that Johnson was a Pope idolator; he justly destroyed the *Essay on Man:* "Never was penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised."

But a complex guilt prevented Johnson from the stance of the strong poet that his gifts merited and demanded. Doubtless the human guilt was filial, however unmerited. Michael Johnson, his father, was fifty-two when Samuel, his first child, was born. The father kept a bookshop in the town of Lichfield. A melancholy man, and a failure at all things, during his final months he asked his son, himself given to "vile melancholy," to attend his bookstall for him in a nearby town. Johnson's pride prevented him and he refused his father, who died soon after. Exactly fifty years later, the formidable critic went to Lichfield and took "a postchaise to Uttoxeter, and going into the market at the time of high business, uncovered my head, and stood with it bare an hour before the stall which my father had formerly used, exposed to the sneers of the standers-by and the inclemency of the weather."

The human sorrow and complexity of Samuel Johnson are caught in that bare hour, open to the elements and public mockery. All of us know, to some degree, the guilt of origins. My own memories of my father, a taciturn and restrained man, begin with his bringing me a toy scissors for my third birthday in 1933, when the Depression had left him, like many other garment workers, unemployed. I wept then at the pathos of the gift and am close to tears again as I write this. Having loved Dr. Johnson since I was sixteen when I first read Boswell and started to read the critic, invariably I fell into trying to understand him through my love, and in any case to know myself better by his example.

I regard Johnson as my critical forerunner, since my life's work from *The*

Copyrighted material

> If I *adored* Mallarmé, it was precisely my hatred of literature and the sign of that hatred, which was still unconscious.
>
> [*Leonardo. Poe. Mallarmé,* trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (1972)]

This led Valéry to a further reflection:

> We say that an author is *original* when we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind; we mean to say that the dependence of *what he does* on *what others have done* is excessively complex and irregular. There are works in the likeness of others, and works that are the reverse of others, but there are also works of which the relation with earlier productions is so intricate that we become confused and attribute them to the direct intervention of the gods.
>
> (To go deeper into the subject, we should also have to discuss the influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author. But this is not the place.)

The mind's defenses are of the essence here since how one poet resists the influence of another is indistinguishable from aesthetic intelligence. To struggle with the influence of Mallarmé became a wrestling with the Angel of Death in order to win the new name: Valéry. Mallarmé, like Leonardo da Vinci, became a name for the power of mind. Over what?

In the Anglo-American tradition, the Miltonic-Wordsworthian poet asserts the power of mind over a universe of death. Valéry, like the French Poe and Mallarmé, desires the power of his mind only over the mind itself, a Cartesian quest rather than a Shakespearean one. The central man in French literature is not Rabelais, Montaigne, or Molière, nor is he Racine, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, or Proust. He is Descartes, who occupies in France the place reserved in other nations for Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Tolstoy, or Emerson. Call it the place of the Founder. Literary influence in Britain, Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia, and the United States is not radically different from country to country. But because a philosopher was the Founder, they order these matters differently in France. Thus, Valéry finds the sublime to be "a beauty entirely deductive—Cartesian." Oddly, he is describing Poe's *The Domain of Arnheim,* a work greatly improved (as is all of Poe) by French translation.

Copyrighted material

Valéry for a time was estranged from writing his poetry, perhaps the finest in the French language since Victor Hugo. Lovers of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé would dispute my comparison, but not Valéry himself, who accurately observed that Hugo "attained in his illustrious old age the pinnacle of poetic power." Sparse and selective as Valéry was, at his strongest he comes close to Hugo's magnificence. Yet he underwent a phase, just before Mallarmé became his mentor, when poetry was replaced by "self-awareness pursued for its own sake." To clarify that awareness, which Valéry conceded had originated in literature, the poet-critic had to estrange himself from poetry.

Self-awareness sought entirely for its own sake is a significant journey into the interior if you happen to be Hamlet or Paul Valéry, but it is likely to collapse into solipsism for most of us. Those who now prate about either separating literature and life or yoking them together become bureaucrats of the spirit, professors of Resentment and Cynicism. Valéry, supremely intelligent, ended his great poem about the marine cemetery with the monitory outcry that the wind was rising and one should try to live.

"The influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author" is central to Valéry's speculations upon literature. But how shall we learn to study the influence of Shakespeare's mind on itself and of *Hamlet* on its dramatist? By what procedure can we contemplate Walt Whitman's relationship in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and the three superb elegies ("Out of the Cradle," "As I Ebb'd," "Lilacs") to the original 1855 *Leaves of Grass,* the volume containing what were later to be titled "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers"? One immediate observation might be that self-influence ought to concern us only in the strongest writers. The effect of *Ulysses* upon the *Wake* is a vital matter; the influence of earlier upon later Updike is of possible interest only to those who esteem him.

Henry James, the master of self-conscious creation, is a proper subject for Valérian investigation, as are Leopardi, Eugenio Montale, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens, all of whom unfolded in relation to their prior imaginings. Goethe, that monster of self-awareness, made a celebrated passage from a poetry of self-denial to one of renunciation, though I remain somewhat skeptical as to what, if anything, he ever renounced. By the time he reached his major phase, Freud's precursor was his earlier self.

Shakespeare, as what W. H. Auden facetiously termed "top bard," has to be the paradigm for self-influence. A beautiful weariness is entertained by Shakespeare after his extraordinary *Antony and Cleopatra. Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens* are in flight from high tragedy, and the so-called late romances (they are

Copyrighted material

tragicomedies) intimate a withdrawal of the daimon. *Cymbeline* is an anthology of self-parody, and even *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* tone down earlier intensities. How did the creator of Falstaff and Hamlet become the artificer who gave us Iago and Cleopatra? There is a curious quality they share, once accepted as a commonplace though now discarded by Shakespearean criticism. I cannot imagine Lear or Macbeth apart from their plays, but Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, and Cleopatra have an independent existence in our consciousness. Shakespeare's art of foregrounding character is such that we delight in transposing his men and women to other contexts, speculating as to how they might fare in other plays or alongside other characters. How can that be? Each of these fourfold is made up out of words and inhabits a fixed space. Yet the illusion of vitalism is nonetheless particularly strong in them, even though it goes against my deepest conviction to employ the word *illusion.* If Falstaff and Hamlet are illusive, then what are you and I?

Traumatized by a severe injury some years back, I found myself recovered in body but not in mind. Lying awake at night I tried to reassure myself that I after all was in my own bedroom and stared at the bookshelves, knowing what was and was not there. My sense of my own reality was wavering and needed labor to restore it. Yet no one need labor to bring literature and life together, as generations of historicists and sociologists have endeavored to do, for when could they have been apart? We cannot know where Shakespeare himself dwells in his plays and poems, but we can teach ourselves, by deep rereadings and prolonged thought, the influence on his later writings of his earlier ones. To seek the writer Shakespeare in his work is a vain quest, but to seek the work in the writer can be a rich enterprise.

What could a poet-dramatist do after writing *King Lear*? Bewilderingly, Shakespeare added *Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, The Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest,* among others. Shakespeare, like his protagonists, overheard himself, and like them he overheard "Shakespeare." Like them again, he changed. Stevens, walking the beach in *The Auroras of Autumn,* observed how the Northern Lights are always enlarging the change. The movement from *Hamlet* through *Othello* on to *King Lear* and beyond enlarged the change in ways previously unknown to imaginative literature in the West.

Valéry, so far as I know, never found the right time and place to "discuss the influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author." This book is my time and place to do so. Self-influence is a Valérian concept, and *The Anatomy of Influence* is partly a Valérian investigation, an exploration of how certain

Copyrighted material

strong writers, especially Shakespeare and Whitman, were possessed by and then possessed their precursors in turn. Both Shakespeare and Whitman subsumed a vast array of strong influences in order to emerge as *the* strong influences on future generations. Shakespeare's influence is so pervasive that we all too easily lose sight of his giant art. Whitman is the most consistent influence in post-Whitmanian American poetry. He is and always will be not just the most American of poets but American poetry proper, our apotropaic champion against European culture. Yet the power of Shakespeare and Whitman is palpable not only in their long line of literary heirs but also in their self-possession: the way each exhausted his precursors to unfold finally in relation to his own prior work.

Shakespeare and Whitman are not the only writers who merit this type of Valérian investigation. I have nominated other worthy candidates already: James, Leopardi, Montale, Crane, Stevens. Sigmund Freud is another. But I choose to focus on Shakespeare and Whitman as two exemplars of the phenomenon Valéry identifies. Self-influence as I use the term is not self-reflection or self-reference, nor does it suggest either narcissism or solipsism. It is a sublime form of self-possession. That these two sublime writers came to inhabit a world of their own making reflects not weakness but strength. The worlds they made made us.

Valérian investigation follows from my lifelong interest in literary influence. To understand what makes poetry poetry and not something else one must locate the poem in relation to its precursors. These relations are the element in which true poetry dwells. And in rare instances they lead us back to the poet's own work. My friend and mentor Kenneth Burke once said that a critic must ask what a writer intended to do for himself or herself by creating a specific work. But I would amend Burke's law: the critic must ask not simply what the writer intended to accomplish as a person but what he or she intended to accomplish *as a writer.*

Inevitably, *The Anatomy of Influence* maps my own copious anxieties of influence: Johnson, Pater, Jewish traditions, Freud, Gershom Scholem, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Emerson, Kenneth Burke, Frye, and above all the poets. As my last reflection on influence, the question that has preoccupied me for more than fifty years, it unfolds in relation to my previous commentary on this topic, perhaps especially *The Anxiety of Influence,* which remains my major statement to date. In that sense *The Anatomy of Influence* too is a Valérian investigation, mapping the influence of a mind on itself and of works on their author.

Copyrighted material

More than any other I have written, this book is a critical self-portrait, a sustained meditation on the writings and readings that have shaped me as a person and a critic. Now in my eightieth year, I remain gripped by particular questions. Why has influence been my obsessive concern? How have my own reading experiences shaped my thinking? Why have some poets found me and not others? What is the end of a literary life?

Recently I stared unhappily at parts of a DVD my wife brought home, an ambivalent movie called *The Good Shepherd,* directed and scripted out of a Yale that I would have said never was had I not been a marginal graduate student and faculty instructor in the early and mid-fifties. No favorite of that quasi-university centered on the undergraduates of Skull and Bones, and loathing what it represented, I survived by subduing my gentle nature and teaching my barbarous students with an initial aggressivity and hostility that I now scarcely can credit, so contrary was it to my mild and shy *Yiddishkeit* (what other term could be appropriate?). Well beyond a half-century later, I encounter certain remnants of my earliest Yale students, and sometimes warily exchange memories. When I tell them they were unteachable, a number affirm they might have learned more had I manifested even an iota of affection. Dimly I recall wishing that many of them could have been sold to the Barbary pirates, who might have instructed them more appropriately.

When I was twenty-four or thereabouts, this cohort among my students seemed the enemy, if only because they assumed *they* were the United States and Yale, while I was a visitor. After nearly six decades, I regard myself as a perpetual visitor at Yale but begin to believe everyone, alas, is also.

I try to teach in what I take to be the spirit of the sages—Akiba, Ishmael, Tarphon—but realize that they would have regarded me as another of the *minim,* like my hero Elisha ben Abuya, proscribed as the Stranger, *Acher,* or the Other, a Gnostic heretic. But we are now a remnant. Between the United States, Israel, and Europe, there are not twelve million of us remaining who affirm a Jewish identity.

My vocation as a teacher was Jewish in its origin, and in old age becomes more so. I have tried to build a hedge around the secular Western canon, my Torah, one that includes Tanakh but yields to Shakespeare's aesthetic and cognitive primacy. The answer to the Hebraic "Where shall wisdom be found?" is multiform, yet most universal in Falstaff, Rosalind, Hamlet, Cleopatra, and Lear's godson Edgar.

At moments I am uneasy, dividing my few remaining years of teaching be-

Copyrighted material

Shakespeare, the Founder

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

SHAKESPEARE'S PEOPLE

A professional teacher these past fifty-five years, I have for a long time now led two discussion groups, one on Shakespeare and the other on poets from Chaucer to Hart Crane. My experience of the two is very different. I attempt to unravel rhetoric in Shakespeare, as I do in Milton or Keats or Crane, but then urgencies arise that militate against this. Falstaff transcends even the florabundance of his diction and images, and Hamlet sublimely parodies our analytics. Teaching Shakespeare you teach consciousness, the drive and its defenses, the disorders of the human, the abysses of personality, the warping of ethos into pathos. That is to say, you teach the range of love, of suffering, of the tragedy of the familial. You dimly hope to win some iota of Shakespeare's own detachment or disinterestedness, but you come up against the chagrin of recognizing that what you considered your own emotions were originally Shakespeare's thoughts.

That life imitates art is an ancient realization, famously revitalized by Oscar Wilde. If Shakespeare's protagonists indeed are "free artists of themselves," as Hegel suggests, we should be not surprised that they move us to desire such freedom for ourselves, even though we cannot be Falstaff or Cleopatra. Actors know this better than most of us can. Their purpose in playing Shakespeare is to assert their own disciplined freedom against the challenge of roles too large to be realized: Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth. And yet the roles themselves

Copyrighted material

threaten the plays: Hamlet and Lear cannot be cabined, cribbed, confined by Shakespeare's text. They break the vessels that he prepared for them.

Vagaries of fashion drift out of the academy even as they first flood in. The Shakespearean critics who to me matter most before our own time and after Johnson are Maurice Morgann, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and A. C. Bradley. Even in our bad era we have had Harold Goddard, William Empson, Kenneth Burke, Frank Kermode, and A. D. Nuttall, who maintained the realization that Shakespeare most mattered because his men and women are ever-living representations of complete human beings. What informs such a realization? It precedes all criticism of Shakespeare, and only developing it in something like Shakespeare's own spirit can hope, in this belated age, to transmute opinion into true criticism. By Shakespeare's own spirit I mean here his capacious detachment or remove, that Kierkegaardian "resonance of the opposite." The art of writing lines, replies, which express a passion with full tone and complete imaginative intensity, and in which you can none the less catch the resonance of its opposite—this is an art which no poet has practiced except the unique poet Shakespeare. Such resonance enables our sympathy with Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth, who by negation speak *for us* as much as to us. Hazlitt said, "We are Hamlet." Darker to say, "We are Iago." Dostoyevsky, unlike Tolstoy a thankful receiver of Shakespeare, would not have wished us to say, "We are Svidrigailov" or "We are Stavrogin," but Shakespeare is larger. No one could want to be the cad Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well,* yet there is a touch of Parolles in nearly everyone I have known: "Merely the thing I am shall make me live."

The miracle of Shakespearean representation is its contaminating power: one hundred major characters and a thousand adjacent figures throng our streets and sidle into our lives. Dickens and Balzac, Austen and Proust more selectively have something of this force to contaminate a heterocosm. Joyce, had he chosen, might have excelled them all, but he isolated his energy upon language, allowing only Leopold Bloom—Poldy—a Shakespearean variety and scope in personality and character.

Joyce envied Shakespeare his audience at the Globe, which had the amplitude to allow an art that appealed to all social classes and degrees of literacy. Shakespeare, after his apprenticeship to Marlowe, educated that audience beyond its limits. Then, schooled by Shakespeare, audiences infuriated Ben Jonson by rejecting his stiffly classical tragedies *Cataline* and *Sejanus.* Reading them now, I wince, embarrassed for this superb poet and moralist, whose *Volpone*

Copyrighted material

and *The Alchemist* remain wonderfully playable and readable. Shakespeare's Roman tragedies had spoiled Jonson's for audiences, to Jonson's understandable resentment.

Consciousness is the *materia poetica* that Shakespeare sculpts as Michelangelo sculpts marble. We *feel* the consciousness of Hamlet or Iago, and our own consciousness strangely expands. The experience of reading Shakespeare is one of a greater widening of our consciousness into what initially must seem a strangeness of woe or wonder. As we go out to meet a larger consciousness, we metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that sets aside moral judgment, while wonder transmutes into a more imaginative understanding.

Shakespeare's most capacious consciousnesses are those of Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, and Cleopatra. That is a common judgment and accurate. Some more limited cognizances in the plays are nearly as enigmatic: Hal/Henry V, Shylock, Malvolio, Vincentio, Leontes, Prospero, Othello, Edmund, Macbeth. For me the strangest and most enigmatic is Edgar, who has defied the understanding of almost all critics and failed to provoke sympathy all but universally. But the failure is ours: we wonder at him and refuse to reimagine his strangeness for ourselves.

Partly this is a matter of Shakespearean perspectivism, which frequently gives us personages more adroit in self-understanding than we manage to be. Hamlet is notoriously interpreted by directors, actors, and scholars so shallowly as to seem transparent. If you cannot even be certain that your murderous Cain of an uncle is not actually your biological father, what can you know? If everything is questionable, is even the fiction of cause and effect plausible? Hamlet's worthiest disciples are Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, also free artists of themselves. Nietzsche emphasizes that anything we can express is already dead in our hearts. That is why Hamlet comes to feel such contempt for the act of speaking. Kierkegaard instructs us to listen for "the resonance of the opposite" each time Hamlet utters a conviction or an affect.

Shakespeare himself is neither Nietzschean nor Kierkegaardian, atheist nor Christian, nihilist nor humanist, and he is no more Falstaff than he is Hamlet. Everyone and no one, as Borges remarked. Nevertheless I persuade myself that I find him more uncannily in certain utterances than in most others. No one speaks for him or as him, but some speeches resonate with peculiar authority. Shylock's "gaping pig" tirade hurts me more than I am easy in acknowledging, though I do not know why. Is he more mad or malevolent? Or even if it be half and half, can we doubt that indeed he would happily have carved up Antonio?—a

Copyrighted material

Hamlet the prince and player is one kind of mystery or strangeness. His play notoriously is another, one that breaks with theatrical convention and literary tradition. Joseph Loewenstein sagely argued that *Hamlet* is an agonistic play, overgoing Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe (and Robert Greene, who had defamed Shakespeare) by returning to Vergil. How much of Euripides Shakespeare could have read is uncertain, and perhaps I confound Euripides with Montaigne, palpably a resort for *Hamlet* and for Hamlet, play and prince. The Euripidean unease with the gods, to grow stronger in *King Lear,* seems yet another strand in the Shakespearean capaciousness here. Nothing can go right in Elsinore because the nature of the cosmos is askew.

Angus Fletcher, commenting upon the later Wittgenstein's rather ambivalent vision of Shakespeare, notes that Wittgenstein is wholly metaphoric in characterizing him. I am fascinated that Fletcher is less concerned than I am about Wittgenstein's Tolstoyan reservations in regard to Shakespeare. Wittgenstein found Shakespeare too English, which is like asserting that Tolstoy was too Russian. But Fletcher is concerned with a rich formulation he terms "iconographies of thought" and is unbothered by the deprecation of "thinking in literature" by Hume, J. L. Austin, and Wittgenstein. "Deprecation" is not at all the precise word for Wittgenstein's stance toward Shakespeare, but what he extends with rhetorical open palm he qualifies with clenched fist. Wittgenstein's Shakespeare is a "creator of language" rather than a poet, a description I cannot understand. Yet metaphor is Shakespeare's instrument both for language making and for thinking. Unlike Aristotle, Wittgenstein evades the work of figuration, which may be why he undervalued Freud as a mere—if powerful—mythologist. Wittgenstein's "new natural linguistic forms" are, as Fletcher observes, the very outlines of thought. Consider Hamlet's bewildering cascade of metaphors for thinking or Shakespeare's own figures of thought in the Sonnets. Fletcher shows that Shakespeare's thinking embraces a larger scope of mental activities than the philosophical. These include "perceptions, cognitions of all sorts, judgments, ruminations, analysis, synthesis, and heightened figurations of inner states."

Reading Tolstoy, Wittgenstein was captured, like the rest of us, by what seems to be the earth itself crying out. Tolstoy is a total artist of narrative, in which the art itself is nature. Shakespeare differs because (except in the Sonnets) he thinks through his characters, and the strongest of them think by and with metaphor. We as yet do not know enough about our own thinking through, by, and with metaphor. Yet I venture the Nietzschean reflection that

Copyrighted material

all metaphor is a mistaking in the name of life. Hart Crane, the most intensely metaphorical of all poets, is neglected as a thinker because his "logic of metaphor" is so difficult. "Adagios of islands" is glossed by Crane as the slow rocking movement of a small boat traversing islets, yet its meaning is covertly that of homoerotic sexual intercourse. Stevens in 1945 wrote a subtle poem with the excruciating title "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors." The wood doves, sacred to Venus, are singing, but the bass lie deep, fearful of the waterish spears of Indians who hunted their ancestors. A fisherman, all ear and eye, presumably represents the poet, who offers the dove singularity of survival by the master of metaphor:

> The fisherman might be the single man
> In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still.

Since the wood dove, like Whitman's mockingbird and hermit thrush, aches for fulfillment, the metaphoric transposition of dove into fisherman is a token of thought usurping passion, a Shakespearean victory. Stevens is aware that we cannot work out any precise relationship between thinking and poetry, but in Shakespeare more than in anyone else they fuse.

Freud implied that only great souls (his own included) could liberate thinking from its sexual past, from the infant's curiosity as to origins. Remembering was the mode of freedom. Shakespeare, the sublime of literature, had no illusions that thought could be desexualized. The poetry of Donne, Jonson, Sidney, Spenser, and above all Marlowe and Marvell refute Freud's idealization as well. Milton, Shakespeare's unwilling ephebe, gives us the tragic thinker Satan as the archetype of this dilemma. Freud wanted to prefer Milton to Shakespeare, but was too intelligent a reader to manage the displacement.

Fletcher wonderfully contrasts Satan's way of thinking to Don Quixote's. Satan, magnificent solipsist, can hold a dialogue only with himself. The Knight and Sancho *can* listen to one another, and influence one another by conversation. In Shakespeare, I do not find that anyone ever truly listens to anyone else: whom can Hamlet hear except the Ghost? The dying Antony cannot persuade Cleopatra to comprehend him because she is acting the great part of Cleopatra. Prospero will not listen, nor will Lear or Macbeth. Tragedy in Shakespeare has many roots and many consequences, one of which is that it has persuaded us not to listen to one another.

Yet ultimately it is misleading to speak of Shakespeare the thinker. Milton the thinker is possible, as is Hamlet the thinker, but Shakespeare the speculator

Copyrighted material

or the wonderer better suits the poet-dramatist who makes us into wonder-wounded hearers. Shakespeare the inventor would be admirable, but few understand any more what Dr. Johnson meant by "the essence of poetry is invention."

Philosophy commences in wonder but journeys into the probable. Shakespeare never abandons the possible, and we abide there with him.

Genre has little relevance for apprehending Shakespeare. In its larger contours his work moved from comedy to tragedy and on to a final phase some scholars miscall romance. *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are of no genre yet usefully can be named tragicomedy. His two central achievements in my judgment are the Falstaffiad (*Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* and Mistress Quickly's elegy for Sir John in *Henry V*) and *Hamlet.* To call the Falstaff plays histories does not illuminate; perhaps tragicomedies is a better identification. *Hamlet,* a poem unlimited, after four centuries remains the most experimental drama ever written. The dark comedies and tragedies of blood that followed were made possible by the composition of *Hamlet.*

The succession of the grandest Shakespearean characters moves from Falstaff and Rosalind through Hamlet on to Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, and Prospero. The immense wealth of Shakespeare's invention also comprises the Bastard Faulconbridge, Juliet, Bottom, Shylock, Hal/Henry V, Brutus, Malvolio, Othello, Edmund, Edgar, Antony, Leontes, Caliban, and so many more. But the central triad remains Falstaff, Hamlet, and Cleopatra, the quick of an invented world.

At the close of Plato's *Symposium,* Socrates explains to Aristophanes and Agathon (a young tragic dramatist) that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy. The challenge ultimately was accepted by Ben Jonson, who failed at tragedy, and by Shakespeare, still unique among the world's playwrights for his achievements in both. Molière composed comedies and Racine tragedies, as did Schiller and Goethe. Kleist is of no genre, but he is dark, and so are Chekhov, Ibsen, Pirandello, Beckett—all masters of tragicomedy.

There are many unanswerable paradoxes presented by Shakespeare but one such is, How could the same dramatist have written *As You Like It* and *Othello, A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear, Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth*? Yet even that is less enigmatic than, How could *anyone* have composed *Hamlet*? Of all literary works I have read it remains the most challenging. Why does its protagonist take up all imaginative space? Everything else in Western literature either prepares for it or dwells in its enduring shadow.

Copyrighted material

There is no useful critical distinction between prince and play. How many readers and audiences these four centuries have had the odd conviction that Hamlet is their secret sharer, a "real person" somehow dropped onto a stage where actors surround him? Out-Pirandelloing the Sicilian master, Hamlet seems to protest being in any play at all, let alone what he scorns as the wrong play for someone of his genius. Indeed, a revenge tragedy is an absurd vehicle for a consciousness unlimited. Any malcontent could hack Claudius down in act 1, or, if momentarily balked, could keep at it like a monomaniac until the slaughter was accomplished. Hamlet alone senses that his quest is metaphysical, perhaps an agon with God or the gods in order to win the name Hamlet away from his putative father. Who is the usurper: the warrior King Hamlet, the adulterous King Claudius, or the Black Prince?

In *The Question of Hamlet* (1959), Harry Levin accurately observed that everything in *Hamlet* was questionable, including the play's questionings. "What do I know?" might be the play's motto. Clearly the prince has read Montaigne as deeply as we go on reading Freud, who teaches us to question our own moral psychology.

Hamlet's capacious consciousness cannot be overemphasized. No other character in all Western literature can rival the prince in quickness of mind. Where else is intelligence so persuasively dramatized? One thinks of Molière's Alceste, but even he is too limited in range of intellect. There is no circumference to Hamlet's mind: his circles of thought spiral outward and downward. To ask why Shakespeare endowed Hamlet with what I assume is the full scope of the poet's own cognitive strength seems to me a risk, for how can we surmise an answer? The poetic mind at its most incandescent changes our concept of motives, which was one of Kenneth Burke's teachings. Shakespearean motivation in his greatest villains—Iago, Macbeth, Edmund—is so fused as to appear motiveless. Iago feels betrayed by the commander for whom, as flag officer, he was prepared to die. Macbeth, sexually baffled in his enormous desire for his wife, evidently hopes to reestablish his manhood in her estimate. Edmund truly is motiveless: who can believe his assertion that he needs to stand up for bastardhood? What is desire to Edmund? He cares neither for Goneril nor Regan, Gloucester nor Edgar, Lear nor Cordelia. Does he care for his own life? He throws it away against a nameless avenger who turns out to be his transfigured half-brother. Monstrously intelligent, Edmund suspects who his adversary is and what the result is likely to be, but for the bastard usurper sprezzatura is as much a necessity as it was for Hotspur, or for the poetry of Yeats.

Copyrighted material

It was Yeats himself who, in a rather brutal letter to Sean O'Casey explaining the Abbey Theater's refusal of *The Silver Tassie* in 1928, recognized this relationship:

> Dramatic action is the fire that must burn up everything but itself; there should be no room in a play for anything that does not belong to it; the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak.
>
> Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions; while he is writing he has no business to know anything that is not a portion of that action. Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed? As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of that education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself, and had altogether different beliefs. A dramatist can help his characters to educate him by thinking and studying everything that gives them the language they are groping for through his hands and eyes, but the control must be theirs, and that is why the ancient philosophers thought a poet or dramatist Daimon-possessed.

Setting aside the blatant unfairness of bringing up *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to demolish O'Casey's fair-to-middling drama, this seems to me a classical statement of the true relation between Shakespeare and his central creations. Yeats, one of the strongest lyric poets in the language, courted the daimon, yet one hardly could say that even the best of his stage dramas burns up his opinions. Is Shakespeare unique in his uncanny detachment? There are also Molière, Chekhov, and Pirandello, though not Racine or Ibsen, who each had his own eminence but was given to visions of the decorums of tragedy.

Shakespeare and Dante, Yeats emphasized in his *Autobiographies,* were poets who achieved a unity of being in their work that gave us "the recreation of the man through the art, the birth of a new species of man." If that is so, then Dante re-created only himself, the Pilgrim. Shakespeare as a person remained one of the old species: Falstaff, Rosalind, Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth, and Cleopatra were a new reinvention of the human.

Confusing Shakespeare with God is ultimately legitimate. Other writers—Eastern and Western—attain sublimity and can give us one to three memorable

Copyrighted material

The Heart of Midlothian. Manzoni's lovers are more than vivid enough without Shakespearean enhancement, while Pip and David Copperfield are somewhat at variance with overtones of Prince Hamlet. Most strikingly, *Pierre* sinks beneath Hamletian weightings, and even Captain Ahab cannot challenge Macbeth, whom he echoes too readily.

The burden is that Shakespeare, more even than Dante, is too immense to be accommodated by those who came later unless he is modulated into a lyrical ancestor, Keats's accomplishment in his great odes or Whitman's in his surprising allusion to King Lear's godson Edgar in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Within drama, Shakespeare must be handled obliquely, as he was by Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, and Beckett, or else you end up with Arthur Miller's involuntary parodies of tragedy.

Some scholars have surmised that Shakespeare abandoned acting as he labored on *Measure for Measure* and *Othello,* which seems correct to me. Perhaps he doubled as the ghost and Player-King in *Hamlet* and took the role of the French king in *All's Well That Ends Well* but recoiled from playing Vincentio in his troubled farewell to comedy, the wonderfully rancid *Measure for Measure.* Molière acted right down to his end in and as *The Imaginary Invalid,* but Shakespeare always had been a role player or character actor, perpetually secondary to Richard Burbage and to the company's clown, first Will Kemp and then Robert Armin. A new kind of perspectivism enters *Measure for Measure* and *Othello,* as Shakespeare learns to trust his audience more.

In fourteen consecutive months, from 1605 to 1606, Shakespeare composed *King Lear, Macbeth,* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* He was forty-one to forty-two and clearly upon his heights as a dramatist. *King Lear* and *Macbeth,* like *Othello,* are tragedies of blood, but what genre is *Antony and Cleopatra*? Properly directed and acted it is the funniest of all Shakespearean plays, though as a double tragedy it eclipses *Romeo and Juliet.* Tragicomedy and history play do not fit the overwhelming conclusions of act 4, the death of Antony, and of act 5, Cleopatra's sublime self-immolation, in contrast to Antony's bungled suicide. And yet Antony's painful death is qualified for us by Cleopatra's superb role-playing: we attend to her far more than to him. Cleopatra's death is worthy of her self-dramatizing myth, but qualified by the extraordinary dialogue between her and the asp-selling clown: "Will it eat me?" Like *Hamlet, Antony and Cleopatra* is a poem unlimited, beyond genre. A. C. Bradley, who resisted its tragic dimension, nevertheless exalted Cleopatra as the inexhaustible equal of Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago.

We have not yet caught up to these characters, nor to their plays.

Copyrighted material

THE RIVAL POET

"King Lear"

Christopher Marlowe in his *Tamburlaine,* a brazen attack upon *any* societal morality, associates poetry, love, and warfare as closely related expressions of power. Marlowe, by temperament and conviction, was not a Christian. His dialectics of power and of beauty are as pagan as Tamburlaine's. Except for his worship of power, Marlowe had no ideology.

Shakespeare's plays and poems are beyond institutional religion as they are beyond political ideology. Wary of the fate of Marlowe—murdered by the Elizabethan CIA, which he had served—Shakespeare allowed himself no explicit critique of anything contemporary. And yet his daimon impelled a more profound break with Renaissance humanist tradition than Marlowe needed or wanted. We are in no position to perceive the scope of Shakespeare's originality because we are inside Shakespeare's rhetoric whether we have read him or not, and his tropes are largely his own creation.

Shakespeare clearly is not an exalter of power: even Henry V is presented equivocally, and it is not sentimentalism to affirm that Falstaff, both in his glory and when he is rejected, meant more to Shakespeare and his audience than did England's hero-king. Falstaff, in one perspective, is a mark of Shakespeare's emancipation from Marlowe, though traces will remain from *Henry V* on. I often ask myself, What would Marlowe have made of Sir John? The worlds of Tamburlaine, the Guise, Edward II, Barabas, and Dr. Faustus would be reduced to cartoon frames if the living being Falstaff were to burst into them.

Copyrighted material

Yet without Marlowe, Shakespeare would not have learned how to acquire immense power over an audience. Tamburlaine *is* Marlowe the poet-dramatist. Shakespeare, miraculously able to conceal the inner dynamics of his art, complexly parodies Marlowe in *Titus Andronicus* but does not free himself from his dangerous precursor in *Richard III*. In some ways Marlowe was never wholly exorcized; how could he be? I envision the young Shakespeare attending a performance of *Tamburlaine* and watching the audience with fascination. The possibility of the sublime of power—*King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra*—was born at the moment of Marlowe's impact upon Shakespeare.

How do you overcome a great original like Marlowe, with whom you served your apprenticeship? Marlowe and Shakespeare knew each other; they could not have avoided it. Shakespeare, evidently a cautious person dedicated to self-conservation, must have been careful to steer clear of Marlowe, a quick man with a dagger who was slain indeed by his own dagger (not a suicide but a state-arranged murder). Though there is Marlovian rhetoric as late as the post-Falstaffian *Henry V*, employed ironically, I would emphasize again Shakespeare's greatest debt to Marlowe: the example of gaining astonishing power over a large audience through one's rhetoric. Shakespeare's enormous vocabulary—more than twenty-one thousand words, some eighteen hundred of them fresh coinage—dwarfs Marlowe's, and the mature rhetoric (from about 1595 on) breaks not only with Marlowe but with all of Renaissance humanism. Yet always present in Shakespeare's consciousness there would have been an awareness of watching both *Tamburlaine* and its enthralled audience.

This kind of influence relationship may be unique. The stance of Euripides toward Aeschylus or of Dante in regard to Guido Cavalcanti is very different from Shakespeare's beholding a new theater in *Tamburlaine*. I do not undervalue Marlowe by observing that the grandest Shakespearean characters have an inwardness beyond Marlowe's genius. But to have invented a dramatic control *over the audience* in which Tamburlaine's vauntings enlist them as potential allies or victims is a surpassingly strange breakthrough. Shakespeare's infinite art far surpasses this, but required it as starting point.

Marlowe exults in the "pathetical persuasion" with which Tamburlaine converts the forces sent against him into his own cohorts and clearly implies that this rhetorical power mirrors the Marlovian capture of the audience. Iago is one of Shakespeare's ultimate triumphs over his apprenticeship to Marlowe's uncanny art. We the audience are in thrall to Iago and could share his demonic joy as he goes on discovering his genius. We don't altogether, though Shakespeare,

Copyrighted material

as always, gives us no moral guidance whatsoever. The Christian moralist in Dr. Johnson reacted very fiercely against this Shakespearean refusal to moralize, until at last the Great Cham of literary criticism collapsed into the absurdity of preferring the poetaster Nahum Tate's revision of *King Lear,* which ends with the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar.

Yet Shakespeare swerved from Marlowe, where moral maxims abound but invert easily, to found a new freedom of distance, unlike any other stance in imaginative literature. Ben Jonson was a severe classical moralist, even as Marlowe was totally equivocal in his only apparent judgments. Long before Samuel Johnson, Shakespeare knew that the good and evil of eternity were too ponderous for the wings of wit. One of Shakespeare's inventions (prophetic of Nietzsche) was a new kind of perspectivism, in which what we see and hear is what we are.

It is not possible to think coherently about Shakespeare's deepest purposes in his giant art. Our philosophy or theology or politics are set aside by him, without even a casual shrug. Ideology is nothing to him. His surrogates in transcendence, Hamlet, and in immanence, Falstaff, expose all idealizing as so much cant. Action is discredited by Hamlet; "honor," responsibility, service to the state are laughed to nothingness by Falstaff.

How is it that Shakespeare, who had no designs upon us, surpasses any other writer—even Dante, Cervantes, and Tolstoy—in revealing the full burden of our mortality? The least tendentious of dramatists, he nevertheless teaches us the reality of our lives and the necessity of confronting our common limitations as humans. I say "teaches" but the use of this word is misleading since Shakespeare, so far as we can tell, has no desire to instruct us.

You can reread, teach, and write about Shakespeare all your life and never get beyond finding him an enigma. Milton, who wants to be a monist, remains binary, and perhaps was conflicted down to the end: *Samson Agonistes* is hardly a Christian dramatic poem. It is Miltonic and therefore personal. *Macbeth,* like *King Lear,* seems to me what William Elton called a pagan play for a Christian audience. Shakespeare cannot be discussed by invoking categories like the monistic or the divided self. The late A. D. Nuttall wrote a wonderful final book in his *Shakespeare the Thinker,* which celebrates the poet-dramatist's freedom from all ideology. But I tend to shy away from philosophy in regard to Shakespeare, unless you wish to consider Montaigne a philosopher. A skeptical awareness that our lives are perpetually in flux, that we are always undergoing change, separates Montaigne and Shakespeare from Plato. Montaigne, who knows

Copyrighted material

everything that matters, professes to know nothing. Shakespeare, preternaturally able to pick up on any hint, clue, or indirection, does not profess at all.

I venture that Shakespeare's marvelous remove stems in some large part from his influence relationship to Marlowe, who exalts the agonistic in art, love, war. Except in the Rival Poet sonnets, Shakespeare seldom expresses this agon, setting aside Prince Hal/Henry V. Shakespeare's contest with literary anteriority operates between the lines. His major influences after Marlowe are the Geneva Bible, Ovid, and Chaucer. They yield him materia poetica, which he cheerfully pillages wherever he can find it. After *Richard III* and a few moments in *Henry V,* he finds little in Marlowe to appropriate. The consciousness of what he never stopped owing to Marlowe is another matter, on which we can only speculate. Chaucer plagiarizes Boccaccio, whom he never mentions while citing fictive authorities. Yet the example of Boccaccio was even more important: storytelling about stories, Chaucer's resource, is quarried from the Italian precursor.

Shakespeare conceivably could have become himself without Marlowe, but his astounding power to bring us woe or wonder as we attend a performance or enact a scene in the theater of mind might have been curtailed, or at least postponed. Shakespeare took his *idea* of an audience from Marlowe and then refined it.

The traces of Renaissance humanism in Marlowe's plays and poems can be oddly discordant, though they abide, but the usurpation of power is a debased Machiavellianism that would have startled Erasmus. We do not know how Athenian audiences were affected by the three great tragic dramatists. Norman Austin points out that, as for Plato, their agon was with Homer. When I reflect on Marlowe's enterprise, I find it to be without precedent, even though Shakespeare's capaciousness has obscured Marlowe's audacity. A grand nihilist, Marlowe saw all ideology as absurd. Distrusting state ideologues who had murdered Marlowe and broken Thomas Kyd by torture, Shakespeare grew into his astonishing remove—but that word is arbitrary. No one has been able to describe with exactitude where Shakespeare stands with regard to his own creation. Our best hope is to trace the crossings between the early and later plays. And here I believe that Shakespeare's ever-evolving relationship to Marlowe is vital. In early plays, such as *Titus Andronicus,* Marlowe is a looming presence who threatens to overwhelm Shakespeare; in later plays like *Lear* and *The Tempest,* Marlowe is a possession, subsumed by Shakespeare's effort to overcome his own giant art.

Copyrighted material

and caricatures, emptinesses into whom he can instill his amazingly effective hyperboles. “The proud full sail of his great verse,” Shakespeare calls Marlowe’s incantatory medium in a sonnet on the Rival Poet.

Assimilating Marlowe to one’s own destructive muse—Southampton or another—could have been performed even by a poet who did not have Shakespeare’s capacious soul. To *integrate* Marlowe with an equivocal male muse is to touch the negative sublime and is worthier of Shakespeare’s uniqueness. After Marlowe’s murder in a Deptford tavern, he haunts Shakespeare, rather surprisingly in *As You Like It,* the most high-spirited of Shakespeare’s plays.

The ghostly Marlowe, in my unsupported surmise, also inhabits the formidable Edmund, arch-villain of *King Lear.* William Elton helpfully remarked the proleptic confluence of Don Juan and the Machiavel in Edmund, an amalgam evidently visible in Marlowe’s public persona and totally lacking in the colorless Shakespeare. Marlowe’s actual psychological orientation, like his religious stance, we never will know. Francis Walsingham’s CIA not only terminated him with maximum prejudice, it tortured his friend Thomas Kyd so as to obtain a confession establishing Marlowe as an atheist and a sodomite. Edmund worships the goddess Nature and seduces both Goneril and Regan with insouciance.

One of the major unexplored topoi in Shakespeare is the struggle between the enemy half-brothers Edmund and Edgar. Shakespeare presents us with two enigmas: why does Edmund seek power, and what are we to think of the recalcitrant Edgar? A prominent modern critic calls Edgar “a weak and murderous character,” which is altogether untrue. A more eminent exegete, the late A. D. Nuttall, located a sadistic element in Edgar (which I dispute) but interestingly viewed it as an expiatory gesture by Shakespeare in regard to the torments visited upon the audience of *King Lear.*

I think that neither Edgar nor Edmund can be apprehended in isolation from the other. Even in mutual relationship, it is uncertain whether either half-brother can be fully comprehended. Edmund burns away his self-understanding with titanic ironies, while Edgar defies any reasonable limits by punishing himself for his gullibility toward Edmund. Intellectually Edmund is the superior and possesses a dangerous capacity for self-interest that is free of all affect, including love, morality, and compassion. In contrast, Edgar learns reality slowly, yet so surely that he becomes the inevitable avenger of his father and the certain destroyer of Edmund, who simply has no chance against him in their final duel to the death.

Edgar is the legitimate son of Gloucester and is Lear’s godson. Shakespeare

Copyrighted material

jumps over several intervening kings so as to present Edgar, at the play's close, as the reluctant new king of Britain, following Lear. Tradition, known to many in Shakespeare's audience, told of Edgar's troubled reign fighting the wolves that had overrun the kingdom. Shakespeare subtly prefigures the darkness of Edgar's fate throughout the play. There is a continuous flow of radical change as Edgar develops, while Edmund continually unfolds until he receives his death wound and only then starts to change, a shattering moment too late to save Cordelia, whose murder he had commanded.

Perhaps Nuttall is partly correct in venturing that Shakespeare projects onto Edgar the dramatist's own unease at his audience's suffering, so that the blinded and suicidal Gloucester becomes our surrogate. I would go beyond Nuttall and suggest that Edgar, throughout the play, is a darkening self-portrait of crucial elements in Shakespeare's poetic mind. Edmund, who is overtly theatrical, delights in his Marlovian rhetorical power over everyone to whom he speaks. Is that why Edmund and Lear never address each other, even though they are onstage together at the inception and conclusion of the tragedy?

Shakespeare, as I observe throughout, is the major master of ellipsis in the history of theater. We have to interpret what he leaves out, a challenge from *The Comedy of Errors* through *The Tempest.* In *The Tragedy of King Lear,* much is given to our own perspectivizing, which is most challenged by the antithetical personalities of Edgar and Edmund. Meditating upon their catastrophic relationship, I am tempted to the surmise that poems in regard to one another resemble that relationship, and so do poets. Shakespeare, subtlest of dramatists, has made both half-brothers difficult to apprehend, though once we come to know them deeply they *can* be comprehended, unlike Lear, who is beyond us. Edmund is seductive and Edgar seems antipathetic, but that is our weakness as readers. (I will not say "as audience," because every *King Lear* I have tried to attend has been lamentable. The great king is too sublime for stage representation, and Edgar's is too complex a role to be assimilated in any theater except the theater of mind. I can think of no part in all of Shakespeare that I have seen so ineptly preformed as Edgar's.)

Edmund's quest for power is affectless, and therefore initially resistant to analogies. It can be observed that Edmund *needs* no one, himself included. He seeks, however, rhetorical control over everyone, in what may be a Shakespearean tribute to Marlowe's singular drive. I rarely get the sense that Shakespeare relies solely on a sway of rhetoric to hold his audience. His irony is too vast for that, and is best exemplified by the monarch of wit, Falstaff, who mocks

Copyrighted material

everything and everyone, and does not deign to spare himself. March Sir John into *King Lear*—outrageous notion—and he would infuriate the cold Edmund by unmasking him immediately. A. C. Bradley asked us to visualize Hamlet confronting Iago and driving the Venetian Machiavel to suicide by immediately parodying him. Falstaff and Hamlet share the genius of demystification in Shakespeare; sometimes in my unruly fashion I follow my much-missed friend, the late Anthony Burgess, in the mental enterprise of wondering how Hamlet and Falstaff would have fared in the same play. Neither of them given to silences, or addicted to listening, possibly they might simply talk past one another, yet the two most capacious consciousnesses in all imaginative literature might have surpassed expectation.

The Marlovian Edmund exercises an ambivalent power over the audience; the Shakespearean Edgar does not. One benefit of mastering the uses of misprision in literature is to learn how to interpret Edgar, who until now has been a failing test for criticism. It surprises my students when I point out to them that Edgar speaks far more lines in the play than anyone except Lear. The centrality of Edgar for Shakespeare's contemporary audience can be judged from the title page of the First Quarto: "M. William Shak-speare: His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam." Shakespeare uses *sullen* to mean a kind of madness of melancholia, but also mournfulness. Uncannily, it is Edmund who first mentions Tom of Bedlam (1.2.134–36), just as Edgar makes his first entrance: "Pat! He comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam."

Since Edgar does not hear this, there is a suggestion of a kind of occult connection between the half-brothers. Edmund, as dramaturgical as Iago, confronts a far easier gull than the formidable Othello. Edgar is credulous, gentle, innocent, and without guile, and swiftly becomes Edmund's fool or victim. Shakespeare does not give us Edgar's motives for descending past the bottom of the social scale and assuming the disguise of a roaring Mad Tom: "Poor Tom! / That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am." This total descent is hardly a weak or murderous character, though a masochistic strain of self-punishment is clear enough. When poor Tom and the mad King Lear encounter one another (act 3, scene 4) we marvel at the histrionic skill of Edgar, who could have been playing a Bedlamite all his days. Few passages even in Shakespeare are as evocative as Edgar's response to the king's "Art thou come to this?"

Copyrighted material

> Who gives any thing to poor Tom? whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire; that hath laid knives under his pillow, and halters in his pew, set ratsbane by his porridge, made him proud of heart, to ride on a bay trotting-horse over four-inch'd bridges, to course his own shadow for a traitor. Bless thy five wits! Tom's a-cold—O do de, do de, do de. Bless thee from whirlwinds, star-blasting, and taking! Do poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes. There could I have him now—and there—and there again—and there.

Ravening self-abnegation is Edgar's downward path to a limited kind of wisdom. He seeks a torturous path upward that will lead him to save his father, though nothing can ever fully explain why his father's despair is "trifled" with by him (as he admits). There is also the drive to vindicate familial honor by cutting down Edmund, which in the climactic duel Edgar performs with frightening ease. Playing Tom o' Bedlam is an education in internal violence, and to some degree Edgar approaches madness by simulating it, in Hamlet's wake. When the insane king addresses his disguised godson as his "philosopher," Shakespeare's unending irony compellingly indicates Poor Tom's mentorship as Lear descends into the abyss. The Fool's fury and Edgar's dissociative refrains fuse to further madden the figure of ultimate authority who both of them catastrophically love.

My late friend William Elton, in his splendid *King Lear and the Gods,* is my precursor in tracing Edgar's development. Elton was concerned with Edgar's relations to the play's pagan deities, but I want a change in emphasis, to chart Edgar's difficult development until at last, in the First Folio text, he takes Albany's place as the unhappy new monarch of Britain. To term Edgar's psychic journey "difficult" understates his transformations. He ends act 3, scene 4, with an extraordinary snatch of verse that we have no evidence not to attribute to Shakespeare himself:

> Child Rowland to the dark tower came,
> His word was still, "Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man."

Two scenes later that will be the blood of his father, Gloucester, streaming from the eyes gouged out by Cornwell. There is generally a prolepsis of the atrocities performed in *King Lear,* and they tend to be uttered by one of Gloucester's

Copyrighted material

sons. The motto of the high tragedy could be Edgar's gnomic summary of Lear, Gloucester, and their offspring: "He childed as I fathered!" Goneril, Regan, and even Edmund are peripheral to that gnome. Lear and Cordelia and Edgar and Gloucester are central. The two loving children were stubborn in their recalcitrance, while both loving fathers were blind, particularly before Gloucester literally was blinded and Lear went mad. Edgar prophesies his own radical "cure" from Gloucester's suicidal drive and looks back at Cordelia's silence, which precipitated the double tragedy. Sonship and daughterhood, like fathering, themselves are seen as tragic by Edgar, who speaks for the play. Whether he is a surrogate for Shakespeare is undecidable, but no one else in this drama fulfills such a role. Perhaps no one could in an apocalypse.

Edmund's forerunners are the Marlovian overreachers Aaron the Moor and Richard III. The creation of Iago—the peer of Falstaff, Hamlet, Cleopatra—marked the triumphant end of the Marlovian strain in Shakespeare. Marlowe returns in Edmund but subdued to Shakespearean nature. His cheerful pledge to Goneril: "Yours in the ranks of death" is true prophecy:

> I was contracted to them both; all three
> Now marry in an instant.

It takes a Marlovian overreacher to make a double date with Goneril and Regan, and Edmund delights us in this. Delight and Edgar are antithetical. Someone in the play must suffer vicariously for everyone else, and Shakespeare elects Edgar. In cutting down Edmund he finally puts paid to Marlowe. Nothing is got for nothing. Who is the interpreter and—if Shakespeare—what is the power he has sought to gain over his own text?

King Lear, set in a Britain a century or so after King Solomon (whether or not Shakespeare imagined that), seems to model its magnificent monarch after the Hebrew ruler and not after Job, as many scholars have thought. There are allusions to the book of Job but also to Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon. For a pagan drama, *King Lear* is rich in biblical echoes, those of the New Testament perhaps being subtler. These allusions do not constitute a pattern of meaning as they would in Blake or D. H. Lawrence or Faulkner. Shakespeare evokes auras but evades doctrines.

James I, the wisest fool in Christendom, delighted by comparisons with Solomon, might be remembered as James the Wise if not for his absurdities. To this day he is the only intellectual among the British monarchs. Lear, like

Copyrighted material

many years ago. I remember standing transfixed in front of the picture for more than an hour until my friend, the late painter Larry Day who had taken me to see it, suddenly murmured, "It is act 4 of *King Lear,* isn't it?"

Agonies are only one of Edgar's changes of garments, which must be why Walt Whitman subtly echoes Edgar in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," section 6. There are many perspectives moving like waves of darkness across our shocked spirits as we read *King Lear,* and Shakespeare privileges none of them. There are only three survivors. Albany, I think, abdicates, presumably because of his guilt at necessarily battling invaders who came to rescue Lear. Kent, loyal to the end, wants only to journey to the undiscovered country where his king has gone. In all of Shakespeare, no new monarch comes to his throne as despairingly as does Edgar. The final quatrain is assigned to him in the First Folio, and I take the thrice repeated "we" to be royal rather than an awkward plural for joint rule by Albany and Edgar. Many in the audience would have known that the historical King Edgar would also see too much but certainly would not reach Lear's eighty years:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say:
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Detachment is the trait Edgar shares with Shakespeare. It or something similar may be regarded as Shakespeare's stance toward all his characters. When Edgar deceives Gloucester in the attempted suicide, he miserably hopes to cure his father's despair by "trifling" with it. Unlike his enemy half-brother, he has no talent for trifling with the lives of others. Something transverse is enacted here. The Marlovian Edmund possesses a large measure—as Iago did—of Shakespeare's genius for botching the lives of those he limned in his night-pieces. Edgar cannot do it except ineptly, but there is nothing Marlovian about Edgar, whom I would term one of the most Shakespearean of all the shadows inhabiting the tragedies.

Copyrighted material

SHAKESPEARE'S ELLIPSIS

"The Tempest"

After Chaucer and Marlowe, Shakespeare's major precursor was the English Bible: the Bishops' Bible up through 1595 and the Geneva Bible from 1596 on, the year that Shylock and Falstaff were created. In speaking of the Bible's influence on Shakespeare, I am referring not to faith or spirituality but to the arts of language: diction, grammar, syntax, rhetorical figures, and the logic of argument. Whether Shakespeare knew it or not, that meant that his deepest model for prose style was the Protestant martyr William Tyndale, whose stark eloquence constitutes about 40 percent of the Geneva Bible, becoming a higher ratio in the Pentateuch and the New Testament. Since Shakespeare's own father was a recusant Catholic, many scholars ascribe Catholic sympathies to the poet-playwright, a judgment that I find rather dubious. I do not know whether Shakespeare the man was Protestant or Catholic, skeptic or occultist, Hermetist or nihilist (though I suspect that last possibility), but the dramatist regularly drew upon the arch-Protestant Geneva Bible throughout the last seventeen years of his productivity. Milton also favored the Geneva Bible, though increasingly I wonder whether the final Milton was not a post-Protestant sect of one, anticipating William Blake and Emily Dickinson.

Among other precursors Ovid gave Shakespeare confirmation of his love of flux and change, the qualities Plato most abhorred. Marlowe at first all but overwhelmed Shakespeare, even in the deliberate parody that is *Titus Andronicus* and the Machiavel Richard III. But Shakespeare so powerfully accomplished a

Copyrighted material

misprision of Marlowe, from at least *Richard II* on, that all the traces of Marlowe became tightly controlled illusions. Chaucer was as crucial to an element in Shakespeare's creation of fictive personalities as Tyndale was to aspects of Shakespeare's style. Elsewhere I have followed Talbot Donaldson's *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* in depicting the effect of the Wife of Bath upon Sir John Falstaff, and I hold to my earlier notion that Shakespeare took a hint from Chaucer in representing persons who change by self-overhearing. Yet even Chaucer, the strongest writer in the language except for Shakespeare, was not the definitive precursor Shakespeare became for himself from 1596 on, when he turned thirty-two and brought Shylock and Falstaff into being.

Can we speak of "Shakespeare Agonistes"? I think there was no such poet. You can speak of "Chaucer Agonistes," who credited nonexistent authorities and would not mention Boccaccio. "Milton Agonistes" should be a byword, but Shakespeare subsumed his influences: Ovid and Marlowe on the surface, William Tyndale and Chaucer far within.

Backgrounding Shakespeare, old style or new, wearies me. Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatist Philip Massinger look the same when the history of their own time is allowed to interpret them. Yet Massinger's writing concerns only a few specialized scholars. Shakespeare's changed everyone, Massinger included, and goes on changing you, me, even the Historicizers and Cynics. What Shakespeare leaves out is more important than what other Elizabethan-Jacobean dramatists put in. All the many elements in Shakespeare's strangeness could plausibly be reduced to his perpetually augmenting elliptical tendency, his development of the art of leaving things out. Appropriately confident of his magical powers over groundlings and the elite alike, he wrote increasingly for something agonistic in himself.

Aldous Huxley has a shrewd essay called "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," which argues that in Homer, when you lose your shipmates you sit down anyway to your meat and wine with gusto and then sleep your losses away. This is counter to Sophoclean tragedy, in which loss is irrevocable and endlessly dark. In Shakespearean tragedy, the Homeric and the Sophoclean fuse, with the English Bible never far away. Genre vanishes in Shakespeare because, contra Huxley, he wants to give himself and you both tragedy and the whole truth. Hamlet, however affected by what appears to be his supposed father's ghost, cannot stop jesting in the mode of his authentic mingled mother-father Yorick, and disrespectfully addresses the Ghost as "old mole."

To accommodate tragedy and the whole truth simultaneously, you must leave

Copyrighted material

as much out as possible, while yet indicating the absences. No alert reader doubts either the tragedy or whole truth of the excruciating plays *Othello* and *King Lear,* both of which are fields of inference where we get lost without realizing our waywardness. When I tell an audience or a student-discussion group that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona was probably never consummated, only rarely do I not face dissent. This is akin to my reception when I insist that the enigmatic Edgar is the other tragic protagonist of *King Lear,* and that he is much its most admirable character, a hero of endurance though with many flaws, who makes mistakes of judgment out of an overwhelming love he cannot learn fully to sustain. Skeptical auditors understandably protest to me, If such interpretations are accurate, why does Shakespeare make it so difficult to arrive at them?

Begin at the other side of this protest: What is clarified in *Othello* if the Moor has never known his wife? What is yet more shattering about *King Lear* if its pragmatic center is Edgar and not the ruined godfather whom he loves and worships? The heroic Moor's vulnerability to Iago's demonic genius becomes far more understandable, particularly if Iago suspects Othello's ambivalent reluctance to posses Desdemona. Edgar is Shakespeare's most profound embodiment of self-punishment, of the spirit splitting apart in the defensive process. If we meditate deeply upon Edgar, we realign Lear's tragedy, since only Edgar and Edmund give us perspectives other than Lear's own on the great king's downward and outward fall into his abyss. This most elaborate of Shakespeare's domestic tragedies depends for its final coherence on the interplay between Lear's incredibly intense feelings, Edmund's icy freedom from all affect, and Edgar's stubborn sufferings, including his acedia, Tom o' Bedlam's "sullen and assumed humor" as the First Quarto's title page phrases it.

Whenever I search for precedents rather than sources for Shakespeare, I arrive more often at Chaucer than at the English Bible, Ovid, or the Ovidian Marlowe. William Blake, commenting on the Wife of Bath, seems to have interpreted her as the incarnation of what he dreaded: the Female Will. These days, I find it necessary to emphasize that Blake found the Female Will as much in men as in women. Chaucer the pilgrim delights in Alice, Wife of Bath, and so do we. Still, even if she disposed of her first three rather feeble husbands with her generously active loins, there is an ellipsis just before her fourth husband so conveniently goes to his funeral, freeing her for the love of her life, her young fifth mate, whom she generously laments. Evidently the inconvenient fourth husband was dealt with handily.

From Chaucer, Shakespeare learned how to conceal his irony by expanding it

Copyrighted material

until sight alone cannot apprehend it. With Hamlet we cannot even hear it. No other literary personage so rarely says what he means or means what he says. This misled the clerical T. S. Eliot, who had unresolved ambivalences toward his own mother, into judging Hamlet to be J. Alfred Prufrock and Shakespeare's play to be "most certainly an artistic failure." With the possible exception of *King Lear, Hamlet* is most certainly the supreme artistic success in Western literature. Eliot, alas a great if tendentious poet, most certainly was one of the worst literary critics of the twentieth century. His refined contempt for Sigmund Freud, the Montaigne of his era, crippled the anti-Semitic oracle who held in sway the academies in my youth.

Richard Ellmann assured me that Joyce always championed the brilliant reading of *Hamlet* given by Stephen in the National Library scene of *Ulysses.* Implicit in that interpretation is the view that Shakespeare's fatherly love for his Hamlet repeats the pattern of Falstaff's love for Hal, a pattern William Empson and C. L. Barber found present in the Sonnets in Shakespeare's betrayed love for Southampton and Pembroke.

The greatest ellipsis in *Hamlet* is its long foregrounding, in which the prince's soul has died. We have to surmise why and how, since the magnitude of his sickness-unto-death has to have long preceded his father's death and mother's remarriage. Our crucial clue is the prince's relationship to Yorick, who bore the boy on his back a thousand times and exchanged so many kisses with an affection-starved child. The signature of the play *Hamlet* is the mature prince holding the skull of Yorick and asking it cruel, unanswerable questions.

There is an occult relation between Hamlet's long malaise and the play's unique and dazzling enigma, the gap cut in mimesis from act 2, scene 2, through act 3, scene 2. We behold and hear not an imitation of an action but rather representations of prior representations. The covenant between stage and audience is abrogated in favor of a dance of shadows, where only the manipulator Hamlet is real. Destroying its own genre, the play thus gives us an unfathered Hamlet. Shakespeare scrambles after him, but Hamlet keeps getting away, Hobgoblin run off with the garland of Apollo.

How can a stage play center both upon the meaning of an apocalyptic self-consciousness and on the transcendence of playacting that all but purges consciousness of self in act 5? That only leads to further questions in this labyrinth of ellipses: Why does Hamlet return to Elsinore after his aborted voyage to England? He has no plan and refuses to devise one. Why go into the obvious

Copyrighted material

Falstaff engendered Hamlet, and the Black Prince made possible Iago and Macbeth. What the Gnostics called the *pleroma,* the fullness, always abides with Falstaff. Hamlet ironically swerves from the giant of comedy, a swerve answered by Shakespeare's antithetical completion of stage acting in *Measure for Measure* and *Othello.* Read together, *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* are a comprehensive synecdoche for Shakespeare's art as a dramatist, however you choose to interpret Duke Vincentio in that broad range that goes from benevolent intervener to Iagolike play-botcher.

In the revisionary scheme I propose, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* together are a radical *kenosis,* an undoing of the Falstaffian pleroma. A compensating sublime can be read in Shakespeare's daimonic response, *Antony and Cleopatra,* the farthest horizon of his career, from which he ascetically withdraws in *Coriolanus. The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* appear as a final glory, an ever-early candor, far-fetched yet homelike on arrival. Leontes, Hermione, Perdita, and Autolycus are one version of finale; Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban are quite another. Falstaff could have said much to Autolycus, but little or nothing to Ariel. *The Tempest* is a wilder shore than *The Winter's Tale* and is its poet's most surprising play, not to be transcended, his last and best comedy, and an extraordinary departure even for the most self-revisionary of all writers ever.

Trace a thread through the dark backward and abyss of time from *The Tempest* (1611) to the *Henry IV* plays (1596–98). Those fifteen years of creation eclipse any other individual achievement in Western literature, an audacious assertion since it includes the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews, Dante, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, Goethe, Blake, Tolstoy, Whitman, Proust, Joyce, and comparable splendors. Call that single thread a perpetual agon between Shakespeare and Shakespeare, later and earlier. Prospero, Leontes, Coriolanus, Antony, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Hamlet, Falstaff: Does that ninefold have any sublimity in common? Go to the other sex. Miranda, Hermione, Perdita, Volumnia, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Desdemona, Ophelia: Do they share anything? So varied are Shakespeare's men and women—and these two minefields exclude clowns and most villains—that we are liable to lose our sense of wonder that a single mind conceived them. The wonder matters because if they had not made a difference we would be something else from what we are.

Falstaff is the matrix from which Shakespeare's mature art of characterization emanated. Even the Bastard Faulconbridge, Juliet, Bottom, and Shylock do not reverberate with Falstaff's richness of being. He is brother to the Wife

Copyrighted material

of Bath, and he is Cleopatra's histrionic rival. The reaction of Shakespeare's contemporary audience to the fat knight retains a critical accuracy we are in danger of losing, despite Dr. Johnson, A. C. Bradley, and Harold Goddard, all of whom saw Falstaff plain.

I do not know of any recent modes of criticism that can explain how meaning gets started in a dramatic character. Falstaff is how meaning gets started, as are Hamlet, Iago, Cleopatra. Prospero is how meaning ebbs out and away, for even Prospero is one of the fools of time. Falstaff is not. Dying, to Mistress Quickly's Cockney prose music, he is a child again, smiling upon his fingers' ends, and singing the Twenty-Third Psalm. He spends his life bidding time stand aside. It will not, and yet we will see no triumph of time over Sir John Falstaff. Betrayed love achieves victory; can that be total defeat?

Falstaff, through florabundance, excess, overflow, creates meaning. Such creation can take place only because Falstaff creates love, laughter, a rejoicing in mere being, the ecstasy of existence. There is a highly deliberate diminishment in Shakespeare's long movement from Falstaff to Prospero, who empties out meaning and ends triumphant but in despair, departing his island back for Milan, where every third thought shall be his grave. Ariel is released to his elements, fire and air, while Caliban is acknowledged, earth and water together, a failed adoption yet now a thing of darkness that indeed is Prospero's own.

Of Prospero the anti-Faustus we have heard too little; Ariel and Mephistopheles are so different that their functional parallel cannot be summoned to an audience's consciousness. But Prospero himself is difficult to absorb:

Graves at my command
Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art.

[5.1.48–50]

A Hermetist magus who resurrects the dead cannot be accommodated by Christian doctrine. Analogues between Shakespeare and Prospero are peculiarly wavering: they are and are not there. Shakespeare resurrects the mighty dead—Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Henry V, Henry VIII—by his magical art of representation. His histories, like his comedies and his tragedies, are of no genre, and really are alternative histories that have triumphed over the facts. Evidently Richard III was a humane king and Henry VII a villain, yet Shakespeare altered that forever.

Copyrighted material

In Milan, princely administration (at which he had failed) will be Prospero's first thought, and reeducating Caliban the second. That leaves only death to close a joyless existence. Whether you interpret Prospero as the greatest of white magicians or as an overworked theatrical director–stage manager or as Shakespeare himself, is that a proper end for a final comedy? *The Tempest* is an awesomely original play, still poorly read and badly produced, but it is curiously fragile. Substitute Falstaff for Trinculo, and the final play Shakespeare indisputably written solely by himself would explode.

Is there no way to cast our hook so as to rescue Prospero's drowned book? On our stages the current obsession with the gloriously pitiful Caliban should yield to an increased joy in Ariel, who intoxicated Shelley and Hart Crane. It is Prospero's and Ariel's play, not Caliban's, though the island *is* his. Robert Browning gave us an extraordinary dramatic monologue, "Caliban upon Setebos," which I greatly prefer to W. H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror,* even though Caliban (presumably after his Milan reeducation) speaks there in the tonalities of the later Henry James, who shared Shelley's and Browning's passion for *The Tempest.*

I recall walking out of a performance of George C. Wolfe's travesty of *The Tempest,* which presented Caliban as a heroic West Indian freedom fighter and added Ariel, an equally fierce Prospero hater, as a West Indian female rebel. In my remaining lifetime, *The Tempest,* as Shakespeare composed it, is not likely to be performed again. Perhaps that doesn't matter: reading and studying the actual play will continue, and sociopolitical fashions will ebb away. The sorrow is that near the close of his work Shakespeare wrote what might be the funniest of his comedies, though its laughter is not akin to Falstaff's aggressive vitalism or to Cleopatra's vitally darker wit. *The Tempest*'s comic strength lies in so sophisticated an irony that we are slow to comprehend it:

> Gonzalo: How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!
> Antonio: The ground indeed is tawny.
> Sebastian: With an eye of green in't.
> Antonio: He misses not much.
> Sebastian: No; he doth but mistake the truth totally.
>
> [2.1.52–56]

You see what you are. The good Gonzalo beholds an earthly paradise, while Antonio and Sebastian, accomplished and prospective usurpers, respectively,

Copyrighted material

regard things as they are, and to a usurping potential advantage. If *The Tempest* still holds up the mirror to nature, then it is only to human nature. Caliban presumably is only half human and Ariel not human at all, but Antonio, Sebastian, Trinculo, and Stephano are all too human.

The only human in the play who is more than a sketch is the magus Prospero, as enigmatic a personality as Shakespeare ever created. He is one of those teachers who is always convinced his auditors are not quite attentive. "Mark me" and "Dost thou hear?" keep breaking from him. Perhaps, nearing the end of Shakespeare's enterprise, Prospero realizes incessantly a truth of all the plays: no one really listens to what anyone else is saying. Here life has imitated Shakespeare: the more we read him, the less we listen to one another. With Cleopatra, we keep saying, "No, let me speak!"

Never far from anger, grumpy Prospero is capable of addressing Ariel as if he were Caliban: "Thou liest, malignant thing!" And yet we are with and for Prospero since *The Tempest* yields us no choice. Even granting that he has been betrayed, his coldness is irksome. We forgive him because of his grand recovery in acts 4 and 5, particularly since his temporal anxiety is revelatory of our own. He keeps wanting to know the time yet almost forgets the conspiracy of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo against his life: "The minute of their plot / Is almost come." His immense power over illusory space gives him no freedom from time.

Why does Shakespeare, in Prospero's abjuration speech, extend the mage's "rough magic" to the shocking impiety of having resurrected the dead?

> Graves at my command
> Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth
> By my so potent art.

The tone has no trace of guilt, but why has Prospero indulged himself in this extravagant activity? The Renaissance mage—say, Giordano Bruno or Dr. John Dee—might seek to perfect nature (as in alchemy) but would not desire to resurrect the dead. Prospero dwarfs Dr. Dee, the royal astrologer sometimes considered to have been his model. The least that must be affirmed of Prospero is the awesomeness of his power. Marlowe's Faustus performs paltry tricks; Prospero is the authentic "favored one" and has mastered reality, except for the chastening riddle of time.

Shakespeare's art of ellipsis is so flagrantly triumphant in *The Tempest* that we tend not to see how it governs the play. After the illusory opening storm, *nothing*

Copyrighted material

happens. If *Othello* is overplotted, then *The Tempest* is a plotless experiment. Even the evident act of abdicating white magic is equivocal. Prospero's authority is not diminished at the close, and I do not believe his Ovidian renunciation. He is not Medea, and his breaking of staff and drowning of book are promises for a future beyond *The Tempest*'s scope.

Perform Prospero's drama as postcolonial allegory or anti-imperialist satire, and it certainly is no comedy. Yet it should be Shakespeare's final comedy, of a new kind we have not yet learned to apprehend. We never can be certain what is or is not happening in the play, but that seems the essence of Shakespearean New Comedy. Any knowledge the work might give us would be purchased at the cost of his power over us. Power becomes comic only if it is mocked. I would suggest that Prospero, more favored than Faustus, nevertheless is a tragicomic protagonist, but so are Caliban and all the humans in the play, except the young lovers Miranda and Ferdinand. Ariel also is exempt from comedy.

I call *The Tempest* a tragicomedy since that, rather than romance, approximates its uncanny genre, yet tragicomedy suits *The Winter's Tale* better than *The Tempest.* No one dies or is wounded in body or soul in *The Tempest,* but we simply don't have a genre that will fit Shakespeare's final full-scale originality. I suspect that if questioned he would have replied "comedy" but would merely have meant all's well that ends, however we modify the final "well."

How can we accommodate a concept of comedy to Prospero? For Shakespeare's initial audience and for centuries afterward, Caliban was nothing but comic. Doubtless he was not played by Shakespeare's chief clown Robert Armin, whose admired singing voice make him the likely Ariel. Stage tradition before our Age of Political Correctness was likely to give the audience a half-fish or half-amphibian as Caliban. That seems to me no worse than the heroic rebel Caliban in most of our current stagings.

Authenticity in culture involves an augmenting of the foundations, according to Hannah Arendt in *Between Past and Future* (1961). By general consent, Shakespeare augments the foundations of drama in *The Tempest.* He does this by demonstrating the dramatist's freedom from history. All attempts to New Historicize *The Tempest* have proved feeble and are already sadly archaic. The freshness of this elliptical play evades every sociopolitical net. How do you catch a wind?

Marlowe, Shakespeare's dangerous forerunner, ended his truncated career with Doctor Faustus. Prospero parodies and trumps Faustus, even in his name. The first Faustus, by Christian tradition, was Simon Magus of Samaria, who

Copyrighted material

The Tempest stands apart from the other three late tragicomedies and from the even more brilliantly cold Shakespearean portion of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Beckett seems straightforward compared to *The Tempest*, which remains the most elliptical play I know. Even as *Hamlet* still seems the most experimental of plays, because of the wild sequence from act 2, scene 2, through act 3, scene 2, so *The Tempest* manages to achieve coherence while leaving out most of what we might expect to be given us. Where are we anyway? Shakespeare had delightedly outraged Ben Jonson by giving Bohemia a seacoast in *The Winter's Tale*. He goes one better in *The Tempest* by locating Bermuda in the Mediterranean somewhere between Italy and Tunis. Weather on the Enchanted Island is glorious except when Prospero is moved to create the illusion of a storm. The landscape, seascape, skyscape also are illusory, since Ariel and his fellow sprites perpetually are out and about ordering sensations and perceptions. And music seems always in the air, Ariel and his company being singing sprites. Yet as poor Caliban keeps lamenting, this is no island paradise, since the sprites pinch and goad him endlessly for discipline and correction.

Shakespeare at once throws away all the rules of stage representation while also imposing a strict time frame and unity of apparent space. Indeed, he writes as though no one, including William Shakespeare, ever has written a play before *The Tempest*. Without precursors, it fathers itself. The opening, the title's tempest out at sea, is memorable for its boatswain, plainspoken and realistic, who shouts, "Use your authority!" to the amiable and good Gonzalo, certainly the sweetest character in the entire play. But no authority (except Prospero's) could quell the storm. You cannot know from the first scene that there is no storm anyway. Since Shakespeare chose the title, we are puzzled at his naming a play for a nonevent.

Shakespeare had been working at perspectivism from his career's start but had achieved an absolute mastery of it only with *Antony and Cleopatra*. Simply, if you want to view Cleopatra as an imperial whore and Antony as her declining victim, you can do so, and that will show you and others just who you are. If you see her as a sublimity and Antony as her life's great love, that will show something else. Shakespeare hands the choice to you and avoids judgment. With *The Tempest* all perspectives are possible at once, and so you need not choose. Prospero's magical will prevails.

Shakespeare directly juxtaposes the mutual cursing of Caliban and Prospero, pupil and teacher, with the exquisite interplay of Ferdinand's lament and Ariel's song. As an aesthetic effect this is extraordinary even for Shakespeare:

Copyrighted material

Ferdinand: Where should this music be? I' th' air, or th' earth?
It sounds no more, and sure it waits upon
Some god o' th' island. Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the King my father's wreck,
This music crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion
With its sweet air. Thence I have followed it
(Or it hath drawn me, rather) but 'tis gone.
No, it begins again.

Ariel [*Sings.*]: Full fathom five they father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.

Burthen [*within*]: Ding dong.

Ariel: Hark, now I hear them—ding dong bell.

Ferdinand: The ditty does remember my drowned father;
This is no mortal business nor no sound
That the earth owes. I hear it now above me.
[1.2.388–408]

Eliot's *The Waste Land* and lyrics by Shelley and Hart Crane meet and mingle in this matrix of so much later poetry in the language. To this music Miranda and Ferdinand meet, instantly fall in love, and thus accomplish the authentic triumph of Prospero's art. For this one moment we are deceived into thinking that Prospero allows a natural epiphany its full glory, yet he wills otherwise.

Since it is Prospero's play and not Ariel's or Caliban's, Shakespeare risks alienating us altogether by the magician's hardness. Poor Miranda speaks wistfully for all of us when she says to the spellbound Ferdinand, "My father's of a better nature, sir, / Than he appears by speech." Yes and no, for Prospero has a kind of inwardness we have not met before, in Shakespeare or any other writer. The labyrinthine journey to the inmost self, inaugurated by Shakespeare from Hamlet through Macbeth, ended with Cleopatra and her Antony. That matrix

Copyrighted material

of darkness is present in *Measure for Measure*'s Vincentio and Angelo, but is revealed to us only in bursts. When deep inwardness returns in Leontes it is a horror, the spider in the cup.

Prospero's difference presumably is the fruit of his magical art. With each occult victory he had become more inaccessible to himself and so to us. If there is a high cost to forbidden knowledge, it yet works out very differently for the magi of Marlowe and of Shakespeare. Faustus is hauled off to hell; Marlowe dies in agony in a Deptford tavern. Prospero departs with Caliban for Milan, where every third thought will be the grave awaiting even the greatest of magi. Shakespeare departs soon after for Stratford to live without players and audience. We do not know why. Unlike Dante and Whitman and Joyce, the poet of *The Tempest* intended no Third Testament, no new Bible.

As a secularist with Gnostic proclivities, and above all as a literary aesthete, I preach Bardolatry as the most benign of all religions. The painter J. M. W. Turner and his critical apostle John Ruskin saw the sun as God. For me, Shakespeare is God. Tropologically, call that the sun if you want to. The First Folio for me is also the First Testament. How wise its editors (who had Ben Jonson's advice) were to open it with *The Tempest,* recognizing that this uncanny comedy declined to be an apocalypse.

Copyrighted material

POSSESSION IN MANY MODES

The Sonnets

The formalist critic L. C. Knights mocked the character-based criticism of A. C. Bradley by saucily asking, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" Knights's question was intended to suggest the absurdity of treating fictional characters as both living creatures and valid objects of study. But I think it an excellent question and tend to surmise: just one, murdered with her first husband.

More compelling still is the question of why this erotically charged woman chose to marry Macbeth. The Macbeths began as the best marriage in all Shakespeare. And if that is a jest, it is Shakespeare's. A love match, founded on desire and ambition, this was murderous from the start, well before King Duncan was slain. Read the text closely—as I have done in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1996)—and it suggests that Macbeth is impeded by overwhelming desire for his wife and is so anxious and hasty that sexually he keeps missing his cue. He is far more effectual on the battlefield than alone with his wife.

I remember many years ago in London watching Michael Redgrave as a properly frightening Macbeth and Ann Todd as a vibrant Lady Macbeth. When she cried out, "Unsex me here!" she doubled over, clutching what King Lear and Sonnet 129 refer to as "hell." Like doubtless many other males in the audience, I was moved indeed.

I find it odd that we know her only as "Lady Macbeth"; why does Shakespeare not give this vital woman her own name? It is her creator's design to remove

Copyrighted material

her from much of the play that dooms her to madness and suicide. Like Dr. Johnson I am troubled by "She should have died hereafter." There will be no time for such a word in the world Macbeth has botched to a false creation. That the death of his wife hardly prevails in Macbeth's consciousness is weird when the tragedy is of the imagination itself.

The scene of Banquo's ghost raises again what may be this scary tragedy's prime question: Was it for a desolate occasion like this that the Macbeths murdered to usurp the throne? The thanes stay not upon the order of their going but go at their angry queen's command, glad to escape with their lives. Childless, Macbeth murders Macduff's children after Fleance gets away to found the Stuart line of Scottish (and English) kings. A great voice, not his own, keeps breaking into Macbeth's soliloquies, in contrast to Hamlet, whose many voices emanate from a coherent center. Possession in several modes renders *Macbeth* the uncanniest of Shakespearean dramas. Nietzsche recognized *Macbeth*'s freedom from all moralities: he did not term this nihilistic, yet it is a Gnostic drama, still in the *kenoma,* the cosmological emptiness carried over from *King Lear.* In both tragedies, Creation and Fall are the same event. The audience suffers *being thrown* into an emptiness. Yet Shakespeare's gnosis is his own. Edmund and Macbeth are both Demiurges, but they could not be more different. Edmund is beyond affect until he receives his death wound from Edgar. Macbeth, except for Lear, experiences the most turbulent emotions in Shakespeare.

What Hamlet did to Shakespeare himself is perpetually in dispute. Who won the victory in the agon between creature and creator? My brief book on that struggle, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited,* received a mixed reaction, which did not surprise me since the matter is a vexed one. Falstaff refused to be held captive by the two parts of *Henry IV* yet did not destroy the coherence of that great double play—is it Shakespeare's greatest achievement? But Hamlet broke the vessels even as Yahweh did in the Creation. God ruined many worlds before this one. Shakespeare, God of literature, ruined *Hamlet,* or else Hamlet ruined his play. But what is "ruin" in the realm of the aesthetic?

Owen Barfield, in his wonderful *Poetic Diction: A Study of Meaning,* reminds us that the root meaning of the verb *to ruin* is "rushing to a collapse." In Shakespeare *ruin,* whether as verb or substantive, has an aura: the splendor of Lear in his madness or of Antony in his fall. We experience a pleasure in and of ruin surpassing that of the world traveler. T. S. Eliot would have been sounder had he called the endless puzzle of Shakespeare's struggle with his own angel,

Copyrighted material

Adonis": "What do we think of him? He possesses a rich poetic power but no judgment to go with it. To him Shakespeare has lent his pen but not his mind." The narrator of the Sonnets may not be Shakespeare in full compass, but he shares the poet-dramatist's mind. Lanham also remarked that there are at least as many different "I"s as there are Sonnets. Some of these "I"s are able to turn "injury into poetry" (C. L. Barber's formulation), while others fall short, or perhaps do not quite want such a "transmemberment of song" (Hart Crane). When Shakespeare holds back in the Sonnets, he chooses lyric over drama. And yet the poet of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* of the fifth act at Belmont of *The Merchant of Venice,* of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II* is the ultimate lyrical dramatist. That fusion comes apart in the Sonnets.

One of my students observed in class discussion some years ago that many of the Sonnets depend upon Shakespeare narrating his own sufferings and humiliations as though they were someone else's. Yes and no, I recall replying, since they are never presented as though indeed they were painful and debasing. Unless Shakespeare prophesied Nietzsche's apothegm "That which does not destroy me strengthens me," we are given a reticence preternaturally reliant upon the exclusion of pathos. And yet the rhetoric of the Sonnets is not Ovidian-Marlovian.

The most illuminating essay on this that I have read is Thomas M. Greene's "Pitiful Thrivers: Failed Husbandry in the Sonnets" (1985). Here is Greene's poignant conclusion:

> The Sonnets can be read to the end as attempts to cope with progressively powerful and painful forms of cost and expense. The bourgeois desire to balance cosmic and human budgets seems to be thwarted by a radical flaw in the universe, in emotion, in value, and in language. This flaw is already acted out at the beginning by the onanistic friend who "feed'st thy lights flame with selfe substantiall fewell" (1). In Sonnet 73, the metaphoric fire lies in its ashes as on a deathbed, "consum'd with that which it was nurrisht by." This becomes, in the terrible Sonnet 129, "a blisse in proofe and proud and very wo," a line always, unnecessarily, emended. The vulnerability of the Sonnets lies in their ceaselessly resistant reflection of this flaw, their stubborn reliance on economies incapable of correcting it, their use of language so wealthy, so charged with "difference," as to be erosive. The vulnerability of the Sonnets might be said to resemble that nameless flaw that afflicts their

Copyrighted material

> speaker, but in their case the flaw is not ultimately disastrous. They are not consumed by the extravagant husbandry that produced them. Their effort to resist, to compensate, to register in spite of slippage, balances their loss with store. They leave us with the awesome cost, and reward, of their conative contention. The vulnerability is inseparable from the striving that leads us to them: the "poet's" expense and Shakespeare's expense.

Emerson's Gnostic observation—"There is a crack in everything that God has made"—is akin to Greene's "radical flaw in the universe, in emotion, in value, and in language." But that is Hamlet's cosmos, and Lear's, and Macbeth's. The more than overwhelming force of the major tragedies is circumvented in the Sonnets, except perhaps for the death march of 129, and the "Desire is death" litany of 147, to me the most terrifying erotic poem I know. Once again, what compelled (if that is the right word) Shakespeare to hold back?

Only the force of Shakespeare's own mind could defend it from itself. Shakespeare, almost all deep readers agree, excelled in intellectual power, wisdom, and linguistic vitality, but the three together are surpassed by his rarest gift: the creation of personalities. *People* is the word I prefer, though that restarts wearisome arguments. Even Cervantes and Tolstoy are not that prodigal at repopulating a heterocosm.

Of the two intensely erotic relationships in the Sonnets, each may be at least a doubling (Southampton *and* Pembroke, Mary Fitton *and* Emilia Bassano Lanier *and* Lucy Negro). Even the Rival Poet may be a tripling (Chapman, Jonson, Marlowe), which would be less provocative than the strong possibility that both the Fair Young Nobleman and the Dark Lady are composites. Many if not most of us realize in retrospect that a lifetime's attachments tend to arrange themselves into recurrent patterns. Fusion re-imagines erotic singularities, however intense and long lingering, and makes them seem only fictions of duration, uneasily akin to poems and literary narratives.

Greene's emphasis upon fluctuations in value is cruelly sustained by the language of trade and economy in the Sonnets. Is that language consistently ironic? I think not, though an ironist so towering as Shakespeare works beyond our ken. Sonnet 87—"Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing"—upon which I have attempted to found a poetics of influence, piles up an extraordinary heap of commercial diction endlessly paradoxical in its referential power: "dear," "possessing," "estimate," "charter," "worth," "releasing," "bonds," "determi-

Copyrighted material

nate," "granting," "riches," "deserving," "gift," "wanting," "patent," "swerving," "gav'st," "mistaking," "misprision," "growing." Those twenty words are packed into the first eleven lines of the poem; is this the feared end of an erotic or of a financial partnership? There is a tradition that Shakespeare purchased his share in the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors with a thousand pounds borrowed from his patron, the earl of Southampton.

The creator of Hamlet trades in the commodity of what Emerson was to call "the great and creative self." The dramatist of Falstaff and Hamlet, Iago and Cleopatra transcends any pragmatics of self-reliance. And yet the poet of the Sonnets engages himself in so Proustian a quest for small and large evidences of betrayal and devaluation that we might recall the more comic sorrows of Swann and Marcel, except that Shakespeare does go through all this for a man and a woman who surprisingly did suit him and evidently were authentically his style and mode.

Shakespeare's erotic vision in the comic sphere concludes in *Measure for Measure,* while in tragedy it culminated in *Timon of Athens.* The late tragicomedies (they are *not* romances) flame out in the jealous madness of Leontes and the stance beyond detachment of Prospero. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare reveals nothing of his own personality while rendering both the Fair Young Nobleman and the Dark Lady sexual minefields. As readers we might murmur that they deserve one another, a judgment that is alien to Shakespeare. And yet the surprising misogyny provoked by his Dark Lady (a stance nowhere evident in the plays) is not justified by him, and his endless celebrations of the Fair Young Nobleman do not bring forward a single good quality in that lethal spoiled aristocrat. Southampton/Pembroke is merely beautiful while Mary/Emilia/Lucy is a furnace, prophetic of Lady Emma Hamilton's Electric Bed, which became Admiral Horatio Nelson's Promised Land aboard the *Victory.*

Even in the Sonnets we are allowed our own perspectives but always at the risk of exposing ourselves while the poet remains sequestered. No one except the narrator of the Sonnets is capable of any affection for the Fair Young Nobleman, but I hardly know a male reader who does not share my lust for the Dark Lady. No other love poem in the English language has an affect as grim as Sonnet 147:

> My love is as a fever, longing still
> For that which longer nurseth the disease,
> Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,

Copyrighted material

Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed:
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who are as black as hell, as dark as night.

Falling in love with an illness of the self, near enough to a sickness-unto-death, is to drive beyond the pleasure principle. I cannot recall any mention of the features of the beloved young man, but am all too aware that the mistress' eyes are raven black, doubtless like those two pitch-balls stuck in Rosaline's face in *Love's Labour's Lost.* Whatever Shakespeare's relation to Southampton or to Pembroke (or to both) it was temperance itself when compared to the furnace of the Dark Lady (or Ladies). "Desire is death": so grand a finale of seem achieves perfection neither of the work nor of the life. For a moment only, the poet-narrator joins himself to Iago and to Edmund.

Do the "pitiful thrivers" of Sonnet 125 exist in the same cosmos that commences two sonnets later? The language of expense, bonds, usury prevails, yet the trade more clearly is erotic, not commercial. Of the Dark Lady, Greene ventures that she "perhaps is the one thriver in the work who is not pitiful."

No one would defend the "loyalties" of the Sonnets, but since they have no world-without-end bargains is there warrant for terming their bargains "tawdry"? No valid promises were made, no pledges enacted, among this triangle. No one emerges in a posture other than prone. Except for the Stony Rimes of Dante, no other "love poems" are so finally forbidding.

Shakespeare does not compose the Sonnets *as* Shakespeare, creator of Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Feste. Wit is too besieged in the Sonnets by a strict restraint of ethos and pathos; logos reigns almost unchallenged. That "almost" reflects Rosalie Colie's sensitive reading in her *Shakespeare's Living Art* (1974), which emphasizes style as doing the work of ethos in the Sonnets. The Sonnets are neither comedy nor tragedy. They are early romance, internalized for their

Copyrighted material

speaker-narrator if not perhaps for their poet. Do they tell a story? Everything that happens has occurred before and will come again. The Falstaffiad/Henriad tells a story, one that in a profound sense is over when we first encounter Falstaff and Hal. No one triangulated their dark story: Henry IV and Hotspur are not Dark Lady and Rival Poet. Did Shakespeare have a nightmare sense of repetition when (if) he experienced with Pembroke what he had suffered with Southampton? How good it is that we cannot and will never know.

There is no Falstaff in the Sonnets; the Falstaff-in-Shakespeare is there in dilemma or predicament, not in wit and vitalistic outcry. Empson had to find Falstaff in Shakespeare the sonneteer because his Falstaff (like the great poet-critic himself) was bisexual. Hal/Henry V is of that double persuasion; Falstaff never is a double man, in Eros or in fending off time, death, and the state. It is not that Falstaff (like Hamlet or even Cleopatra) is too good for his play(s) but that they are not good enough for him. Nothing, even by Shakespeare, overmatches the double play of *Henry IV,* but even that Homeric and Aristophanic wealth cannot contain Sir John, who as life itself breaks every vessel that would contain his force.

Does Shakespeare the poet break the vessels in the Sonnets? Start at the beginning and read your way through. From 19 on ("Devouring time, blunt thou the lion's paws") you will stop many times: 20, 29, 30, 40, 53, 55, 66, 73, 86, 87, 94, 107, 110, 116, 121, 125, 129, 130, 135, 138, 144, 146, and 147 among them. That is two dozen poems I have chosen personally; others may choose differently. Whichever you choose, they touch very near the limits of art.

Shakespeare—to know whom is to have acquired knowledge—might have had no quarrel with Francis Bacon's essay "Of Love," which he must have read: *That it is impossible to love and to be wise.* In Samuel Johnson that became the reflection, Love is the wisdom of fools and the folly of the wise. That seems to me a fit motto for Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Copyrighted material

Stand back from that assertion and it can seem insane. Assume that Peter Alexander, and Harold Bloom in his wake, could be right in ascribing the missing Ur-*Hamlet* of 1588 or so to Shakespeare himself and not to Marlowe's crony Thomas Kyd. In 1604 a writer observed that tragedy "should please all, like Prince Hamlet," which follows Gabriel Harvey's saying in 1600 that "the wiser sort" are pleased by the tragedy of Hamlet. I will not ask who among us four centuries later are of the wiser sort. G. K. Chesterton, writing in 1901, still speaks to my sense both of Falstaff and of Hamlet: "Falstaff was neither brave nor honest, nor chaste, nor temperate, nor clean, but he had the eighth cardinal virtue for which no name has ever been found. Hamlet was not fitted for this world; but Shakespeare does not dare to say whether he was too good or too bad for it" ("The True Hamlet"). Surely Falstaff was too good for this world, while Hamlet was both too good and too bad to be fitted for our world, which remains Elsinore writ large.

The actual fortress-castle at Elsinore could hardly be larger. I was taken to see it in 2005, when I was in Denmark to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Bicentennial Award. The visual experience stunned me and belatedly changed my mind about some aspects of the play. Where and how Shakespeare lived during some of the middle to later years of the 1580s is lost to us. Could he have gone abroad with a company of English actors, who perhaps even played the Ur-*Hamlet*? That is merely wild speculation on my part, yet the scale and rugged brutalism of the Elsinore fortress troubled me with the intuition that he had been there. The great hall in which the duel is staged is gigantic, and the commanding position of the fortress over the water gives a vivid conviction of how powerful the Danish monarchy still was in Shakespeare's day. Above all the scale of Elsinore, a sublime ruggedness of context indoors and outdoors, lingers in memory as the stage for Hamlet's curtailed life and early death.

How early that death is remains undecidable. Shakespeare, elliptical and crazily random in this lawless drama, gives us an undergraduate Hamlet at the start, presumably twenty or less, and a thirty-year-old in the graveyard scene. The lapsed time of the play can only be a week or at most two. This does not matter compared to greater ellipses. How far back does the sexual relationship between Gertrude and Claudius go? Was there any complicity, however passive, on Gertrude's part in the fratricide? How intense, on Hamlet's side, was the romance—if any—with Ophelia? More important than all these: How is Prince Hamlet so conversant not only with Shakespeare's own company of players but with the context that makes relevant London theatrical gossip? It

Copyrighted material

is a legitimate inference that he may have spent more time at the Globe than in pursuing his studies at the Lutheran University of Wittenberg.

Hamlet in the play is rather more than a theatrical amateur play-botcher. His admonitions to the players—clearly directed to the clown Will Kemp, in particular, who must have played the Gravedigger—seem more incontrovertibly the utterance of Shakespeare himself than anything else in the thirty-eight or so dramas we confidently can ascribe to the world's central poet-playwright.

When the Christian Bible is treated as a single work, say in the King James Version, I become unhappy. There are copious reasons for my discontent, quite aside from the captivity of the Jewish Bible, being dragged along by Christian triumphalism. Yet I have expounded my stance upon this in print, all too often for some. William Shakespeare of Stratford really did write almost everything attributed to him; partisans of Marlowe, Oxford, Bacon, or Middleton can be waved aside. I grant that the texts are multiform and frequently unreliable, so that we cannot quite know what is or what is not in *Hamlet* or *King Lear.* And I will not appeal to our mutual experience of attending performances of Shakespeare, since not infrequently I walk out at the first intermission, reflecting that at eighty I do not need to endure any more high-concept directors, who should be shot at dawn.

I am a common reader who goes through Shakespeare again, from start to finish, each year, in and out of the classroom. He did not intend his quarter-century of playwriting as a unitary effort, but his friends gathered almost all of the plays together in 1623, seven years after his death, in what we now term the First Folio. Ben Jonson advised the actor-editors, doubtless reflecting on his own just audacity in having brought forth his *Works* in a folio of 1616 (which, however, did not contain his plays). Yet Jonson not only encouraged Shakespeare's friends; he prefaced the First Folio with a great poem to Shakespeare's memory and plays, many of which he must have read for a first time. The poem, eighty lines in superb couplets, implicitly treats the plays as a life work, and so a single one. Jonson urges us to "Look how the father's face / Lives in his issue," which makes the individual plays Shakespeare's daughters and sons. I would like to think that *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* do not much resemble their father, though even they have their admirers. *Titus Andronicus* I take as a spoof, a send-up of Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, and George Peele, while *Merry Wives* travesties the greatness of Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays.

Shakespeare's immediate precursor was Marlowe, only a few months older

Copyrighted material

but the beneficiary of a running start as an undergraduate. Marlowe was murdered in 1593, when he and Shakespeare were twenty-nine. Had Shakespeare died with Marlowe, he would have left us the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III,* but not much more, if scholars are accurate in their datings. Popular as *Richard III* remains, it does not measure up to the *Tamburlaine* plays, *The Jew of Malta,* and *Faustus.* Had Marlowe lived, he would have continued to unfold, but he was unlikely to change. No writer ever has transformed himself as Shakespeare did from 1594 to 1613. In just short of two decades, at least twenty-seven permanent dramas came forth, accompanied by what are among the finest short poems in the language.

As with the indubitable villains Macbeth, Iago, and Edmund, Hamlet's atmosphere is conjecture: his imagination is proleptic, his mode is prophecy. Macbeth is preternatural; he has second sight and he hallucinates. Iago anticipates Milton's Satan, in whom Angus Fletcher finds the masterpiece of tragic isolation and negativity. What troubles Satan is his mixed heritage: Hamlet, Macbeth, Iago. He has little in him of Edmund's zestful blend of Don Juan and an English Machiavel, though he lusts after both Eve and Adam. His cosmological despair is Hamlet's; his temporal anxieties are Macbeth's; his sense of injured merit is Iago's. In *Colors of the Mind,* Fletcher generously illuminates the iconography of fallen thought in Satan, doomed to the rigors of endless self-justification, the solipsist's dilemma. When I was younger, my passion was for Satan; now I am warier, since solipsism cannot die its own death. With grim eloquence, Fletcher distinguishes Satan from his prime precursor, Hamlet: "Milton has created the largest and most heroic image of the hero as suffering thinker, or, to personify, of thinking as suffering. For unlike Hamlet, who dies in a wild melodrama of dueling, the defeated antagonist of Jesus can only watch his opponent go quietly home to his Mother's house."

Has Fletcher not stacked the deck? Or had Milton done that for him? But few believe that the hero of Western consciousness goes down appropriately in Claudius's poisoned duel. Hamlet, as much an enigmatic Redeemer as Mark's Jesus, is given nothing better to do than to chop down Claudius, not a mighty opposite but a frantic Machiavel to whom no one would assign a passing grade. Milton, far more deeply affected by Shakespeare than he knew, makes his own sacrifice in chronicling Satan. Where is Lucifer, the unfallen Satan? When we first see Hamlet, he is already ruined. The Ghost can do no more to him than the Prince has done to himself. He is the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he knows it. Satan begins in the right place, but why will Milton

Copyrighted material

not represent it? I fear this is Milton's tribute to Hamlet, Macbeth, Iago, and the inescapable forerunner, Shakespeare.

Try to envision a first two books of *Paradise Lost* with a gloriously unfallen Lucifer; we would be stopped upon his wings by sound. Our Adversary seems trouble enough without added sublimity. Ophelia praises a Hamlet we never see; Satan studies the nostalgias but already is crippled by temporal anxieties. I cannot locate C. S. Lewis's temper-tantrum Satan. Something has gone wrong with the hero-villain, but no one as yet is able to tell us what.

Milton, undaunted, could have given us an unfallen Lucifer had he chosen to do so; some traces survive. Shakespeare, even in the graveyard, shows us splinters of an angelic Hamlet but will never allow us to see the undiminished Prince. And yet Satan and Hamlet both think their ways into the desolation of reality. Man's life is thought, and all of us are fallen angels: Satan, Hamlet, Shakespeare, the reader.

Wisdom is Hebrew as well as Greek, but literary criticism was wholly Greek in its origins, and tendentiously ideological when Plato malformed it. Shakespeare plays with transcendence for mostly comic effects, but has no use for Plato's transcendental Forms, scarcely of interest to a consciousness that loves change. Metamorphosis for Shakespeare is another mode of thinking in his theater of mind, where Hamlet abides as monarch of wit. Whatever his illnesses (and these all seem north-by-northwest) Hamlet leads any competitors (Oedipus included) in *recognition,* perhaps the central act of thinking in imaginative literature. Fletcher cites Heidegger's wordplay on the link in etymology between *thinking* and *thanking,* so that memory is made into both cognition and praise, as it is in the Psalms. Recognition, in that context, need not be resolution but generally is only partial, since full recognition concludes thinking in literature.

In a later study, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare* (2007), Fletcher identifies our sense of remaining time with Shakespeare's large view of "nature." That sense itself is a Shakespearean enlargement of Aristotle's "recognition," defined by the philosopher as "a change from ignorance to knowledge," knowledge that is hard to accept. There are great figures who refuse tragedy, Falstaff and Don Quixote in particular. Both of them are too intelligent not to know that what they refuse is the catastrophe of recognition. Shakespeare abounds in those who refuse recognition: Bottom, Shylock, Malvolio are among them. Falstaff, a thinker incessant and powerful enough to have challenged even Hamlet, Rosalind, and Cleopatra, is wary even of partial recognition.

Copyrighted material

Fletcher shows us this refusal flowering into the soliloquy, where no one can approach Shakespeare's giant art. Hamlet's soliloquies, now shunned by many directors and actors, are the masterpieces of Shakespeare the thinker.

Exportable to the entire world except for France—despite Stendhal, Victor Hugo, and Balzac—the Shakespearean soliloquy expires upon the French stage. Voltaire thought Shakespeare "barbaric," and French drama, until Alfred Jarry and the Absurdists, avoided dramatic monologue. It is the heroic praxis of Racine always to provide an interlocutor or at least auditor upon the stage. I have seen no study of Shakespeare's soliloquies altogether worthy of them, but they are a high art within his art, and constitute the royal road to his enhancement of our own sense of personality. We *hear* Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, but they *overhear* themselves, and change through that self-overhearing. Will as deepest desire is surprised by this overhearing, and Shakespeare, who played endlessly upon his first name, might be said to develop will-overhearing while gradually abandoning self-overhearing.

I revise here my earlier notion that Shakespeare's reinvention of the human centers upon change through overhearing. Except for one unsympathetic but clever critic, who remarked that what was being overheard was Shakespeare himself, my rumination met either silence or poor wit (Shakespeare did *not* invent the lightbulb; Edison did). My intellectual debt in this area was to John Stuart Mill, who wrote that poetry is not heard but overheard. But by what psychic agency or component of glory?

Shakespeare's secret, his guide through the labyrinth of influence exercised upon him by his own mind and works, was a discovery I should have termed the selfsame or the will overhearing itself. In Shakespeare, the knit of identity is not psyche or the soul but the daimon, pneuma, spark of will, what Nietzsche and Yeats called the antithetical self as opposed to a primary self. I do not believe that Shakespeare was a Hermetist (Frances Yates) or at times an Ophitic Gnostic (A. D. Nuttall), but this greatest of all poets possessed his own way of knowing, which never can be fully deciphered by us except through endless deep rereadings. Possess Hamlet by memory and he ceases to seem merely clever or as crazy as the rest of us. G. Wilson Knight said that Hamlet's was "the embassy of death" from that undiscovered country. D. H. Lawrence reacted to Hamlet's soliloquies pretty much as to Whitman's poems. Hamlet/Shakespeare and Walt/Whitman at once were "obscene knowers" (Lawrence's term) and also minds that broke the new road.

Copyrighted material

shefsky, both alas before my time as a child born in 1930. But that would have been swagger with pathos, akin to Schwartz as Shylock, dropping the scalpel with a shudder as he approached Antonio the trembling *shagitz* and crying out with a tremor that shook the Second Avenue Theater: *Ik bin doch a Yid!* Not that I see Uncle Satan murmuring, "Well after all, I *am* Jewish," but rather that he declines the role of vulgarian proposed for him by T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis. Satan did not attend Harvard or Yale, Oxford or Cambridge. Doubtless he assiduously studied Talmud until expelled by furious rabbis, compelled to recognize another *Acher,* the Stranger they rejected in Elisha Ben Abuya, with whom I have identified for more than sixty years.

Neil Forsyth's *The Satanic Epic* (2003) is my particular favorite among recent studies of *Paradise Lost.* Forsyth intimates that Milton's God may be just as much a hero-villain as Satan is, but Forsyth declines to see Milton's refusal to portray Lucifer (the unfallen Satan) as a flaw or a descent from the Shakespearean fullness. That Miltonic falling away from Shakespeare's pleroma is my subject here.

Imagine Milton's uncompleted tragedy *Adam Unparadised* as composed by Shakespeare. Its prime personages would have been Lucifer, Adam, Eve, and God: three hero-villains and a witty heroine. Christ, a worse disaster even than God in *Paradise Lost,* would not have appeared. Lucifer might have resembled Prince Hamlet, while Adam could combine aspects of the uxorious Othello and the slow learner Edgar of *King Lear.* God of course would be Lear, and Eve a synthesis of Rosalind and other comedic splendors in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's grandest originality always was the imagining of change; he would have been delighted to represent Lucifer overhearing himself and then undergoing change to the music of perpetual surprise. Ovidian to his core, the dramatist loved change; the quasi-Platonist Milton employed Circe, mistress of bestial transformations, as the symbol of all metamorphosis. Lusting after Eve as intensely as do Adam and Satan, the epic poet nevertheless associates her with the Homeric Circe. Shakespeare makes us admire Rosalind as a goddess of erotic transformations, an all-but-universal matchmaker. And though she warns Orlando that as a woman she is changeable, her love actually is constant, as is Eve's for Adam.

Lucifer is the unfallen Satan, never quite shown to us by Milton. The origins of Lucifer (the light-bearer, in Saint Jerome's Latin) are in the ancient bright Star of Morning: Athtar, Phaethon, Helel (this last in Isaiah 14, *Helel ben Shahar,* shining Son of Dawn), applied to the defeated king of Babylon. Assimilated to the downfall of the Covering Cherub, the prince of Tyre in Ezekiel,

Copyrighted material

the Morning Star became the vision of prelapsarian Satan. But where is he in Milton?

At the close of book 3 the heroic Satan, voyaging to the New World of Eden (Hebrew for "delight") pauses atop Mount Niphates, on the border between Syria and Armenia. Starting book 4 he utters an extraordinary soliloquy (lines 32–113), which was written years before *Paradise Lost* and meant to open *Adam Unparadised.* Here the speaker addresses first the sun and then himself alone. The overt model is the beginning of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, but hidden in these sonorous tonalities is the voice of the Prince of Denmark:

> O thou that with surpassing glory crowned,
> Lookst from thy sole dominion like the God
> Of this new world; at whose sight all the stars
> Hide their diminished heads; to thee I call,
> But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
> O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
> That bring to my remembrance from what state
> I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
> Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
> Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king:
> Ah wherefore! he deserved no such return
> From me, whom he created what I was
> In that bright eminence, and with his good
> Upbraided none; nor was his service hard.
> What could be less than to afford him praise,
> The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,
> How due! Yet all his good proved ill in me,
> And wrought but malice; lifted up so high
> I sdeigned subjection, and thought one step higher
> Would set me highest, and in a moment quit
> The debt immense of endless gratitude,
> So burdensome, still paying, still to owe;
> Forgetful what from him I still received,
> And understood not that a grateful mind
> By owing owes not, but still pays, at once
> Indebted and discharged; what burden then?
> O had his powerful destiny ordained

Copyrighted material

Me some inferior angel, I had stood
Then happy; no unbounded hope had raised
Ambition. Yet why not? Some other power
As great might have aspired, and me though mean
Drawn to his part; but other powers as great
Fell not, but stand unshaken, from within
Or from without, to all temptations armed.
Hadst thou the same free will and power to stand?
Thou hadst: whom hast thou then or what to accuse,
But heaven's free love dealt equally to all?
Be then his love accursed, since love or hate,
To me alike, it deals eternal woe.
Nay cursed be thou; since against his thy will
Chose freely what it now so justly rues.
Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.
O then at last relent: is there no place
Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduced
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
The Omnipotent. Ay me, they little know
How dearly I abide that boast so vain,
Under what torments inwardly I groan;
While they adore me on the throne of hell,
With diadem and scepter high advanced
The lower still I fall, only supreme
In misery; such joy ambition finds.
But say I could repent and could obtain
By act of grace my former state; how soon
Would height recall high thoughts, how soon unsay

Copyrighted material

What feigned submission swore: ease would recant
Vows made in pain, as violent and void.
For never can true reconcilement grow
Where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep:
Which would but lead me to a worse relapse
And heavier fall: so should I purchase dear
Short intermission bought with double smart.
This knows my punisher; therefore as far
From granting he, as I from begging peace:
All hope excluded thus, behold instead
Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight,
Mankind created, and for him this world.
So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,
Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;
Evil be thou my good; by thee at least
Divided empire with heaven's king I hold
By thee, and more than half perhaps will raign;
As man ere long, and this new world shall know.

Depths beneath depths: this is Hamlet's infinite self-consciousness. It does not matter that Satan is an obsessed theist and Hamlet is not. Two angelic intellects inhabit a common abyss: the post-Enlightenment ever-augmenting inner self, of which Hamlet is a precursor, intervening between Luther and Calvin, and later Descartes and Spinoza. Milton's mind is so powerful that it almost holds off Hobbes and produces the last heroic poem, definable as the ascendancy of rhetoric over dialectic.

Satan's rhetoric atop Niphates emphasizes the infinitude of obligation: "The debt immense of endless gratitude, / So burdensome, still paying, still to owe." He goes on to blame himself but not persuasively, given Raphael's account in book 5 of how the rebellion began. Empson sensibly blamed God for starting all the trouble anyway:

Hear all ye angels, progeny of light,
Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers,
Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand.
This day I have begot whom I declare
My only Son, and on this holy hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold

Copyrighted material