

SHAKESPEARE AND THE GERMAN STUDENTS

By HELMUT VIEBROCK



'TELL me how you deal with Shakespeare and I tell you who you are'.

THIS maxim which is a variation of the well-known saying 'Tell me with whom you converse and I shall tell you who you are', is calculated to stress the curious nature of a great work of art, particularly so, I feel, of Shakespeare's great dramatic work, in that it threatens to unmask the critic's prejudices, and to detect his shortcomings and limitations, by confronting him with his own interpretation, or, to put it metaphorically 'to hoist the Shakespearian engineer with his own critical petard'.

Why this should be so – if you agree that it *is* so – it is difficult to say. One is tempted to attribute it to the very same quality of dramatic poetry that made Shakespeare the playwright induce Hamlet his persona to explain to the players his instruments 'the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.' Now, a mirror is in itself a solid object, and yet it reflects, more or less faithfully other objects. Surely, Shakespeare's work is not a mere reflection of the world, but an interpretation of it; however, not in analytic terms, but in great synthetic figures and configurations. 'Shakespeare' – according to the German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel – 'is the world all over again'. (Shakespeare ist die Welt noch einmal').

Now, if this dramatic art has, more than other works, the quality of unmasking the critic, there must be in it some ultimate resistance to willful interpretation, some hard core, not just of meaning, but of testing meaning.

There is, on the one hand, transparency and lucidity, structural, textural, admitting the probing gaze into the very depth of its fabric; there is, on the other hand, concreteness, poetic opacity, – metaphorical, symbolical, preventing the searching eye from looking into the white truth which can only be looked at when veiled, as the sun can only be looked at through clouds. And as for the critic, he appears like a man who wants to look through a window-pane into a room and sees his own image reflected by the self-same glass the transparency of which admits his gaze.

There is, in Shakespeare, a rare, a unique mixture of transparency and opacity, the one being the condition of the other, and, both being the condition of whatever insight may be gained through it. The insight we gain is partly insight into our own minds, and it is now, by reversal of the maxim, true to say: 'Know yourself – nosce te ipsum – by trying to understand Shakespeare.'

The hard core that resists any willful or arbitrary interpretation and unmasks him who attempts it, is simply: *the truth*. Obviously 'truth' is no object, no sack of gold hidden in the caves of Shakespeare's art, but the precious quality of the ever-renewed currency of the communication between that great work of art and a critically appreciative mind. There is one axiom that I would like to lay down, because it has proved a touchstone in my discussions with German students: namely that though a work of art, like a play of Shakespeare's, is a product of history, it also transcends its historical condition or 'matrix', and can only be fully understood if it is experienced again and again, as *immediately* as possible, irrespective of the fact that the reader's or the listener's position, or point-of-view, too, is historically determined, and that as a critic the reader and listener will have to bring all his critical powers to bear on his own experience. But it is the experience that has priority, for no critical reflection, be it ever so astute, can replace the full impact of experience. And it is never a detached object, a mere text, that the Shakespearean critic, as indeed any critic of poetry, criticises, but the whole play, as it is re-created and experienced by sensitive readers or appreciative listeners.

If these readers or listeners are German students, the enquiry into their attitude towards Shakespeare is equal to an attempt to describe their attitude towards imaginative literature in general and towards Shakespeare's dramatic poetry in particular. This involves us in a complex task, as it means criticising both the students and their object, Shakespeare. If I attempt, in what follows, to describe my own experience with German students confronted with Shakespeare, I offer myself, together with them, as an object of their criticism to you, and it will be up to you to draw conclusions as to whether there is anything particularly 'German' in their – or our – attitude.

You may have tacitly assumed, now, that I would talk about contemporary German students. I shall. I am committed to do so by the plural 'students' of the title of my talk. But when it occurred to me that you would expect this, ladies and gentlemen, I wondered whether I should not play you a little trick, innocently pretending that what I had had in mind

were German students at different stages of the past up to the present. In fact, I came to the conclusion that before talking about the present-day attitude of students in Germany towards Shakespeare, it would be almost necessary to open up an historical perspective, in order to assess the possible reasons for both a certain contemporary peculiarity and a certain national quality of that world-wide phenomenon: the reception of Shakespeare at different times and in different countries.

Having decided, then, on a quick retrospect, I began to think about a German post-graduate student at Strasbourg, which is now in France, who, having recently been introduced by a slightly older theologian, mad about folk-poetry, became a most fervent admirer and propagator of Shakespeare in Germany. I am, of course, referring to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, allegedly the greatest German poet. Young Goethe, in concord with other young enthusiasts, and acting under the determining forces of his time and his personality, helped to marshal the way that the young German intelligentsia were to go in the years before the French Revolution, in what we call the period of 'Storm and Stress'.

In the evening of October 14th 1771, young Wolfgang Goethe, a handsome, high-spirited young man of 22, made a speech in honour of Shakespeare at his parents' home in Frankfurt on the Main, the place where I come from. The house is still there, or rather, it is there again, for it was completely destroyed at the end of the last war; but it was rebuilt and refurnished so exactly and so carefully that one seems to breathe the very air of a spacious baroque residence of a well-to-do upper middle-class family in the once prosperous free Imperial city of Frankfurt in the latter half of the 18th century. Goethe's short and fiery address to the party is a flourish, a fanfare, indicating that a great change has come about in Germany. Little is said in that speech about the Elizabethan age, or about Shakespeare the playwright, or the touring theatre-companies that had made the German public acquainted with more or less mutilated versions of Shakespearian plays; but much is said about a new evaluation of man, of nature, of society, in Germany, on the eve of a new era. With iconoclastic fervour, and a good deal of spirited arrogance, the young poet sets about to demolish aesthetic and moral conventions. Instead of a rational, enlightened, and optimistic concept of life, he serenely proposes a new tragic view and a Promethean, tragic vision of human existence, in a world when the great passionate individual soul has to endure the rage of fate.

Of Shakespeare's plays, young Wolfgang says this: 'His plots, to speak according to common usage, are not really plots, but his plays all turn

around the secret point (pivot), which no philosopher has as yet seen and determined, in which the peculiar quality of our self, the pretended freedom of our will, collides with the necessary course of the whole'. ('Seine Pläne sind nach dem gemeinen Stil zu reden, keine Pläne, aber seine Stücke drehen sich alle um den geheimen Punkt, den noch kein Philosoph gesehen oder bestimmt hat, in dem das Eigentümliche unseres Ichs, die prätendierte Freiheit unseres Willens, mit dem notwendigen Gang des Ganzen zusammenstößt.').

This bold analysis is certainly still Aristotelian, but it also reveals a new experience: the experience that through the discovery of Shakespeare, as Goethe puts it, he had recognised, he had felt, 'in the most lively manner, his existence to have been enlarged by an infinitude.' And when he bursts out rhapsodically: 'And I cry Nature! Nature! nothing has so much nature as Shakespeare's characters!' The magic word 'nature' is not now Rousseau's antidote to corrupt and corrupting civilization, but his own intuition of a living force, or active principle, that has all the explosive force of the Promethean fire. It is the confirmation of Goethe's change from Protestant pietism to a new stoic philosophy of self-reliance. It is also his breaking with 18th century bourgeois society in the name of nature; and Shakespeare was Goethe's 'presider' in this crisis. This attitude was *not* to last. But, in 1771, Goethe is the German graduate-student of the 'Storm and Stress' period, though, indeed, *unrepresentative* in that he was the son of a well-to-do family, in a rich city, sheltered, at least socially and economically, from 'Storm and Stress'.

Twenty years later, on the 19th of June 1793, another German student, in Leipzig, which is now in Eastern Germany, a representative of the older generation of Romantic poets, Friedrich Schlegel, a student of languages and law, is writing to his beloved brother August Wilhelm about Shakespeare. He describes his emotions roused by reading *Hamlet*, who was to become the very epitome and symbol of the generation of the Romantics. He writes: 'The subject and the effect of this play is heroic despair, i.e. an infinite disintegration of the very highest powers. The reason of this inner death lies in the magnitude of his understanding (mind). Were he less great, he would be a hero. — It is not worth his while to be a hero; if he wanted to, it would be for him but an easy game. He surveys a countless amount of circumstances — hence his indecision. — If, however, one asks after truth in this manner, nature turns mute; and to such impulses, to so severe a searching, the world is naught, for our frail existence cannot create anything that would fulfil our immortal longings. The inmost core of his being is horrible nothingness (empti-

ness?), scorn of the world and of his own self.'

Friedrich Schlegel was the younger brother of August Wilhelm Schlegel, the famous translator of Shakespeare, together with Ludwig Tieck. It is the fate of Shakespeare's fame in Germany that the 'classic' translation for more than one century to come was to be made a Romantic poet. This is the reason why Shakespeare, whom the Germans also consider *their* poet, became known, not in his Elizabethan vigour and colourfulness, but in a slightly more sentimental and softer fashion.

It was August Wilhelm Schlegel whose 'Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature' Coleridge found so congenial to his own ideas that with regard to Shakespeare criticism one may almost substitute the one for the other. When on May 10th, 1792, August Wilhelm Schlegel, the student, writes to his friend Tieck: '... I have perused *The Winter's Tale* still several times, and discovered many beautiful things in it; but I get more and more angry with the arrogant commentators who are as blind as moles, with their thoughtless parrotry ... that Shakespeare is a genius, but one lacking judgement ...', we think we hear Coleridge's voice in his chapter on 'Shakespeare's Judgement equal to his Genius.'

One may perhaps go so far as to say that Coleridge displays what he charges the Germans with: an excessiveness, a 'nimeity' or 'too-muchness', at least in his passion for speculation and the planning and devising of systems. It is perhaps well to remark already now that the present-day attitude of the young German intelligentsia disproves the notion of a perennial national character: for emotional excess seems to have turned into strong rational restraint and profound scepticism that is suspicious of any unreflected emotion, as of any irrational behaviour, has replaced the former mystic or metaphysical bent of mind.

There can be no doubt that Shakespearean studies in Germany and an unflinching interest for Shakespeare on the German stage, received their strongest impact from these bright boys – and bright girls, like Dorothea Tieck, too – in the Pre-Romantic and Romantic days. And there can be no doubt that Coleridge carried this infectious Shakespeare enthusiasm, transformed into theoretical and speculative criticism, from Germany back to England when he returned from the Continent in 1799.

For the German students of Shakespeare, there were, in those days of classic and romantic idealism, two Shakespearian characters above all others that held them spell-bound: Hamlet and Romeo. But above all Hamlet. It is curious to reflect that Hamlet, perhaps the greatest individual dramatic character of the English Stage, should have become *one* of the great symbolic figures for the German mind, along with the other,

much more self-assertive and wordly one: Goethe's Faust. Hamlet has, next to the everlasting Faust, always had a peculiar fascination for the German mind, possible because Hamlet's conflict between thought and action has always been taken by Germans to symbolize Germany's historical dilemma as a frustrated nation. When a Swiss critic, Walter Muschg, 1964, gave an address to the Shakespeare Society with the title 'Germany is Hamlet', he was referring to this tendency to consider Shakespeare's tragedy of the mind an allegory of Germany's national fate.

Now, 'the national character' is largely a fictitious, and hardly a verifiable thing that can be proved scientifically. But in spite of all due cautionings, it has a way of asserting itself, especially when it can be described in terms of recurrent attitudes in the course of ever-changing history.

With regard to Germany and the history of the German nation, one of the most reliable historians, in my and many people's opinions, Golo Mann, a son of Thomas Mann's, the novelist's, has tried to grasp the peculiar character of the history of the German nation in the past. In his book on German history of the 19th and 20th centuries he says: 'He who becomes absorbed in the history of the German nation, easily gets the impression of an unquiet life in extremes at some time; idea and reality stand wide apart, as during the time of the medieval empire, when the German Kings and Roman emperors, as they called themselves, fought for a phantastic empire, far exceeding the boundaries of the language, whilst Germany itself disintegrated into an infinite number of small territories. At some time we see the nation raging against herself, celebrating a long orgy of self-destruction, as at the time of the 30 Years' War (1618-48). At some other time, German characters attain to the greatest heights which men have ever touched, whilst at the same time dim mediocrity determines the general public tone. From a political quietness Germany turns to an excited political activity, from colourful variety to radical uniformity; she rises from impotence to aggressive power, relapses into ruin, works herself back again with incredible quickness to new hectic prosperity.' The gist of this analysis is, with regard to the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, when Shakespeare became popular, that it was a time of great spirits in a world of dim mediocrity and political powerlessness, a time when poetic genius and political power were at the farthest imaginable distance from one another. For this period, Hamlet might indeed be adopted as the fit national symbol.

The curious thing, however, is, that in the German version of *Hamlet*, as it was produced in 1776 in Hamburg, Hamlet did not die in the end,

but – as in the old Teutonic saga of Saxo Grammaticus – ascended the throne, a feat that, more surprisingly, heightened the play's success with the German youth: 'The fact that this melancholy dreamer and misanthrope eventually obtained the crown, made him the idol of an agitated youth torn between sentimental 'Weltschmerz' (melancholy) and aimless activism.' (Muschg, Germany is Hamlet. Sh. Jb. 1965, p. 35). Goethe repeats in his great autobiography *Fiction and Reality (Dichtung und Wahrheit)*: 'Hamlet and his soliloquies remained phantoms haunting all young people's minds.' And a poor Swiss cloth-weaver and writer, Ulrich Bräker, apostrophises Hamlet with the words: 'You have not yet uttered anything German, but I guess your meaning, perhaps you were not able to explain yourself more clearly.' One might almost gauge from these words that he thought if Hamlet could only have had the German language at his disposal, he might have expressed himself more clearly, thus averting T.S. Eliot's verdict and many a clever conjecture. I am afraid Bräker thought too highly of the German language. One thing, however, is certain: Hamlet's character has undergone a change with the translation, and this change is due to the peculiar structure of the German language, or, for that matter of the English language. This becomes obvious when investigating the syntax of the famous soliloquy 'To be or not to be' (which I figured out is in Maltese *Tkun jew Matkum*). I would ask permission, ladies and gentlemen, to quote a part of it, because it bears directly on my subject:

To be, or not to be – that is the question;
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep –
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
 To sleep, perchance to dream. At, there's the rub; . . .

Have you noticed that this passage contains twelve infinitives with the preposition 'to'? I do not know whether an Englishman is aware of the strong teleological tendency of this preposition 'to': suggesting a trend, a purpose, a directedness of action towards a goal. Compared with this purposive and dynamic infinitive, or verbal noun, the German infinitive 'sein' or 'Nichtsein' is static, meditative, metaphysical. The accumulation

of twelve static infinitives instead of dynamic ones in the German translation makes for a marked transformation of an impetuous, though speculative speech and character to a less active and more contemplative one. In other words: much of Hamlet's transformation into the dreamer is due to German Grammar. If today, German producers engage translators to make new translations, one of the reasons is to get away from the oppressive tradition of a romanticised Shakespeare.

Let us continue and conclude our historical survey: Since the time of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, where, after Napoleon's defeat, restorative political decisions vanquished hopes of democratic progress, the feeling that Germany's history was fatally doomed began to spread. Those who saw in romantic enthusiasm and emotional idealism a danger for Germany, discovered ambiguous traits in Hamlet. This turning of the tide came to a peak when on the eve of the July Revolution of 1830 in Paris, a young German poet, Ludwig Böme, a republican, dismissed Hamlet as a self-centred egotist unfit for political action. Hamlet, he said, had studied at Wittenberg, the university of Protestant theology, and heavy German philosophy had incapacitated him for life.

This break with Hamlet was the signal for the fight of 'Young Germany' around 1848 against the romantic cult of Shakespeare. The tension between dream and action, philosophy and politics had become a public, a national characteristic. The young German revolutionaries, the democratic-minded students of 1848, were themselves torn between words and actions. Their magniloquent metaphors already indicate the failure of the German bourgeois revolution of 1848, when in St. Paul's at Frankfurt, the first German national assembly met and adjourned. More and more, Shakespeare's Hamlet turned into a symbol of the futility of the struggle for democratic freedom. In a poem from the pre-revolutionary days of 1848 by Ferdinand Freiligrath, entitled 'Hamlet', the equation Hamlet = Germany is fully articulated:

Germany is Hamlet. Serious and silent
 Within his portal every night
 Walks buried liberty
 Beckoning to the men on guard.

Deutschland ist Hamlet! Ernst und stumm
 In seinen Toren jede Nacht
 Geht die begrabne Freiheit um
 Und winkt Männern auf der Wacht.

We may say, then, that given the European situation of the French

Revolution of 1789 and the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, Shakespeare had been an idea of rousing force during the former, and a symbol of depressing frustration during the latter. In each case he was a significant symbol.

Then follows the long period of Shakespeare's domestication by the philologists. It was the youth of the early 20th century, the 'Youth Movement', that rediscovered Shakespeare as a living force. But the Youth Movement around 1900 had as Max Kommerell, a brilliant German scholar and poet has put it, the character of pathetic helplessness, doomed to perish – it had in the first world war the form and ending of a children's crusade. It seems that there were only two types of 'leader' available: the intellectual aristocrat of the Stefan George type, and the ruthless demagogue whose name I hate to mention.

Given the unbalanced course of our history, as Golo Mann has described it, and given the particular responsibility and burden of two World Wars and Nazism, shouldered by the older generation, the young Germans of today adopt a particularly harsh attitude towards their own country's past and present. Born after the war, not personally guilty of its horrors, though tied by national and personal ties to the older generation which they consider responsible, the young people protest not only against war, authoritarianism, social oppression and injustice under an outwardly streamlined and superficially prosperous civilization, but also against a cultured heritage, which has been accumulating under political forms of aristocratic and bourgeois government, and which, according to them, is tinged, if not soaked, with the repressive spirit of inequality and dominance of one class or group over another. For what I shall say now, I would like to be understood as relating my own experience with a small, but very articulate group of students, and a larger, but more moderate, more or less progressive students in the English department. There is a third group of students very quiet, but serious-minded students, who believe the allegation of the reformists to be mere uncritical consumers.

Of the 600 students of English at Frankfurt – we consider this number small compared to other departments in other universities – I would venture to say that though perhaps only 5% belong to the active reformers, the majority of students would sympathize or side with them in all questions where students' representation is the issue, though they would not go the whole length with them when the political change of established institutions is the aim. All students, however, share one common attitude: profound scepticism of everything 'established', particularly so, as far as traditional views, doctrines, beliefs and schools of thought are concerned.

The small articulate and aggressive group of radical reformers, who interpret the academic corporation according to the economic model of employers and employees, and who take their tools from Marxism and the study of sociology, consider the study of Shakespeare mainly as the task of unmasking the repressive spirit of Tudor ideology or Tudor myth which, according to their belief, Shakespeare could not help absorbing and reproducing. An interpretation of Shakespeare in terms of the history of ideas, or, as they would ironically say 'eternal values', would provoke derision with the militant group, and would make others feel uneasy. At its most radical, 'criticism' is an a-priori suspiciousness of anything 'affirmative', this word being used in a derogatory sense. Appreciation, as Coleridge understood it, would be viewed askance as 'affirmative'. The following statement of a pamphlet, betraying very intelligent minds at work, is characteristic for this radical attitude: 'Incessantly, official literary criticism harps on 'general humanity', on 'freedom', or 'spirit' (Geist), on 'Nature' etc., and by the aid of such categories, purified (indeed) from historical connotations, tends to glue together innumerable isolated facts which enter, reified, into its positivistic inventory.' It is only fair to say that the kind of criticism described is a bad type of criticism and even the caricature of a bad one.

Scepticism, of course, is a healthy antidote to gullibility, and in so far it must be accepted as a possible safeguard against political, ideological and academic pied pipers or seducers, unless, alas, excess of scepticism may blind people's eyes just as much as too much credulity. Distrust of normal reactions may assume proportions that vary from the ludicrous or amusing to the frightening, when it extends to the more habitual or spontaneous reactions and to the subconscious mind, when it is thought the right critical attitude to show, at every moment, controlled reflections of one's own reactions. To laugh about Falstaff, would betray, according to the lore of the radical reflectionist, a lack of rational control. So a young girl asked very seriously, when my assistant laughed about some of Falstaff's preposterous nagging: 'Why do you laugh? Would you please reflect your laughing?' This is what Keats did, in his beautiful sonnet 'Why did I laugh tonight', and he added, as you know, 'No voice will tell'. He was sadly unreflective – think of his preposterously unreflective statement on the 'Negative Capability', which he also attributed to Shakespeare! – Fortunately there are quite a few students who still laugh obligingly if the professor cracks his jokes.

If scepticism is an attitude that all German students share, more or less, there is another common trait that bears on the study of Shakespeare.

This is their interest in society in history and the changing basic attitudes.

There is a marked opposition to formal aesthetic criticism or mere structural analysis, that now appears to have been coeval with the period of reconstruction after the war. What was a veritable liberation and revelation twenty years ago in Germany, the development of an unrestrained aesthetic approval, after twelve years of proscription and revilement, in terms of a crude nazist ideology, and what has often developed, unfortunately, into a mere matter of self-sufficient routine, almost an industry, seems now drawing to a close. This need be no cause for anxiety unless the new historico-sociological trend should forget the achievement of the 'New Criticism', by now aged: that a work of art in order to yield meaning to an extrinsic enquiry, must first have been understood as what it is: not a fact, but an artefact.

The majority of students are well trained in structural analysis, but their inclination is towards the historical dimension of literature again. They are interested with regard to Shakespeare, in the history plays and their divergence from the sources and historical facts, if ever historical facts are ascertainable. The larger group of students would, on the whole, agree with the smaller group that, as philosopher Walter Benjamin has put it, 'Knowledge of literary works handed down through history ... cannot abstract from their historical conditions'. They would, however, disagree with the statement that this knowledge is determined by the forms of social domination, and of the state of development of the economic productive powers as well as by the ideology in the service of this domination and by the state of philosophical thought and science which depend on the state of productive powers'. But they would be intensely interested in social, economic and political questions with regard to, say, *Richard II*, or *Henry VI*.

The test in my seminar on Shakespeare was made with *Henry VI*, and *Richard II*. In *Henry VI*, a very early play, there occur the scenes of the rebel Jack Cade of Kent, whose rebellion was beaten down and was eventually killed by Alexander Iden, the model citizen of Kent. Investigations into the historical situation, based on the reading of primary sources of historiography, such as the *Annals of the time of King Henry VI. A.D. 1450*, brought to light a document entitled 'The complaint of the Commons of Kent, and causes of their assemblies on the Blackheath.' Of the 15 items of grievances which constitute a vivid picture of the economic and social state in 15th century Britain, Shakespeare has only one or two referring to political grievances. It was of great interest to the students to learn that what is afterwards said of Richard II., that he *farmed*

the Kingdom, is already voiced by the men of Kent in complaint No. 9:

'Item, the sheriffes and undersheriffes let to farme their offices and bailiwickes, taking great suertie therefore, the which causeth exortions doone by them and by their bailiffes to the people.'

This and similar documentary evidence was eagerly accepted as the true reflection of the time of serfdom under a feudal system with a weak monarchic centre, while Shakespeare's play became to them suspect as a selective and biased presentation of history by a dramatist subservient to Tudor ideology and Tudor myth. I pointed out, emphatically, that even Jack Cade turns 'under the handes of Master Shakespeare', from a ranting villanous rebel into a pathetic and tragic human being, a hunted man, who is trapped at last, in a garden – symbol of order! – and killed like a ferocious animal. With regard to *Richard II*, the main point of interest was – *not* the dilemma of a king's falling short of his royal image as long as he held his office, in order to live up, and die up, to it after having been deprived of it, – but the question of legitimacy and the right of rebellion, and again, the conflicting standards of right and justice involved. Therefore the scene before Flint Castle, with Bolingbroke both pleading and threatening, became the crucial point of interest for them. In short, it was those scenes where attitudes clash, and here, even the minutest linguistic or poetical detail mattered, as when Bolingbroke charges Northumberland with a message to the king which is, up to a point, a declaration of loyalty and petition of rights. You remember the scene in the third act:

Henry Bolingbroke

On both his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand,
 And sends allegiance and true faith of heart
 To his most royal person; hither come
 Even at his feet to lay my arms and power,
 Provided that my banishment repeal'd
 And lands restor'd again be freely granted;
 If not, I'll use the advantage of my power
 – ...' etc.

This 'If not' and the ambiguous strategy of the display of arms – 'our fair appointment' – but the simultaneous observance of silence – 'without the noise of threat'ning drum' – was far more interesting than the poetry of Richard's speeches, because the students felt that *this* was reality, this was the way things happen. And more interesting than almost

any other character was, for them, the Duke of York, between the parties, loyal to the office, though not to the man. It is power and the fear of abuse of power that worries them, and along with the abuse of power, all forms of oppression. They might, on this account, identify themselves with Hamlet. But the Brecht-born principle of alienation, which is in opposition to any kind of romantic identification and empathy, and the decline of hero-worship and cult of personality make them see Hamlet in a new light. They do not admire him. They do not admire. It is no longer Hamlet the soliloquist that impresses. It is Hamlet engaged in discussion, in argument, in a verbal duel. It is the subtle testing and probing of a dialogue between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the spies, that catches their fancy, a repartee like the following: Take this one as an example (II, 2):

HAM.: ... But, in the beaten way of friendship
what make you at Elsinore?

ROS.: To visit you, my Lord; no other occasion.

HAM.: Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you; and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it your inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come; nay, speak.

GUI.: What should we say, my Lord?

HAM.: Why, anything. But to th' purpose: you were sent for,
and there is a kind of confession in your looks,
which your modesties have not craft enough
to colour; I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.

ROS.: To what end, my lord?

HAM.: That you must teach me ...

It is probably this apprehension of traps and snares laid everywhere – even when there are none – that creates such an interest in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the twin-spies, and it is this interest that may have induced Tom Stoppard to experimentally blow up the two flat characters to life-like stature, though hardly to roundness, only to reveal their hollowness – fit symbol for the danger of a man becoming a mere function: the danger of de-humanisation. Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, in a fascinating production at Frankfurt fascinated the young people. It left the elderly patrons rather dumbfounded. An old gentleman said, in Frankfurt dialect: 'I would have given the whole of it for a line of Shakespeare.'

Let me wind up:

It is an undeniable progress of contemporary criticism, I think, to ask the basic critic question: *cui bono* – what is the good of it, and whom does it serve? Shakespeare criticism, this vast and world-wide industry, like criticism in general, has become an organisation that the young find baffling, bewildering and frustrating. They also see that the world, in spite of its breathtaking technological development, still suffers from the same, or even worse, old curse as in former ages. It is understandable that in literature as elsewhere they should want to try for themselves what they can do with fresh intellectual vigour and uncompromised capabilities.

But – there is one great misunderstanding, that is equal to a serious and dangerous error of judgement: It is the idea that a work of art, a great literary and dramatic work of art, say Shakespeare's *Richard II*, or *King Lear*, or *Troilus and Cressida*, is an historical product that may be judged critically and distrustfully with a view to unmasking a repressive spirit of feudal or bourgeois ideology of the age hidden in the secret folds of its structure. Now, there certainly is the idea of an *hierarchical order* or *degree* in Shakespeare's *Troilus*, there is the idea of *paternal authority*, not to say *authoritarianism*, in *Lear*, and there is the blatant fact of *misrule* in *Richard II*; to reflect on this is both useful and necessary. But is that all? Is that really all Shakespeare can offer?

My answer is, of course, No. It is, first of all, not enough, I think, to criticise without thoroughly absorbing and experiencing the whole play. A Shakespearian play is an historical *document*, to be sure, but, to use Warren and Wellek's expression, it is also and above all, a monument, and a living one too. As such it contains, not only an 'emancipative potential', but a vast 'human potential'; it is a vast sum of models of human behaviour, of the 'condition humaine', presented not 'affirmatively', but suggestively, probingly, questioningly, though all this in impressive figures and configurations of an archetypal quality.

It is not enough to remain critically aloof and exterior to Shakespeare; his work, though mediated by the means of his age, has to be met *directly*, again and again, with the preparedness to let one's own ideology or philosophy be questioned by the unmasking character of that great art.

I would go a long way with my progressive young German friends in some questions – but in this question of direct experience I would take a very firm stand: for you either take art and literature seriously *as* art and literature, or you consider it just as material or documentary evidence. In the first case it stops being a mere *object* for criticism, and becomes

itself a subject, a critical force, not only fit to unmask the critic, but fit to open his eyes for what it is to be a genius with an imagination with which to conceive a world of vast significant actions and situations showing in vast symbolic figures, what it is to be a man (or a woman) exposed to the contending powers of fortune and nature. A colleague of mine in Hamburg, charged by a student under the name of Henry V to have misrepresented Shakespeare as not misrepresenting history, said, and I agree completely: 'The great poet does not know more details than the historian, but he gains from them, by his gift of intuition, a picture that is more universal, stressing at the same time the essential elements. He also forgets, in moments of poetic intuition, national, religious and social prejudices, from which historians usually suffer'. Some German students would deny this. But I think they will only do so, because we, i.e. the officially appointed custodians, are not always capable of clearly and fully explaining why it is that Shylock, e.g. has turned 'under the hands of Master Shakespeare' into a tragic figure, why the comic simpletons of *Henry IV* or *Henry V* turn, under those hands, into human beings with all the pathos of their exploited position in life.

It was quite an experience to see *Henry V* performed by the British Old Vic in Germany some time ago. One might have asked: What have we Germans in the 1960ies got to do with that British warrior King making war in France? But it so happened that 'the people' came out so powerfully, showing that they had human potential in them which a sensitive producer will bring out without doing violence to the play. The King, however, came out powerfully, too, as a man burdened with a heavy responsibility.

The question is: will Shakespeare continue to be read, produced and discussed essentially undistorted, as much in the future as he was in the past? If he is, the future society will resemble, let us hope, not in its shameful shortcomings, our present society in its interest in the value of the human individual as the *raison d'être* of society. If not, not. At any rate, Shakespeare may serve the German students of today just as much as a mirror as he has served all his former critics as a mirror. 'Tell me how you deal with Shakespeare, and I tell you who you are' should read 'Tell me whether you will take Shakespeare with you into the new century, the 21st, when the world is due to come of age, or not, and I will tell you whether, in my view, life in that age will be worth living, or not.'