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MIMESIS

THE REPRESENTATION OF REALITY
IN WESTERN LITERATURE

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

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THE WEARY PRINCE

Prince Henry: Before God, I am exceeding weary.

Poins: Is it come to that? I had thought weariness durst not have attached one of so high blood.

Prince Henry: Faith, it does me; though it discolours the complexion of my greatness to acknowledge it. Does it not show vilely in me to desire small beer?

Poins: Why, a prince should not be so loosely studied as to remember so weak a composition.

Prince Henry: Belike, then, my appetite was not princely got; for, by my troth, I do now remember the poor creature, small beer. But, indeed, these humble considerations make me out of love with my greatness. What a disgrace is it to me to remember thy name? or to know thy face to-morrow? or to take note how many silk stockings thou hast; viz., these, and those that were thy peach-coloured ones? or to bear the inventory of thy shirts, as, one for superfluity, and one other for use? . . .

This is a conversation between Prince Henry (subsequently King Henry) and one of the boon companions of his youthful frolics. It occurs in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, part 2, at the beginning of the second scene of act 2. The comic disapproval of the fact that a person of such high rank should be subject to weariness and the desire for small beer, that his mind should be obliged so much as to notice the existence of so lowly a creature as Poins and even to remember the inventory of his clothes, is a satire on the trend—no longer negligible in Shakespeare's day—toward a strict separation between the sublime and the realm of everyday realities. Attempts in this direction were inspired by the example of antiquity, especially by Seneca, and were spread by the humanist imitators of antique drama in Italy, France, and in England itself. But they had not yet met with complete success. However important the influence of antiquity may have been on Shakespeare, it could not mislead him, nor yet other dramatists of the Elizabethan period, into this separation of styles. The medieval-Christian and at

the same time popular-English tradition which opposed such a development was still too strong. At a much later period, more than a century and a half after his death, Shakespeare's work became the ideal and the example for all movements of revolt against the strict separation of styles in French classicism. Let us try to determine what the mixture of styles in his work signifies.

The motif is introduced by Poins, and then immediately taken up by the Prince in a humorous vein with an undertone of rhetorical preciousness which serves to emphasize the contrasts: "it discolours the complexion of my greatness" versus "small beer." Goaded on by Poins's second reply, the Prince playfully develops the theme: "small beer" now becomes a wretched creature that has sneaked into the noble recesses of his consciousness against all law and order, as it were. Now other "humble considerations" occur to him and put him out of conceit with his own greatness. From among them, with wittily charming impertinence, he falls upon the very Poins who stands before him: is it not a shame to me, he argues, that I should remember your name, your face, and even the inventory of your clothes?

A large number of the elements of mixed style are mentioned or alluded to in these few lines: the element of physical creaturalness, that of lowly everyday objects, and that of the mixture of classes involving persons of high and low rank; there is also a marked mixture of high and low expressions in the diction, there is even use of one of the classical terms which characterize the low style, the word "humble." All this is abundantly represented in Shakespeare's tragic works. Examples of the portrayal of the physical-creatural are numerous: Hamlet is fat and short of breath (according to another reading he is not fat but hot); Caesar faints from the stench of the mob acclaiming him; Cassio in *Othello* is drunk; hunger and thirst, cold and heat affect tragic characters too; they suffer from the inclemencies of the weather and the ravages of illness: in Ophelia's case insanity is represented with such realistic psychology that the resulting stylistic effect is completely different from what we find in Euripides' *Herakles* for example; and death, which can be depicted on the level of the pure sublime, here often has its medieval and creatural appearance (skeletons, the smell of decomposition, etc.). Nowhere is there an attempt to avoid mentioning everyday utensils or, in general, to avoid the concrete portrayal of the everyday processes of life; these things have a much larger place than they do in antique tragedy, although there too, even before Eu-

ripides, they were not so completely taboo as with the classicists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

More important than this is the mixture of characters and the consequent mixture of tragic and comic elements. To be sure, all the characters whom Shakespeare treats in the sublime and tragic manner are of high rank. He does not, as the Middle Ages did, conceive of "everyman" as tragic. He is also more consciously aristocratic than Montaigne. In his work the *humaine condition* is reflected very differently in the different classes, not only in practical terms but also from the point of view of aesthetic dignity. His tragic heroes are kings, princes, commanders, noblemen, and the great figures of Roman history. A borderline case is Shylock. To be sure, in terms of his class, he is not a common everyday figure; he is a pariah; but his class is low. The slight action of the *Merchant of Venice*, with its fairy-tale motifs, is almost too heavily burdened by the weight and problematic implications of his character, and many actors who have undertaken the part have tried to concentrate the entire interest of the play upon him and to make him a tragic hero. His character is a temptation to tragic overemphasis: his hatred has the deepest and most human motivation, is much more deeply based than the wickedness of Richard III; it becomes significant through its power and tenacity. In addition, Shylock formulates it in phrases which echo great humanitarian ideas, especially those which most deeply moved and influenced later centuries. The most famous of these formulations is the answer which he gives the doge at the beginning of the great court scene (4, 1) when, alone against all the others, he defends his rigid and pitiless legal viewpoint: Why do you not treat your slaves as your equals? You will answer: The slaves are ours: so do I answer you. At this and many other moments there is something about him of somber and at the same time truly human greatness. And in general he does not lack problematic depth, impressiveness of character, power and passion, and strength of expression. And yet in the end Shakespeare drops these tragic elements with heedless Olympian serenity. In earlier scenes he had already put a strong emphasis on ludicrous and grotesque traits in Shylock's character, notably his miserliness and his somewhat senile fear; and in the scene with Tubal (end of 3, 1), where he alternately laments the loss of the valuables which Jessica has taken with her and rejoices over Antonio's ruin, Shylock is frankly a figure from farce. In the end Shakespeare dismisses him, without greatness, as a circumvented fiend, just as he found him in his sources, and after his departure he adds a whole

act of poetical fairy-tale sport and amorous dalliance, while Shylock is forgotten and abandoned. There is no doubt, then, that the actors are wrong who have tried to make Shylock a tragic hero. Such a conception is at odds with the economy of the play as a whole. Shylock has less greatness by far than Marlowe's gruesome Jew of Malta and that despite the fact that Shakespeare saw and stated the human problem of his Jew much more deeply. For him Shylock, both in terms of class and aesthetically, is a low figure, unworthy of tragic treatment, whose tragic involvement is conjured up for a moment, but is only an added spice in the triumph of a higher, nobler, freer, and also more aristocratic humanity. Our Prince has the same views. Far be it from him to respect Poins as his equal, although he is the best among the characters in the Falstaff group, although he possesses both wit and valor. What arrogance there is in the words he addresses to him only a few lines before the passage quoted above: ". . . I could tell to thee—as to one it pleases me, for fault of a better, to call my friend. . . ." The manner in which Shakespeare elsewhere treats the middle and lower classes we shall take up in due course. In any case, he never renders them tragically. His conception of the sublime and tragic is altogether aristocratic.

But if we disregard this class restriction, Shakespeare's mixing of styles in the portrayal of his characters is very pronounced. In most of the plays which have a generally tragic tenor there is an extremely close interweaving of the tragic and the comic, the sublime and the low. This effect is brought about by the joint use of several methods. Tragic actions in which public or other tragic events occur, alternate with humorous popular and rowdy scenes which are now closely, now somewhat more loosely connected with the principal action. Or again in the tragic scenes themselves, and with the tragic heroes, there appear fools and other humorous types who accompany, interrupt, and—each in his own way—comment upon what the heroes do, suffer, and say. Finally, not a few of Shakespeare's tragic characters have their own innate tendency to break the stylistic tenor in a humorous, realistic, or bitterly grotesque fashion. There are numerous examples of the three procedures, and very frequently two of these methods, or even all three, are used in conjunction. For the first—the alternation of tragic and comic scenes in a tragedy—we may cite the populace scenes in the Roman plays, or the Falstaff episodes in the histories, or the grave-digger scene in *Hamlet*. The last named example verges on the tragic and, because of Hamlet's own appearance in it, might almost be

used as an illustration of the second or even the third procedure. The most famous example of the second procedure—sublime and tragic personages accompanied by comic commentators—is the fool in *King Lear*; but much more in the same genre can be found not only in *Lear* but also in *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and elsewhere. Still more decisive for the stylistic character of Shakespeare's tragedy is the third procedure, the mixture of styles in the tragic personage himself. In Shylock's case—where, to be sure, Shakespeare in the end decided in favor of an interpretation in terms of the comic and the low—we have already observed the shifting back and forth between the tragic and the comic within one character. But the same phenomenon, in variously proportioned mixtures, is also to be found in characters who are treated as unqualifiedly tragic. Even Romeo's sudden falling in love with Juliet, for example, is almost fit for a comedy, and an almost unconscious development takes the characters in this play of love from childlike beginnings to a tragic climax. Gloucester's successful wooing of Lady Anne at the bier of Henry VI (*King Richard III*, 1, 2), has something darkly grotesque; Cleopatra is childish and moody; even Caesar is undecided, superstitious, and his rhetorical pride is almost comically exaggerated. There is much more of this nature. Hamlet and Lear especially furnish the most significant examples. Hamlet's half real, half pretended insanity rages, within a single scene and even a single speech, through all levels of style. He jumps from the obscene to the lyrical or sublime, from the ironically incongruous to dark and profound meditation, from humiliating scorn leveled at others and himself to the solemn assumption of the right to judge and proud self-assertion. Lear's rich, forceful, and emotional arbitrariness has in its incomparable sublimity elements that strike us as painfully senile and theatrical. The speeches of his faithful fool themselves tear at his mantle of sublimity; but more incisive are the stylistic ruptures which lie in his own nature: his excesses of emotion, his impotent and helpless outbursts of anger, his inclination to indulge in bitterly grotesque histrionics. In the fourth scene of act 2 he falls on his knees before his wicked daughter Regan, who has hurt and is still hurting him most grievously, in order to act out as it were the step he is expected to take (that is, to ask Goneril, his other daughter, to forgive him). This is an extreme and theatrical gesture of bitterly grotesque self-humiliation. He is always ready to exaggerate; he wants to force heaven and earth to witness the extremes of his humiliation and to hear his complaints. Such gestures seem immeasurably shocking in an old man of eighty, in a

great king. And yet they do not in the least detract from his dignity and greatness. His nature is so unconditionally royal that humiliation only brings it out more strongly. Shakespeare makes him speak the famous words "aye, every inch a king," himself, from the depth of his insanity, grotesquely accoutered, a madman playing the king for a moment. Yet we do not laugh, we weep, and not only in pity but at the same time in admiration for such greatness, which seems only the greater and more indestructible in its brittle creaturality.

Let these examples suffice. Their purpose is merely to remind the reader of these generally known facts and to present them in an arrangement that accords with our particular problem. Shakespeare mixes the sublime and the low, the tragic and the comic in an inexhaustible abundance of proportions. And the picture is further enriched if we also consider the fabulous and fantastic comedies in which there are also occasional overtones of the tragic. Among the tragedies there is none in which a single level of style is maintained from beginning to end. Even in *Macbeth* we have the grotesque scene with the porter (2, 1).

In the course of the sixteenth century the conscious distinction of the categories of tragic and comic in human destiny had come to the fore again. A similar distinction was not, it is true, entirely unknown during the Middle Ages, but in those earlier centuries the conception of the tragic could not develop unimpeded. This is not entirely due—as a matter of fact it is not due at all—to the fact that the tragic works of antiquity were unknown, that antique theory had been forgotten or misunderstood. Facts of this nature could not have interfered with the independent development of the tragic. The reason is rather that the Christian figural view of human life was opposed to a development of the tragic. However serious the events of earthly existence might be, high above them stood the towering and all-embracing dignity of a single event, the appearance of Christ, and everything tragic was but figure or reflection of a single complex of events, into which it necessarily flowed at last: the complex of the Fall, of Christ's birth and passion, and of the Last Judgment. This implies a transposition of the center of gravity from life on earth into a life beyond, with the result that no tragedy ever reached its conclusion here below. To be sure, we had occasion earlier, especially in the chapter on Dante, to point out that this by no means signifies a devaluation of life on earth or of human individuality; but it did bring with it a blunting of tragic climaxes here on earth and a transposition of catharsis into the other world.

Then, in the course of the sixteenth century, the Christian-figural schema lost its hold in almost all parts of Europe. The issue into the beyond, although it was totally abandoned only in rare instances, lost in certainty and unmistakability. And at the same time antique models (first Seneca, then the Greeks also) and antique theory reappeared, unclouded. The powerful influence of the authors of antiquity greatly furthered the development of the tragic. It was, however, unavoidable that this influence should at times have been at odds with the new forces which, arising from contemporary conditions and the autochthonous culture, were driving toward the tragic.

The dramatic occurrences of human life were seen by antiquity predominantly in the form of a change of fortune breaking in upon man from without and from above. In Elizabethan tragedy on the other hand—the first specifically modern form of tragedy—the hero's individual character plays a much greater part in shaping his destiny. This is, I believe, the prevailing view, and on the whole it appears to me to be correct. But it needs to be qualified and supplemented. In the introduction to an edition of Shakespeare which I have before me (*The Complete Works of W.S.*, London and Glasgow, n.d., Introduction by St. John Ervine, p. xii) I find it expressed in the following terms: "And here we come on the great difference between the Greek and the Elizabethan drama: the tragedy in the Greek plays is an arranged one in which the characters have no decisive part. Theirs but to do and die. But the tragedy in the Elizabethan plays comes straight from the heart of the people themselves. Hamlet is Hamlet, not because a capricious god has compelled him to move to a tragic end, but because there is a unique essence in him which makes him incapable of behaving in any other way than he does." And the critic continues by emphasizing Hamlet's freedom of action, which allows him to doubt and hesitate before he comes to a decision—a freedom of action which Oedipus and Orestes do not possess. In this form the contrast is formulated too absolutely. It is not possible to deny Euripides' Medea a "unique essence" and even freedom of action or to overlook the fact that she has moments of indecision when she fights her own gruesome passion. Indeed, even Sophocles, that almost model representative of classical antiquity, shows at the beginning of his *Antigone*, in the conversation between the two sisters, an example of two persons who find themselves in exactly the same situation but who decide—without any pressure of fate and purely in accordance with their own particular characters—in favor of different courses of conduct. Yet the English

critic's basic idea is sound: in Elizabethan tragedy and specifically in Shakespeare, the hero's character is depicted in greater and more varied detail than in antique tragedy, and participates more actively in shaping the individual's fate. But it is also possible to describe the difference in another way: one might say that the idea of destiny in Elizabethan tragedy is both more broadly conceived and more closely linked to the individual character than it is in antique tragedy. In the latter, fate means nothing but the given tragic complex, the present network of events in which a particular person is enmeshed at a particular moment. To whatever else may have happened to him during his life, so long as it is not part of the prehistory of the present conflict, to what we call his "milieu," little attention is given, and apart from age, sex, social status, and references to his general type of temperament, we learn nothing about his normal existence. The essence of his personality is revealed and evolves exclusively within the particular tragic action; everything else is omitted. All this is based upon the way in which antique drama arose and on its technical requirements. Freedom of movement, which it reached only very slowly, is much less, even in Euripides, than in the modern drama. In particular, the above-mentioned strict limitation to the given tragic conflict is based upon the fact that the subjects of antique tragedy are almost exclusively taken from the national mythology, in a few cases from national history. These were sacred subjects and the events and personages involved were known to the audience. The "milieu" too was known, and furthermore it was almost always approximately the same. Hence there was no reason to describe its special character and special atmosphere. Euripides challenged the tradition by introducing new interpretations, both of action and character, into the traditional material. But this can hardly be compared with the multiplicity of subject matter, the freedom of invention and presentation which distinguish the Elizabethan and the modern drama generally. What with the great variety of subject matter and the considerable freedom of movement of the Elizabethan theater, we are in each instance given the particular atmosphere, the situation, and the prehistory of the characters. The course of events on the stage is not rigidly restricted to the course of events of the tragic conflict but covers conversations, scenes, characters, which the action as such does not necessarily require. Thus we are given a great deal of "supplementary information" about the principal personages; we are enabled to form an idea of their normal lives and particular characters apart from the complication in which they

are caught at the moment. Thus fate here means much more than the given conflict. In antique tragedy it is almost always possible to make a clear distinction between the natural character of a personage and the fate which befalls him at the moment. In Elizabethan tragedy we are in most cases confronted not with purely natural character but with character already formed by birth, situation in life, and prehistory (that is, by fate)—character in which fate has already had a great share before it fulfils itself in the form of a specified tragic conflict. The latter is often only the occasion which releases a tragic situation prepared long before. This is particularly apparent in the cases of Shylock and Lear. What happens to them individually, is individually predestined for them; it fits the specific character of Shylock or of Lear, and this character is not only the natural character but one prepared by birth, situation, and prehistory, that is, by fate, for its unmistakable idiosyncrasy and for the tragic situation destined for it.

We have already mentioned one of the causes or at least premises of this far more broadly conceived presentation of human destiny: the theater of the Elizabethans offers a much more varied human world than did the antique theater. Its range of subject matter covers all lands and times and all the combinations of fancy. There are themes from English and Roman history, from the legendary past, from novelle and fairy tales. The places of the action are England, Scotland, France, Denmark, Italy, Spain, the islands of the Mediterranean, the Orient, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, ancient Egypt. The exotic appeal which Venice, Verona, and the like had for an English audience in the year 1600 is an element that was virtually—not to say completely—unknown to the theater of the ancients. A figure like Shylock's raises through its mere existence problems outside the sphere of the classical drama. Here we must point out that the sixteenth century had attained a comparatively high level of historical consciousness and historical perspective. For a similar development the antique theater had little occasion, because the range of its subject matter was too limited and because the antique audience did not regard any form of life and culture except its own either as equal in value or as worthy of artistic attention. During the Middle Ages all practical acquaintance with alien forms of life and culture was lost. Although two past cultures—the antique and the Judaeo-Christian—were of great importance within the frame of medieval civilization, and although both of them, especially the Judaeo-Christian, were often portrayed in literature and art, there was yet such a lack of historical consciousness and perspec-

tive that the events and characters of those distant epochs were simply transferred to the present forms and conditions of life: Caesar, Aeneas, Pilate became knights, Joseph of Arimathaea a burgher, and Adam a farmer, of twelfth or thirteenth century France, England, or Germany.

With the first dawn of humanism, there began to be a sense that the events of classical history and legend and also those of the Bible were not separated from the present simply by an extent of time but also by completely different conditions of life. Humanism with its program of renewal of antique forms of life and expression creates a historical perspective in depth such as no previous epoch known to us possessed: the humanists see antiquity in historical depth, and, against that background, the dark epochs of the intervening Middle Ages. It makes no difference what errors of conception and interpretation they may have been guilty of in detail—the vision in perspective was gained. From Dante on it is possible to detect traces of such a historical perspective; in the sixteenth century it grows more distinct and more widely known, and even though, as we shall see, the tendency to accept antiquity as an absolute model and to neglect everything pertaining to the intervening centuries threatened to expel historical perspective from men's consciousness again, it was never successful to the extent of reestablishing the autarchic life natural to antique culture or the historical naïveté of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In addition there is in the sixteenth century the effect of the great discoveries which abruptly widened the cultural and geographic horizon and hence also men's conception of possible forms of human life. The various European peoples came to regard themselves as national entities and hence grew conscious of their distinctive characteristics. Finally the schism in the Church contributed to differentiating various groups of people. In consequence the comparatively simple contrast of Greek or Roman versus barbarian or Christian versus heathen was replaced by a much more complex picture of human society. This did not happen all at once; it was prepared over a long period of time; but in the sixteenth century it progresses by leaps and bounds, adding enormously both to the breadth of perspective and to the number of individuals acquiring it. The world of realities in which men live is changed; it grows broader, richer in possibilities, limitless. And it changes correspondingly when it appears as the subject matter of artistic representation. The sphere of life represented in a particular instance is no longer the only one possible or a part of that only and clearly circumscribed one. Very often there is a switch from one

sphere to another, and even in cases where this does not occur, we are able to discern as the basis of the representation a freer consciousness embracing an unlimited world. We have commented upon this in connection with Boccaccio and especially in connection with Rabelais; we could also have done so in connection with Montaigne. In Elizabethan tragedy and particularly in Shakespeare, perspective consciousness has become a matter of course, although it is neither very precise nor uniformly expressed. Shakespeare and the authors of his generation sometimes have erroneous ideas about foreign lands and cultures; they sometimes intentionally mingle contemporary scenes and allusions with a foreign theme, as for example the observations on the London stage in *Hamlet*. Quite often Shakespeare makes the setting of a play some fairyland only loosely connected with real times and places. But this too is only a playing upon the perspective view. Consciousness of the manifold conditions of human life is a fact with him, and he can take it for granted on the part of his audience.

Within a specific theme there is still another type of evidence of perspective consciousness. Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries are averse to completely detaching a turn of fortune which concerns a single person or a limited number of persons from its general context of events and presenting it on a single level of style, as the tragic poets of antiquity had done and wherein their sixteenth and seventeenth century imitators even outdid them at times. This isolating procedure, which is to be explained through the religious, mythological, and technical premises of the antique theater, is out of keeping with the concept of a magical and polyphonic cosmic coherence which arose during the Renaissance. Shakespeare's drama does not present isolated blows of fate, generally falling from above and involving but a few people in their effects, while the milieu is limited to the few persons indispensable to the progress of the action; on the contrary, it offers inner entanglements which result from given conditions and from the interplay of variously constituted characters and in which not only the milieu but even the landscape, even the spirits of the dead and other supernatural beings participate. And the role of these participants often contributes nothing at all or at least very little to the progress of the action, but instead consists in a sympathetic counterpoint—a parallel or contrary motion on various levels of style. There is an abundance of secondary actions and secondary characters which, in terms of the economy of the principal action, could be entirely dispensed with or at least greatly reduced. Instances are the Gloucester episode

in *Lear*, the scene between Pompey and Menas in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2, 7), many scenes and characters in *Hamlet*—everybody can add to the list. Naturally, such actions and characters are not completely useless in the dramatic economy. Even a minor character like Osric in *Hamlet* is rendered so fully because he releases a significant reflex of Hamlet's temperament and momentary state of mind. Yet for the progress of the action, Osric need not have been fully rendered. Shakespeare's dramatic economy is prodigally lavish; it bears witness to his delight in rendering the most varied phenomena of life, and this delight in turn is inspired by the concept that the cosmos is everywhere interdependent, so that every chord of human destiny arouses a multitude of voices to parallel or contrary motion. The storm into which Regan drives her old father, the king, is not an accident; it is contrived by magic powers which are mobilized to bring the event to a crisis, and the fool's speeches, and Poor Tom's later, are voices from the same cosmic orchestra, although their function within the purely rational structure of the action is very slight. But they bring with them a rich scale of stylistic levels, which, within the prevailing key—the sublime—descends to farce and sheer nonsense.

This stylistic situation is characteristically Elizabethan and Shakespearean, but it is rooted in popular tradition, and indeed first of all in the cosmic drama of the story of Christ. There are intermediate steps and it is also true that a variety of folkloristic motifs not of Christian origin have forced their way in. But the creatural view of man, the loose construction with its numerous accessory actions and characters, and the mixture of the sublime with the low cannot in the last analysis come from any other source than the medieval Christian theater, in which all these things were necessary and essential. Even the participation of the elements in a great destiny has its best-known model in the earthquake at the time of Christ's death (Matthew 27: 51ff.), and this model had remained very influential during the Middle Ages (cf. *Chanson de Roland*, 1423ff. or *Vita Nova*, 23). Yet now, in the drama of the Elizabethans, the superstructure of the whole has been lost; the drama of Christ is no longer the general drama, is no longer the point of confluence of all the streams of human destiny. The new dramatized history has a specific human action as its center, derives its unity from that center, and the road has been opened for an autonomously human tragedy. The great order of the past—Fall, Divine Sacrifice, Last Judgment—recedes, the human drama finds its order within itself; and it is at this point that antique precedent intervenes

with plot-complication, crisis, and tragic resolution; the division of the action into acts is from the same source. But the freedom of tragedy, and the realm of man generally, no longer acknowledge the limits of antiquity. The dissolution of medieval Christianity, running its course through a series of great crises, brings out a dynamic need for self-orientation, a will to trace the secret forces of life. Through this need and will, magic and science, the elemental sphere and the moral and human sphere, become mutually related. An immense system of sympathy seems to pervade the universe. Furthermore Christianity had conceived the problems of humanity (good and evil, guilt and destiny) more excitingly, antithetically, and even paradoxically than had antiquity. Even after the solution contained in the drama of original sin and salvation began to lose its validity, the more deeply stirring conception of the problem and the related ideas of the nature of man long remained influential. In Shakespeare's work the liberated forces show themselves as fully developed yet still permeated with the entire ethical wealth of the past. Not much later the restrictive countermovements gained the upper hand. Protestantism and the Counter Reformation, absolutistic ordering of society and intellectual life, academic and puristic imitation of antiquity, rationalism and scientific empiricism, all operated together to prevent Shakespeare's freedom in the tragic from continuing to develop after him.

Thus Shakespeare's ethical and intellectual world is much more agitated, multilayered, and, apart from any specific dramatic action, in itself more dramatic than that of antiquity. The very ground on which men move and actions take their course is more unsteady and seems shaken by inner disturbances. There is no stable world as background, but a world which is perpetually reengendering itself out of the most varied forces. No reader or spectator can fail to sense this; but it may not be superfluous to describe the dynamism of Shakespeare's thought in somewhat greater detail and give an example of it. In antique tragedy the philosophizing is generally undramatic; it is sententious, aphoristic, is abstracted from the action and generalized, is detached from the personage and his fate. In Shakespeare's plays it becomes personal; it grows directly out of the speaker's immediate situation and remains connected with it. It is not a result of the experience gained in the action, nor an effective rejoinder in the stychomythia; it is dramatic self-scrutiny seeking the right mode and moment for action or doubting the possibility of finding them. When the most revolutionary of the Greek tragic poets, Euripides, attacks the class distinctions between

men, he does so in a sententiously constructed verse to the effect that only the name dishonors the slave; otherwise a noble slave is nowise inferior to a free man. Shakespeare does not attack class distinctions, and it would seem that he had no views of social revolutionary import. Yet when one of his characters expresses such ideas out of his own situation it is done with an immediacy, a dramatic force, which give the ideas something arresting and incisive: Let your slaves live as you live; give them the same food and quarters; marry them to your children! You say your slaves are your property? Very well, just so do I answer you: this pound of flesh is mine, I bought it. . . . The pariah Shylock does not appeal to natural right but to customary wrong. What a dynamic immediacy there is in such bitter, tragic irony!

The great number of moral phenomena which the constant renewal of the world as a whole produces, and which themselves constantly contribute to its renewal, engenders an abundance of stylistic levels such as antique tragedy was never able to produce. I open a volume of Shakespeare at random and come upon *Macbeth*, act 3, scene 6, where Lennox, a Scottish nobleman, tells a friend what he thinks of the most recent events:

My former speeches have but hit your thoughts,
Which can interpret further: only, I say,
Things have been strangely borne. The gracious Duncan
Was pitied of Macbeth:—marry, he was dead:—
And the right-valiant Banquo walk'd too late;
Whom, you might say, if't please you, Fleance kill'd,
For Fleance fled. Men must not walk too late.
Who cannot want the thought, how monstrous
It was for Malcolm and for Donalbain
To kill their gracious father? damned fact!
How did it grieve Macbeth! did he not straight,
In pious rage, the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drinks and thralls of sleep?
Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely too;
For 'twould have anger'd any heart alive,
To hear the men deny't. . . .

The form of discourse employed in this passage—a form in which something is insidiously implied or “insinuated” without being stated—was well known in antiquity. Quintilian treats of it in his ninth book, where he discusses the *controversiae figuratae*, and the great orators

offer examples of it. But that it should be used so completely unrhethorically, in the course of a private conversation, and yet entirely within the somberly tragic atmosphere, is a mixture which is foreign to antiquity. I turn a few pages and come to the lines in which, immediately before his last battle, Macbeth receives the news of his wife's death:

Seyton: The queen, my lord, is dead.
 Macbeth: She should have died hereafter;
 There would have been a time for such a word . . .
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (Enter a Messenger.)
 Thou com'st to use thy tongue; thy story quickly . . .

All the terrible things which Macbeth has done and which he has suffered because of what he has done, have made him hard and fearless. He is no longer easily affrighted ("I have supp'd full with horrors"). Furthermore all his strength is concentrated for a last stand. At this moment comes the news of the death of his wife—the companion who first drove him into crime and yet in whom the strength to live has failed before it has in him—and plunges him, though only for a moment, into somber brooding; it is a slackening of the tension, but one which can only lead to hopelessness, heaviness, and despair; yet it is heavy with humanity and wisdom too. Macbeth has become heavy with a self-acquired wisdom which has arisen for him from his own destiny, he has grown ripe for knowledge and death. This final ripeness he now attains, at the moment when his last and only human companion leaves him. As here from horror and tragedy, so, in another instance, it is from the grotesque and ridiculous that the man in all his purity arises, the man as he was really intended to be and as in fortunate moments he may possibly have realized himself. Polonius is a fool, he is silly and senile; but when he gives his blessing and final

advice to his departing son (1, 3), he has the wisdom and the dignity of age.

But something else is to be noted here besides the great variety of phenomena to which we referred above and the ever-varied nuances of the profoundly human mixture of high and low, sublime and trivial, tragic and comic. It is the conception, so difficult to formulate in clear terms although everywhere to be observed in its effects, of a basic fabric of the world, perpetually weaving itself, renewing itself, and connected in all its parts, from which all this arises and which makes it impossible to isolate any one event or level of style. Dante's general, clearly delimited figurality, in which everything is resolved in the beyond, in God's ultimate kingdom, and in which all characters attain their full realization only in the beyond, is no more. Tragic characters attain their final completion here below when, heavy with destiny, they become ripe like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear. Yet they are not simply caught in the destiny allotted to each of them; they are all connected as players in a play written by the unknown and unfathomable Cosmic Poet; a play on which He is still at work, and the meaning and reality of which is as unknown to them as it is to us. Let me adduce in this connection a few lines from *The Tempest* (4, 1):

. . . these our actors,
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
 Are melted into air, into thin air;
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
 And like this unsubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind; we are such stuff
 As dreams are made of, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep.

This says two things: that Shakespeare includes earthly reality, and even its most trivial forms, in a thousand refractions and mixtures, but that his purpose goes far beyond the representation of reality in its merely earthly coherence; he embraces reality but he transcends it. This is already apparent in the presence of ghosts and witches in his plays, and in the often unrealistic style in which the influences of Seneca, of Petrarchism, and of other fashions of the day are fused in a characteristically concrete but only erratically realistic manner. It

is still more significantly revealed in the inner structure of the action, which is often—and especially in the most important plays—only erratically and sporadically realistic and often shows a tendency to break through into the realm of the fairy tale, of playful fancy, or of the supernatural and demonic.

From another viewpoint too the tragic in Shakespeare is not completely realistic. We alluded to it at the beginning of this chapter. He does not take ordinary everyday reality seriously or tragically. He treats only noblemen, princes and kings, statesmen, commanders, and antique heroes tragically. When common people or soldiers or other representatives of the middle or lower classes appear, it is always in the low style, in one of the many variations of the comic which he commands. This separation of styles in accordance with class appears more consistently in him than in medieval works of literature and art, particularly those of Christian inspiration, and it is doubtless a reflection of the antique conception of the tragic. It is true, as we have said, that in him tragic personages of the higher classes exhibit frequent stylistic lapses into the corporeal-creatural, the grotesque, and the ambiguous; but the reverse is hardly so. Shylock would seem to be the only figure which might be cited as an exception, and we have seen that in his case too the tragic motifs are dropped at the end. Shakespeare's world-spirit is in no way a popular spirit—a point which distinguishes him basically from his admirers and imitators in the *Sturm und Drang* period and the romantic period. The dynamic throbbing of elemental forces which we feel in his works has nothing to do with the depths of the popular soul with which those men of a later age connected it. From this point of view it is instructive to compare Shakespeare's and Goethe's populace scenes. The first scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the servants of the Montagues and Capulets meet, has much in common with the meeting of peasant leaders with troopers from Bamberg at the beginning of *Götz von Berlichingen*. But how much more serious, more human, and more intelligently interested in the events are Goethe's characters! And if in this case it might be objected that the problems developed in *Götz* concern the people directly, no such objection can be sustained in a comparison of the populace scenes in the Roman plays, in *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus*, with those in *Egmont*. It is not only any such sympathetic penetration of the popular soul which is foreign to Shakespeare; he shows nothing precursory of the Enlightenment, of bourgeois morality, and of the cultivation of sentiment. In his works, whose author remains

almost anonymously aloof, there is a very different atmosphere from that in the products of the era of Germany's literary awakening, in which one always hears the voice of a deeply sensitive, richly emotional personality enthusiastically declaiming upon freedom and greatness in an austere bourgeois study. Consider how impossible a *Klärchen* or *Gretchen*, or a tragedy like *Luise Millerin*, would be in Shakespeare's world; a tragic situation revolving about the virginity of a middle-class girl is an absurdity within the frame of Elizabethan literature.

In this context we should recall the famous interpretation of Hamlet in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (book 4, chapters 3 and 13). It is profound and beautiful; it has been admired with good reason not only by the Romanticists but also by many later readers, both in Germany and in England. There is convincing force in Goethe's explanation of Hamlet's tragedy as resulting from the sudden collapse of the external and ethical security of his early years, from the break-down of his trust in the ethical order represented for him by the bond—now cruelly disrupted—which previously united his parents, whom he loved and revered. But Goethe's interpretation is at the same time a stylistic mirror of his own time, the age of Goethe. Hamlet appears as a tender, emotional, modest young man, ideally striving for the highest good but insufficiently endowed with inner force. What happens—in Goethe's words—is that “a great deed is laid upon a soul not equal to it”; or—as he puts it a little later—“a beautiful, pure, noble, and highly moral being, devoid of the physical strength which makes the hero, is crushed by a burden which it can neither bear nor cast off. . . .” Must we assume that Goethe failed to sense Hamlet's native force, which continues to grow throughout the course of the play, his cutting wit, which makes all those about him tremble and flee, the cunning and boldness of his stratagems, his savage harshness toward Ophelia, the energy with which he faces his mother, the icy calm with which he removes the courtiers who cross his path, the elasticity and boldness of all his words and thoughts? Despite the fact that he again and again puts off the decisive deed, he is by far the strongest character in the play. There is a demonic aura about him which inspires respect, awe, and often fear. Whenever he does move into action, it is quick, bold, and at times malicious, and it strikes the mark with assured power. True enough, it is precisely the events that summon him to vengeance which paralyze his power of decision. But can that be explained from a lack of vitality, a lack of that “physical

strength which makes the hero"? Is it not rather that in a strong and almost demonically gifted nature, doubt and weariness of life must assert themselves, that the entire weight of his existence must be displaced in this direction? That it is precisely because of the passion with which a strong nature abandons itself to its emotions that they become so overwhelming that the duty to live and to act becomes a burden and a torture? Our intention here is not to set up another interpretation of Hamlet in opposition to Goethe's; we merely wish to indicate the direction in which Goethe and his age were moving when they undertook to assimilate Shakespeare to their own attitudes. In passing I might observe that more recent research has become very skeptical in regard to such homogeneously psychological interpretations of Shakespeare's characters—indeed, to my mind, rather too skeptical.

The wealth of stylistic levels contained in Shakespeare's tragedy goes beyond actual realism. At the same time it is freer, harder, more unqualified, more godlike in its nonpartisan objectivity than the realism of his admirers about 1800. On the other hand, as we attempted to show above, it is conditioned by the possibilities of the mixture of styles which the Christian Middle Ages had created. Only this Christian mixture of styles could realize the prophecy which Plato formulates at the end of the *Symposium*, when in the gray light of dawn Socrates explains to the only two revelers who have not yet succumbed to sleep, Agathon and Aristophanes, that one and the same poet should master both comedy and tragedy, and that the true tragic poet is also a comic poet. That this Platonic anticipation or demand could mature only by way of the Christian-medieval conception of man, that it could be realized only after that conception had been transcended, is an observation which has been made and formulated, at least in general terms, by a number of writers, among them Goethe. I shall quote a passage in which he expresses it—a passage which, again, is a stylistic self-mirroring. It combines keen insight with a certain critical shortsightedness, which in this case appears as an old-bourgeois humanism without sympathy for the Middle Ages. The passage occurs in his notes on his translation of Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, toward the end of the section on taste, which is remarkable in other respects too. It was written in 1805 and runs as follows:

In the Greeks and many Romans there is to be found a very tasteful distinguishing and purifying of the various forms of literary composition, but we Northerners cannot be exclusively

referred to their example. We have other ancestors to be proud of and many other models to bear in mind. If the romantic trend of ignorant centuries had not brought the monstrous and the insipid together, whence should we have a *Hamlet*, a *Lear*, a *Devoción de la Cruz*, a *Príncipe Constante*?

To maintain ourselves at the height of these barbarous advantages—since we shall never attain the superiorities of Antiquity—and to do so with courage is our duty. . . .

The two plays which Goethe cites after the two by Shakespeare are by Calderón; and this brings us to the literature of the Spanish *siglo de oro*, in which, notwithstanding its very different premises and atmosphere, there is a treatment of the reality of life quite similar to that of the Elizabethans, both in regard to the mixture of stylistic levels and to the general intent which, while including the representation of everyday reality, does not stop there, but goes on beyond it. The constant endeavor to poeticize and sublimate reality is still more clearly noticeable than in Shakespeare. Even in regard to separation of styles in terms of class, certain parallels can be traced. But they are quite superficial; the Spanish national pride makes it possible for every Spaniard to be treated in the elevated style, not merely the Spaniard of noble descent; for the motif of woman's honor, which is so important and actually central in Spanish literature, occasions tragic complications even among peasants, and in this way popular dramas of a tragic character come into existence, as for example Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* or Calderón's *El Alcalde de Zalamea*. In this sense Spanish realism is more decidedly popular, more filled with the life of the people, than English realism of the same period. In general it gives much more of contemporary everyday reality. While in the majority of the countries of Europe, especially in France, absolutism silenced the people so that its voice was hardly heard for two centuries, Spanish absolutism was so intimately connected with the very essence of the national tradition that under it the people attained the most variegated and lively literary expression.

Yet in the history of the literary conquest of modern reality, the literature of Spain's great century is not particularly important—much less so than Shakespeare, or even Dante, Rabelais, or Montaigne. To be sure, it too had a strong influence on the romantic movement from which, as we hope to show later, modern realism developed; but within romanticism it stimulated the fanciful, adventurous, and theat-

rical far more than it did the trend toward reality. Spanish medieval literature had been realistic in a peculiarly genuine and concrete fashion. But the realism of the *siglo de oro* is itself something like an adventure and seems almost exotic. Even when it depicts the lower spheres of life, it is extremely colorful, poetic, and illusionistic. It brightens everyday reality with ceremonious forms of social intercourse, with choice and precious turns of phrase, with the emotional force of chivalric ideals, and with all the inner and outer enchantment of Baroque and Counter-Reformation piety. It turns the world into a magic stage. And on that magic stage—this again is very significant for its relation to modern realism—a fixed order reigns, despite all the elements of adventure and miracle. In the world, it is true, everything is a dream, but nothing is a riddle demanding to be solved. There are passions and conflicts but there are no problems. God, King, honor and love, class and class decorum are immutable and undoubted, and the figures neither of tragedy nor comedy present us with questions difficult to answer. Among the Spanish authors of the golden age whom I know, Cervantes is certainly the one whose characters come nearest to being problematic. But if we want to understand the difference, we need only compare the bewildered, easily interpreted, and ultimately curable madness of Don Quixote with Hamlet's fundamental and many-faceted insanity which can never be cured in this world. Since the pattern of life is so fixed and secure, no matter how much that is wrong may occur within it, we feel in the Spanish works, despite all their colorful and lively bustle, nothing of a movement in the depths of life, or even of a will to explore it in principle and recast it in practice. The actions of the persons in these works predominantly serve to let their ethical attitudes, whatever they are, whether tragic or comic or a mixture of both, strikingly demonstrate and prove themselves. Whether or not the actions produce, promote, or initiate anything, is of lesser importance. In any case, the order of the world is as immutably fixed afterward as it was before. It is only within that order that one can prove oneself or go astray. How much more important ethical attitude and intention are than the success of an action is parodied by Cervantes in chapter 19 of book 1 of *Don Quixote*. When the knight is informed by the wounded *bachiller* Alonso Lopez of the harm he has done by his attack on the funeral procession, he feels nowise mortified or abashed. He had taken the procession for a satanic apparition, and so it was his duty to attack it. He is satisfied that he has done his duty and feels proud of it. Seldom, indeed, has a subject

suggested the problematic study of contemporary reality as insistently as does Don Quixote. The ideal conceptions of a past epoch, and of a class which has lost its functions, in conflict with the reality of the contemporary present ought to have led to a critical and problematic portrayal of the latter, the more so since the mad Don Quixote is often superior to his normal opponents by virtue of his moral steadfastness and native wit. But Cervantes did not elaborate his work in this direction. His representation of Spanish reality is dispersed in many individual adventures and sketches; the bases of that reality remain untouched and unmoved.