of academic writing about him kept growing, such unserious purpose was tacitly judged incompatible with the seriousness of his literary effort. This is a dangerous illusion. As I, myself, keep gleefully uncovering the Joycean traps that I can see, I must be falling into the ones that I cannot see. It is impossible, I feel, to exaggerate this writer's capacity for mischief.

HAMLET'S DULL REVENGE
Vengeance in Hamlet

The almost sacred status achieved by the work of Shakespeare has always combined with the various shibboleths of modern criticism—the “intentional fallacy” for instance, fatal to the perception of irony—to prevent us from responding as we should to Shakespeare’s most precious invitation to us, his invitation to become his accomplices and share in his prodigious awareness of a dramatic process that always consists in some form of victimage or sacrifice, a process with such deep roots within us and effects so paradoxical and hidden that it can be reactivated and ridiculed simultaneously. The Malvolio of Twelfth Night is a good example of this ambivalence.

The great artist is a magnetizer; he can channel our mimetic impulses in the direction he chooses. In some of his plays Shakespeare obviously alludes to how little it takes to arouse indignation rather than sympathy or to turn tragedy into comedy and vice versa. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for instance, the play within the play, the ridiculous Pyramus and Thisbe, is a parodic inversion of Romeo and Juliet. And the man who turns heroes into villains and villains into heroes, the poet, is really a sorcerer’s apprentice. At any moment he can become the victim of his own game. If the spectators do not accept the victim he offers, they will turn against him, they will choose him as their substitute victim; the poet will become the real scapegoat of his own theater.

As he recites the prologue of Pyramus and Thisbe, Quince misplaces a few commas and the intended compliment comes out sounding like a string of insults. It takes almost nothing to turn the captatio benevolentiae into a captatio malevolentiae. Fortunately for Quince and his friends, Theseus is a wise ruler who sees the good intention behind the misleading language. What we sense here is the dramatic creator’s extreme sensitivity to the hazardous nature of his craft. He has to worry not only about the gap
between his intentions and his words, but about the manner in which these words will be uttered by the actors and above all, of course, about their reception by the audience.

The dramatic poet depends too much upon the crowd not to know about the essential fickleness. Success or failure may result less from the intrinsic quality of the work than from collective reactions that are unpredictable because they are essentially mimetic; from one performance to the next these reactions may abruptly shift from one extreme to the other with no apparent reason. They are analogous, of course, to the scapegoat phenomena upon which all theater and, more originally still, all ritual is founded. This dependence of the playwright upon the mimetic impulse of the multitude cannot account, to be sure, for his prodigious insight into the role of random victimage in human affairs, but it must certainly sharpen his native sensitivity; it must increase the effects of whatever personal experience of similar phenomena may have first contributed in his previous history to his later "gift" as a dramatist.

The poet must be thrilled by his power to lead the crowd wherever he chooses. In the earlier plays some of the allusions Shakespeare makes to this power suggest, indeed, by their almost incredible brilliance and wit, a kind of jubilation. But there must be another and more negative side to the exercise of this power. The poet understands catharsis too well to feel as serenely complacent about it as do literary critics. Shakespeare's own conception of his role as a creator is much less exalted than ours. Even if in some of his references to poets victimized by society a note of compassion and seriousness is occasionally heard, his overall treatment of the theme has nothing to do with the puffed-up self-pity we inherited from the Romantic age. The playwright is playing with fire, and if he gets burned he has no one to blame but himself.

Why should the poet feel proud for providing the crowd with vicarious victims? The fact that he himself is no dupe, that he manipulates the ignorant spectators at a distance and yet desires the knowledgeable ones to appreciate that distance, does not make the manipulation more praiseworthy. The elite is invited to share in a pleasure more sophisticated and subtle than the catharsis of the lower level but still essentially cathartic in nature. The only difference is that the satisfaction of the few is obtained at the expense of the many. The real scapegoat now is the mass audience in a reversal that has become the rule in modern literature. It does not seem, however, that from this inverted catharsis, Shakespeare did draw the type of personal reassurance that has since nourished and still nourishes the ego of countless intellectuals and artists in the modern world.

The preceding remarks are tentative, of course, and they would be of no interest, really, if they did not suggest a new approach to some plays I have not yet mentioned, notably to the one play that, to this day, has remained the most mysterious, in spite of the almost incredible amount of critical attention it has received.

Vengeance in Hamlet

Hamlet belongs to the genre of the revenge tragedy, as hackneyed and yet inescapable in Shakespeare's days as the "thriller" in ours to a television writer. In Hamlet Shakespeare turned this necessity for a playwright to go on writing the same old revenge tragedies into an opportunity to debate almost openly the questions I have tried to define. The weariness with revenge and catharsis that can be read, I believe, in the margins of the earlier plays must really exist because, in Hamlet, it moves to the center of the stage and becomes fully articulated.

Some writers who were not necessarily the worst found it difficult, we are told, to postpone for the while the output of the lengthy Elizabethan play an action that had never been in doubt in the first place and that is always the same anyway. Shakespeare can turn this tedious theatre into the most brilliant feat of theatrical double entendre because the tedium of revenge is really what he wants to talk about, and he wants to talk about it in the usual Shakespearean fashion; he will denounce the revenge theater and all its works with the utmost daring without denying his mass audience the catharsis it demands, without depriving himself of the dramatic success that is necessary to his own career as a dramatist.

If we assume that Shakespeare really had this double goal in mind, we will find that some unexplained details in the play become intelligible and the function of many obscure scenes becomes obvious.

In order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause. This is what we noted before, and the revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of his intended victim. And the guilt of that intended victim entails in turn the innocence of the victim's victim. If the victim's victim is already a killer and if the revenge seeker reflects a little too much on the circularity of revenge, his faith in vengeance must collapse.

This is exactly what we have in Hamlet. It cannot be without a purpose that Shakespeare suggests the old Hamlet, the murdered king, was a murderer himself. However nasty Claudius may look, he cannot look nasty enough if he appears in a context of previous revenge; he cannot generate, as a villain, the absolute passion and dedication that is demanded of Hamlet. The problem with Hamlet is that he cannot forget the context. As a result, the crime by Claudius looks to him like one more link in an already long chain, and his own revenge will look like still another link, perfectly identical to all the other links.

In a world where every ghost, dead or alive, can only perform the same action, revenge, or clamor for more of the same from beyond the grave, all voices are interchangeable. You can never know with certainty which ghost is addressing whom. It is one and the same thing for Hamlet to question his own identity and to question the ghost's identity, and his authority.

To seek singularity in revenge is a vain enterprise, but to shrink from revenge in a world that looks upon it as a "sacred duty" is to exclude oneself from society, to become a nonentity once more. There is no way
out for Hamlet; he shifts endlessly from one impasse to the other, unable to make up his mind because neither choice makes sense.

If all characters are caught in a cycle of revenge that extends in all directions beyond the limits of its action, Hamlet has no beginning and no end. The play collapses. The trouble with the hero is that he does not believe in his play half as much as the critics do. He understands revenge and the theater too well to assume willingly a role chosen for him by others. His sentiments are those, in other words, that we have surmised in Shakespeare himself. What the hero feels in regard to the act of revenge, the creator feels in regard to revenge as theater. But the public wants vicarious victims and the playwright must oblige. Tragedy is revenge. Shakespeare is tired of revenge, and yet he cannot give it up, or he gives up his audience and his identity as a playwright. Shakespeare turns a typical revenge topic, Hamlet, into a meditation on his predicament as a playwright.

Claudius and the old Hamlet are not blood brothers first and enemies second; they are brothers in murder and revenge. In the myths and legends from which most tragedies are drawn, brotherhood is almost invariably associated with the reciprocity of revenge. Close examination reveals that brotherhood, the most frequent probably of all mythological themes, stands for this reciprocity rather than for the specific family relationship it designates. Being the least differentiated relationship in most kinship systems, the status of a brother can become a mark of undifferentiation, a symbol of violent desymbolization, the sign paradoxically that there are no more signs and that a warring confusion tends to prevail everywhere.

This interpretation is confirmed by the large proportion of mythical antagonists who are not merely brothers but identical twins, Jacob and Esau, for instance, or Eteocles and Polynices, or Romulus and Remus. Twins possess in the highest degree the quality that is already essential to mythical brotherhood: they are undistinguishable; they completely lack the differentiation all primitive and traditional communities deem indispensable to the maintenance of peace and order.

It is surprising, to say the least, that modern anthropology has not yet rediscovered the significance of twins in mythology and primitive religion. Far from pointing to a new direction, the exclusively differential emphasis of structuralism and its offspring constitutes the ultimate fulfillment of the old and most powerful tradition not only of our social sciences and of our philosophy but of religion itself. This tendency minimizes at its best, and at its worst completely suppresses, everything essential to the understanding of a writer like Shakespeare, beginning with the mimetic nature of human conflict and the resulting tendency of the antagonists to behave more and more alike as they falsely perceive more and more difference between themselves.

If Shakespeare had shared the ignorance of our social sciences and literary critics in regard to mythological twins and brothers, he would never have written The Comedy of Errors. The most striking feature of this play is that, thanks to the theme of the undetected twins, many effects that are really similar to the unperceived equalizing effects of tragic conflict can be exploited in a vein of comic misunderstanding.

This significance of twins and brothers, not only in mythology but in a stage tradition that includes, of course, the Plautus of The Menenchi, must be present to our minds if we are to interpret correctly the scene in which Hamlet, holding in his hands the two portraits of his father and his uncle, or pointing to them on the wall, tries to convince his mother that an enormous difference exists between the two. There would be no Hamlet "problem" if the hero really believed what he says. It is also himself, therefore, that he is trying to convince. The anger in his voice and the exaggeration of his language with its coldly contrived metaphors suggest that he labors in vain:

Look here upon this picture, and on this
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's orb, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,

A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?

The gentleman doth protest too much. The symmetry of the whole presentation and of Hamlet's own expressions tend to reassert the resemblance he denies: "This was your husband . . . Here is your husband, . . ."

Hamlet begs his mother to give up her conjugal relationship with Claudius. The tons of Freud that have been poured over the passage have obscured its significance. Hamlet does not feel indignant enough to rush out and kill the villain. As a result he feels uncomfortable about himself and blames his mother because she obviously feels even more indifferent to the whole affair than he does. He would like his mother to initiate the revenge process for him. He tries to arouse in her the indignation he himself cannot feel, in order to catch it secondhand from her, perhaps, out of some kind of mimetic sympathy. Between Gertrude and Claudius he would like to see a dramatic break that would force him to side resolutely with his mother.

It is generally accepted view nowadays that Gertrude must have felt a tremendous attachment to Claudius. Far from confirming that view, the following lines suggest exactly the opposite:
Hamlet does not say that his mother is madly in love with Claudius; he says that even if she were, she should still be able to perceive some difference between her two husbands. Hamlet assumes, therefore, that his mother, like himself, perceives no difference whatever. This assumption is obviously correct. Gertrude remains silent during her son’s tirade because she has nothing to say. The reason she could marry the two brothers in rapid succession is that they are so much alike and she feels the same indifference to the one as to the other. It is this overwhelming indifference that Hamlet perceives, and he resents it because he is trying to fight it in himself. Like so many other queens of Shakespeare, like the queens of Richard III, for instance, Gertrude moves in a world where prestige and power count more than passion.

We are often dominated nowadays in our literary criticism by what might be called an “erotic imperative” no less dogmatic in its demands, and no less naïve ultimately, than the sexual taboos that came before. In time, this rebellious child of puritanism will grow old, let us hope, and it may then become possible to recognize that his effects upon Shakespearean irony were no less detestable and destructive than those of his father.

What Hamlet needs, in order to stir up his vengeful spirit, is a revenge theater more convincing than his own, something less halfhearted than the play Shakespeare is actually writing. Fortunately for the hero and for the spectators who are eagerly awaiting their final bloodbath, Hamlet has many opportunities to watch rousing spectacles during his play and tries to generate even more, in a conscientious effort to put himself in the right mood for the murder of Claudius. Hamlet must receive from someone else, a mimetic model, the impulse that he does not find in himself. This is what he tried to achieve with his mother, we found, but did not succeed. He is not successful either with the actor who impersonates for him the role of Hecuba. It becomes obvious, at this point, that the only hope for Hamlet to accomplish what his society—or the spectators—require, is to become as “sincere” a showman as the actor who can shed real tears when he pretends to be the queen of Troy!

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann’d,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suitting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?

Another catchy example for Hamlet comes from the army of Fortinbras on its way to Poland. The object of the war is a worthless speck of land. Thousands of people must risk their lives:

Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When Honor’s at the stake.

The scene is as ridiculous as it is sinister. It would not impress Hamlet so much if the hero truly believed in the superiority and urgency of his cause. His words constantly betray him, here as in the scene with his mother. As a cue for passion, his revenge motif is no more compelling, really, than the cue of an actor on the stage. He too must “greatly . . . find quarrel in a straw,” he too must stoke everything “even for an eggshell.”

The effect of the army scene obviously stems, at least in part, from the large number of people involved, from the almost infinite multiplication of the example, which cannot fail to increase its mimetic attraction enormously. Shakespeare is too much a master of mob effects not to remember at this point the cumulative effect of mimetic models. In order to whip up enthusiasm for the war against Claudius, the same irrational contagion is needed as in the war against Poland. The type of mimetic incitement from which Hamlet “benefits” at this point resembles very much the kind of spectacle that governments never fail to organize for their citizenry when they have decided it is time to go to war: a rousing military parade.

But it is not the actor, ultimately, or the army of Fortinbras, but Laertes, I believe, who determines Hamlet to act. Laertes provides the most persuasive spectacle not because he provides the “best” example but because his situation parallels that of Hamlet. Being Hamlet’s peer, at least up to a point, his passionate stance constitutes the most powerful challenge imaginable. In such circumstances, even the most apathetic man’s sense of emulation must rise to such a pitch that the sort of disaster that the fulfillment of the revenge demands can finally be achieved.

The simple and unreflective Laertes can shout to Claudius “give me my father” and then leap into his sister’s grave in a wild demonstration of grief. Like a well-adjusted gentleman or a consummate actor, he can perform with the utmost sincerity all the actions his social milieu demands, even if they contradict each other. He can mourn the useless death of a human being at one minute, and at the next he can uselessly kill a dozen more if he is told that his honor is at stake. The death of his father and sister are almost less shocking to him than the lack of pomp and circumstance at their burial.
At the rites of Ophelia, Laertes keeps asking the priest for “more ceremony.” Laertes is a formalist and reads the tragedy of which he is a part very much like the formalists of all stripes. He does not question the validity of revenge. He does not question the literary genre. He does not question the relationship between revenge and mourning. These are not valid critical questions to him; they never enter his mind, just as it never occurs to most critics that Shakespeare himself could question the validity of revenge.

Hamlet watches Laertes leap into Ophelia’s grave, and the effect on him is electrifying. The reflective mood of the conversation with Horatio gives way to a wild imitation of the rival’s theatrical mourning. At this point he obviously decides that he, too, should act according to the demands of society, that he should become another Laertes in other words. He, too, as a result, must leap into the grave of one who has already died, even as he prepares more graves for those still alive:

’Sounds, show me what thou’lt do.
Woo’t weep? Woo’t fight? Woo’t fast? Woo’t tear thyself?
Woo’t drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?
I’ll do’t. Dost thou come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.

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I’ll rant as well as thou. (V, i, 274–83)

In order to embrace the goal of revenge, Hamlet must enter the circle of mimetic desire and rivalry; this is what he has been unable to achieve so far, but here, thanks to Laertes, he finally reaches a hysterical pitch of that “pale and bloodless emulation” that constitutes the terminal stage of the ontological disease, so often described elsewhere by Shakespeare, in Troilus and Cressida of course, as well as in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

These words are a crystal-clear expression of the mimetic frenzy that leads to victimage. When we hear them, we should know that the conclusion is near. The explicitness of the passage is comic, really, and crucial to the intelligence of the whole play, coming as it does after all the scenes we have already read and confirming their role as scenes of still halfhearted mimetic incitement.

Shakespeare can place these incredible lines in the mouth of Hamlet without undermining the dramatic credibility of what follows. Following the lead of Gertrude, the spectators will ascribe the outburst to “madness.”

This is mere madness.
And thus awhile the fit will work on him.
Anon, as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping. (284–88)

A little later Hamlet himself, now calmly determined to kill Claudius, will recall the recent outburst in most significant words:

I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his. I’ll court his favors.
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion. (V, ii, 75–80)

Like all victims of mimetic suggestion, Hamlet reverses the true hierarchy between the other and himself. He should say: “by the image of his cause I see the portraiture of mine.” This is the correct formula, obviously, for all the spectacles that have influenced Hamlet. The actor’s tears and the military display of Fortinbras were already presented as mimetic models. In order to realize that Laertes, too, functions as a model, the last two lines are essential. The cool determination of Hamlet, at this point, is the transmutation of the “towering passion” that he had vainly tried to build up before and that Laertes has finally communicated to him through the “bravery of his grief.”

The more acute stages of the mimetic process are more obviously compulsive and self-destructive than the earlier ones. But they are only the full development of what was present as a germ before. That is why these stages are, among other things, caricature mimetic. Everything obscure and implicit until then becomes transparent and explicit. Normal people, so-called, must resort to the “madness” label in order not to perceive the continuity between this caricature and their own mimetic desire. In front of Hamlet’s outburst inside the grave, a well-informed psychiatrist must diagnose the type of symptom that belongs to “histrionic schizophrenia,” or some such disease. He cannot see anything there but pure pathology, completely divorced from all rational behavior, including his own, which he does not perceive as mimetic. The writers of genius never share that illusion. If schizophrenia often imitates “with a vengeance,” if it turns to spectacular “histrionics,” the reasons may be not that the patient is particularly eager to imitate, or gifted for imitation, but that he is less gifted for the unconscious imitation that is being silently pursued at all times among the normal people all around him.

The question “what is the schizophrenic individual trying to achieve when he engages in his histrionics?” receives an answer in Hamlet. He is trying to achieve what everybody else seems to achieve without difficulty. He is trying to be a normal man himself; he is aping the well-adjusted personality of Laertes, the man who can draw his sword when he should and who can jump into his sister’s grave when he should, without looking like a madman.

The madman makes us feel uneasy not because his game is different
from ours but because it is the same. It is the same old mimetic game in which we all engage, but a little too emphatic for our taste, as if played with excessive application by a man who lacks a sense of proportion. This type of madman desperately tries to be like us or perhaps we merely pretend, in order to put us to shame, to deride our overwhelming servility. We prefer to leave the matter alone and not to look at ourselves in the mirror that is offered to us.

Shakespeare's own ambiguous relationship to the theater is not unlike Hamlet's relationship to his revenge. But a definition of the play in terms of the creator's problem as a playwright can be no more than a necessary first step. Hamlet would not be Hamlet if Shakespeare, as he wrote it, had been contemplating his own scriptural novel according to the fashion that prevails in the contemporary script. He would not have created a play of such enduring and widespread fascination. There must be something in the Hamletian transposition of the author's latitudes with revenge and its tragedies that transcends the centuries and still corresponds to the predicament of our own culture.

The theater, we found, still relies on imperfectly detected scapegoat processes for its cathartic effects, much attenuated, of course, but structurally identical to the rituals of primitive religion. This relationship is acknowledged by some critics. In his essay on Coriolanus, Kenneth Burke shows that everything in that tragedy is planned with the victimage of the hero in mind, and the most efficient strategy of victimage corresponds to the "esthetic rules" defined by Aristotle in his Poetics. 1

In his Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye also views tragedy as a bloodless and imaginary transposition of sacrificial rites. 2 In order not to exaggerate the difference such a transposition can make, we must remember that sacrificial rites themselves are already a transposition of more spontaneous forms of victimage.

However subtle and refined theatrical effects may become, they still amount to new displacements of the original scapegoat effects, at the end of which there must still be a real victim that will be effective as a victim in proportion to the satisfaction provided by its victimage, in proportion therefore to our inability to acknowledge its arbitrariness. It may well be that traditional cultural forms, such as the theater, can never dispense entirely with victimage. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the human mind is caught in an endlessly circular process. As far as we can tell, there is something unique in the ability of modern culture to perceive victimage as such, to interpret scapegoat effects, in other words, as psychosocial phenomena rather than as religious or aesthetic epiphanies.

Not before the end of the Middle Ages, it seems, did the word "scape-}

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Even if the reasons of the biblical writers for siding with the victims were primarily psychological or social, the question of how this attitude was achieved pales into insignificance, really, next to the achievement itself. The critics can overlook the formidable revolution that the biblical perspective represents because they have never suspected what really lies behind mythology, victimization, the scapegoat mechanism.

Even in its most primitive layers, the biblical text already tends to demythologize more effectively than any modern demythologizer. In the Pentateuch this demythologization still occurs within a mythical framework, as it does, to a certain extent, in Greek tragedy. With pre-exilic and exilic prophecy, this framework disappears and the prophets openly denounce violence and the idolatry of violence. This Old Testament revelation probably reaches its highest mark with the book of Job, certain psalms, and the Songs of the Suffering Servant, the Ebed Yahweh of the Second Isaiah. One achievement of those texts is to make the role of the scapegoat fully explicit as founder of the religious community, outside of any specific context. Each school of interpreters, Jewish and Christian primarily, has tried to supply its own context and to exclude others, never realizing that, if the first object of the revelation is the generative mechanism of all human culture, all contexts are equally valid.

In the Gospels, similarly, the passion of Jesus must be read, first of all, as a revelation of human violence. The perfect victim does not die in order to ensure an immolation that would be perfect in the eyes of a still sacrificial god. The notion means that a victim perfectly nonviolent and just will make the revelation of violence complete not only in his words, but through the hostile polarization of the threatened human community. This victim's death reveals not only the violence and injustice of all sacrificial cults, but the nonviolence and justice of the divinity whose will is thus fully accomplished for the first and only time in history.

To all previous religious laws, the Gospel substitutes a single command: "give up retaliation and revenge in any form." This is no utopian scheme, no folksy anarchism dreamed up by a romantic reformer. If the victimage mechanism must be misunderstood in order to remain operative, its full revelation will leave the human community deprived of sacrificial protection.

The traditional reading of many Gospel themes suffers from sacrificial distortions. In a nonsacrificial reading, all themes find their place, but divested of any reference to a vengeful god. The apocalyptic theme, for instance, at least in the Gospels themselves, consists of a purely human threat. Apocalyptic prophecy means no more and no less than a rational anticipation of what men are likely to do to each other and to their environment, if they go on disregarding the warning against revenge in a desacralized and sacrificially unprotected world.

Far from being almost exhausted, as many people believe, the impact of the Judeo-Christian revelation may only have been retarded by the universal failure to read the texts correctly. Their subversive force was filtered by the sacrificial veils that antireligious as well as religious and traditional readings have thrown over them.

The sacrificial misreading of the Gospels made the various phases of Christian culture possible. In the Middle Ages, for instance, Gospel principles were superficially reconciled with the aristocratic ethics of personal honor and revenge. With the Renaissance, this edifice began to collapse, and Shakespeare is a major witness to that event. Even after the disappearance of blood feuds, duels, and similar customs, Christian culture never disentangled itself completely from values rooted in revenge. Although nominally Christian, social attitudes remained essentially alien to the authentic Judeo-Christian inspiration.

This inspiration never disappeared, but it often became too weak to challenge the prevailing compromises, even to take full consciousness of itself. It made its influence felt as a nameless and ambiguous force, a creeping subversion of all social values and attitudes.

Hamlet is certainly no coward; we saw that his inaction, following the command of the ghost, results from his failure to muster the proper sentiments. This failure never receives the direct and unambiguous explanation it demands in terms of a revulsion against the ethics of revenge. We may find this strange at a time when blood revenge was really on the way out and its principle was widely challenged. On the other hand, from a dramatic and literary viewpoint, Shakespeare's silence is not strange at all. Hamlet belongs to a genre which demands that the ethics of revenge be taken for granted. A revenge tragedy is not an appropriate vehicle for tirades against revenge.

Outwardly, at least, Shakespeare had to respect the literary conventions of the time. In a revenge tragedy all eloquence must be on the side of revenge; all the disgust that the hero feels for the act of revenge, and that the creator feels for its aesthetic exploitation, remains a half-formed thought, an almost incoherent feeling that must fail in the end to gain full control of that hero's behavior, lest it deprive the play of its official status as a revenge play. The spectators are provided with the victims they expect.

Shakespeare's genius turned this constraint into an asset. The silence at the heart of Hamlet has become a major reason for the enduring fascination of the play, its most enigmatically suggestive feature. How is this possible?

If the preceding observations are correct, the dependence of human culture on revenge and victimage is too fundamental not to survive the elimination of the most grossly physical forms of violence, the actual murder of the victim. If the Judeo-Christian ferment is not dead, it must be engaged in an obscure struggle against deeper and deeper layers of the essential complicity between violence and human culture. As the struggle reaches these deep layers, we lack the words to describe the issues; no
guish strategy from procrastination. The very notion of strategy may be strategic in regard to the self-defeating nature of revenge that no one wants to face, not yet at least, so that the possibility of revenge is not entirely removed from the scene. Thanks to the notion of strategy, men can postpone revenge indefinitely without ever giving it up. They are equally terrified by both radical solutions and go on living as long as possible, if not forever, in the no-man’s-land of sick revenge.

In that no-man’s-land it becomes impossible to define anything. All actions and motivations are their own opposites as well as themselves. When Hamlet does not seize the opportunity to kill Claudius during his prayer, it could be a failure of the will or a supreme calculation; it could be instinctive humaneness or a refinement of cruelty. Hamlet himself does not know. The crisis of Degree has reached the most intimate recesses of the individual consciousness. Human sentiments have become as mixed up as the seasons of the year in A Midsummer’s Night Dream. Even he who experiences them can no longer say which is which, and the critic’s search for neat differentiations misses the point entirely. Most interpreters cling to the illusion that differences alone must be real behind deceptive similarities, whereas the opposite is true. Similarities alone are real. We must not be misled by Ophelia’s blond hair and pitiable death. Or rather, we must realize that Shakespeare consciously misleads his less attentive spectators with these gross theatrical signs of what a pure heroine should be. Just like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia allows herself to become an instrument in the hands of her father and of the king. She too is affected by the disease of the time. Another sign of her contamination is her language and behavior, which are both contaminated with the erotic strategy of a Cressida and the other least savory Shakespearian heroines. What Hamlet resents in Ophelia is what any human being is always resents in another human being, the visible signs of his own sickness. It is the same sickness, therefore, that corrupts Ophelia’s love for Hamlet and debases Hamlet’s love for the theater.

Hamlet’s purpose, when he sets up his play within the play, is to expose Gertrude and Claudius or, rather, force them to expose themselves. This is astonishingly similar to what many dramatists are doing today, except that Hamlet has not yet reached that supreme stage of self-deception where the theoreticians join in and the whole enterprise is justified as a superior form of aesthetic responsibility. With Jean-Paul Sartre and his successors, the showmanship of resentment has been presented as the strictest moral obligation for the writer to denounce all his “bourgeois” spectators indiscriminately.

The rule of the game is to have all the Gertrudes and Claudius in the audience rise up in the middle of the performance and leave the theater in an uproar. Nothing is acceptable anymore that has not been indignantly rejected by the public. Unfortunately, the public too can learn the rules and embrace its own denunciation with an enthusiasm that has become a sec-
ond nature and does not even have to be feigned anymore. No difference remains between scandal and convention, between revolt and conformity. Contraries merge, not in some glorious Hegelian synthesis, but in unnameable monstrosities. The salt of the earth does not even know it has lost its flavor and the most pungent demystification, the most sophisticated deconstruction, turns into the platitudes of a Polonius.

The dilemma has not changed; it has only assumed more extreme and spectacular forms that should make its perception and definition easier for us than for Shakespeare but, curiously, Shakespeare is still ahead of us as a "demystifier." We need him, I believe, to understand better the strange historical situation into which we have been thrust by the very enormity of our technological power.

I do not intend to be facetious. Technological progress has made our weapons of war so destructive that their use would defeat any rational purpose of aggression. For the first time in Western history, the primitive fear of revenge becomes intelligible once more. The whole planet has become the equivalent of any primitive tribe, but no sacrificial cult is available, this time, to ward off and transfigure the threat.

No one wants to initiate a cycle of revenge that might literally annihilate humanity, and yet no one wants to give up revenge entirely. Like Hamlet, we are poised on the fence between total revenge and no revenge at all, unable to make up our mind, unable to take revenge and yet unable to renounce it. In the shadow of that monstrous threat, all institutions dissolve, "degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities," all human relations disintegrate; "each thing meets in more oppugnacy." Justice loses its name and "the unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask." The enterprise is sick.

Many people curse nowadays the same scientific and technological discoveries they still worshiped a few years ago. The same biblical God who was blamed earlier for slowing down this progress, now that things are beginning to turn sour, stands accused of inciting and promoting this dangerous venture of modern man. We are still trying to project our own violence against that God but to no avail, this time, since we no longer believe in him.

In reality, mankind's domination of the entire world can become a peril to mankind, it cannot be the fault of some god, it can only be the human spirit of revenge, which is not completely extinct with us. If we had not decided to exclude the Judeo-Christian scriptures from our cultural problematic, this fact alone would immediately remind us of the still unheeded only partly heeded evangelical warning against revenge. The Judeo-Christian text may be more relevant to our destiny, after all, than the Oedipal mythology of Sigmund Freud or the Dionysiac mythology of Friedrich Nietzsche. We should suspect by now that there is more to the warning against revenge than utopian anarchism and sentimental moralism.

We should also begin to understand Hamlet.

To read Hamlet against revenge is anachronistic, some people say, be-
cannot confront the grave symptom of Hamlet's hesitation without hesitating himself between two distinct pathologies: hysterical paralysis of the will and specific aboulia. But this is only a minor uncertainty. Regarding the ultimate cause, a psychoanalyst never hesitates. Like Polonius before him, Ernest Jones is convinced that Hamlet's problems are strictly sexual. 

Jones's only difference with Polonius's assessment is a shift from the daughter of the analyst to the mother of the patient. That shift makes everything more interesting and modern. Our time being the more disjointed of the two, it should and does produce the more sophisticated Poloniises it so richly deserves. If the psychoanalysts could only get the contemporary Hamlet on their couch, if they could only straighten out his Oedipus complex, his specific aboulia would vanish; he would stop shilly-shallying and push that nuclear button like a real man. 

Almost all critics today stick to the ethics of revenge. The psychiatrist sees the very thought of its abandonment as an illness he must cure, and the political critic sees revenge as a literary rule he must respect. Others still try to read Hamlet through one of the popular ideologies of our time, like political rebellion, the absurd, the individual’s right to an aggressive personality, and so on. It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides a perfect vehicle for all the masks of modern resentment. The remarkable consensus in favor of revenge verifies, I believe, the conception of the play as that no-man's-land between total revenge and no revenge at all, that specifically modern space where everything becomes suffused with sick revenge. 

It is fashionable nowadays to claim that we inhabit an entirely new world in which even our greatest masterpieces have become irrelevant. I would be the last one to deny that there is something unique about our world, but there is something unique also about Hamlet, and we may well be deceiving ourselves in order not to face a type of relevance we do not welcome. 

It is not Hamlet that is irrelevant, but the wall of conventions and ritualism with which we surround the play, in the name now of innovation rather than tradition. As more events, objects, and attitudes around us proclaim the same message ever more loudly, in order not to hear that message, we must condemn more of our experience to insignificance and absurdity. With our most fashionable critics today we have reached the point when history makes no sense, art makes no sense, language and sense itself make no sense. 

Although superficially reassuring, this nonsense with which we would like to surround ourselves constitutes a tacit surrender to the forces that led Hamlet to the last act of his play and that might lead, today, to its planetary equivalent. It cannot be a fortuitous coincidence if the world, which four centuries ago wrote Hamlet and now finds itself in the strange historical impasse upon which we prefer not to reflect, is also the world whose sole religious law is to renounce revenge, the world that now even refuses to mention it but cannot ignore it anymore, the world that finds itself compelled more and more to obey that law—or to perish. 

We ourselves forged that situation with no help from anyone. We cannot blame it on some vengeful god. We have no more god upon whom to reject the responsibility we so proudly assumed when it did not appear menacing. Although the situation in which we now find ourselves was eminently predictable, most philosophers and scientists were unable to predict it; the few who did never got a serious hearing. 

As modern culture turned to science and philosophy, as the Greek side of our inheritance became dominant, to the point when mythology proper, with disciplines like psychoanalysis, made a kind of intellectual reappearance, the Judeo-Christian text was rejected to the outer fringes of our intellectual life; it is now entirely excluded. 

As a result, absolutely no sense can be made of our current historical predicament. We are beginning to suspect something fundamental is missing from our intellectual landscape, but we do not seriously dare ask what. The prospect is too terrifying. We pretend not to see the disintegration of our cultural life, the desperate futility of the puppet shows that occupy the empty stage during this strange intermission of the human spirit. A silence has descended upon the earth, as if an angel were about to open the seventh and last seal of an apocalypse. 

Hamlet is no mere word game. We can make sense out of Hamlet just as we can make sense out of our world, by reading both against revenge. This is the way Shakespeare wanted Hamlet to be read and the way it should have been read long ago. If now, at such a time in our history, we still cannot read Hamlet against revenge, who ever will?