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THE RECEPTION OF HAMLET

R. A. FOAKES

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
> Deferential, glad to be of use,
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
> Almost, at times, the Fool.
>
> T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

Prufrock[1] speaks for much of the twentieth century in his inability to conceive of being Hamlet the *Prince*. By 1917, when this poem was published, Hamlet the prince had been deflected into a Prufrock figure, ever failing to make decisions: 'There will be time to murder and create . . . And time yet for a hundred indecisions'; and in the end Prufrock will not dare to 'Disturb the universe'.[2] Although our first impression from the poem is of someone like Polonius, and although Prufrock denies he is Prince Hamlet, reminding us of a royal authority figure, there is no prince in the poem, but only, as the centre of attention and of self-consciousness, Prufrock, who presents himself as an embodiment of what had become known as Hamletism. Perhaps no other character's name in Shakespeare's plays, and few in any other author's works, have been converted into a noun expressive of an attitude to life or 'philosophy', as we say, and a verb (to Hamletize). Adjectives like Falstaffian, and nouns like Micawberism, relate to the idiosyncrasies of these characters, whereas Hamletism has a wider resonance, representing a body of ideas abstracted from a character already extrapolated from the play *Hamlet*.

Hamletism as a term had become established by the 1840s, and came to have a range of meanings, all interconnected, and developed from an image of Hamlet as well-intentioned but ineffectual, full of talk but unable to achieve anything, addicted to melancholy, and sickened by the world around him, – in short, the Hamlet of the first and third soliloquies: Hamlet contemplating self-slaughter, speaking of death as a kind of sleep, or confronting death as he examines the skulls in the graveyard scene. It was used by Herman Melville in his novel *Pierre* (subtitled *The Ambiguities*, 1852) to express the idea of a 'nobly-striving but ever-shipwrecked character';[3] and as the term became widely current later in the century, it carried gloomier connotations, especially in France after the production of the play by William Macready there in 1844; this was described by Théophile Gautier in his *History of*

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1 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London, 1963), p. 17. This essay ties in with my article 'King Lear and the Displacement of Hamlet', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 50 (1987), 263–78, and with my forthcoming book, *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art*.

2 Eliot, *Poems*, p. 14.

3 Herman Melville, *Pierre*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, 1971), pp. 135–6.

Dramatic Art in France (1859), with especial emphasis on the graveyard scene, in which, after he threw down the skull of Yorick, Macready drew out a fine cambric handkerchief and wiped his fingers with disgust.[4] The image of a refined, over-sensitive figure was fixed in the French imagination in a series of lithographs by Delacroix, which Baudelaire hung on his walls; for one early composition, that of Hamlet with the gravediggers, Delacroix used a female friend as a model for Hamlet drawn as a beardless youth, delicate, pallid, and with 'white feminine hands and tapering fingers, an exquisite nature, but without energy'.[5] Hamletism came to embody for the Symbolist poets an idea of an effeminate man whose natural bent was for contemplation, and who was unsuited for action; they thus saw in Hamlet 'not action impeded by morbid melancholy or reflection, as had their elders, the Romantics, but rather the image of mundane action thwarting their pursuit of the ideal'.[6] Whether Hamlet was seen as typifying someone required to act but failing to do so, or as typifying a man prevented by the need to act from dedicating himself to the pursuit of the ideal, the idea of failure attached itself to him. For Jules Laforgue in particular, Hamlet summed up the *fin de siècle* mood of pessimism, *ennui* and despair which he dramatized in his poetry. As Thomas Mann's fictional hero Tonio Kröger travelled to Denmark in search of his alter ego, Hamlet, so Laforgue went to Elsinore so that he could stand by that sea whose monotonous waves assuredly inspired in Hamlet this 'epitaph on the history of humanity: "Words, words, words"'.[7]

Laforgue in turn had a major impact on T. S. Eliot, whose Prufrock resembles some of the figures in Laforgue's *Complaintes*. Gautier had seen Hamlet as raising the question whether the universe is nothing more than the nightmare of a sick god ('L'univers n'est-il que le cauchemar d'un dieu malade . . . ?'),[8] and the defeatism of intellectuals whose time always seemed to be out of joint came to be identified with Hamlet and Hamletism. The term was sufficiently current in England by 1905 for the *Daily Chronicle* to advise its readers to 'forget Hamletism and all its ills'.[9] In D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), Birkin rejects love, weary, as he says, with 'the life that belongs to death – our kind of love', and sums up his negative mood to Ursula in the boating episode by saying, 'One shouldn't talk when one is tired and wretched – One Hamletises, and it seems a lie.'[10] In denying that he is Prince Hamlet, Prufrock, who comes across as a sort of connoisseur of oblivion, may nevertheless be seen as Hamletizing. Such an idea of Hamlet is a far cry from the heroic Hamlet portrayed on the eighteenth-century stage, or Ophelia's image of him as 'The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,' or Horatio's 'Goodnight, sweet prince.' I want to trace how and why this shift took place, and comment in a preliminary way on its significance for interpreting Hamlet now.

Although there have been vigorous stage Hamlets since David Garrick played the role with 'uncommon spirit',[11] the theatrical tradition of cutting out the ending of the play,

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4 Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de la littérature dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans* (6 vols., Paris, 1858), vol. 3, p. 324; see also René Taupin, 'The Myth of Hamlet in France in Mallarmé's Generation', *MLQ*, 14 (1953), 432–47, citing p. 434.

5 Helen Phelps Bailey, *Hamlet in France from Voltaire to Laforgue* (Geneva, 1964), p. 138.

6 Bailey, p. 152.

7 Albert Sonnenfeld, 'Hamlet the German and Jules Laforgue', *Yale French Studies*, 33 (1964), 92–100, citing p. 9.

8 Gautier, 3.324.

9 Cited in *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. R. W. Burchfield, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1976), under 'Hamletism', p. 20.

10 *Women in Love*, edited by David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 186–7.

11 Review in the *London Chronicle*, 17–19 December 1771, cited in *Shakespeare, The Critical Heritage*, ed. Brian Vickers, vol. 5 (London, 1979), p. 46. Garrick cut out 898 lines of the 1002 in Act 5 to rescue this 'noble play' from 'all the rubbish of the 5th act' (Vickers, 5.11).

dispensing with minor characters like Fortinbras, and even Horatio sometimes, no doubt contributed to the remarkable change that took place towards the end of the eighteenth century. The conflation of the Second Quarto and Folio texts in printed editions from Theobald's (1733) onwards also fostered misconceptions in critical assessments of the play, and helped to establish the idea of Hamlet as delaying his revenge for no good reason, and as continually deferring action.[12] Furthermore, the ideal of a prince embodied in the Renaissance conception of the courtier as a man of action lost its meaning in the wake of the French Revolution, in an age that saw the emergence of mass industrial societies, and the rise of individualism in the nineteenth century. So it should not surprise us that Hamlet begins to be appropriated into a new image at the end of the eighteenth century. He sheds his role as prince and courtier, and becomes privatized, as in Goethe's famous *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796); in this novel, Wilhelm interprets Hamlet in relation to himself: 'A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away.'[13] Incapable of heroism, Hamlet is conceived as a soul unfit for the performance of a great action. The sensitive, melancholy figure, shrinking from involvement, projected in Goethe's novel passes into the ineffectual dreamer who seemed to typify intellectuals who were incapable of translating their revolutionary ideals into action. This is seen in Ferdinand Freiligrath's famous poem of 1844 beginning 'Germany is Hamlet' ('Deutschland ist Hamlet'), and portraying a Hamlet whose 'boldest act is only thinking'; Freiligrath ends by identifying himself with Hamlet as a 'poor old dreamer'.[14]

Hamlet could thus be absorbed into the German consciousness in two ways, as identified by the observant scholar Gervinus in 1849, either as an idealist, unequal to the real world; or as embittered by its deficiencies and his inability to change things.[15] So in Germany, as in France, Hamlet came to be seen as a contemplative in pursuit of ideals, but trapped in a world demanding action, or as a noble figure capable of action, but embittered and rendered ineffectual by his disgust with the world around him. Both perspectives contributed to a sense of Hamlet as settling for what Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* identified as the aesthetic choice, i.e. neutrality, or refusing to act, out of a sense of the futility of all endeavour.[16] Although the Furness Variorum edition (1877) was, after the Franco-Prussian war and the German victories of 1870, dedicated to the 'GERMAN SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY OF WEIMAR REPRESENTATIVE OF A PEOPLE WHOSE RECENT HISTORY HAS PROVED ONCE FOR ALL THAT GERMANY IS NOT HAMLET',[17] the familiar Hamlet returned in the influential formulation by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as someone afflicted with a disgust so powerful that it becomes a disease, a nausea towards life and a world he cannot face.[18]

In Russia Hamlet became the exemplar of what Turgenev called the superfluous man. In his *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), Turgenev imagines a thirty-year-old man (age of Hamlet) who keeps a diary in the last few weeks of a life that is meaningless, a life that, as he says, has almost driven him out of his mind with *ennui*. He fails in his pursuit of love and dies in the spring as everything else comes to life; he has

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12 See the Introduction by G. R. Hibbard in his edition of *Hamlet* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 22–7.

13 Cited in Ruby Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 118–19.

14 Cited in *Hamlet*, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, edited H. H. Furness, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1877; reprinted New York, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 376–8.

15 Cited in *Hamlet*, ed. Furness, vol. 2, pp. 300–1.

16 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1976), vol. 2, pp. 166–9; Bailey, p. 153.

17 *Hamlet*, ed. Furness, 1877; the dedication was removed from later reprints, and does not appear in that of 1905.

18 Frederick Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), translated Walter Kaufman (New York, 1967), p. 60.

derived pleasure only from the contemplation of his own unhappiness.[19] This followed a short story, 'Hamlet of Shshtchigry District' (1849), in which Turgenev listens to the life-story of a strange man educated in Germany (again like Hamlet), who lives bored on his family estate, and sees himself as insignificant and useless; he refuses to name himself, only saying, 'call me the Hamlet of Shshtchigry county. There are lots of such Hamlets in every county.'[20] In his well-known essay of 1860 comparing Hamlet and Don Quixote, Turgenev depicted Hamlet as representative of persons who are thoughtful and discriminating, but 'useless in the practical sense, in as much as their very gifts immobilize them'; for him Hamlet personified scepticism.[21] Hamlet also lies behind Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), with its central figure, apparently a civil servant, for whom 'not only too much consciousness, but any sort of consciousness is a disease', and who finds the 'result of consciousness is to make all actions impossible', so that he cannot take the revenge he desires.[22]

Later still Chekhov created Layevsky in his story *The Duel* (1891), described by another character as 'a failure, a superfluous man, a neurotic, a victim of the age'.[23] In refusing to take responsibility for the life of lies he leads, Layevsky says, 'I'm as bad as Hamlet'. This story was, in a way, a response to Turgenev, who is blamed in the course of it for 'inventing failures',[24] and it ends with Layevsky, the Hamlet figure, living in poverty, and working off his debts, so taking on responsibilities. He is thus to some extent redeemed; but the image of Hamlet as a failure haunted Chekhov, who had created in *Ivanov* (1887–9) a central figure who neglects his wife, talks endlessly, and does nothing: he says, 'I do nothing and think of nothing, but I'm tired, body and soul . . . I'm bored here too', and he sees himself as 'a kind of Hamlet': 'Wherever I go I carry misery, indifference, boredom, discontent, and disgust with life.'[25] Ivanov ends by shooting himself, carrying out the suicide merely contemplated by Hamlet. He is different from the figures in Turgenev and Dostoevsky in that he blames himself, not society, for what he is. Yet through all these responses to the character of Hamlet runs the burden of Hamletism, the image of Hamlet as disgusted, consumed by ennui, sensitive and over-conscious, and unable to do anything about it.

In France Hamlet was mythologized well into the twentieth century as a dreamer who opts for an ideal of pure being, and finds 'his vocation thwarted, his pure world violated, by the necessity to act', or who suffers from *taedium vitae* and is averse to action.[26] Hamletism in fact took several forms, but as René Taupin summed it up, it expresses 'the lure of nothingness, the delightful contemplation of ruins, sadism and masochism, the desire for and the inability to love, sarcasm and humour turned against oneself'[27] – this was what was

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[19] Ivan Turgenev, *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850; translated Isabel Hapgood, *Novels and Stories of Ivan Turgenieff*, 6 vols. (New York, 1904), vol. 3; subject to ennui in his meaningless life, he finds pleasure in the contemplation of his own unhappiness (p. 71). Turgenev does not mention Hamlet in this story, but Chekhov links Layevsky in *The Duel* with both the 'superfluous man' and with Hamlet. See also Grigori Kozintsev, *Shakespeare Time and Conscience* (translated Joyce Vining, New York, 1966), pp. 126–7.

[20] 'Hamlet of Shshtchigry District' (1849), translated Hapgood, *Novels and Stories*, vol. 2 (New York, 1903), pp. 146–90, citing p. 190.

[21] *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (1860), translated Robert Nichols (Edinburgh, 1930), p. 26.

[22] Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'Notes from the Underground', translated David Magarshack, *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York, 1968), pp. 267, 276.

[23] Anton Chekhov, 'The Duel', in *The Oxford Chekhov*, translated Ronald Hingley, 9 vols. (London, 1965–80), vol. 5, pp. 150, 144.

[24] Chekhov, 'The Duel', vol. 5, p. 147.

[25] Anton Chekhov, 'Ivanov' (1887–9), *The Oxford Chekhov*, tr. Ronald Hingley, vol. 2 (London, 1967), 2.6, p. 193; 4.10, p. 225.

[26] Peter Brooks, 'The Rest is Silence: Hamlet as Decadent', in *Jules Laforgue Essays on a Poet's Life and Work*, ed. Warren Ramsey (Carbondale, 1969), pp. 93–110, citing p. 97; Taupin, 'The Myth of Hamlet', p. 439.

[27] Taupin, p. 442.

read into Shakespeare in the 1880s and remained a mordant presence in the consciousness of French intellectuals. As late as 1950, in the wake of two world wars, Paul Valéry imagined the figure of Hamlet brooding over millions of ghosts in the graveyard of Europe:[28]

> Today, from an immense platform at Elsinore which stretches from Basel to Cologne, and which reaches the sands of Nieuport, the marshes of the Somme, the hilltops of Champagne and the granite of Alsace, our European Hamlet contemplates millions of spectres. But he is an intellectual Hamlet; he reflects upon the life and death of human truths . . . He is overwhelmed by the accumulation of discoveries and knowledge we have piled up; he is incapable of coping with this unlimited activity. He muses on the boredom of repeating the past; he muses on the folly of always wanting to be an innovator . . .

It is a vision of bleakness in which Hamlet becomes himself a giant spectre or ghost symbolizing the European intellectual brooding over desolation and not knowing what to do with all the skulls around him.[29] Valéry's metaphor transforms the graveyard scene so that Europe itself becomes a vast cemetery in which Hamlet picks over the skulls of great artists and thinkers of the past, Leonardo, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel, whose work has led to nothing. This is the culmination of the French obsession with Hamlet holding a skull, an obsession that goes back to Delacroix's painting of a 'delicate and wan' figure, 'with white and feminine hands, an exquisite but weak nature', and a 'somewhat irresolute air', as Baudelaire described the picture.[30]

In England Hamlet was privatized initially by the Romantics, as by Coleridge, who saw him as a figure overwhelmed by the activity of his mind, so that 'he is a man living in meditation, called upon to act by every motive human & divine, but the great purpose of life defeated by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve'.[31] His famous remark, 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself,'[32] absorbs the character into Coleridge's own persona, abstracting him from the play, and giving him the independent life that before long led to the idea of 'Hamletism'. Even the radical William Hazlitt found himself able only to echo Coleridge in his essay on the play, broadening Coleridge's identification of Hamlet with himself into 'It is *we* who are Hamlet. The play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history.'[33] Hazlitt extends the privatization of Hamlet, who, as a man 'whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought', turns into an embodiment of each of us, or at any rate of 'whoever has become thoughtful and melancholy through his own mishaps or those of others . . . he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted . . . whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought'.[34] But the private Hamlet was soon returned to the public and political arena, as by Emerson, who gave currency to an image of Hamlet as typifying the 1830s in his essay on 'The American Scholar' (1837), in which he defines his age as one of introversion: 'We, it seems, are critical. We are embarrassed with second thoughts. We cannot enjoy any thing for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists.' He saw his age as 'infected with Hamlet's unhappiness' and 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought', so that Hamlet is identified with the nineteenth-century intellectual for whom 'action, this way or that, is profoundly insignificant'.[35]

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[28] Paul Valéry, 'Variété', in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1950), vol. 4, pp. 20–1, as translated by René Taupin, p. 446.

[29] Valéry, vol. 4, p. 21: 'Et moi, se dit-il, moi, l'intellect européen, que vais-je devenir?' See also Bailey, *Hamlet in France*, p. 154.

[30] Taupin, 'The Myth of Hamlet', p. 434.

[31] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1987), vol. 1, p. 390.

[32] Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, 24 June 1827.

[33] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930–4), vol. 4, p. 232.

[34] Hazlitt, vol. 4, p. 232.

[35] 'The American Scholar', *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 66.

Lowell (1850) generalized in a somewhat different way, but to much the same effect, saying men of Hamlet's 'type are forever analysing their own emotions and motives. They cannot do anything because they always see two ways of doing it.'[36]

Matthew Arnold (1853) in his gloomy way also identified Hamlet with the problems of the age, the modern world, in which 'the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity' of the ancient Greeks have disappeared, and the 'dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have represented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and Faust [i.e. Goethe's *Faust*]'.[37] Later in the nineteenth century, Edward Dowden applauded what Schlegel and Coleridge had said, and repeated Emerson's comment, 'action, this way or that, is profoundly insignificant to Hamlet'; but he wanted to locate what he called Hamlet's 'malady' in his heart as well as his head, in his sensibility as well as his intellect.[38] A. C. Bradley (1904) effected this shift by finding the immediate cause for Hamlet's inaction in a disgust for life brought on by his discovery of his mother's lustfulness; and so the malady of Hamlet turned into a neurosis, a morbid condition of melancholy, the paralysing pressure of which, from 'the psychological point of view', became the centre of the tragedy.[39]

Ernest Jones extended this psychoanalysis in 1923, and later in his book *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), arguing that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because he is repressing an unconscious desire to have displaced his own father himself, and in Hamlet, 'as in every victim of a powerful unconscious conflict the Will to Death is fundamentally stronger than the Will to Life'.[40] This view, anticipated in Chekhov's embodiment of Hamletism, the suicidal Layevsky, is reflected in James Joyce's *Ulysses* in Stephen Daedalus' image of Hamlet/Shakespeare as a 'deathsman of the soul', who causes the 'bloody shambles' of Act 5; and it was taken over into academic cricitism in the influential essay by Wilson Knight (1930, 1947), called 'The Embassy of Death', in which Hamlet, as the ambassador of death, affects others like a 'blighting disease' by his passivity and negation;[41] but the most subtle expression of this kind of reading is found in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Here, in a sweeping view of the evolution of civilization as a struggle between 'Eros and Death, the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction', the price of advance in civilization is seen as 'a loss of happiness through heightening the sense of guilt', and this is manifested as anxiety or malaise. Although Freud does not comment specifically on the play, it was in his mind, for he cites in this connection the line, 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.'[42]

I have jumped rapidly from Coleridge lecturing in 1811 to the twentieth century, but I have said enough, I hope, to show how Hamlet, converted into a projection at first of the troubled minds of individual Romantics, and so democratized, became available as a representative embodiment of the failings of a class, of a group of intellectuals, of a nation, of Europe in Valéry's despairing vision, and even of the world. Hamlet could thus be identified with an attitude or philosophic stance as Hamletism, and incorporated into an image of 'Man'

[36] James Russell Lowell, 'On *Hamlet*', *c.*1850, in Williamson, p. 84.

[37] Matthew Arnold, Preface to *Poems* (1853), in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p. 591.

[38] Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare's Mind and Art* (1875; 3rd edn, London, 1886), pp. 132, 134. Dowden refers to Hamlet's 'malady' on p. 160.

[39] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1905), pp. 117–27, citing p. 127.

[40] Ernest Jones, *Essays in Applied Psycho-analysis* (1923), in C. C. H. Williamson, *Readings in the Character of Hamlet 1661–1947* (London, 1950), p. 435; see also *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York, 1949; reprinted 1976).

[41] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930, revised 1949; New York, 1957), p. 32.

[42] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930, tr. James Strachey, New York, 1961), pp. 69, 81 and n.

with a capital 'M', the whole of mankind. The growth of Hamletism is traceable mainly in the works of men of letters, essayists, poets, novelists and dramatists, who were writing for a general readership. But ideas of Hamlet and Hamletism to which they gave wide currency affected the academic criticism that has burgeoned with the professionalization of university English departments since the 1930s. The most influential academic essays of the twentieth century have continued to offer us, with whatever qualifications, an image of Hamlet infected if not overwhelmed by Hamletism. An example is J. Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935, 9 impressions by 1962), in which we are told that 'From the very beginning Shakespeare has been playing variations upon the Hamlet theme . . . suggesting that sense of frustration, futility and human inadequacy which is the burden of the whole symphony'; and Shakespeare 'never lets us forget that he [Hamlet] is a failure, or that he has failed through weakness of character'.[43] Another is Maynard Mack's 'The World of Hamlet' (1951–2). In this important essay the play is presented as a 'paradigm of the life of man', 'Man in his aspect of bafflement', envisaged as 'moving in darkness on a rampart between two worlds';[44] Hamlet's inability to act is linked to the overlapping meanings of words like 'act', 'play', and 'show', and in a world of seeming Hamlet raises questions about the nature of reality when to act is to play or to pretend. Hamlet confronts a condition not of his own making, and cannot do anything about it; so he seems to embody for Mack 'an emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, the subjection of humanity to fortune – all that we might call the aspect of failure in man'.[45] Mack avoids committing himself to a psychology, or finding a neurosis in Hamlet, and his analysis is primarily moral and metaphysical, but his conclusions are in many ways in line with those of Dover Wilson and earlier critics.

There have been alternative voices, notably Peter Alexander, who tried to restore a notion of Hamlet as 'the ideal prince',[46] referring to Shakespeare's sources in Saxo and Belleforest, but although he claimed that Hamlet unites 'heroic passions of antiquity with the meditative wisdom of later ages', the best he could do for a modern equivalent was to link him somewhat oddly with Raymond Chandler's hero, Philip Marlowe, citing his famous comment, 'down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid',[47] and diminishing the Prince into a tough but humane private eye. Yet this is perhaps the best analogy for the heroic anyone has come up with in an age when, as Joseph Wood Krutch argued years ago in *The Modern Temper* (1929), the idea of the hero has lost most of its force.[48] George Hunter also tried to rescue the Prince in an essay affirming 'The Heroism of Hamlet' (1963) as that of an individual who 'keeps facing up to and maintaining some control over the flux of action he stirs around him', a heroism depending less on 'acting or even knowing than on being',[49] but again this is a

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[43] J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935; 3rd edn, 1951, reprinted Cambridge, 1962), pp. 261, 268, 274.

[44] Maynard Mack, 'The World of Hamlet', *Yale Review*, NS 41 (1951–2), 502–23, citing pp. 503, 507.

[45] Mack, p. 515.

[46] Peter Alexander, *Hamlet Father and Son* (Oxford, 1955), p. 166.

[47] Alexander, pp. 184, 174.

[48] Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (New York, 1929): Krutch thought Hamlet showed 'greatness of spirit', and died 'not as a failure, but as a success' (p. 131), while now we 'can believe in Oswald [Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*], but we cannot believe in Hamlet' (p. 132). His was a rare voice in continuing to see Hamlet as heroic, and he seemed unaware of the process by which Hamlet had come to embody something not unlike the diseased consciousness of Oswald.

[49] G. K. Hunter, 'The Heroism of Hamlet', in *Hamlet*, edited J. R. Brown and Bernard Harris (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 5, London, 1963), 90–109, citing pp. 104, 105; see also, for versions of a strong Hamlet, Joseph Summers, *Dreams of Love and Power* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 45–67; Andrew Gurr, *Hamlet and the Distracted Globe* (Edinburgh, 1978).

sadly diminished and slimmed down concept of heroism, consisting rather in a stance towards events than in doing anything. And Laurence Olivier, fresh from his energetic triumph in the film of *Henry V*, presented in his movie of *Hamlet* (1947) an image of a golden-haired courtier, wearing braid on his shoulder suggestive of a military officer, so that he seemed to Harry Levin to coalesce with the image of the swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks;[50] but this image was contradicted by much else in the film, notably by the voiceover at the beginning saying, 'This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind.'

Hamlet as indecisive, a neurotic nauseated by sex or the world, a nihilist in love with death, above all a failure: these have remained the dominant images. At the same time, an extraordinary shift has taken place since Goethe, Schlegel and Coleridge deconstructed the Prince and turned him into a private reflection of each of us, a common man, or, in Hazlitt's words, 'as little of the hero as a man can well be'.[51] For the privatized Hamlet, abstracted from the play and turned into a projection of each of us as individuals ('It is *we* who are Hamlet'; 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself') was gradually restored to the public arena, though still largely withdrawn from the play as an autonomous figure. Indeed, once set free from the play, Hamlet was not easily put back into it. Numerous academic critics have, of course, written on the play, often treating it as self-contained, as a text to be confined within its own boundaries, having no wider relevance; they have argued interminably about whether Claudius committed incest, whether the Ghost comes from Heaven, Hell or Purgatory, whether Claudius sees the play within the play, and why Hamlet doesn't stab the King when he is praying and at his mercy. But many, too, have made the character the centre of their attention, and have found in the play 'a study in indecision',[52] seeing Hamlet as neurotic or morally trapped, or they have rapped him over the knuckles as showing a 'desire to escape from the complexities of adult living', and seen him as 'unable to break out of the closed circle of loathing and self-contempt'.[53] And at its best, as in Maynard Mack's essay, academic criticism has had a strong intertextual relationship with the writings on Hamlet by artists, poets, novelists, directors and intellectuals; and the reception of Hamlet by these is what I have been mainly concerned with.

So let me return to the shift that brought back Hamlet from the private to the public world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This shift took two forms.[54] One was overtly political, as in Freiligrath's identification of Hamlet with young German intellectuals unable to bring about the desired revolution, or in Valéry's despairing vision of Europe after World War 2 as the spectre of Hamlet presiding over a civilization diminished to an anthill. From a right-wing point of view, Hamlet seemed to represent the failure of a 'great nature confronted with a low environment',[55] or, in a harsher aspect, a 'spirit of disintegration', as a man 'isolated, self-nauseated, labouring in a sense of physical corruption',[56] a representative of what W. B. Yeats[57] called 'this filthy modern tide' ('The

[50] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), p. 131.

[51] Hazlitt, vol. 4, p. 233.

[52] Allardyce Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London, 1927), p. 80.

[53] L. C. Knights, *An Approach to Hamlet* (London, 1960), pp. 90–1; *Explorations* (London, 1946, reprinted 1958), p. 70.

[54] I am leaving out of account here the treatment of Hamlet in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, where efforts were made to reconstruct Hamlet as a courageous and heroic character; see, for instance, Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet a Window on Russia* (New York, 1976).

[55] E. K. Chambers, 'Hamlet' (1894), cited in Williamson, *Readings in the Character of Hamlet*, p. 186.

[56] D. H. Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy*, 1916; New York, 1958, p. 88; Lawrence was describing Enrico Persevalli's performance in the role.

[57] W. B. Yeats, 'The Statues', in *Collected Poems* (1933, 2nd edn, London, 1950), pp. 375–6.

Statues', 1938), or of 'the reaction from the great aristocratic to the great democratic principle' deplored by D. H. Lawrence.[58] From a left-wing point of view, though Hamlet was momentarily rescued in the middle of World War 2 by Max Plowman, who identified him in 1942 as 'self-conscious man encompassed by a world of violence . . . our world is in fact the world of Hamlet, a world that has suffered injury and cries out for justice',[59] Hamlet is more likely to be seen, in Charles Marowitz's words, as 'the supreme prototype of the conscience-stricken but paralysed liberal, one of the most lethal and obnoxious characters in modern times'.[60]

By the 1960s, in any case, a larger disillusion had set in; we had Jan Kott's influential vision of *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (English version, 1964), written by someone who, as Peter Brook said in his foreword, 'assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night'.[61] Hamlet was necesarily politicized in the context of the cold war. In 1965 there was a notable production of the play by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, directed by the young Peter Hall, and people, mostly young themselves, stood in line for hours to get tickets. Hamlet was played by a tall adolescent David Warner, dressed like a student, and wearing the ankle-length scarf then fashionable; he was gauche, gangling, anti-romantic, there was nothing to suggest a prince, and, as the conservative *Financial Times* reported, Hamlet appeared 'a beatnik, not only in his dress and appearance, but in his behaviour as well';[62] the term 'beatnik' was introduced in 1958 with reference to the 'beat generation' who rejected bourgeois values in America; Webster coyly defines it as 'a person who rejects the mores of established society (as by dressing and behaving unconventionally) and indulges in exotic philosophizing and self-expression'.[63] Hamlet the beatnik caught the imagination of audiences then, and it is worth noting Peter Hall's address to the cast of his production; Hall was a Cambridge graduate and had read the critics, and after referring to Granville-Barker, Brecht and Jan Kott, he said[64]

> Shakespeare himself was entering a dark valley – a place of cynicism, tragedy, and disgust . . . For our decade, in my view, the play will be about the problems of commitment in life and in politics, and also about the disillusionment that produces an apathy of the will . . . There is a sense of what-the-hell-anyway, over us looms the mushroom cloud. And politics are a game and a lie, whether in our own country or in the East–West dialogue, which goes on interminably, without anything very real being said . . . [at the end] you are left with Fortinbras, the perfect military ruler . . . I would not particularly like to live in a Denmark ruled by Fortinbras.

In the world of the H-bomb cynicism seemed the only stance: what possibility was there of commitment? There have been other political readings since Peter Hall's production, though the play seemed for some time to lose its contemporary relevance after 1970, in England

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58 D. H. Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy*, p. 69.

59 Max Plowman, *The Right to Live* (1942), cited in Williamson, p. 717.

60 Charles Marowitz, *The Marowitz Shakespeare* (New York, 1978), p. 13.

61 Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (translated Boleslaw Taborski (London, 1964), p. ix; Peter Brook's foreword was not included in the American edition, which has instead a foreword by Martin Esslin, who writes, strangely in view of Kott's readings, 'it is one of the roots of Shakespeare's universality that his work seems free of any definite ideological position' (p. xvii).

62 *Financial Times*, 20 August 1965, B. A. Young reviewing. Alan Brien, in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 August, saw Warner's Hamlet as a 'lanky, seedy overgrown student out of a Russian novel'.

63 *Webster's Ninth New College Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1986). According to the Supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word was introduced, after 'sputnik', in 1958, in reference to the 'beat generation', seen as new barbarians rebelling against American bourgeois values.

64 Peter Hall's talk to his company of actors, as reported in *The Observer*, 15 August 1965.