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Hamlet and the Paths Among the Passions from *Vehemence and Wonder*

One of the great mysteries within the passions is that only certain paths occur that link one state of vehemence to another. From fear we often pass to an intense feeling of shame once the fear has been dispelled, but rarely do we pass from shame to fear. Jealousy, reaching a pitch of vehemence, transposes into rage. Ambition, as we see it, for example, in Lady Macbeth, redesigns itself as guilt while carrying over the same murderousness, but now directed at herself. On the other hand, guilt seldom wakes up to find itself ambition. Of these trajectories among the passions the most essential and at the same time most mysterious is the path that leads from wrath to mourning. What are arguably the two greatest works of our literary tradition, the *Iliad* and *King Lear* are both constructed around an armature where anger, shattered by the death of Patroklos or Cordelia, is reassembled into grief with all intensity preserved, but sublimated into sorrow. Vengeance and mourning preserve while redeploying a common sum of inner excitation, solitude, and prolonged focus on a single object that thins out or cancels any diffuse investment in the rest of the world.

To progress from killing to mourning, from rage to grief is, at first glance, an obvious and humane sequence. The descent from rage to regret and sorrow; from causing death to comprehending—in mourning—the full reality of death; to pass from the most active and volcanic of states to the immobility of mourning: all have about them, as passages, a seeming naturalness little different from going from exertion to exhaustion. But this humanity or obviousness blocks our access to what might really be at stake in these fixed passages.

Within the literature of the passions such passages from state to state control the unfolding of the work as a whole. Almost alchemical in their suddenness, and motivated from without, the metamorphosis of rage into grief or ambition into guilt lies at the heart of the work where it operates as plot does in the literature of action or choice and growth in the literature of character. In *A Winter's Tale* that vehemence is located in King Leontes and passes from jealousy to rage, from rage to remorse,

from remorse to mourning, and finally, from mourning to wonder. The life history of the King records him as the custodian of a fixed quantity of vehemence that he invests and reinvests, now in rage, now in guilt, now in wonder, until he reaches a serenity that coincides with life itself being already, for him, a matter of the past.

The literature of the passions tells the life history of a quantity of energy which appears first as one state of vehemence, then is redesigned, as another until a finality is reached that is best summed up by the final line of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, "Calm of mind, all passion spent." The state of serenity, peaceful even to the point of exhaustion, that ends the *Iliad*, *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, and *Wuthering Heights* to list just a few of the works of the literature of the passions, is a sign that the inner logic of the work has been constructed around the excitation, transformation, and final exhaustion of a state of vehemence.

The larger path that leads from energy to exhaustion is in its essence not a reversible path. But why should it be that locally we move only from fear to shame or from anger to mourning and not in the reverse direction? One answer might be that there is some one state towards which all others tend. Hume felt that he could show that many states have a tendency, because of the uncertainty that sets the mind in motion from state to state and from object to object, to degenerate into an unsettled state of fear. It can equally be argued, that the social aftermath of many states of passion is a feeling of embarrassment or shame, once the social world is once again noticed. The decline into fear or into shame would then be intrinsic to the mechanism of the passions themselves. But it is not any universal mechanism of this kind that leads jealousy to spill over into rage or ambition into guilt. Nonetheless, certain routes of this kind have an almost mechanical predictability within experience. As La Rochefoucauld has written, "One passes often from love to ambition, but never the other way, from ambition to love."

To turn these paths back upon themselves has never been a casual experiment within art. It is one of the many unique features of *Hamlet* that it tries to do just this. What we could call the classical trajectory from anger to mourning—classical, since it describes the economy of the passions in the *Iliad* and *King Lear*—is in *Hamlet* forced backwards. A son, whose inner loss matches the black mourning suit that he alone goes on wearing, is set the problem of passing from the vehement inactivity and world-emptiness of grief into the anger that makes revenge possible. At one level, the paralysis that results is the outcome of a paradox within the passions: anger and vengeance can precede settled mourning, but cannot follow it. Mourning is, as I will try to show, an alternative reading of the situation of a death to the reading of vengeance. The two cannot occupy the

same place; that is, the same soul at the same time. Within the literature of the passions Shakespeare has designed in *Hamlet* a work that stalemates and then pushes aside the mechanisms of the passions themselves, forcing them to give way to solutions of a different order.

In the argument that follows I will try to show that such a reversal within the current of the passions coincides with the aftermath of the passions themselves, meaning by aftermath the historical situation in which the central description of human nature no longer required the passions as one of its elements. A. O. Hirschman has recently described the 17th century as a period in which accounts of the self move from a vocabulary of the Passions to a vocabulary of the Interests. He spells out, for the inner life, the social changes and their psychological consequences that Max Weber had described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. To speak of the aftermath of the passions is simply to use a shorthand for this redistribution of the energies of the inner life into new categories that were those of a mercantile and family oriented civilization. Such a civilization has a strong commitment to both predictability—that is, regularity—and to a concept of privacy and inner life that are at odds with the very mechanisms of the passions: their impetuosity and their indiscriminate self display.

In *Hamlet* the details of the successor world are not spelled out, and for my purposes it is not important whether that world is the European world described by Weber and Hirschman, or some other. What I wish to show is how the vocabulary of the passions could be rearranged so as to spell out, not some new state within the passions, but their aftermath. The key lay in taking the single most important trajectory, that from vengeance seeking anger to mourning, and constructing circumstances in which only by passing in the opposite, impossible, direction could the laws of vehemence continue to hold sway.

Alternatives within Mourning

At first it seems that it is in his mourning that Hamlet is the very incarnation of passion. The play begins with Claudius' reproach to Hamlet for his too prolonged state of mourning in which, as Gertrude says, he seems to "seek for his father in the dust." Unlike the new king and his new wife, Hamlet has conspicuously refused to lurch from funeral to wedding, from death bed to marriage bed, from grief to joy. It is here that he insisted on delay while others rushed on to satisfy their passion. His own love for Ophelia seems unable, as Gertrude's passion for Claudius had been, to push quickly aside the fact of the old king's death. He has refused to "cast

thy nighted color off." What the new king sees as "mourning duties" should last only a certain time beyond which grief becomes "obstinate condolence" or "stubbornness." After a time "unprevailing woe" must be "throw(n) to earth," and life resumed with a "new father" just as the state has taken a new king.

The features of stubbornness, invariability, and withdrawal from an ever-changing social life to pursue in solitude the course of his passion make Hamlet in his grief a classic picture of an impassioned man, one whose vehemence is the vehemence of mourning. What seemed at first his callous response to the deaths of Ophelia, Rosencranz and Guildenstern, and Polonius, might be described as the grip of his deep and primal mourning for his father, whose death makes all else trivial. Just as Akilleus slaughters twelve prisoners at the pyre of Patroklos, kills and mutilates the body of Hektor, and slaughters his way across the Trojan army, all these killings counting as nothing because of his pervading grief at his friend's death, so Hamlet's carelessness with death in bringing about these four killings might shrink in the face of his all obsessing mourning for his father that ends only with his own death. That death, and the death of Claudius lead to the final "death" or vanishing into the after-world of the ghostly father who remains throughout the play only partially dead. By continuing to cause actions within the world, and continuing to appear within the world, reporting, even if only by hints, on his condition, he remains, in part at least, alive. The play's de facto end is the completion of the father's prolonged dying. And it is this that might be called the end of all mourning. That Hamlet does not survive his mourning is only a further tribute to its vehemence.

Could we go further and say that not only less important grief — as for Ophelia — but all other passions are frozen out by a stubbornness of mourning, that Claudius describes for us in the first portrait that is drawn of Hamlet? The anger and vengeance that even his father requires of him might then be seen, not as a consequence of a paralysis of thought, or doubt, or self-consciousness, but as the stubbornness of a more authentic passion (grief) which holds its own against not only pleasure and the distractions of social life, but against love in the presence of Ophelia, and wonder in the presence of the natural world, but even against the anger that the murdered father hopes will activate vengeance. What his father requires is not revenge, but that Hamlet be able to reconfigure his mourning into vengeance. The trajectory from incandescent anger to mourning must, if Hamlet is to obey his father's command, be reversed so as to supply out of the psychology of grief the materials of anger.

Grief and anger are alternative responses to death or to any loss. That mourning and anger are like two sides of a scale where a movement of the

one requires a corresponding movement of the other can be seen as in some ways the central matter in the *Iliad* and *King Lear*. In anger the fact of death is set aside to focus on the cause of death, almost as though the merely static fact were unendurable. The passive suffering of diminution is thrown aside in the new active phase of revenge. Because revenge can be taken, the suffering does not have to be endured as something that simply happened to one. The revenge ethic is the single most powerful rejection of the most damaging emotional conclusion of mourning, its helpless and inactive waiting. Revenge could be called, to alter Clausewitz' phrase about war, the continuation of mourning by other means. When Akilleus rolls in the dust and weeps, he mourns Patroklos, but in setting out to kill Hektor he transposes mourning into vengeance. Most of all, he is able to set aside the paralytic passivity of grief that pays honor to death by simulating so many of its effects within the life of the mourner—not eating, for example, or refusing to continue with one's concerns, or being unable to feel strongly for others. In Hamlet's words, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world!"

The most important split between the strategy of anger and that of grief occurs around the component of guilt and self-reproach within all mourning. A feeling of responsibility for the death, or at least a guilt at not having prevented it, hovers over every loss almost as a misunderstanding of death itself, or a refusal of the passivity built into losses that happen to us, a refusal so urgent that it would prefer to imagine the self responsible if that would make it seem less passive. With anger and revenge the guilt is discovered to lie, not in the self, but concretely in the outer world where it can be attacked and punished.

The Innocence of Vengeance

Revenge and anger work out a simplification of grief in which the self, instead of responsibility, presents itself as the defender of the dead, replacing him in acts that if alive, he certainly would do for himself. Had he only been wounded by the one who succeeded in killing him, his first act would have been to retaliate. In revenge we execute for the victim the very acts that in the extremity of his suffering he has been rendered unable to do for himself, like a victim who has subsequently been blinded by an attacker so that he cannot later identify him in court. In revenge, the "death" is taken as just such a pre-emption of retaliation, since the one thing that pushing aggression to the final point of homicide seems certain to prevent is any later settling of accounts. Thus the killing of Old Hamlet by Claudius is, from the point of view of revenge, not the central crime,

but rather the secondary act that seemed to guarantee that the real crime (whether that be seen as the seduction of Gertrude or the usurpation of the throne) could never be revenged. The mythological story of the rape of Philomel in which Tiresias cuts out the tongue of his victim so that she can never say what has happened to her is the model for this act. This is the structure that guarantees the innocence of revenge. The revenge that Hamlet is asked to do by his father is no more than the simple act that if the movements of his hand could still occur on earth, his father would do for himself. Or, to put it another way, had the plot been stopped just short of success, Old Hamlet with his own sword would have slain Claudius. Equally, he would have executed him on the spot had he discovered him in bed with Gertrude or engaged in a plot to usurp the crown. Hamlet, like all avengers, is the delegate engaged in carrying out those very acts that had his murder been incomplete, the victim would have done at once for himself.

It is this that the ending of the play makes clear. The plot to poison Hamlet with the drink or to kill him by means of the poisoned tip of a sword is interrupted and revealed before its completion. In Claudius's final plot he restages the poisoning of the first Hamlet, but with the difference that this time there exists a pause before death. In that brief pause the facts are all made clear to the victim (Hamlet) just before his death. Hamlet then becomes his own avenger in killing Claudius and Laertes, an act that he, unlike his father, can execute on this side of the curtain of death, before his death and not after it, precisely because of the plot's interruption just before its execution. Hamlet, therefore, requires no delegation, and the acts of killing hover between prevention and vengeance. They cannot be seen as prevention, since he has already been touched by the poison and will soon die. Yet because he is still within a zone of ambiguity between life and death, about to die but still able to strike, he can act. This zone in which he is already doomed but not yet dead creates a mirror image, on this side of death, for the similar zone of ambiguity on the other side within which his father is dead but still partially active. It is within these two zones that all acts of revenge within the play occur.

Legally, we draw an absolute distinction between acts of violence to prevent our own death and acts done after that death to revenge it. But in experience this reality and finality of the moment of death that converts innocent prevention into culpable revenge is not clear. A man who comes upon a murderer just finishing the grisly slaughter of the man's child appears justified in our eyes if, on the spot, in his rage, he strikes the murderer dead. In *King Lear* Lear hangs the killer of Cordelia on the spot. But should the father do so just one day later, our doubts about "ven-

geance" and "revenge" would begin to come into play. If he takes revenge a month later, we feel that he is at fault, because now the matter should be in the hands of the state — transferred to the hands of objective justice. Should the father take his revenge 20 years later we would pity him, but think him mad.

When he acts on the spot, having discovered the killer just finished with his work, the immediacy of grief and rage gives to the revenge the feel of rightness as if it were little more than the *defensive* blows he would have struck had he arrived just a few minutes earlier in time to defend his child rather than revenge it. Ten minutes earlier, even the cost of the life of the assailant would have seemed nothing could the blow have saved the child. Arriving a few moments too late, his murderous stroke has the effect of being "as if" in defence, "as if" to prevent, although slightly too late.

Here vengeance and prevention, revenge and defense seem so near as to inextricable. So Lear says "I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever! / Cordelia! Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!/? What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in a woman. / I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee." This is the purest case of vengeance, of mourning and grief threaded together. Cordelia seems still alive, and Lear's moment of imagining that she is still speaking, but in her customary soft voice, disguises the line between life and death which, in turn, erases the line between prevention and revenge, between the act of killing the one who was *about to hang her but had not yet completely done so*, an act designed to save her life, and prevent the death that, once complete, makes his killing into vengeance.

Vengeance has always this aspect of prolonged, "as-if"-but-too-late prevention. That is the innocence at the heart of revenge. It is to show just what would have been done to prevent the act and defend the victim if these acts, had been, as they were not, *in time*. This is a second aspect of the innocence of vengeance, the first is the identification or delegation so intimate that the acts of vengeance are no more than those very acts that the victim himself would have done had the plot been interrupted short of success.

Both features are conspicuous in the revenge required of Hamlet. First of all, in *Hamlet* it is the "as-if-alive" presence of the Old King's ghost that blurs this line between prevention and vengeance. The king, although already murdered, is incompletely dead. He has not ceased to be an active presence in the world. The curtain within time dividing before from after death is incompletely closed, permitting an ambiguous zone. The entire play takes place within this zone, since it begins by noticing the presence of the ghost and ends with the death of Claudius that will permit

the Old King to be completely dead; that is, no longer active on earth. Secondly, *Hamlet* takes up the most familiar form of revenge, where the delegation takes place within a family. In fact, the identification of victim and revenger is made complete by giving victim and avenger the same name: Hamlet.

In the drama of vengeance, which has always had an almost operatic, public, feature, one thing displayed for all to see is the militant alliance between the revenger and the slain victim for whose sake vengeance is now being taken. This solidarity is made so prominent that it pushes aside any suspicion that just this angry revenger, so eager that the guilty one not go unpunished, is himself responsible or partly guilty. It is this relation between guilt and the eagerness for justice that Sophokles so brilliantly knots together in *Oedipus Rex*. The hunger for justice functions as a distraction that moves the questions about the guilt of everyone or the specific guilt of this revenger out of sight so as to concentrate on a single outer target. The part played by the uniqueness of the target in revenge is fundamental. If we call that target "the one who must be killed" (Claudius in the case of *Hamlet*; Hektor in the case of the *Iliad*; the white whale in the case of *Moby Dick*) then one convenience of the revenge narrative is to concentrate guilt in a single outer figure and demonstrate the innocence of all others in their pursuit of that figure. By pursuing Hektor, Akilleus blanks out the prior question of his own part in the death of Patroklos who had been sent into battle, dressed in Akilleus' own armor, as a second self for Achilleus himself who saw how desperate the situation of his allies was, but chose to continue his quarrel with Agamemnon. He therefore permitted his friend to go as a substitute into battle. His later revenge creates a symmetry of delegation. Patroklos went into the field as the delegate or substitute for the man who will return to that field only to revenge or carry out for Patroklos the set of deeds that, once he is dead, are no longer within the range of his own will.

Anger and mourning supply alternative solutions to both passivity and responsibility in the face of death. Hamlet's inability to carry out revenge is, in part, a sign of his rejection of the simplification offered by anger to the deepest internal problem of grief, the inescapable feeling of responsibility and even the sense of "having done nothing" to prevent death.

The psychological questions of innocence within revenge or of the alternatives of anger and mourning within grief make up only one part of the carefully designed zone of ambiguity around the act of killing within *Hamlet*. In the first of Hamlet's own killings he stabs and kills "whomever" stands behind a curtain. This curtain filters out the identity of his victim at the moment of attack. Later he will see, with some disappointment, that he has killed Polonius. The curtain makes the identity of the

victim into "someone hiding in my mother's bedroom." It is not that Hamlet has killed the wrong person, but only that the generic murder happens to cover a wider field than he, in advance, could picture. Similarly, a letter that, when opened, orders the receiver to execute whom-ever has just handed the letter to him, functions as a similar curtain to prepare a generic murder. It is behind this curtain that Rosencranz and Guildenstern are killed, instead of Hamlet.

Sleep we might think of as a third form of curtain separating the killer and his victim. The Old King's afternoon nap hides the identity of the killer from his victim, reversing the function of the curtain that hid the identity of his victim from Hamlet. Finally, it is poison, as we see in the final scene, that erects this curtain in an unusually casual way. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup intended for Hamlet. In his turn, Hamlet then forces the rest of the poison, deliberately, down the throat of the poisoner. And in the exchange of swords, Laertes is nicked by the sword that, unknown to Hamlet, was intended to kill him. The curtain in Gertrude's bedroom through which Hamlet strikes provides the play's master image for the stealth and redirection of death in a no longer face to face social realm. Poison on the tip of a sword is a curtain over that sword, as is the envelope that conceals the contents of the letter from the one who carries it to the recipient. Sleep is the envelope or curtain within which each of us, like the King, spends a third of our lives. Each of these curtained experiences filters out or makes impossible aspects of the total situation of deliberately inflicted death. The play as a whole rotates the aspects of death so as to bring now one and now another to the front. At the same time, the filter removes and calls attention to its act of removal, one after another of the appurtenances within consciousness, of the act of killing. That Shakespeare works out so many variations, subtracting now this, now that aspect of knowledge and feeling from the moment of killing shows that the staging of this act in its totality is one of his goals in the play.

Killing Sleeping Kings

These many killings and variations on the puzzle of knowledge at the moment of death entail the mystification of the slayer and the slain, each hidden from the other's sight. Polonius cannot know that he is about to die, since he cannot see that on the other side of the curtain Hamlet has drawn and is about to strike. On his side of the curtain Hamlet cannot know whom he is about to slay. The same mystifications occur for each of the secondary killings. But it is in the design and reiteration of the original act

of murder upon which all these later acts depend, Claudius' killing of the sleeping king in his garden by pouring poison in his ear, that the most remarkable version of this paradox takes place.

The Ghost describes his murder with these words:

Sleeping within my orchard,
 My custom always of the afternoon,
 Upon the secure hour thy uncle stole
 With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,
 And in the porches of my ear did pour
 The leperous distillment, whose effect
 Holds such an enmity with blood of man
 That swift as quicksilver it courses through
 The natural gates and alleys of the body,
 And with a sudden vigor it doth posset
 And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
 The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine,
 And a most instant tetter barked about
 Most lazarlike with vile and loathsome crust
 All my smooth body.
 Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand,
 Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched...
 (I. v. 59-75)

Before describing this extraordinary scene in detail, I want to notice the reiteration of this scene in Shakespeare. Like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* concerns the chain of killings that follow from the murder of a sleeping king. In *Macbeth* the act itself is staged in the tension of present time even though the actual killing occurs offstage. Every moment of preparation and aftermath is represented with an almost hallucinatory intensity. The murder of the sleeping king in *Hamlet* has, like most of the passionate acts of the play, taken place before the play itself begins. But the care with which it is visualized in the King's own narrative and then pantomimed in the play within the play that Hamlet presents to the court two acts later, keeps it active as a scene within the time of the play even though it has occurred earlier. The killing occurs three times: once in fact, once in the King's narration to his son, and finally, in the play performed for the court.

In *Othello* a scene with significant differences occurs. Desdemona wakes up just as she is about to be killed, but her death is set in relation to a moment between sleep and waking that calls attention to awareness of impending death in a careful way. The difference that Desdemona is not

a royal figure makes conspicuous the first of the layers built into the killings within *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*: a sleeping king is simultaneously the most powerful of men and a man utterly without power. He is all powerful, but helpless as an infant.

In his analysis of the passions in *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume has a remarkable comment on such killings.

"Tis an aggravation of a murder, that it was committed upon persons asleep and in perfect security; as historians readily observe of any infant prince who is captive in the hands of his enemies, that he is the more worthy of compassion the less sensible he is of his condition. As we ourselves are here acquainted with the wretched situation of the person, it gives us a lively idea and sensation of sorrow, which is the passion that generally attends it; and this idea becomes still more lively, and the sensation more violent by a contrast with that security and indifference which we observe in the person himself."

(Book II, section vii p. 419)

These points are made by Hume as a final turn to his important account of sympathy, the power to feel passions in relation to the experience of others. We are able to suffer when another undergoes suffering or to feel elation when another has a triumph. We even feel shame or embarrassment for someone else who has done something embarrassing. What interests Hume, however, is the paradox that very often we feel even more strongly those passions that the other does not or cannot feel. If someone reacts modestly to a great honor we feel, in our sympathy, greater and not less pride for him. A man in extreme suffering elicits our sympathy even more if outwardly he minimizes his expressions of distress and bears his sufferings patiently. What we might have expected with sympathy, that we feel in proportion to what we see another feel, is challenged by these cases. We seem to operate, Hume suggests, with an idea of what is commonly felt, or what is the general result and we apply that measure to our own response.

Hume's extreme example is a man murdered while sleeping. Sleep is itself the very proof of security and ease. The young prince who cannot even understand that he has fallen into the hands of his enemies is the same case. What Hume is proposing is that in these cases we can see clearly that our sympathy is not a simple replication of whatever the other is feeling. Asleep, he is feeling comfortable and secure. Instead, what we do in the act of sympathy is to step in and replace him. We appoint ourselves his representative and feel what *generally* would be felt. We do it

for him because he cannot do it for himself. For the sleeping king, we take over the passions of fear or horror that the sleeping man, about to die, cannot feel because of the curtain of sleep. We re-insert a full humanity into the situation. For the young prince who has fallen into the hands of his enemies, he cannot know that he is about to die, nor can he comprehend the many, more than personal, consequences of that death for his country that will have lost its future king. We supply for him the missing passions in the face of the dreadful act.

In doing this we perform an act of delegation similar to the act of revenge. In carrying out revenge, we do only those acts that the victim would have done had he been able to do them to save himself. If the other had only wounded him with the first stroke, he would have tried to kill his attacker to prevent any second stroke that would be fatal. As revenger Hamlet is only asked to replace his father in those very acts that, had he not died, he would have found it simple to do. What Hume's examples point to is the fact that the case of a murdered sleeper makes clear the general relation of delegation for which revenge is only a special case. In Hamlet's case, his father remains enough alive to tell him exactly what he would do and to whom were he able. His being "alive" (although as a ghost) after his murder, so as to sponsor revenge, is fundamentally linked to his being asleep just before that murder, so as to sponsor the more general delegation of passion.

In *Hamlet* the extraordinary conditions that surround the killing of the king, Hamlet's father, refine out with an ingenious precision the connections between consciousness and murder. As a result they expose a normally hidden or confused relation of the passions to that ultimate violation of the will: one's own murder. If all passions occur as part of the technology of the will, and most often as consequences of an insult to the will or an impairment of the will — as anger and grief make clear — then there can be no greater paradox within the passions than the fact that although they are able to respond to the smallest nuances of impairment to the will, as when we kick angrily at a door that we had expected to open easily, they are unable to respond to the final and total destruction of the will in murder.

The conditions of King Hamlet's death invert the ordinary ones for one's own killing. The murdered man usually is conscious of what is about to happen just before his death. This is the very meaning of the phrase "to face death," and it is precisely this that Hektor in the *Iliad* does when he stops running and turns to face Akilleus. Were he overtaken while still running he would be killed from behind and never know the moment of oncoming death. He does know already just who it is that is chasing him and that, if he cannot outrun him, he is about to die. Since it

is by means of the blow of a sword that he will die, he also knows the means, whether he chooses to stop, turn, and face death or not.

On the other side of death, the opposite is true. It is the one event about which no later reflections are possible. Death deprives the victim of the power to react to the event. Therefore, the many passions that are passions only in relation to the past — passions such as anger, guilt, regret, grief, which only begin once the event has taken place — are impossible for that very event for which, proportionally, they would be most important. Only those passions directed towards a future event, such as fear, hope, anxiety, and courage are possible in relation to an event that in its nature will have no aftermath within which the victim could look back at it and respond. Sleep blocks passions of anticipation as well. To be murdered while sleeping thus designs out both the passions directed towards the future by means of a curtain of sleep and those directed at the past by means of the finality of death. Sleep erases the will along with the passions that are the very texture of the will in the one event for which they would be ultimately legitimate. The moment of actually being murdered is the ultimate case in which the fear that hovers over many threats or possibilities of destruction — most of which evaporate or have only a possible threat within them — at last must be fully present if fear itself is to be legitimate in the many everyday examples of fearing.

Killing plays the part that it does in the literature of the passions, in part, because it breaks off the back and forth of action, response, counter-response and so on by means of the one act that removes the possibility of any further personal response. It becomes the final act of a will that can be certain that it will not be limited by the answering act of the other. It becomes, for that reason, the direct translation in the field of action for the unilateral assertion of the self that the passions imply in general in the wider realm of inner life.

These ordinary conditions of death or murder provide an intense moment prior to death, a moment in which the awareness that death is about to occur, and with that awareness, the passions of fear, or serenity, hope somehow to avoid it, courage or resignation. But after the event has occurred, no consciousness or passion is possible. In King Hamlet's death these conditions are turned upside down. Asleep at the moment of his murder he has no consciousness that he is about to die. But present after his own death as a ghost, he is able to experience and express that ordinarily unlighted side of the moon of awareness that the finality of death keeps hidden. To be asleep just at the moment of being murdered and to be awake afterwards and able to describe it exactly as though one had been present during the event but separate from oneself and at a distance from the scene are symmetrical reversals of ordinary experience. To be a

ghost in this sense, armed with a complete eye-witness account of one's own murder, exists almost as a compensation for the lack of consciousness during the moment just before death, which in a killing is probably a more charged moment of awareness than any that preceded it in the entire life. To be asleep at just the crucial passage of life is illuminated from the other side by being awake and aware within the normally darkened sphere of the death that follows.

To put the problem only in terms of consciousness is to make it seem that knowledge is the key object that Shakespeare has in sight by playing with the conditions of death. There is an element of knowledge, of course. The essence of poison, let alone poison poured into the ear of a sleeper, is that it makes possible unknown murder. A realm of secrecy and privacy are opened up by poison. The victim often does not know by whom he has been killed, and with many poisons, he does not know that he is "being killed." To know one's killer and to know that one is being murdered at all (as opposed to falling asleep or feeling sick) are both already mystified facts within a world of poisons, by contrast to a world of swords. Being asleep only brings out more clearly what is the basic barrier to knowledge already located in the means of death — the poison. But it transfers that barrier to the victim rather than leaving it within the external means. Because he was asleep he did not know that he was about to die. Nor did he know at whose hand. These epistemological facts of sleep were, however, already facts of poison itself.

Just as the murder is unknown to the victim, it remains mystified to the society of survivors who in *King Hamlet's* case think that he died of a snakebite. That the old King remains as a ghost who does know the exact details of his death draws a line between knowledge shared by the victim and his killer — both of whom now know every detail of the act — and the false account believed by all others. Once young Hamlet is informed by his father, he finds himself within the secret society of the murderer and the victim. In a society of mystified knowledge, made possible by poison, only those three share a full understanding of what took place.

Dying Twice

Shakespeare times the opening of the play no less significantly than he did the end which I have described as the moment when at last the murdered king will be completely dead. The play begins two months after the death of Hamlet's father, but at the moment when, in effect, his father dies for him again in the scene of murder set before the son by his father's ghost. Of the murder he had suspected nothing. This second version of

his father's death factors out the two possible responses; on the one side, and for the first two months, mourning for the father lost by accident; on the other side, vengeance for the father murdered. What appear as alternative stories (accidental death while sleeping due to a snake bite or murder at his brother's hand by a poison poured into his ear) manifest opposed internal passions open to Hamlet as the bereaved son. Here we do not have two different stories, but two successive stories, each of which lasts long enough for it to call forth the response within the passions that is its due.

The story of murder, occurring as it does late in the process of grief — two months after the death — invites Hamlet to cast off any guilt and convert the paralysis of mourning into the activity of vengeance. It is crucial that Shakespeare shows us Hamlet in the second scene of the play before he has spoken to his father, but after we, but not Hamlet, know that the father's ghost has begun to walk at night. Hamlet, in the first scene where we, first of all, observe him act socially, and, then, hear him described in the portraits that his mother and step-father draw, and, finally, witness his own self-description in his soliloquy, is a Hamlet with only the fact of grief and without the possibility of vengeance.

The first words of his soliloquy unfold, within his grief, a core of suicidal thought. The father's death has stimulated a will to action, but against himself. Death is sensuously imagined, but first as a melting that might come of itself, supplying the advantage of suicide without the need to kill. "Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew..." If this melting or dispersal were to happen of itself, suicide would not even be necessary, and it is interesting that even here in the case of aggression against himself, Hamlet begins by imagining and preferring an alternative that just happens by itself, without the necessity of agency, to the clear act. But Hamlet does go on to a second possibility, "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter." Here, too, where the act is proposed it is also barred, and exists as a wish that can be entertained because it has been crippled in advance.

Within his protraction of mourning rests this merely wished aggression against his own life. His disgust with his mother which the rest of the soliloquy will turn on, adds a second aggressive element within his grief. Blamed, but not for his father's death, rather for her sexual haste in marrying a lesser man a month after her husband's death, she is, none the less, the target, as Hamlet himself is, of a stewing anger. His anger has the impotence of grief, which is always unable to act to change the fact of death that had caused the grief, but now transferred to sexuality and self-disgust. Just as the Everlasting has fixed a ban on self-slaughter, the Ghostly Father will erect an equal ban on any vengeance on the mother.

So, while redirected in his anger to a new target by the Ghost who informs him that Claudius was his killer, Hamlet is simultaneously encouraged to revenge and blocked explicitly, by canon of the Everlasting and father's warning, from taking any vengeance on what had until then appeared to be his true targets, his mother and himself.

In wishing that his flesh would melt or dissolve, Hamlet proposes a third alternative to the passivity of grief and the active anger of revenge. He dreams that what is hated will simply go away by itself. The two stories of the father's death translate, or seem motivated by, the two alternative passions within Hamlet. All things known to only one person, whether hallucinatory or not, have no public substance that would make it important to distinguish between inner and outer world. Because these two stories are known only to Hamlet they are, in effect, not facts at all but details of his inner life made concrete in this narrative form. The words "melt" and "dissolve" invert this conversion, since what they describe is not the outer world of flesh but the ordinary actions of the passions within the mind. It is the passion that over time will melt, or fade away, while flesh continues to require both slaughter and self-slaughter.

Mourning for the Passions

A ghost is the temporary aftermath of a life, as smoke is of a fire now out. Shakespeare's play, as the prolonged and sub-divided fifth act to a series of events over, like the father's murder, before the curtain rises, draws a line between a world of passions prior to the time of the play, and a new world made up of the aftermath of passion. The ambition and lust of Claudius; the passion that drove Gertrude to infidelity to the King; the military valor and power of the king himself, who years before had fought with Fortinbras and slain him, adding to his country's borders; even the love which we hear of, but only later, and from Ophelia, that led Hamlet, before the time of the play, to utter "Almost all the holy vows of Heaven" in making tenders of his love to Ophelia: each of these states of passion is regarded from the other side of a gulf.

Since mourning is, of all the passions, the one that regards all experience across a similar rip within time, it is mourning that personalizes the wider meanings of an aftermath into an individual case. It seems the one passion that stands in the aftermath of the passions themselves, imitating in a passionate state the very world-weariness and indifference of such dispassionate states as boredom, fatigue, or indifference. When Freud sets Mourning within the wider state of Melancholy or, as we would call it, depression, he looks at a pathological loss of interest in the world that

seems at first to have no center in a loss. "In grief the world becomes poor and empty, in melancholy it is the ego itself."

The German word for tragedy, *Trauerspiel*, places mourning (*trauern*) at the heart of what the English word "tragedy" only notices as an incident of a certain kind. If *Hamlet* is a *Trauerspiel* but disguised within the shell of a Revenge Tragedy, then the atmosphere of prolonged mourning and the settlement with mourning that takes place in the course of the play, aim back at just what kind of a world was lost in the death of the former King. The unsuccessful heir of the same name will never live to embody his virtues in the new world that follows. The world in which young Hamlet might have been or ought to have been King passes over to the "rights of memory" that young Fortinbras invokes in living on to revenge at least the political losses of his own father's death.

Denmark itself passes away, as a distinct kingdom, along with the fading ghost, the son who dies, just as his father did, by poison. Around these occur all the accessory deaths, the most important of which wipe out the entire family of Polonius in which the new values of calculation, love, and family occur on a scale that is domestic and not royal. The liquidation of the world which the fading ghost takes with him translates Freud's phrase, "the world becomes poor and empty." But in the other half of his formula, the inner loss of territory— "In melancholy it is the ego itself" — welds the political fact to a psychological blank spot on the map: a mourning for the passions themselves. Emptied out from among the categories of action, the passions are noticed where they once occurred, but now in absence.