



Wilson Knight

The Wheel of Fire

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The Wheel of Fire

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Wilson Knight

The Wheel of Fire

Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy

With an introduction by T. S. Eliot



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You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave:
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

King Lear, iv. vii. 45

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.

Macbeth, i. iii. 127

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PREFATORY NOTE

This re-issue of what was—except for my monograph *Myth and Miracle* (lately reprinted in *The Crown of Life*)—my first book, contains the original text complete with only some insignificant, mainly typographical, alterations. My two original essays on *Hamlet*, ‘*Hamlet’s Melancholia*’ and ‘*The Embassy of Death*’, are, for neatness, grouped as one. I have tidied up some mannerisms, but made no attempt at correction of matter, preferring to let the various essays stand as documents of their time ‘with all their imperfections on their heads’, while hoping that they may be found to have worn not too badly during the years since their first publication in 1930. Where there are additions, as with my ‘additional notes’ and my three new essays, I have dated them. Of these essays, the first, on ‘*Tolstoy’s Attack*’, was originally published as an English Association pamphlet and is reprinted here by kind permission of the Association. The other two, ‘*Hamlet Reconsidered*’ and ‘*Two Notes on the Text of Hamlet*’ are quite new. I give line-references to the Oxford Shakespeare.

On looking back over the last two decades I feel that a short retrospective comment may help to clear up certain misunderstandings. My animadversions as to ‘character’ analysis were never intended to limit the living human reality of Shakespeare’s people. They were, on the contrary, expected to loosen, to render flexible and even fluid, what

had become petrified. Nor was I at all concerned to repudiate the work of A. C. Bradley. Though Bradley certainly on occasion pushed 'character' analysis to an unnecessary extreme, yet he it was who first subjected the atmospheric, what I have called the 'spatial', qualities of the Shakespearian play to a considered, if rudimentary, comment. Indeed, my own first published manifesto concerning my general aims in Shakespearian interpretation, an article in the year 1928 in the old *Shakespeare Review* under the editorship of A. K. Chesterton, defined those aims as the application to Shakespeare's work in general of the methods already applied by Bradley to certain outstanding plays. It was, and is, my hope that my own labours will be eventually regarded as a natural development within the classic tradition of Shakespearian study.¹

But here again a distinction is necessary. It has been objected that I write of Shakespeare—as indeed did Coleridge, Hazlitt and Bradley—as a philosophic poet rather than a man of the stage. That is, in its way, true: and it is true that I would not regard the well-known commentaries of Harley Granville-Barker as properly within this central, more imaginative and metaphysical, tradition. Nevertheless, my own major interest has always been Shakespeare in the theatre; and to that my written work has been, in my own mind, subsidiary. But my experience as actor, producer and play-goer leaves me uncompromising in my assertion that the literary analysis of great drama in terms of theatrical technique accomplishes singularly little. Such technicalities should be confined to the theatre from which their terms are drawn. The proper thing to do about a play's dramatic quality is to produce it, to act in it, to attend performances; but the penetration of its deeper meanings is a different matter, and such a study, though the commentator should certainly be dramatically aware, and even wary, will not itself speak in theatrical terms. There is, of course, an all-important relation (which I discuss fully in my *Principles of Shakespearian Production*); and indeed the present standard of professional Shakespearian production appears to me inadequate precisely because these deeper meanings have not been exploited. The play's surface has been merely translated

¹ Parts of my essay 'The *Lear* Universe' constitute an expansion under changed focal length of material first indicated by Bradley (1953).

from book to stage, it has not been re-created from within; and that is why our productions remain inorganic.

So much, then, for what this new 'poetic interpretation' is not. What, in short, can we say that it is?

A recent account by Mr. Lance L. Whyte of modern developments in physics, which appeared in *The Listener* of July 17th, 1947, can help us here. Mr. Whyte explains how the belief in rigid 'particles' with predictable motions has been replaced by concepts of 'form, pattern and symmetry'; and not by these as static categories only but rather by something which he calls the 'transformation of patterns'. For 'particles' put 'characters' and we have a clear Shakespearian analogy. Even the dates, roughly, fit: 'From about 1870 to 1910' these 'particles' were thought to hold the key 'to all the secrets of nature'; but since then the conception has been found inadequate. Rigidly distinct and unchanging atoms have become 'patterns' occupying certainly a 'measurable region of space' but yet themselves, as patterns, dynamic, self transforming. The pattern itself moves; space and time coalesce; such is the mysterious 'design of nature'. But, as too with Shakespeare, the old theories are not to be peremptorily dismissed. They are merely to be regarded as 'less than the utterly complete explanations they were once thought to be':

They have therefore to be re-interpreted as part of some more comprehensive approach. The answer may be that we must not think of patterns as if they were built out of particles, but that what we have called particles, may ultimately be better explained as components of patterns.

The argument against excessive 'character' study could not be more concisely expressed.

Most important of all, however, is Mr. Whyte's stress on the 'development and transformation of patterns'. Though the 'causal analysis of detailed parts' must be continued as before, we are henceforth to 'pay more attention to certain aspects of phenomena which have been neglected till now, like pattern-tendency and transformation'. So 'the task before physics is to discover a new principle which can unite permanence and change'; and here, in the words I have italicized, we have our key to the literary problem.

Long before reading this article I had felt a certain similarity between the methods of what I call 'poetic interpretation' and what I vaguely understood by the theory of Einstein. Mr. Whyte observes that Einstein's relativity theory served to shift emphasis from individual entities to their observable 'relationships'; just as, in my early essays on *Hamlet*, I tried, at the risk of offending those who had (very reasonably) taken the play's hero to their hearts, to see that hero not merely as an isolated 'character' rigidly conceived, but in direct and living relation to his own dramatic environment. That, too, has been my method with other plays; and it is precisely such a 'relationship' that lies regularly behind Shakespeare's use of symbolism as distinct from persons. As for Mr. Whyte's closely similar thought of uniting permanence and change, the analogies are yet more obvious. My own investigations have continually forced me to speak, directly or metaphorically, in terms of a space-time unity, which is yet only to be properly known as a unity in so far as it has first been accepted as a duality. It is, as it were, the space-time 'relationship' that is central and so all-important: as with the interaction of spatial atmosphere and plot-sequence in any one Shakespearian play; the single tempest-music opposition binding and interpenetrating the whole succession of plays; the 'dome' and 'river' symbolisms of the Romantics and all that this implies (especially for the understanding of Keats, whose peculiar artistry can be shown to mature from an exquisite fusion of these, or similar, impressions). When actual stage-production is our argument, we have the fitting of action to setting. Poetry itself may be defined as pre-eminently a blend of the dynamic and the static, of motion and form, and, at the limit, the perfectly integrated man, or superman, is to be conceived as a creature of superb balance, poise and grace. Interpretation is, then, merely the free use of a faculty that responds with ease, and yet with full consciousness of the separate elements involved, to this space-time fusion, or relationship, this eternity, of art, in which every point on the sequence is impregnated by the whole. It is, moreover, something which, once admitted, can be applied widely to literature of consequence: it is as much at home with the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus as with *Hassan* and *Journey's End*. There is nothing peculiarly Shakespearian about it.

Mr. Whyte himself sees the developments he describes as part of a

general movement of the twentieth-century mind, noting similar tendencies in both biology and psychology. It would be sad were literary investigation to be allowed to lag too far behind these more virile sciences. Properly handled it might go some way towards meeting Mr. Whyte's expectation of a newly comprehensive system of knowledge 'covering the organic as well as the inorganic world, and therefore relevant also to man himself'.

Exactly what started me, personally, on this quest it would be hard to say. I was whole-heartedly devoted to Shakespeare—especially to Shakespeare acted—from a very early age. Perhaps what Mr. Eliot calls the 'restless demon' to interpret dates from a question posed suddenly by my brother during a performance of *The Tempest* to which I had persuaded him to accompany me: 'What does it mean?' For many years I have been labouring at the answer.

This note must not be allowed to grow into an essay of reminiscence. Let me conclude by expressing my thanks to Messrs. Methuen & Co. for being willing, at so difficult a time as this, to offer me the privilege and advantage of their imprint.

Leeds, 1947

G. W. K.

Among the writings that appear in retrospect to have influenced my Shakespearian investigations I would list John Masefield's 1924 Romanes Lecture *Shakespeare and Spiritual Life*; and also the pages on *Macbeth* in the chapter 'On the Ghosts in the Tragedies of Shakespeare' in Edward Gordon Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre*, which I had probably read. My remarks on 'character' might be compared with Strindberg's similar arguments in his preface to *Lady Julia*.

My thoughts on the dramas treated in the following pages have been amplified in *The Golden Labyrinth* (1962), *Shakespearian Production* (enlarged 1964), *Byron and Shakespeare* (1966), and *Shakespeare and Religion* (1967). These contain much on *Timon of Athens*, and some new thoughts on the personality of *Othello* and on his handkerchief (for the handkerchief *Shakespearian Production*, pp. 100–101, and *Byron and Shakespeare*, p. 250). For *King Lear*, I would point to my articles 'Tragedies of Love', *Books and Bookmen*, February 1971 (Vol. 16, No. 5), and 'Gloucester's Leap', *Essays in Criticism*, July 1972 (XXII, 3).

I would draw attention to Harold Fisch's impressive study, *Hamlet and the Word: the Covenant Pattern in Shakespeare* (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972).

Exeter, 1972

An important acknowledgement was made to J. Middleton Murry in the preface, not since reprinted, to my first publication, *Myth and Miracle*, in 1929. Among the following essays, especially the second essays on *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, the influence of A. C. Bradley is clearly apparent. Of Bradley I shall say more in my forthcoming book *Shakespeare's Dramatic Challenge*.

Exeter, 1974

My *Shakespeare's Dramatic Challenge* has now been published by Croom Helm in London and Barnes and Noble in New York. It contains discussions of the spiritual and dramatic rise of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, with an amplified treatment of *Timon of Athens*. A video-tape will be marketed from Collegiate Productions, Yeovil College, Somerset.

The book may be grouped with my *Shakespearian Production* as necessary to the understanding of my stage work. To them may be added the long unpublished *Symbol of Man*, in preparation, and my *Dramatic Papers* lodged in the Shakespeare Library of the Public Libraries at Birmingham, and also important essays by the Editor, by Francis Berry, and by Linden Huddleston, in *The Morality of Art*, edited by D. W. Jefferson, 1969.

Exeter, 1978

Symbol of Man is now published by The Regency Press, London and The University Press of America, Washington, DC. The University Press has also reissued *Shakespeare's Dramatic Challenge*, *Shakespearian, Production*, *The Christian Renaissance* and *Poets of Action*. For colour tapes see p. ii.

Exeter, 1983

INTRODUCTION

It has taken me a long time to recognize the justification of what Mr. Wilson Knight calls 'interpretation'. In my previous scepticism I am quite ready to admit the presence of elements of pure prejudice, as well as of some which I defend. I have always maintained, not only that Shakespeare was not a philosophical poet in the sense of Dante and Lucretius; but also, what may be more easily overlooked, that 'philosophical poets' like Dante and Lucretius are not really philosophers at all. They are poets who have presented us with the emotional and sense equivalent for a definite philosophical system constructed by a philosopher—even though they may sometimes take little liberties with the system. To say that Shakespeare is not a philosophical poet like these is not to say anything very striking or important. It is more worth while to point out that my notion of Dante or Lucretius as providing the 'emotional equivalent' for a philosophical system expressed by someone else, is not to be pressed to a literal point for point parallelism, as in the old theory of mind and body. The poet has something to say which is not even necessarily implicit in the system, something which is also over and above the verbal beauty. In other words, the pattern of Cyrene or that of the Schools is not the whole of the pattern of the carpet of Lucretius or of Dante. This other part of the pattern is something to be found in the work of other great poets than those who

are 'philosophical'—I say of other, not of all—for that would exclude Horace or Dryden or Malherbe. It is also to be found in the work of some (again, not of all) of the greatest novelists: certainly of George Eliot, and of Henry James who gave the phrase its currency. And of this sort of 'pattern' the most elaborate, the most extensive, and probably the most inscrutable is that of the plays of Shakespeare. For one thing, in Dante the pattern is interwoven chiefly with the systematic pattern which he set himself, and the mystery and excitement lies in trying to trace its relations and differences—the relation, and the personal variations in another mode, between for example the Thomist doctrine of Love, the poetic provençal tradition, and the direct experience of Dante with its modifications under philosophical and literary influences. But the philosophic pattern is far more a help than a hindrance, it is indeed *a priori* a help. Furthermore, Dante in his kind of poetry was doing exactly what he liked with his own material; and the practical exigencies of a badly paid playwright, popular entertainer, sometimes actor, and sometimes busy producer, can only confuse us in our study of Shakespeare. Then again, with Dante the philosophic system gives us a kind of criterion of consciousness, and the letter to Can Grande confirms it; just as of a lesser writer, but no less genuine a pattern-maker, Henry James, we have some gauge of consciousness in his very nearness to us in time and civilization, in the authors he studied and the constant play of his criticism upon his own work. But with Shakespeare we seem to be moving in an air of Cimmerian darkness. The conditions of his life, the conditions under which dramatic art was then possible, seem even more remote from us than those of Dante. We dare not treat him as completely isolated from his contemporary dramatists, as we can largely isolate Dante. We see his contemporaries for the most part as busy hack writers of untidy genius, sharing a particular sense of the tragic mood: this sense, such as it is, merging into the mere sense of what the public wanted. They confuse us by the fact that what at first appears to be their 'philosophy of life' sometimes turns out to be only a felicitous but shameless lifting of a passage from almost any author, as those of Chapman from Erasmus. This, indeed, is a habit which Shakespeare shares; he has his Montaigne, his Seneca, and his Machiavelli, or his Anti-Machiavel like the others. And they adapted, collaborated, and overlaid each other to the limits of confusion.

Nevertheless, they do seem, the best of Shakespeare's contemporaries, to have more or less faint or distinct patterns. (I was tempted to use the word 'secret' as an alternative to 'pattern', but that I remembered the unlucky example of Matthew Arnold, who said much about the 'secret of Jesus', a secret which having been revealed only and finally to Arnold himself, turned out to be a pretty poor secret after all.) In Marlowe, surely, we feel the search for one; in Chapman a kind of blundering upon one; in Jonson the one dear and distinct, slight but much more serious than it looks, pattern. There is something in the *Revenger's Tragedy*, but one play does not make a pattern; and Middleton completely baffles me; and as for Ford and Shirley, I suspect them of belonging to that class of poets not unknown to any age, which has all of the superficial qualities, and none of the internal organs, of poetry. But a study of these dramatists only renders our study of Shakespeare more difficult. The danger of studying him alone is the danger of working into the essence of Shakespeare what is just convention and the dodges of an overworked and underpaid writer; the danger of studying him together with his contemporaries is the danger of reducing a unique vision to a mode.

I once affirmed that Dante made great poetry out of a great philosophy of life; and that Shakespeare made equally great poetry out of an inferior and muddled philosophy of life. I see no reason to retract that assertion: but I ought to elucidate it. When I say 'great poetry' I do not suggest that there is a pure element in poetry, the right use of words and cadences, which the real amateur of poetry can wholly isolate to enjoy. The real amateur of poetry certainly enjoys, is thrilled by, uses of words which to the untrained reader seem prosaic. I would say that *only* the real amateur of poetry, perhaps, if this is not too presumptuous, *only* the real practitioner, can enjoy a great deal of poetry which the untrained reader dismisses as clever paraphrase of prose; certainly, to enjoy Pope, to have an analytic enough mind to enjoy even *second* rate eighteenth-century poetry, is a better test of 'love of poetry' than to like Shakespeare, which is no test at all: I can tell nothing from the fact that you enjoy Shakespeare, unless I know exactly *how* you enjoy him. But the greatest poetry, like the greatest prose, has a doubleness; the poet is talking to you on two planes at once. So I mean not merely that Shakespeare had as refined

a sense for words as Dante; but that he also has this doubleness of speech.

Now it is only a personal prejudice of mine, that I prefer poetry with a clear philosophical pattern, if it has the other pattern as well, to poetry like Shakespeare's. But this preference means merely a satisfaction of more of my own needs, not a judgement of superiority or even a statement that I *enjoy* it more as poetry. I like a definite and dogmatic philosophy, preferably a Christian and Catholic one, but alternatively that of Epicurus or of the Forest Philosophers of India; and it does not seem to me to obstruct or diminish either the 'poetry' or the other pattern. Among readers, probably both types, that of Dante and that of Shakespeare, suffer equal transformation. Dante will be taken as a mere paraphraser of Aquinas, occasionally bursting through his rigid frame into such scenes as Paolo and Francesca, but neither by his admirers nor by his detractors credited with anything like the freedom of Shakespeare. Shakespeare will be still worse traduced, in being attributed with some patent system of philosophy of his own, esoteric guide to conduct, yoga-breathing or key to the scriptures. Thus are the planes of order and pattern confounded.

It is also the prejudice or preference of any one who practises, though humbly, the art of verse, to be sceptical of all 'interpretations' of poetry, even his own interpretations; and to rely upon his sense of power and accomplishment in language to guide him. And certainly people ordinarily incline to suppose that in order to enjoy a poem it is necessary to 'discover its meaning'; so that their minds toil to discover a meaning, a meaning which they can expound to any one who will listen, in order to prove that they enjoy it. But for one thing the possibilities of meaning of 'meaning' in poetry are so extensive, that one is quite aware that one's knowledge of the meaning even of what oneself has written is extremely limited, and that its meaning to others, at least so far as there is some consensus of interpretation among persons apparently qualified to interpret, is quite as much a part of it as what it means to oneself. But when the meaning assigned is too clearly formulated, then one reader who has grasped a meaning of a poem may happen to appreciate it less exactly, enjoy it less intensely, than another person who has the discretion not to inquire too insistently. So, finally, the sceptical practitioner of verse tends to limit his criticism of poetry

to the appreciation of vocabulary and syntax, the analysis of line, metric and cadence; to stick as closely to the more trustworthy senses as possible.

Or rather, tends to try to do this. For this exact and humble appreciation is only one ideal never quite arrived at or even so far as approximated consistently maintained. The restless demon in us drives us also to 'interpret' whether we will or not; and the question of the meaning of 'interpretation' is a very pretty problem for Mr. I. A. Richards, with which neither Mr. Wilson Knight nor myself in this context can afford to be too narrowly concerned. But our impulse to interpret a work of art (by 'work of art' I mean here rather the work of one artist as a whole) is exactly as imperative and fundamental as our impulse to interpret the universe by metaphysics. Though we are never satisfied by any metaphysic, yet those who insist dogmatically upon the impossibility of knowledge of the universe, or those who essay to prove to us that the term 'universe' is meaningless, meet, I think, with a singularly unanimous rejection by those who are curious about the universe; and their counsels fall more flat than the flimsiest constructions of metaphysics. And Bradley's apothegm that 'metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct; but to find these reasons is no less an instinct', applies as precisely to the interpretation of poetry.

To interpret, then, or to seek to pounce upon the secret, to elucidate the pattern and pluck out the mystery, of a poet's work, is 'no less an instinct'. Nor is the effort altogether vain; for as the study of philosophy, and indeed the surrendering ourselves, with adequate knowledge of other systems, to some system of our own or of someone else, is as needful part of a man's life as falling in love or making any contract, so is it necessary to surrender ourselves to some interpretation of the poetry we like. (In my own experience, a writer needs less to 'interpret' the work of some minor poet who has influenced him, and whom he has assimilated, than the work of those poets who are too big for anyone wholly to assimilate. But I dare say that if one was as great a poet as Shakespeare, and was also his 'spiritual heir', one would feel no need to interpret him; interpretation is necessary perhaps only in so far as one is passive, not creative, oneself.)

And I do not mean that *nothing* solid and enduring can be arrived at in

interpretation: but to me it seems that there must be, as a matter of fact, in every effort of interpretation, some part which can be accepted and necessarily also some part which other readers can reject. I believe that there is a good deal in the interpretation of Shakespeare by Mr. Wilson Knight which can stand indefinitely for other people; and it would be a waste of time for me to pronounce judicially on the two elements in Mr. Knight's work. For that would be merely a re-interpretation of my own; and the reader will have to perform that operation for himself anyway. But I confess that reading his essays seems to me to have enlarged my understanding of the Shakespeare pattern; which, after all, is quite the main thing. It happened, fortunately for myself, that when I read some of his papers I was mulling over some of the later plays, particularly *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*; and reading the later plays for the first time in my life as a separate group, I was impressed by what seemed to me important and very serious recurrences of mood and theme. The old theory, current in my youth, of a Shakespeare altering and deteriorating his form and style to suit a new romantic taste, would not do; or if Shakespeare did this, then it became a remarkable coincidence that he should be able in middle life to turn about and give the public what it wanted—if these strange plays could conceivably be what any public would want—and at the same time remain steadfast in such integrity of exploration. And the mastery of language, I was sure, was quite undiminished.

To take Shakespeare's work as a whole, no longer to single out several plays as the greatest, and mark the others only as apprenticeship or decline—is I think an important and positive step in modern Shakespeare interpretation. More particularly, I think that Mr. Wilson Knight has shown insight in pursuing his search for the pattern below the level of 'plot' and 'character'. There are plots and there are characters: the question of 'sources' has its rights, and we must, if we go into the matter at all, inform ourselves of the exact proportion of invention, borrowing, and adaptation in the plot; and so far as possible we must separate the lines written by Shakespeare from those written by collaborators, or taken over from an earlier hand or interpolated by a later. This sort of work must be done to prepare for the search for the real pattern. But I think that Mr. Knight, among other things, has insisted upon the right way to interpret poetic drama. The writer of poetic

drama is not merely a man skilled in two arts and skilful to weave them in together; he is not a writer who can decorate a play with poetic language and metre. His task is different from that of the 'dramatist' or that of the 'poet', for his pattern is more complex and more dimensional; and with the subtraction which I have noted above, that Dante's pattern is the richer by a serious philosophy, and Shakespeare's the poorer by a rag-bag philosophy, I should say that Shakespeare's pattern was more complex, and his problem more difficult, than Dante's. The genuine poetic drama must, at its best, observe all the regulations of the plain drama, but will weave them *organically* (to mix a metaphor and to borrow for the occasion a modern word) into a much richer design. But our first duty as either critics or 'interpreters', surely, must be to try to grasp the whole design, and read *character* and *plot* in the understanding of this subterrene or submarine music. Here I say Mr. Knight has pursued the right line for his own plane of investigation, not hypothesizing 'character' and 'plot'. For Shakespeare is one of the rarest of dramatic poets, in that each of his characters is most nearly adequate both to the requirements of the real world and to those of the poet's world. If we can apprehend this balance in *Pericles*, we can come to apprehend it even in *Goneril* and *Regan*. And here Mr. Knight seems to me to be very helpful in expressing the results of the passive, and more critical, poetic understanding.

My fear is, that both what I say in this prefatory way, and what Mr. Wilson Knight has to say, may be misunderstood. It is a little irony that when a poet, like Dante, sets out with a definite philosophy and a sincere determination to guide conduct, his philosophical and ethical pattern is discounted, and our interpreters insist upon the pure poetry which is to be disassociated from this reprehensible effort to do us good. And that when a poet like Shakespeare, who has no 'philosophy' and apparently no design upon the amelioration of our behaviour, sets forth his experience and reading of life, he is forthwith saddled with a 'philosophy' of his own and some esoteric hints towards conduct. So we kick against those who wish to guide us, and insist on being guided by those who only aim to show us a vision, a dream if you like, which is beyond good and evil in the common sense. It is all a question of our willingness to pursue any path to the end. For the very Catholic philosophy of Dante, with its stern judgement of morals, leads us to the

same point beyond good and evil as the pattern of Shakespeare. Morality, we need to be told again and again, is not itself to be judged by moral standards: its laws are as 'natural' as any discovered by Einstein or Planck: which is expounded by, among others, Piccarda. Well: we must settle these problems for ourselves, provisionally, as well as we can.

Without pursuing that curious and obscure problem of the meaning of interpretation farther, it occurs to me as possible that there may be an essential part of error in all interpretation, without which it would not be interpretation at all: but this line of thought may be persevered in by students of *Appearance and Reality*. Another point, more immediately relevant, is that in a work of art, as truly as anywhere, reality only exists in and through appearances. I do not think that Mr. Wilson Knight himself, or Mr. Colin Still in his interesting book on *The Tempest* called *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, has fallen into the error of presenting the work of Shakespeare as a series of mystical treatises in cryptogram, to be filed away once the cipher is read; poetry is poetry, and the surface is as marvellous as the core. A mystical treatise is at best a poor substitute for the original experience of its author; and a poem, or the life's work of a poet, is a very different document from that. The work of Shakespeare is like life itself something to be lived through. If we lived it completely we should need no interpretation; but on our plane of appearances our interpretations themselves are a part of our living.

1930

T. S. ELIOT

1

ON THE PRINCIPLES OF SHAKESPEARE INTERPRETATION

The following essays present an interpretation of Shakespeare's work which may tend at first to confuse and perhaps even repel the reader: therefore I here try to clarify the points at issue. In this essay I outline what I believe to be the main hindrances to a proper understanding of Shakespeare; I also suggest the path which I think a sound interpretation should pursue. My remarks are, however, to be read as a counsel of perfection. Yet, though I cannot claim to follow them throughout in practice, this preliminary discussion, in showing what I have been at pains to do and to avoid, will serve to indicate the direction of my attempt.

At the start, I would draw a distinction between the terms 'criticism' and 'interpretation'. It will be as well to define, purely for my immediate purpose, my personal uses of the words. 'Criticism' to me suggests a certain process of deliberately objectifying the work under consideration; the comparison of it with other similar works in order especially to show in what respects it surpasses, or falls short of, those works; the dividing its 'good' from its 'bad'; and, finally, a formal judgement as to its lasting validity. 'Interpretation', on the contrary, tends to merge into

the work it analyses; it attempts, as far as possible, to understand its subject in the light of its own nature, employing external reference, if at all, only as a preliminary to understanding; it avoids discussion of merits, and, since its existence depends entirely on its original acceptance of the validity of the poetic unit which it claims, in some measure, to translate into discursive reasoning, it can recognize no division of 'good' from 'bad'. Thus criticism is active and looks ahead, often treating past work as material on which to base future standards and canons of art; interpretation is passive, and looks back, regarding only the imperative challenge of a poetic vision. Criticism is a judgement of vision; interpretation a reconstruction of vision. In practice, it is probable that neither can exist, or at least has yet on any comprehensive scale existed, quite divorced from the other. The greater part of poetic commentary pursues a middle course between criticism and interpretation. But sometimes work is created of so resplendent a quality, so massive a solidity of imagination, that adverse criticism beats against it idly as the wind that flings its ineffectual force against a mountain-rock. Any profitable commentary on such work must necessarily tend towards a pure interpretation.

The work of Shakespeare is of this transcendent order. Though much has already been written on it, only that profitably survives which in its total effect tends to interpretation rather than criticism. Coleridge, repelled by one of the horrors in *King Lear*, admitted that the author's judgement, being so consistently faultless, was here probably superior to his own: and he was right. That is the interpretative approach. Hazlitt and A. C. Bradley both developed that approach: their work is primarily interpretative. But to-day there is a strong tendency to 'criticize' Shakespeare, to select certain aspects of his mature works and point out faults. These faults are accounted for in various ways: it is said that Shakespeare, though a great genius, was yet a far from perfect artist; that certain elements were introduced solely to please a vulgar audience; or even, if the difficulty be extreme, that they are the work of another hand. Now it will generally be found that when a play is understood in its totality, these faults automatically vanish. For instance, Hamlet's slowness to avenge his father, the forgiveness of Angelo, Macbeth's vagueness of motive, Timon's universal hate—all these, which have continually baffled commentators, instead of

projecting as ugly curiosities, will, when once we find the true focus demanded by the poet's work, appear not merely as relevant and even necessary, but as crucial, and themselves the very essence of the play concerned. It is, then, a matter of correct focal length; nor is it the poet's fault if our focus is wrong. For our imaginative focus is generally right enough. In reading, watching, or acting Shakespeare for pure enjoyment we accept everything. But when we think 'critically' we see faults which are not implicit in the play nor our enjoyment of it, but merely figments of our own minds. We should not, in fact, think critically at all: we should interpret our original imaginative experience into the slower consciousness of logic and intellect, preserving something of that child-like faith which we possess, or should possess, in the theatre. It is exactly this translation from one order of consciousness to another that interpretation claims to perform. Uncritically, and passively, it receives the whole of the poet's vision; it then proceeds to re-express this experience in its own terms.

To receive this whole Shakespearian vision within the intellectual consciousness demands a certain and very definite act of mind. One must be prepared to see the whole play in space as well as in time. It is natural in analysis to pursue the steps of the tale in sequence, noticing the logic that connects them, regarding those essentials that Aristotle noted: beginning, middle, and end. And yet by giving supreme attention to this temporal nature of drama we omit what, in Shakespeare, is at least of equivalent importance. A Shakespearian tragedy is set spatially as well as temporally in the mind. By this I mean that there are throughout the play a set of correspondences which relate to each other independently of the time-sequence which is the story: such are the intuition-intelligence opposition active within and across *Troilus and Cressida*, the death-theme in *Hamlet*, the nightmare evil of *Macbeth*. This I have sometimes called the play's 'atmosphere'. In interpretation of *Othello* it has to take the form of an essential relation, abstracted from the story, existing between the Othello, Desdemona, and Iago conceptions. Generally, however, there is unity, not diversity. Perhaps it is what Aristotle meant by 'unity of idea'. Now if we are prepared to see the whole play laid out, so to speak, as an area, being simultaneously aware of these thickly-scattered correspondences in a single view of the whole, we possess the unique quality of the play in a new sense. 'Faults'

begin to vanish into thin air. Immediately we begin to realize necessity where before we saw irrelevance and beauty dethroning ugliness. For the Shakespearian person is intimately fused with this atmospheric quality; he obeys a spatial as well as a temporal necessity. Gloucester's mock-suicide, Malcolm's detailed confession of crimes, Ulysses' long speech on order, are cases in point. But because we, in our own lives and those of our friends, see events most strongly as a time-sequence—thereby blurring our vision of other significances—we next, quite arbitrarily and unjustly, abstract from the Shakespearian drama that element which the intellect most easily assimilates; and, finding it not to correspond with our own life as we see it, begin to observe 'faults'. This, however, is apparent only after we try to rationalize our impressions; what I have called the 'spatial' approach is implicit in our imaginative pleasure to a greater or a less degree always. It is, probably, the ability to see larger and still larger areas of a great work spatially with a continual widening of vision that causes us to appreciate it more deeply, to own it with our minds more surely, on every reading; whereas at first, knowing it only as a story, much of it may have seemed sterile, and much of it irrelevant. A vivid analogy to this Shakespearian quality is provided by a fine modern play, *Journey's End*. Everything in the play gains tremendous significance from war. The story, which is slight, moves across a stationary background: if we forget that background for one instant parts of the dialogue fall limp; remember it, and the most ordinary remark is tense, poignant—often of shattering power. To study *Measure for Measure* or *Macbeth* without reference to their especial 'atmospheres' is rather like forgetting the war as we read or witness *Journey's End*; or the cherry orchard in Tchekhov's famous play. There is, however, a difference. In *Journey's End* the two elements, the dynamic and static, action and background, are each firmly actualized and separated except in so far as Stanhope, rather like Hamlet, bridges the two. In *The Cherry Orchard* there is the same division. But with Shakespeare a purely spiritual atmosphere interpenetrates the action, there is a fusing rather than a contrast; and where a direct personal symbol growing out of the dominating atmosphere is actualized, it may be a supernatural being, as the Ghost, symbol of the death-theme in *Hamlet*, or the Weird Sisters, symbols of the evil in *Macbeth*.

Since in Shakespeare there is this close fusion of the temporal, that is,

the plot-chain of event following event, with the spatial, that is, the omnipresent and mysterious reality brooding motionless over and within the play's movement, it is evident that my two principles thus firmly divided in analysis are no more than provisional abstractions from the whole. However, since to make the first abstraction with especial crudity, that is, to analyse the sequence of events, the 'causes' linking dramatic motive to action and action to result in time, is a blunder instinctive to the human intellect, I make no apology for restoring balance by insistence on the other. My emphasis is justified, in that it will be seen to clarify many difficulties. It throws neglected beauties into strong relief; and often resolves the whole play with a sudden revelation. For example, the ardour of Troilus in battle against the Greeks at the close of *Troilus and Cressida*, Mariana's lovely prayer for Angelo's life, the birth of love in Edmund at the close of *King Lear*, and the stately theme of Alcibiades' revenge in *Timon of Athens*—all these cannot be properly understood without a clear knowledge of the general themes which vitalize the action of those plays.

These dual elements seem perfectly harmonized in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. In *Hamlet* the spatial element is mainly confined to the theme of Hamlet and the Ghost, both sharply contrasted with their environment: thus the play offers a less unified statement as a whole, and interpretation is rendered difficult and not wholly satisfactory. With *Othello*, too, there is difficulty. Unless the play is to be considered as purely a sequence of events, if we are to find a spatial reality, we must view the qualities of the three chief persons together and in their essential relation to each other expect to find the core of the metaphysical significance: for the primary fact of the play is not, as in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, a blending, but rather a differentiating, a demarcation, and separation, of essence from essence. In *Timon of Athens* both elements appear, but the temporal predominates in that the imaginative atmosphere itself changes with the play's progress: which fact here seems to reflect the peculiar clarity and conscious mastery of the poet's mind. With the poet, as with the reader, the time-sequence will be uppermost in consciousness, the pervading atmosphere or static background tending to be unconsciously apprehended or created, a half-realized significance, a vague all-inclusive deity of the dramatic universe. In respect of this atmospheric suggestion we find a

sense of mystery in *King Lear* which cannot be found in *Othello*; and, in so far as the Shakespearian play lacks mystery, it seems, as a rule, to lack profundity. But in *Timon of Athens* the mystery of *King Lear* is, as it were, mastered, and yet re-expressed with the clarity of *Othello*. Here the poet explicates the atmospheric quality of former plays in a philosophic tragedy whose dominant temporal quality thus mirrors the clarity, in no sense the sterility, of the poet's vision. The spatial, that is, the spiritual, quality uses the temporal, that is, the story, lending it dominance in order to express itself the more clearly: *Timon of Athens* is essentially an allegory or parable. My suggestion as to the poet's 'consciousness' must, however, be considered as either pure hazard or useful metaphor, illuminating the play's nature and perhaps hitting the truth of Shakespeare's mind in composition. Certainly Hazlitt thought that in *Timon of Athens* the poet was of all his plays the most 'in earnest'. Elsewhere I am not concerned with the poet's 'consciousness', or his 'intentions'. Nor need the question arise; but, since a strong feeling exists that no subtlety or profundity can be born from a mind itself partly unconscious of such things, and since Shakespeare's life appears not to have been mainly concerned with transcendental realities—except in that he was born, loved, was ambitious, and died—it will be as well to refer briefly to the matter of 'intentions'. This I shall do next, and will afterwards deal with two other critical concepts which, with 'intentions', have helped to work chaos with our understanding of poetry.

There is a maxim that a work of art should be criticized according to the artist's 'intentions': than which no maxim could be more false. The intentions of the artist are but clouded forms which, if he attempt to crystallize them in consciousness, may prefigure a quite different reality from that which eventually emerges in his work,

not answering the aim
And that unbodied figure of the thought
That gave't surmised shape.

In those soliloquies where Brutus and Macbeth try to clarify their own motives into clean-cut concepts, we may see good examples of the irrelevance born by 'intentions' to the instinctive power which is bear-

ing the man towards his fate: it is the same with the poet. Milton's puritanical 'intentions' bear little relevance to his Satan. 'Intentions' belong to the plane of intellect and memory: the swifter consciousness that awakens in poetic composition touches subtleties and heights and depths unknowable by intellect and intractable to memory. That consciousness we can enjoy at will when we submit ourselves with utmost passivity to the poet's work; but when the intellectual mode returns it often brings with it a troop of concepts irrelevant to the nature of the work it thinks to analyse, and, with its army of 'intentions', 'causes', 'sources'; and 'characters', and its essentially ethical outlook, works havoc with our minds, since it is trying to impose on the vivid reality of art a logic totally alien to its nature. In interpretation we must remember not the facts but the quality of the original poetic experience; and, in translating this into whatever concepts appear suitable, we find that the facts too fall into place automatically when once the qualitative focus is correct. Reference to the artist's 'intentions' is usually a sign that the commentator—in so far as he is a commentator rather than a biographer—has lost touch with the essentials of the poetic work. He is thinking in terms of the time-sequence and causality, instead of allowing his mind to be purely receptive. It will be clear, then, that the following essays say nothing new as to Shakespeare's 'intentions'; attempt to shed no light directly on Shakespeare the man; but claim rather to illuminate our own poetic experiences enjoyed whilst reading, or watching, the plays. In this sense, they are concerned only with realities, since they claim to interpret what is generally admitted to exist: the supreme quality of Shakespeare's work.

Next as to 'sources'. This concept is closely involved with that of 'intentions'. Both try to explain art in terms of causality, the most natural implement of intellect. Both fail empirically to explain any essential whatsoever. There is, clearly, a relation between Shakespeare's plays and the work of Plutarch, Holinshed, Vergil, Ovid, and the Bible; but not one of these, nor any number of them, can be considered a cause of Shakespeare's poetry and therefore the word 'source', that is, the origin whence the poetic reality flows, is a false metaphor. In Shakespeare's best known passage of aesthetic philosophy we hear that the poet's eye glances 'from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven', and that the poet's pen turns to 'shapes' the 'forms of things unknown'. It

'gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name'. That is, the source of poetry is rooted in the otherness of mental or spiritual realities; these, however, are a 'nothing' until mated with earthly shapes. Creation is thus born of a union between 'earth' and 'heaven', the material and the spiritual. Without 'shapes' the poet is speechless; he needs words, puppets of the drama, tales. But the unknown 'forms' come first. In another profound but less known passage (*Richard II*, v. v. 6) we hear that in creation the brain is 'the female to the soul'. The spiritual then is the masculine, the material the feminine, agent in creation. The 'source' of *Antony and Cleopatra*, if we must indeed have a 'source' at all, is the transcendent erotic imagination of the poet which finds its worthy bride in an old world romance. It seems, moreover, that a great poet must, if he is to forgo nothing of concreteness and humanity, lose himself in contemplation of an actual tale or an actual event in order to find himself in supreme vision; otherwise he will tend to philosophy, to the divine element unmated to the earthly. Therefore 'sources', as usually understood, have their use for the poet: they have little value for the interpreter. The tale of Cleopatra married to a Hardy's imagination would have given birth to a novel very different from Shakespeare's play: the final poetic result is always a mystery. That result, and not vague hazards as to its 'source', must be the primary object of our attention. It should further be observed that, although the purely 'temporal' element of Shakespearian drama may sometimes bear a close relation to a tale probably known by Shakespeare, what I have called the 'spatial' reality is ever the unique child of his mind; therefore interpretation, concerned, as in the following essays, so largely with that reality, is clearly working outside and beyond the story alone. Now, whereas the spatial quality of these greater plays is different in each, they nearly all turn on the same plot. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the poet has chosen a series of tales to whose life-rhythm he is spontaneously attracted, and has developed them in each instance according to his vision.

And finally, as to 'character'. In the following essays the term is refused, since it is so constantly entwined with a false and unduly ethical criticism. So often we hear that 'in *Timon of Athens* it was Shakespeare's intention to show how a generous but weak character may come to ruin through an unwise use of his wealth'; that 'Shakespeare

wished in *Macbeth* to show how crime inevitably brings retribution'; that, 'in *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare has given us a lesson concerning the dangers of an uncontrolled passion'. These are purely imaginary examples, coloured for my purpose, to indicate the type of ethical criticism to which I refer. It continually brings in the intention-concept, which our moral-philosophy, rightly or wrongly, involves. Hence, too, the constant and fruitless search for 'motives' sufficient to account for *Macbeth's* and *Iago's* actions: since the moral critic feels he cannot blame a 'character' until he understands his 'intentions', and without the opportunity of praising and blaming he is dumb. It is not, clearly, possible to avoid ethical considerations; nor is it desirable. Where one person within the drama is immediately apparent as morally good and another as bad, we will note the difference: but we should follow our dramatic intuitions. A person in the drama may act in such a way that we are in no sense antagonized but are aware of beauty and supreme interest only; yet the analogy to that same action may well be intolerable to us in actual life. When such a divergence occurs the commentator must be true to his artistic, not his normal, ethic. Large quantities of Shakespeare criticism have wrecked themselves on the teeth of this dualism. In so far as moral values enter into our appreciation of the poetic work, they will tend to be instinctive to us: Shakespeare here, as in his other symbols, speaks our own language. I mean, it is as natural to us to like Cordelia better than Goneril with a liking which may be said to depend partly on moral values as it is for us to recognize the power of Shakespeare's tempest-symbol as suggesting human tragedy, or his use of jewel-metaphors to embody the costly riches of love. In ages hence, when perhaps tempests are controlled by science and communism has replaced wealth, then the point of Shakespeare's symbolism may need explanation; and then it may, from a new ethical view-point, be necessary to analyse at length the moral values implicit in the Cordelia and Edmund conceptions. But in these matters Shakespeare speaks almost the same language as we, and ethical terms, though they must frequently occur in interpretation, must only be allowed in so far as they are used in absolute obedience to the dramatic and aesthetic significance: in which case they cease to be ethical in the usual sense.

This false criticism is implied by the very use of the word 'character'.

It is impossible to use the term without any tinge of a morality which blurs vision. The term, which in ordinary speech often denotes the degree of moral control exercised by the individual over his instinctive passions, is altogether unsuited to those persons of poetic drama whose life consists largely of passion unveiled. *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are created in a soul-dimension of primal feeling, of which in real life we may be only partly conscious or may be urged to control by a sense of right and wrong. In fact, it may well seem that the more we tend away from the passionate and curbless life of poetic drama, the stronger we shall be as 'characters'. And yet; in reading *Macbeth* or *King Lear* we are aware of strength, not weakness. We are not aware of failure: rather we 'let determined things to destiny hold unbewailed their way'. We must observe, then, this paradox: the strong protagonist of poetic drama would probably appear a weakling if he were a real man; and, indeed, the critic who notes primarily *Macbeth's* weakness is criticizing him as a man rather than a dramatic person. Ethics are essentially critical when applied to life; but if they hold any place at all in art, they will need to be modified into a new artistic ethic which obeys the peculiar nature of art as surely as a sound morality is based on the nature of man. From a true interpretation centred on the imaginative qualities of Shakespeare, certain facts will certainly emerge which bear relevance to human life, to human morals: but interpretation must come first. And interpretation must be metaphysical rather than ethical. We shall gain nothing by applying to the delicate symbols of the poet's imagination the rough machinery of an ethical philosophy created to control the turbulences of actual life. Thus when a critic adopts the ethical attitude, we shall generally find that he is unconsciously lifting the object of his attention from his setting and regarding him as actually alive. By noting 'faults' in *Timon's* 'character' we are in effect saying that he would not be a success in real life: which is beside the point, since he, and *Macbeth*, and *Lear*, are evidently dramatic successes. Now, whereas the moral attitude to life is positive and dynamic and tells us what we ought to do, that attitude applied to literature is invariably negative and destructive. It is continually thrusting on our attention a number of 'failures', 'mistakes', and 'follies' in connexion with those dramatic persons from whom we have consistently derived delight and a sense of exultation. Even when terms of negation, such as 'evil', necessarily appear—as

with Hamlet and Macbeth—we should so employ them that the essence they express is felt to be something powerful, autonomous, and grand. Our reaction to great literature is a positive and dynamic experience. Crudely, sometimes ineffectually, interpretation will attempt to translate that experience in a spirit also positive and dynamic.

To do this we should regard each play as a visionary whole, close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism: three modes of transmission, equal in their importance. Too often the first of these alone receives attention: whereas, in truth, we should not be content even with all three, however clearly we have them in our minds, unless we can work back through them to the Original vision they express. Each incident, each turn of thought, each suggestive symbol throughout Macbeth or King Lear radiates inwards from the play's circumference to the burning central core without knowledge of which we shall miss their relevance and necessity: they relate primarily, not directly to each other, nor to the normal appearances of human life, but to this central reality alone. The persons of Shakespeare have been analysed carefully in point of psychological realism, yet in giving so detailed and prolix a care to any one element of the poet's expression, the commentator, starting indeed from a point on the circumference, instead of working into the heart of the play, pursues a tangential course, riding, as it were, on his own life-experiences farther and farther from his proper goal. Such is the criticism that finds fault with the Duke's decisions at the close of *Measure for Measure*: if we are to understand the persons of Shakespeare we should consider always what they do rather than what they might have done. Each person, event, scene, is integral to the poetic statement: the removing, or blurring, of a single stone in the mosaic will clearly lessen our chance of visualizing the whole design.

Too often the commentator discusses Shakespeare's work without the requisite emotional sympathy and agility of intellect. Then the process of false criticism sets in: whatever elements lend themselves most readily to analysis on the analogy of actual life, these he selects, roots out, distorting their natural growth; he then praises or blames according to their measure of correspondence with his own life-experiences, and, creating the plaster figures of 'character', searches

everywhere for 'causes' on the analogy of human affairs, noting that Iago has no sufficient reason for his villainy, executing some strange transference such as the statement that Lady Macbeth would have done this or that in Cordelia's position; observing that there appears to have been dull weather on the occasion of Duncan's murder. But what he will not do is recapture for analysis his own original experience, concerned, as it was, purely with a dramatic and artistic reality: with Iago the person of motiveless and instinctive villainy, with Cordelia known only with reference to the *Lear* universe, with the vivid extravagant symbolism of abnormal phenomena in beast and element and the sun's eclipse which accompanies the unnatural act of murder. These, the true, the poetic, realities, the commentator too often passes over. He does not look straight at the work he would interpret, is not true to his own imaginative reaction. My complaint is, not that such a commentator cannot appreciate the imaginative nature of Shakespeare—that would be absurd and unjustifiable—but that he falsifies his own experience when he begins to criticize. Part of the play—and that the less important element of story—he tears out ruthlessly for detailed analysis on the analogy of human life: with a word or two about 'the magic of poetry' or 'the breath of genius' he dismisses the rest. Hence the rich gems of Shakespeare's poetic symbolism have been left untouched and unwanted, whilst Hamlet was being treated in Harley Street. Hence arises the criticism discovering faults in Shakespeare. But when a right interpretation is offered it will generally be seen that both the fault and the criticism which discovered it are without meaning. The older critics drove psychological analysis to unnecessary lengths: the new school of 'realistic' criticism, in finding faults and explaining them with regard to Shakespeare's purely practical and financial 'intentions', is thus in reality following the wrong vision of its predecessors. Both together trace the process of my imaginary critic, who, thinking to have found an extreme degree of realism in one place, ends by complaining that he finds too little in another. Neither touch the heart of the Shakespearian play.

Nor will a sound knowledge of the stage and the especial theatrical technique of Shakespeare's work render up its imaginative secret. True, the plays were written as plays, and meant to be acted. But that tells us nothing relevant to our purpose. It explains why certain things cannot

be found in Shakespeare: it does not explain why the finest things, the fascination of Hamlet, the rich music of Othello, the gripping evil of Macbeth, the pathos of King Lear, and the gigantic architecture of Timon of Athens came to birth. Shakespeare wrote in terms of drama, as he wrote in English. In the grammar of dramatic structure he expresses his vision: without that, or some other, structure he could not have expressed himself. But the dramatic nature of a play's origin cannot be adduced to disprove a quality implicit in the work itself. True, when there are any faults to be explained, this particular pursuit and aim of Shakespeare's poetry may well be noted to account for their presence. Interpretation, however, tends to resolve all but minor difficulties in connexion with the greater plays: therefore it is not necessary in the following essays to remember, or comment on, the dramatic structure of their expression, though from another point of view such comment and analysis may well be interesting. It illuminates one facet of their surface: but a true philosophic and imaginative interpretation will aim at cutting below the surface to reveal that burning core of mental or spiritual reality from which each play derives its nature and meaning.

The soul-life of a Shakespearian play is an enduring power of divine worth. Its perennial fire is as mysterious, as near and yet as far, as that of the sun, and, like the sun, it burns on while generations pass. If interpretation attempts to split the original beam into different colours for inspection and analysis it does not claim, any more than will the scientist, that its spectroscope reveals the whole reality of its attention. It discovers something: exactly what it discovers, and whether that discovery be of ultimate value, cannot easily be demonstrated. But, though we know the sun better in the spring fields than in the laboratory, yet we might remember that the spectroscope discovered Helium first in the solar ray, which chemical was after sought and found on earth. So, too, the interpretation of poetic vision may have its use. And if it seems sometimes to bear little relevance to its original, if its mechanical joints creak and its philosophy lumber clumsily in attempt to follow the swift arrow-flight of poetry, it is, at least, no less rational a pursuit than that of the mathematician who writes a rhythmic curve in the stiff symbols of an algebraic equation.

I shall now shortly formulate what I take to be the main principles of right Shakespearian interpretation:

(i) Before noticing the presence of faults we should first regard each play as a visionary unit bound to obey none but its own self-imposed laws. To do this we should attempt to preserve absolute truth to our own imaginative reaction, whithersoever it may lead us in the way of paradox and unreason. We should at all costs avoid selecting what is easy to understand and forgetting the superlogical.

(ii) We should thus be prepared to recognize what I have called the 'temporal' and the 'spatial' elements: that is, to relate any given incident or speech either to the time-sequence of story or the peculiar atmosphere, intellectual or imaginative, which binds the play. Being aware of this new element we should not look for perfect verisimilitude to life, but rather see each play as an expanded metaphor, by means of which the original vision has been projected into forms roughly correspondent with actuality, conforming thereto with greater or less exactitude according to the demands of its own nature. It will then usually appear that many difficult actions and events become coherent and, within the scope of their universe, natural.

(iii) We should analyse the use and meaning of direct poetic symbolism—that is, events whose significance can hardly be related to the normal processes of actual life. Also the minor symbolic imagery of Shakespeare, which is extremely consistent, should receive careful attention. Where certain images continually recur in the same associative connexion, we can, if we have reason to believe that this associative force is strong enough, be ready to see the presence of the associative value when the images occur alone. Nor should we neglect the symbolic value of aural effects such as the discharge of cannon in *Hamlet* and *Othello* or the sound of trumpets in *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*.

(iv) The plays from *Julius Caesar* (about 1599) to *The Tempest* (about 1611) when properly understood fall into a significant sequence. This I have called 'the Shakespeare Progress'. Therefore in detailed analysis of any one play it may sometimes be helpful to have regard to its place in the sequence, provided always that thought of this sequence be used to illuminate, and in no sense be allowed to distort, the view of the play under analysis. Particular notice should be given to what I have called the 'hate-theme', which is turbulent throughout most of these plays: an especial mode of cynicism toward love, disgust at the physical body,

and dismay at the thought of death; a revulsion from human life caused by a clear sight of its limitations—more especially limitations imposed by time. This progress I have outlined in *Myth and Miracle*, being concerned there especially with the Final Plays. The following essays are ordered according to the probable place in the Shakespeare Progress of the plays concerned. The order is that given by the late Professor Henry Norman Hudson in *The New Hudson Shakespeare*. Though I here compare one theme in *Julius Caesar* with *Macbeth*, I postpone a comprehensive analysis of the play, since its peculiar quality relates it more directly to the later tragedies than to those noticed in this treatment.

These arguments I have pursued at some length, since my interpretation reaches certain conclusions which may seem somewhat revolutionary. Especially will this be apparent in my reading of the Final Plays as mystical representations of a mystic vision. A first sketch of this reading I have already published in *Myth and Miracle*. Since the publication of my essay, my attention has been drawn to Mr. Cohn Still's remarkable book *Shakespeare's Mystery Play: A Study of The Tempest* (Cecil Palmer, 1921). Mr. Still's interpretation of *The Tempest* is very similar to mine. His conclusions were reached by a detailed comparison of the play in its totality with other creations of literature, myth, and ritual throughout the ages; mine are reached solely through seeing *The Tempest* as the conclusion to the Shakespeare Progress. *The Tempest* is thus exactly located as a work of mystic insight with reference to the cross-axes of universal and Shakespearian vision. It would seem, therefore, that my method of interpretation as outlined in this essay has already met with some degree of empirical proof.

In conclusion, I would emphasize that I here lay down certain principles and make certain objections for my immediate purpose only. I would not be thought to level complaint against the value of 'criticism' in general. My private and personal distinction between 'criticism' and 'interpretation' aims at no universal validity. It can hardly be absolute. No doubt I have narrowed the term 'criticism' unjustly. Much of the critical work of to-day is, according to my distinction, work of a high interpretative order. Nor do I suggest that true 'criticism' in the narrow sense I apply to it is of any lesser order than true interpretation: it may well be a higher pursuit, since it is, in a sense, the more creative and endures a greater burden of responsibility. The relative value of the two

modes must vary in exact proportion to the greatness of the literature they analyse: that is why I believe the most profitable approach to Shakespeare to be interpretation rather than criticism.

2

THE EMBASSY OF DEATH: AN ESSAY ON *HAMLET*

I

In this first section I shall indicate the nature of Hamlet's mental suffering. It will then be clear that many of the scenes and incidents which have proved difficult in the past may be considered as expressions of that unique mental or spiritual experience of the hero which is at the heart of the play. In thus isolating this element for analysis I shall attempt to simplify at least one theme—and that the most important one—in a play baffling and difficult in its totality. My purpose will therefore be first limited strictly to a discussion, not of the play as a whole, nor even of Hamlet's mind as a whole, but of this central reality of pain, which, though it be necessarily related, either as effect or cause, to the events of the plot and to the other persons, is itself ultimate, and should be the primary object of our search.

Our attention is early drawn to the figure of Hamlet. Alone in the gay glitter of the court, silhouetted against brilliance, robustness, health, and happiness, is the pale, black-robed Hamlet, mourning. When first we meet him, his words point the essential inwardness of his suffering:

But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
(1. ii. 85)

When he is alone he reveals his misery more clearly:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

(l. ii. 129)

The mood expressed by these lines is patent. To Hamlet the light has been extinguished from the things of earth. He has lost all sense of purpose. We already know one reason for Hamlet's state: his father's death. Claudius and his mother have already urged him to

throw to earth

This unprevailing woe . . .
(l. ii. 106)

Now, during Hamlet's soliloquy, we see another reason: disgust at his mother's second marriage:

... within a month:
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
 (I. ii. 153)

These two concrete embodiments of Hamlet's misery are closely related. He suffers from misery at his father's death and agony at his

mother's quick forgetfulness: such callousness is infidelity, and so impurity, and, since Claudius is the brother of the King, incest. It is reasonable to suppose that Hamlet's state of mind, if not wholly caused by these events, is at least definitely related to them. Of his two loved parents, one has been taken for ever by death, the other dishonoured for ever by her act of marriage. To Hamlet the world is now an 'unweeded garden'.

Hamlet hears of his father's Ghost, sees it, and speaks to it. His original pain is intensified by knowledge of the unrestful spirit, by the terrible secrets of death hinted by the Ghost's words:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood . . .
(I. v. 15)

This is added to Hamlet's sense of loss: this knowledge of the father he loved suffering in death:

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires . . .
(I. v. 10)

Nor is this all. He next learns that his father's murderer now wears the crown, is married to his faithless mother. Both elements in his original pain are thus horribly intensified. His hope of recovery to the normal state of healthy mental life depended largely on his ability to forget his father, to forgive his mother. Claudius advised him well. Now his mother's honour is more foully smirched than ever; and the living cause and symbol of his father's death is firmly placed on Denmark's throne. Forgetfulness is impossible, forgetfulness that might have brought peace. The irony of the Ghost's parting word is terrible:

Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me.
(I. v. 91)

If the spirit had been kind, it would have prayed that Hamlet might