

# 8 THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK

THE RIDDLE OF *Hamlet*. "SUBJECTIVE" AND "OBJECTIVE" SOLUTIONS. THE PROBLEM OF HAMLET'S CHARACTER. STRUCTURE OF THE TRAGEDY. FABLE AND SUBJECT. IDENTIFICATION OF THE HERO. CATASTROPHE.

The tragedy of *Hamlet* is generally considered an enigma. It differs from Shakespeare's other tragedies as well as from the works of others in that its course of action never fails to surprise and bewilder the spectator. This is why the essays and critical studies on the play are more like commentaries. They have one trait in common: all try to solve the riddle set by Shakespeare. After his first encounter with the ghost, Hamlet is expected to kill the king—why is he unable to do this? And why does the play reflect nothing but his failure to act? Shakespeare does not explain the reasons for Hamlet's inertia, and thus the critics approach the riddle from two different angles: the first, from the character and personal experiences of Hamlet, and the second, from the environmental obstacles in his path. According to one viewpoint, the problem lies in Hamlet's personality. Critics of this persuasion attempt to show that the reason for Hamlet's delay in taking revenge is that his feelings rebel against an act of violence, that he is irresolute and weak-willed, or that, as Goethe claimed, too heavy a task was placed on his weak shoulders. Since none of these interpretations allows for an exhaustive explanation

of the tragedy, we can positively say that they are devoid of any scientific significance, for exactly opposite views may exist just as rightfully. Other critics explain Hamlet's lingering as a manifestation of his state of mind, as if he were a real person. These critics usually argue from true life experience and human nature, not from the artistic structure of the play. They go so far as to say that Shakespeare intended to show the tragedy of the weak-willed person called upon to perform a task for which he is not properly equipped. They regard *Hamlet* as a tragedy of weakness and the absence of will, despite the scenes in which the hero exhibits just the opposite character traits and appears as a man of extraordinary determination, courage, valor, and implacability in the face of moral considerations.

Another school of critics seeks to explain Hamlet's procrastination by the objective obstacles that lie on the path to his goal. The king and his courtiers exert opposition against Hamlet, who does not kill the king at once, because it is impossible for him to do so. These critics, who follow Werder's view, claim that Hamlet's task is not to kill the king but to expose his guilt and chastise him. We can, of course, find as many arguments in favor of this view as opposed to it. These critics are badly mistaken, because they miss two fundamental points. First, nowhere in the tragedy does Shakespeare formulate such a task for Hamlet, either directly or by implication. The critics, therefore, are attempting to write for Shakespeare by inventing new, complicated tasks, again proceeding from common sense and life experience rather than from the aesthetics of tragedy. Also, they are shutting their eyes and ears to many scenes and monologues in which Hamlet, aware of the subjective character of his procrastination but unable to understand the reasons for it, attempts some explanations, none of which suffices fully to support his actions.

Both groups of critics agree, however, that the tragedy is highly enigmatic; this admission takes most of the substance out of their arguments. Indeed, if their considerations were correct, the tragedy would have no riddle. How could the play be mysteriously enigmatic if Shakespeare intended merely to portray a weak and undecided person? It would be clear from the outset that the hero's procrastination is due to his irresolution. A play about a weak-willed character would be a bad one if his weakness were concealed in a riddle. If the critics of the second group, those who claim that the main difficulties arise from external causes, were correct, then *Hamlet* would fail because Shakespeare, unable to represent with clarity the real meaning of the tragedy (this very struggle with external obstacles), would disguise it, too, with a riddle. The critics are trying to solve Hamlet's mystery with arguments ir-

relevant to the tragedy itself. They approach it as if it were a case from actual life which must be explained and understood on the basis of common sense. According to Berné's very pertinent remark, a veil has been thrown over the picture, but in trying to lift it in order to examine the picture beneath we discover that the veil is painted into the picture itself. This observation is quite accurate, for it is easy to show that the riddle has been intentionally built into the tragedy. The tragedy is structured as a riddle which cannot be explained nor solved by strictly logical means. By depriving the tragedy of its riddle, the critics deprive the play of its most essential element.

Let us now consider the enigma of the play. Despite differences in approach, critics unanimously note the obscurity and ambiguity of the play. Hessner speaks of *Hamlet* as a tragedy-mask. According to Kuno Fischer, we stand before Hamlet and his tragedy as if we were standing before a curtain. We expect the curtain to rise and reveal the image, but we discover that the image concealed is none other than the curtain itself. Berné says that *Hamlet* is an absurdity, worse than the death of one that has not yet been born. Goethe refers to some somber mystery associated with the tragedy. Schlegel compares it to an irrational equation. Baumgardt mentions the complexity of a fable that contains a long series of diverse and unexpected events. "The tragedy *Hamlet* indeed resembles a labyrinth," writes Kuno Fischer. "*Hamlet*," says Brandes, "is not permeated by a 'general meaning' or by the idea of unity. Certainty and definition were not the ideals which Shakespeare was striving to reach. . . . The play is laden with riddles and contradictions, but its charm and attractiveness are due mostly to its obscurity." <sup>1</sup> Speaking of "obscure" books, Brandes claims that *Hamlet* is one such: "At times a gulf opens between the action that envelops the play like a mantle, and the core of the play." <sup>2</sup> "Hamlet remains a mystery," says ten Brink, "but an infinitely attractive one, because we know that it is not artificially construed but draws its origin from nature's wisdom." <sup>3</sup>—"But Shakespeare created a mystery," to quote Dowden, "which remains a question, forever exciting, but never fully explained. Therefore one cannot assume that an idea or a magical formula can solve the difficulties presented by the drama or suddenly shed light upon all. Obscurity is characteristic of a work of art concerned, not with a specific problem, but with life; and in that life, in the story of a soul that treads the shady boundary between dark night and bright day there are . . . many things that defy or confuse investigation." <sup>4</sup>

We could continue forever with these excerpts and quotations, since almost all critics dwell on this subject. Even such deprecators of Shakespeare as Tolstoy and Voltaire state essentially the same view. Voltaire,

for example, in the introduction to his tragedy *Semiramis* states that "the course of events in the tragedy *Hamlet* is a huge mess." Rümelin describes the play as a whole as incomprehensible. <sup>5</sup>

All these critics see in the obscurity a mantle that conceals a center, a curtain that hides an image, or a veil that prevents our eyes from seeing the picture beneath. But if *Hamlet* is what the critics claim it to be, why is it shrouded in so much mystery and obscurity? Frequently the mystery is greatly exaggerated, and even more frequently it is based on utter misunderstanding. Such misunderstanding underlies Merezhkovskii's view that "the ghost appears to Hamlet in an atmosphere of solemnity and romanticism, with claps of thunder and earthquakes . . . The ghost tells Hamlet of the secrets of the dead, of God, blood, and vengeance." <sup>6</sup> This might be read in some operatic libretto, but certainly not in the actual *Hamlet*.

We can therefore disregard all criticism which tries to separate the enigma from the tragedy and take the veil from the picture. However, it may be of some interest to see how this criticism deals with the inscrutability of Hamlet's character and behavior. Berné says that "Shakespeare is a king who does not obey laws. Were he like anyone else, we could say that Hamlet is a lyrical character who defines dramatic processing." <sup>7</sup> Brandes also notes this incongruity: "We must not forget that this dramatic phenomenon—an inactive hero—is required to some extent by the technique of the play. If Hamlet were to kill the king immediately upon receiving the ghost's message, the play would have to be restricted to one act. Hence, it becomes imperative to find delaying tactics." <sup>8</sup> But this need to delay would imply that the subject is not suited to tragedy, that Shakespeare artificially delays an action that could be completed instantly, and introduces four superfluous acts into a play capable of being resolved in a single act. Montague notices this, too, and provides an excellent formula: "Inaction is the action of the first three acts." Beck comes to a similar interpretation. He explains everything by the contradiction between the plot of the play and the character of the protagonist. The plot belongs to the chronicle into which Shakespeare has woven his subject, and Hamlet's character belongs to Shakespeare himself. Between the two there is an irreconcilable contradiction. "Shakespeare was not fully the master of his own play and was not completely free to use all its component parts," a deficiency which can be attributed to the chronicle. This view, however, is so simple and self-evident that it is pointless to look elsewhere for solutions or explanations. Thus we turn to a new group of critics who seek the solution to *Hamlet* either in the requirements of dramatic technique (as mentioned by Brandes) or in the historic and literary roots of the tragedy. In this case, however, it is obvious that the author's talent is defeated by the

rigid rules of technique, or that the historic background of the subject exceeds the possibilities of artistic treatment. In either case we must regard *Hamlet* as a failure because Shakespeare was unable to select a suitable subject for his tragedy. Then Zhukovskii would be correct in saying that "Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Hamlet*, looks like a monstrosity to me. I don't understand its meaning. Those who find so much in *Hamlet* exhibit the wealth of their own thought and imagination rather than prove the superiority of the play. I can't believe that Shakespeare, when composing this tragedy, thought in exactly the same way as Schlegel and Tieck did, when they read into its incongruities all the unsolved riddles of human life . . . I asked him\* to read *Hamlet* to me and then tell me in detail his thoughts on this *monstrosity*."

Goncharov holds the same view. He claims that *Hamlet* cannot be played on stage. "Hamlet is not a typical role. No one can play it; there has never been an actor who could play it . . . He would lose himself in it as if he were the Wandering Jew. . . . Hamlet's character is a phenomenon which anyone in a normal state of mind simply cannot comprehend."<sup>9</sup> Not all the literary critics who seek to explain *Hamlet's* wavering by technical or historical means think that Shakespeare has written a bad play. Many of them point to the positive aesthetic aspects of *Hamlet's* procrastination. Volkenshteyn, for instance, holds a different view, which is the opposite of Heine's, Berné's, Turgenev's, and many others, who believe that *Hamlet* himself is weak-willed and spineless. The opinions of this group are reflected in Hebbel's words: "*Hamlet* is a corpse, long before the curtain rises. What we see are the roses and thorns which sprung from his corpse." Volkenshteyn feels that the true essence of a drama, particularly a tragedy, is the tension and stress of passions; he also feels that a tragedy is always supported by the hero's inner strength. This is why he believes that the view of *Hamlet* as a weak-willed and spineless person, "is based on the blind trust in semantics which characterizes some of the most profound literary criticism. . . . A dramatic hero cannot be taken for what he says he is. He must be judged for his acts. Hamlet's acts are energetic. He alone carries on a long and bloody fight with the king and the entire Danish court. In his tragic striving for the restoration of justice, he attacks the king three times: the first time he kills Polonius by mistake; the second time he spares the king because the latter is praying; and the third time, at the end of the play, he succeeds. With superb ingenuity he sets a trap to corroborate the statements of the ghost. He deftly eliminates Rosen-

\* Here Zhukovskii refers to a critic who is left unnamed by Vygotsky. *Translator's note.*

crantz and Guildenstern from his path. Indeed, he conducts a titanic struggle. . . . Hamlet's versatile, strong character corresponds to his physical fitness: Laertes is the best fencer in France, yet *Hamlet* defeats him because he turns out to be more adroit (how this contradicts Turgenev's assertion of *Hamlet's* physical weakness!). The protagonist of the tragedy shows a maximum of will. . . . We would not feel the tragedy in *Hamlet* if its hero were irresolute and weak."<sup>10</sup> There is nothing new in outlining those traits in *Hamlet* which denote his strength and courage. This has been done many times before as has the demonstration of the obstacles facing *Hamlet*. What is new is the treatment of the material which deals with *Hamlet's* irresolution and weakness. According to Volkenshteyn, all the monologues in which *Hamlet* reproaches himself for his lack of resolution are but instruments to whip up his will; they do not illustrate his weakness, but rather his strength.

Thus, according to Volkenshteyn, *Hamlet's* self-accusations are yet another evidence of his extraordinary strength of character. His titanic struggle requires a maximum of effort and fortitude, but he is not satisfied with himself and he demands still more of himself. This interpretation proves that the contradictions are not accidental but have been introduced intentionally and that, moreover, they are only seemingly fortuitous. Any mention of weakness and irresolution is evidence of exactly the opposite—*Hamlet's* formidable will. But even this attempt to solve *Hamlet's* problem is not entirely successful. As a matter of fact, it repeats, only in slightly different terms, the earlier view of *Hamlet's* character, without explaining why he procrastinates, why he does not kill the king in the first act, immediately after the revelations of the ghost (as suggested by Brandes), or why the tragedy does not end with the first act. We are thus forced to side with Werder, who claims that the exterior obstacles represent the true cause of *Hamlet's* procrastination. This view, however, is in complete contradiction with the meaning of the play. We may agree, though, with the fact that *Hamlet* is conducting a titanic struggle, if we proceed from *Hamlet's* own character. Let us assume that tremendous forces are concentrated within him. But with whom does he conduct his struggle, against whom is it directed, and how does it express itself? No sooner are these questions asked than it becomes obvious that *Hamlet's* opponents are nonentities and the forces preventing him from murder are insignificant; he himself blindly gives in to the machinations directed against him. The critic cannot but note that although prayer saves the king's life once, there is hardly any indication that *Hamlet* is devout or that he spares the praying king because of any deep personal conviction. On the contrary, this reason crops up as if by accident and is almost incomprehensible to

the spectator. The accidental killing of Polonius proves that Hamlet's decision to kill was made immediately after the players' performance before the court. Why, then, does his sword smite the king only at the very end of the tragedy? Finally, no matter how premeditated or accidental, no matter how limited by outward circumstances his struggle may be, most of the time Hamlet is parrying blows directed against him rather than carrying on his own attack. The murders of Guildenstern and all the rest are nothing but self-defense, and we cannot possibly term such self-defense a titanic struggle. We will show that Hamlet's three attempts to kill the king, to which Volkenshteyn refers, are evidence of exactly the opposite of what that critic sees in them.

Equally poor interpretation was the staging of *Hamlet* by the Second Moscow Art Theatre, a production which followed Volkenshteyn's line closely. The directors proceeded from the clash of two distinct aspects of human nature. "One is protesting, heroic, fighting to assert its own sense of life. This is our Hamlet. In order to emphasize this aspect of our hero we had to shorten the text of the tragedy considerably and eliminate from it all that could possibly interfere with the whirl of events. . . . As early as the middle of the second act Hamlet takes his sword in his hand and does not let it go until the end of the tragedy. We have also underscored Hamlet's activity by condensing all the obstacles which he encounters in his path. This was our guideline in the treatment of the king and the other characters. King Claudius personifies everything that attempts to thwart the heroic Hamlet. . . . And our Hamlet dwells continuously in an impassioned state of struggle against all that is personified by the king . . . To emphasize the shades and colors in the play we found it necessary to transfer the action to the Middle Ages." Thus spoke the directors of the play in their announcement of plans for the staging of *Hamlet*. They admit quite openly that for stage requirements and for better understanding of the tragedy they had to perform the following three operations on the play: to discard from it everything that prevents such an understanding; to condense the obstacles that lie in Hamlet's way; and to accentuate the shades and colors in the play, while transferring the action to the Middle Ages (despite the fact that the play is usually seen as taking place during the Renaissance). After three such operations it is obvious that any and all interpretations of the drama are possible. It is also obvious that these three operations transform the tragedy into something diametrically opposed to the author's intent. The fact that such radical surgery was required to produce a particular interpretation of Shakespeare's work is the best evidence of the immense discrepancy between the true meaning of

*Hamlet's story and the meaning attributed to it by the critics.* To illustrate the almost colossal contradictions which beset this staged version of *Hamlet*, it suffices to mention that the king, who has a fairly modest role in the original play, suddenly becomes the heroic counterpart to Hamlet [37]. If Hamlet, as the focal point of heroic, enlightened will, is one of the tragedy's poles, then the king, as the focal point of the anti-heroic, dark power, is its other pole. But to reduce the role of the king to the personification of all the negative principles of life would require the writing of a new tragedy with a purpose different from that pursued by Shakespeare.

Much closer to the truth are those explanations of Hamlet's irresolution which, while also proceeding from formal considerations, try to solve the riddle without performing major surgical operations on the original text. One such attempt is an explanation of some of the peculiarities of Hamlet based on the technique and design of the Shakespearean stage [38]. Its importance, cannot be denied; indeed study of the subject is vital to a proper understanding of the tragedy. In this regard, significance is acquired by Prels' law of temporal continuity in the Shakespearean drama which requires from both audience and author a concept of staging totally different from that of our modern theaters. We divide a play into acts, each involving only the brief time interval during which the events represented in it occur. Important events, and their effects, take place between acts, and the audience learns about them subsequently. Acts may be separated by intervals of several years. All this requires specific stylistic techniques. Things were totally different in Shakespeare's day: the action was continuous, a play apparently was not divided into acts, the performance was not interrupted by intermissions, and everything happened before the eyes of the audience. This important aesthetic convention was bound to have a considerable bearing upon the composition and the structure of any play. Many things become clear once we acquaint ourselves with the technique and aesthetics of the stage of Shakespeare's time. But if we overstep the boundary and assume that by establishing the necessity of some technical measure we have solved the problem of the play, we commit a grave error. We must be able to discern the extent to which each device is really due to the stage technique of that time. This, however, is not sufficient, for we must also show the psychologic significance of the device. We must explain why from among many such devices Shakespeare chose this one, since to admit that a device can be explained only by its technical indispensability is tantamount to a declaration of the supremacy of bare technique over art. There is no doubt that the structure of a play greatly depends upon its technique, but it is also true that

for preparing the most effective scenes, the author destroys the character of the Hamlet of the legend. For the entire duration of the play Hamlet does not act the way he might want or might like to, but the way the author requires him to act: at one time he is terrorized by his father's ghost, and another time he chaffs at him, calling him an old mole; first he loves Ophelia, later he teases her cruelly, and so forth. It is impossible to find an explanation for Hamlet's actions or words, and it is therefore impossible to assign to him any character at all.

But since it is generally accepted that the great Shakespeare could not possibly write anything bad, scholars and critics have racked, and are racking their brains to discover some unusual beauty in an obvious defect, which is particularly evident and quite irritating in *Hamlet*, where the protagonist has no character. The wise critics now proclaim that Hamlet expresses, with extraordinary power, a completely new and profound character, whose distinguishing feature is the absence of character, and that only the genius of a Shakespeare could create such a profound characterless character. Having established this, the scholarly critics proceed to write volume upon volume to praise and explain the greatness and significance of the characterization of a person without character. It is true that some of the critics occasionally produce timid remarks that there might be something odd about that character, that Hamlet is an unsolvable riddle; but no one finds the courage to say that the emperor is naked, that it is perfectly plain that Shakespeare was either unable or unwilling to give Hamlet a specific character. Nor did he understand that it was at all necessary. And so the scholarly critics continue to study, investigate, and extol this mysterious literary production. . . .<sup>14</sup>

We defer to Tolstoy's opinion, not because we believe his conclusions to be correct or absolutely trustworthy. The reader will understand that Tolstoy's final judgment of Shakespeare issues from nonartistic motivations; the decisive factor in his moral condemnation of Shakespeare is the fact that he regards the latter's morals as irreconcilable with his own moral ideals. We must bear in mind that this moralistic approach has led Tolstoy to disapprove not only of Shakespeare but of many other authors and their works. Toward the end of his life he considered even his own writings harmful and unworthy, proving that this moralistic view reaches beyond the boundaries of art, is too broad and universal to take account of details, and cannot be applied in the psychological investigation of art. However, Tolstoy supports his moralistic conclusions with purely aesthetic arguments; these appear to be so convincing as to destroy that unreasoning and unreasonable hypnosis which surrounds Shakespeare and his opus. Tolstoy looks at Hamlet with the eyes of the child in Andersen's fairy tale of the emperor's new clothes; he is the first who has the courage to say that the emperor is naked, i.e., that all the

merits, such as profundity, precision of character, penetration of the depths of the human psyche, and so forth, exist only in the spectator's imagination. Tolstoy's greatest merit lies in his statement that the emperor is naked, with which he exposes not primarily Shakespeare but the preposterous and false concept of the Bard, with which he compares his own opinion which he considers diametrically opposed to the one accepted by the entire civilized world. Thus, pursuing a moralistic aim, Tolstoy destroys one of the most absurd prejudices in the history of literature. He was the first to express boldly what now has been confirmed by many, namely, that Shakespeare fails to give convincing psychological motivation to quite a few of the intrigues and actions in his plays, that his characters are often implausible, and that frequently there are serious incongruities, unacceptable to common sense, between the protagonist's character and his actions. Stoll, for instance, bluntly asserts that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare is more interested in the situation than in the hero's character, that *Hamlet* should be viewed as a tragedy of intrigue in which the decisive role is played by the sequence of events and not by the disclosure of the hero's character. Rugg holds the same view. He speculates that Shakespeare does not entangle the action in order to complicate Hamlet's character, but that he complicates the character to make the hero fit more easily into the traditional dramatic concept of the fable [40]. Such commentaries are by no means unique, nor do they stand alone among other conflicting opinions. In other Shakespearean plays, quite a few facts have been found which prove incontestably that Tolstoy's assertion is basically correct. We will show how Tolstoy's opinion can be properly applied to such tragedies as *Othello*, and *King Lear*, how convincingly he has proved the irrelevance of character in Shakespeare's works and how precisely he has understood the aesthetic significance of Shakespeare's language.

We take, as the starting point for our discussion, the obvious view, according to which no specific character can be assigned to Hamlet, for he is made up of contradictory traits, and it is impossible to find a credible explanation for his words and actions. However, we will dispute Tolstoy's views on Shakespeare's complete inability to represent the artistic progress of the action. Tolstoy fails to understand, or perhaps does not want to accept, Shakespeare's aesthetics. By narrating the latter's artistic devices in plain language, he transposes the author's poetic language into a language of prose, removes the devices from the aesthetic functions which they perform in the drama—and reaches a nonsensical conclusion. This, of course, is bound to happen if we perform a similar operation on the work of any other poet and deprive his text of its proper sense by narrating the story in plain language. Tolstoy proceeds to re-

count *King Lear*, scene by scene, to show the preposterousness of their concatenation. Were we to do the same to his *Anna Karenina*, we would reduce that novel to a similar bundle of absurd nonsense. What Tolstoy says about *Anna Karenina* can also be applied to *King Lear*. It is impossible to retell the facts of a novel or a tragedy and express its meaning, because meaning can only be found in the combination of ideas. Tolstoy claims that this combination is not made up of thoughts but of "something else" which cannot be expressed in words but only through images, scenes, situations, and so forth. To retell *King Lear* in one's own words is as impossible as putting music into words. This is why narration is the least convincing method of artistic critique. His basic mistake, however, did not prevent Tolstoy from making a number of brilliant discoveries which will supply students of Shakespeare with many interesting problems for years to come and which of course will be interpreted in a way different from Tolstoy's. While we agree with Tolstoy that Hamlet has no character, we persevere in our argument: Could this lack of character be an artistic intention of the author rather than just a mistake? Of course Tolstoy is right when he points out the absurdity of those arguments that maintain that the depth of Shakespeare's character lies in this absence of character. We cannot dismiss the idea, however, that in this tragedy, Shakespeare had no intention of revealing, describing or studying a character per se, and that he may intentionally have used a character totally unfit for the particular events of the play in order to obtain a specific artistic effect from the paradox.

We shall show the fallacy of the idea that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a tragedy of character. At this point, however, we shall merely assume that the lack of character is the author's intention, and that he uses it as a device for specific artistic purposes. We shall begin by analyzing the structure of the tragedy.

We can proceed with our analysis in three different ways: First, we have the sources used by Shakespeare, the original treatment of the material; then, the plot of the tragedy; and, finally, a new and more complex artistic feature—the dramatis personae. We shall now try to determine the interrelationship between these three elements.

Tolstoy rightly begins his investigation by comparing the original saga of Hamlet with Shakespeare's tragedy. In the saga everything is clear and understandable. The motives behind the prince's acts are obvious. The action is well coordinated, and each step is justified both psychologically and logically. Many of the earlier studies of the play have elaborated this point sufficiently. The riddle of Hamlet could hardly have sprung up if the story had been confined to the old sources, or at

least to its older pre-Shakespearean dramatic forms, since there is absolutely nothing mysterious or obscure in them. This fact enables us to draw a conclusion diametrically opposed to Tolstoy's view that all is clear and obvious in the legend but muddled and unreasonable in *Hamlet* and that consequently Shakespeare has spoiled the legend. It is more correct to follow an opposite trend of thought: since everything is logical and understandable in the saga, Shakespeare had available to him ready-made logical and psychological motives. If he chose to process this material so as to ignore all the obvious ties which hold the original saga together, he must have had a special intention. We are inclined to believe that Shakespeare created Hamlet's enigma for stylistic reasons and that it is not the result of the author's inability. We therefore choose to approach the problem from a different angle. As a matter of fact, we no longer consider it to be an unsolved riddle or a difficulty to be overcome; we consider it an intentional artistic device that we must try to understand. The question we ask is, "Why does Shakespeare make Hamlet delay," rather than, "Why does Hamlet delay?" Any artistic method, or device, can be grasped much more easily from its teleological trend (the psychological function it performs) than from its causal motivation, which may explain a literary fact but never an aesthetic one.

To find an answer to the question of why Shakespeare makes Hamlet delay, we must compare the Hamlet legend with the plot of the tragedy. We have already mentioned that the treatment of the plot follows the law of dramatic composition, prevalent in Shakespeare's time, known as the law of temporal continuity. Action on stage was considered continuous, and consequently the play proceeded according to a time concept completely different from that of contemporary plays. The stage was never empty, not even for an instant. While a dialogue took place on stage, some lengthy events of perhaps several days' duration occurred backstage, as the audience learned several scenes later. The spectator thus did not perceive the passing of real time, for the playwright operated with a fictitious stage time of totally different proportions. Consequently, there figures a tremendous distortion of the concept of time in the Shakespearean tragedy. The duration of events, everyday occurrences, and actions are distorted to fit the requirement of stage time. How absurd then it is to talk of Hamlet's temporizing in terms of real time! By what real time units could we measure his procrastination? The real time periods are in constant contradiction in the tragedy and there is no way of determining the true duration of events in the tragedy. We are unable to estimate how much time elapses between the first apparition of the ghost and the killing of the king. Is it a day, a month,

a year? It is therefore evident that the problem of Hamlet's procrastination cannot be solved psychologically. If he kills the king only a few days after the first appearance of the ghost, then there is no delay, no procrastination, in terms of the course of our everyday life. But if it takes him longer, we must seek different psychological explanations for different periods of time; that is, there is one explanation if it takes him a month and another if it takes him a year to kill his uncle. In the tragedy, Hamlet is not in any way bound by these units of real time, since all the events of the play are measured and related to one another in terms of conventional [41] stage time units. Does this mean that the question of Hamlet's delaying no longer arises? Could it be that the author allocated to the action exactly the amount of time it requires on stage and that therefore everything happens on schedule? We shall see that this is not the case. Indeed, all we have to do is remind ourselves of the monologues in which Hamlet reproaches himself for procrastinating. The tragedy apparently emphasizes the temporizing of its hero and, surprisingly enough, gives several quite different explanations for this procrastination.

Let us follow the main plot of the tragedy. Immediately upon the revelation of the ghost's secret, when Hamlet learns that he has been charged with the duty of revenge, he says that he will fly to revenge on wings as swift as love's desire. From the pages of memory he deletes all the thoughts, feelings, and dreams of his entire life, to devote himself entirely to the secret behest. Already at the end of this scene he sighs under the unbearable burden of the discovery that has befallen him. He bemoans the fact that he was born to perform a fateful exploit. After his talk with the actors, Hamlet reproaches himself for the first time for his inaction. It astonishes him that an actor is carried away by passion and inflamed by a meaningless plot, while he himself remains silent and inactive in the face of the crime which has destroyed the life and the reign of a great sovereign—his father. The remarkable thing in this famous monologue is Hamlet's inability to understand the reason for his delay. He reproaches himself by speaking of shame and dishonor, but he alone knows that he is no coward. Here we are given the first motive for delaying the death of the king: perhaps the words of the ghost are not to be believed. Indeed, the accusations must be thoroughly verified. So, Hamlet sets his famous "mousetrap," and only after it snaps are all his doubts gone. Since the king has given himself away, Hamlet no longer doubts the veracity of the ghost. When Hamlet's mother calls him, he convinces himself not to lift his sword against her:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out

Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. Soft! Now to my mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:  
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;  
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;  
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;  
How in my words soever she be shent,  
To give them seals never, my soul, consent! (III, 2) →

Hamlet now is ready to kill, and he fears that he might even harm his own mother. Oddly enough, this realization is followed by the prayer scene. Hamlet enters, takes his sword, and places himself behind the king whom he could kill on the spot. We have left Hamlet ready to avenge, ready to kill, we have left him as he was convincing himself not to raise arms against his mother; now we expect him to perform his act. But instead we hear

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
And now I'll do't: and so he goes to heaven . . . (III, 3)

A few verses later Hamlet sheathes his sword and gives a completely new reason for his procrastination: he does not want to kill the king while the latter is praying or atoning.

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At gaming, swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't,  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto he goes. My mother stays:  
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days. (III, 3) →

In the next scene Hamlet kills Polonius, who is hiding behind a tapestry, by unexpectedly making a pass with his sword through the arras and calling out "A rat!" From this, and from his words to the dead Polonius it is obvious that he intended to kill the king, who is precisely the rat caught in the mousetrap; it is the king to whom Hamlet refers as "thy better" and for whom he mistook Polonius. The motives that have stopped Hamlet in the preceding scene have disappeared, so much so

that it appears irrelevant. One of the two scenes must include an obvious contradiction if the other is correct. Kuno Fischer says that most critics consider the scene of Polonius' killing to be proof of Hamlet's unplanned, thoughtless actions. Many productions, and quite a few critics, omit the prayer scene because they fail to understand how it is possible to introduce a new motive for procrastination without prior preparation. Nowhere in the tragedy, either earlier or later, does this new condition for killing the king (to kill him while he is sinning in order to destroy his soul after death) appear. During Hamlet's scene with his mother the ghost appears again, and Hamlet thinks that he has come to reproach him for putting off the revenge. Hamlet does not resist being exiled to England; in the monologue after the scene with Fortinbras he compares himself to that courageous leader, and once again reproaches himself for his weak will and inactivity. He feels that his procrastination is a disgrace, and finishes his monologue resolutely:

... O, from this time forth

My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (IV, 4)

Later when we find Hamlet in the graveyard, or again talking to Horatio, or finally during the duel, there is no mention of revenge. Not until the very end of the play is Hamlet's promise that he will think only about blood kept. Before the duel he is full of premonitions:

Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? (V, 2)

He feels that his death is approaching, and so does the audience. Not until the very end of the duel does he think about revenge. The final catastrophe seems to be contrived for completely different reasons. Hamlet does not kill the king to fulfill his promise to the ghost. The spectator learns that Hamlet is virtually dead because the poison is already in his blood and he has less than half an hour to live. Only now, with one foot in the grave, does he kill the king.

The final scene leaves absolutely no doubt that Hamlet kills the king for his latest crime: the poisoning of the queen, and the killing of Laertes and Hamlet himself. Not a word is said about Hamlet's father, and the audience has completely forgotten about him. The denouement is astonishing and inexplicable—nearly all the critics agree that the killing of the king leaves us with the feeling of duty unfulfilled, or, at best, fulfilled by default.

The play, it would appear, was obscure and enigmatic because Hamlet had not killed the king. Now that he has performed the killing, the enigma should vanish; instead it has really only now become apparent. Mezières quite correctly states: "Indeed, everything in the last scene surprises us; everything from the beginning to the end is unexpected. Throughout the play we have been waiting for Hamlet to kill the king. Finally he strikes—but no sooner does he perform the deed than we are again astonished and bewildered. . . ." Says Sokolovskii, "The last scene of the tragedy is based on a collision of accidental circumstances that happen so unexpectedly and so suddenly that some commentators with old-fashioned views have accused Shakespeare of blundering. . . . The intervention of an external force had to be invented. . . . It is purely accidental, and in the hands of Hamlet it functions like those sharp weapons which we occasionally allow children to handle but all the while guide their grip on the hilt. . . ." <sup>15</sup>

Berné is correct in saying that in killing the king Hamlet avenges not only his father but his mother and himself as well. Johnson reproaches Shakespeare for having the king killed not according to a premeditated plan but as a totally unexpected accident. Alfonso states, "The killing of the king is due to events totally beyond Hamlet's control; it is not the result of a well-prepared plan. Had it been left entirely to Hamlet, the king would never have been killed." If we take a closer look at this new line of plot, we see that Shakespeare at times emphasizes Hamlet's procrastination and at other times conceals it. He composes several scenes in a row without ever mentioning the task set before the prince, and then he has Hamlet reveal his weakness once more in statements and monologues. The audience is reminded of Hamlet's procrastination in sudden, explosionlike spurts, rather than being apprised of it in a continuous, uniform fashion. After the sudden explosion of a monologue, the spectator looks back and vividly realizes the existence of procrastination. But the author rapidly covers it up until the next explosion, and so on. In the spectator's mind are combined two fundamentally incompatible ideas. On the one hand, Hamlet must avenge his father and let no internal or external causes prevent him from going into action. The author even plays with the audience's impatience and makes it see Hamlet draw his sword but then, quite unexpectedly, not strike. On the other hand, the audience realizes that Hamlet is delaying, but fails to understand why. It observes the drama of Hamlet evolve, torn by contradictions, evading the clearly set task and constantly straying from the path which is so clearly outlined.

Given such treatment of the subject, we may plot our interpretational curve of the tragedy. The plot of our story runs in a straight line, and if



Hamlet had killed the king immediately after hearing the ghost's revelations, he would cover the distance between these two events in the shortest possible way. The author, however, proceeds in a different fashion. Because at all times he lets us see, feel, and be aware of the straight line which the action should follow, we are even more keenly conscious of the digressions and loops it describes in actual fact.

It appears as if Shakespeare had set himself the task of pushing the plot from its straight path onto a devious and twisted one. It is quite possible to find in these the series of events and facts indispensable for the tragedy, on account of which the play describes its oblique orbit.

We must resort to synthesis, to the physiology of the tragedy, in order to understand this fully. We must try to guess the function assigned to this curve from the significance of the whole. We must try to find out why the author, with such exceptional and in many respects unique boldness, forces the tragedy to deviate from its straight path.

Let us consider the end of the tragedy. Two things immediately strike the critic's eye. First of all, the main line of development of the tragedy is fuzzy and obscured. The king is killed in the course of a melee; he is but one of four victims, whose deaths occur as suddenly as a bolt from the blue. The audience is caught by surprise, for it does not expect events to proceed in this fashion. The motives for the king's death are so obviously implicit in the final scene that the audience forgets that it has finally reached the point to which the tragedy had been leading without actually reading it. As soon as Hamlet sees the queen die, he shouts:

O villainy! Ho! let the door be lock'd:  
Treachery! Seek it out.

Laertes reveals to Hamlet that these plots are all the king's. Hamlet then exclaims:

The point evenom'd too!  
Then, venom, to thy work.

Finally, as he gives the king the poisoned goblet,

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damnéd Dane,  
Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?  
Follow my mother.

Nowhere is there any mention of Hamlet's father, and all the motivations are based on the events of the last scene. Thus the tragedy reaches its catastrophe, but it is concealed from the spectator that this is precisely the point to which the plot development has been directed. Yet,

in addition to this direct camouflage another, exactly opposing one, reveals itself, and we can easily show that the scene of the killing of the king is treated on two diametrically opposed psychological planes: On the one hand, the king's death is overshadowed by a series of immediate causes, as well as other deaths; on the other hand, it is distinguished from the series of killings in a way that has no comparison in any other tragedy. All the other deaths come to pass almost unnoticed. The queen dies, and no one seems to take note. Only Hamlet bids her farewell, "Wretched queen, adieu!" Even Hamlet's own death seems to be blurred and overshadowed. Once dead, nothing is said about him anymore. Laertes dies inconspicuously and, significantly, he exchanges forgiveness with Hamlet before his life leaves him. He forgives Hamlet Polonius' death and his own, and begs Hamlet to forgive him for having killed him. This sudden and quite unnatural change in Laertes' character has no motivation in the tragedy. It is necessary only to calm the audience's reaction to these deaths and make the king's death stand out more clearly against this dimmed background. As mentioned earlier, the king's death is made to stand out by means of a highly exceptional device that has no equal in any other tragedy. What is so unusual about this scene is the fact that for some unexplained reason Hamlet kills the king twice, first with the tainted sword, then with the poisoned potion. Why? The action does not call for it. Both Laertes and Hamlet die from the effect of one poison only, that on the sword. It would appear that the killing of the king has been split into two separate actions, to emphasize it and to impress upon the audience the fact that the tragedy has reached its conclusion. We can easily find a reason for this double killing of the king, which would appear to be absurd from a methodological viewpoint and futile from a psychological viewpoint. The meaning of the tragedy is in its catastrophe, the killing of the king, which we have been expecting from the first act on, but which we reach by a totally different, unexpected path. In fact, the catastrophe comes as a result of a new plot, and when we reach that point we do not immediately realize that it is the point to which the tragedy has been carrying us all along.

It now becomes clear that at this point (the king's double death) converge two distinct lines of action, each of which we have seen go its own way, and each of which must end in its own, separate death. But no sooner does the double killing happen than the poet begins to blur this device of short-circuiting the two lines of the catastrophe. In the brief epilogue in which Horatio, in the manner of all Shakespearean narrator-players, briefly retells what has happened in the play, the king's death is once again obscured:

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world  
 How these things came about: so shall you hear  
 Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
 Of accidental judgments, casual slaughterers,  
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,  
 And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads: all this can I  
 Truly deliver.

In this general mass of "bloody acts and casual slaughterers" the catastrophe of the tragedy is once again diluted to the point of obliteration. In this climactic scene we come to realize the tremendous power of the artistic treatment of the subject, and witness the effects that Shakespeare manages to draw from it. A closer look into the sequence of these deaths reveals that Shakespeare perverts their natural order to obtain a satisfactory artistic effect. The deaths form a melody, as if they were individual notes. In actual fact the king dies before Hamlet, but in the artistically treated plot we do not hear about the king's death. All we do know is that Hamlet is dying and that he will not live for another half hour. Though we know that he is virtually dead and that he received his wound before anyone else, he outlives the rest of the victims. All these groupings and regroupings of the basic events serve to satisfy one requirement, that of the psychological effect. When we learn of Hamlet's imminent death we lose, once and for all, any hope that the tragedy will ever reach the point toward which it has been developed. We are convinced, indeed, that all events are running in the opposite direction. But at that very instant, when we least expect it, and are personally convinced that it is impossible, the catastrophe does finally come to pass. Hamlet, in his last words, points to some mysterious hidden meaning in all the preceding events. He asks Horatio to recount how everything happened, and why, and asks him to give an impartial description of the events, the one that the audience might also remember, and concludes, "The rest is silence." And it is indeed silence for the audience, since the rest happens in the unexpressed sequels that arise from this extraordinarily constructed play. More recent investigators quite willingly underscore that eternal complexity of the play which earlier critics neglected to notice. "We see here several plots running parallel: the story of the murder of Hamlet's father and Hamlet's vengeance, the story of Polonius' death and Laertes' vengeance, Ophelia's story, Fortinbras' story, the episodes with the actors, Hamlet's trip to England, and so on. The action changes location no less than twenty times. In each individual scene we witness rapid changes of theme, character,

and location. An element of arbitrariness prevails. . . . There is much talk about intrigue . . . and many episodes that interrupt, or change, the course of action. . . ." <sup>16</sup>

However, Tomashevskii misses the point by claiming that these sudden changes are only a matter of the variety and diversity of the subject. The episodes that interrupt or change the course of action are closely connected with the basic plot. They include the episodes with the actors and with the gravediggers who in a grimly jocular way renarrate Ophelia's death, the killing of Polonius, and all the rest. The plot of the tragedy, in its final form, unfolds before us in the following way: the story on which the tragedy is based is conserved. From the very beginning, the audience has a clear view of the outline of the action and of the path along which it should develop. The action, however, constantly strays from the path set by the plot and meanders in quite complex curves. At some junctures, such as in Hamlet's monologues, the audience is informed, in spurts, that the tragedy has left the preset track. These monologues, in which Hamlet bitterly reproaches himself for procrastinating, are primarily meant to make us realize that things are not evolving the way they should and to keep us aware of the final point toward which all action is directed. After each monologue, we hope that the action will right itself and fall back into the preset path, until a new monologue reveals to us that the action has once more gone astray. As a matter of fact, the structure of the tragedy can be expressed by two very simple formulas. The formula of the story is that Hamlet kills the king to avenge the death of his father; that of the plot is that he does not kill the king. If the material of the tragedy tells us how Hamlet kills the king to avenge the death of his father, then, the plot of the tragedy shows us how he fails to kill him and, when he finally does, that it is for reasons other than vengeance. The duality of the story and the plot accounts for the action taking its course on two different planes. Constant awareness of the preset path, the deviations from it, and the internal contradictions, are an intrinsic part of this play. Shakespeare apparently chose the most suitable events to express what he wanted to say. He chose material that definitely rushed toward a climax, but at the same time forced him to deviate from it. Shakespeare used a psychological method quite appropriately called the "method of teasing the emotions" by Petrazhitskii, who wanted to introduce it as an experimental method. In fact, the tragedy does nothing but tease our feelings. It promises the fulfillment of the task set from the very beginning, but deviates again and again from this goal, thus straining our expectations to the utmost and making us quite painfully feel every step that leads away from the main path. When the target is reached at last, it turns

out that we have been brought to it from a completely different direction; we also discover that the two paths which led away from each other in apparent conflict suddenly converge at one point during the final scene (when the king is killed twice). The same motives that prevent the killing of the king finally lead us to his death. The catastrophe reaches a point of extreme contradiction, a short-circuiting of two currents flowing in opposite directions. Add to this the fact that the evolving plot is continuously interrupted by completely irrational events, and we can see that the effect of mysteriousness and obscurity is one of the fundamental motives of the author. We think of Ophelia's madness, of Hamlet's intermittent insanity, of his deception of Polonius and the courtiers, of the pompous and rather senseless declamation of the actor, of the cynical conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia, of the clownish scene of the gravediggers—and we discover that all this material reworks the same events that occurred earlier in the play but exaggerates them to some extent and emphasizes their absurdity, as in a dream. Suddenly we understand the true meaning of these events. We may liken them to lightning rods of absurdity ingeniously placed by the playwright, at the most dangerous points of his tragedy, in order to bring the affair somehow to an end and make the absurdity of Hamlet's tragedy plausible. However, the task of art, like that of tragedy, is to force us to experience the incredible and absurd in order to perform some kind of extraordinary operation with our emotions. Poets use two devices for this purpose. First, there are the "lightning rods of absurdity," as we called all the irrational and absurd parts of *Hamlet*. The action evolves in such an incredible way that it threatens to become absurd. The internal contradictions are extreme. The divergence between the two lines of action reaches its apogee and they seem to burst asunder, tearing apart the entire tragedy. It is at this stage that the action suddenly takes on the forms of paradox, pompous declamation, cynicism, recurrent madness, open buffoonery. Against this background of outspoken insanity the play's absurdity slowly becomes less marked and more credible. Madness and insanity are introduced in massive doses to save the play's meaning. Every time absurdity threatens to destroy the play's action, it is diverted by the "lightning rod" [42] which solves the catastrophe that is bound to happen at any moment. The other device used by Shakespeare to force us to put our feelings into the paradox of the tragedy is the following: Shakespeare operates with a double set of conventions [43], introduces a stage on stage, forces his characters to stand up against actors, presents one and the same event twice (once as the real event and then as one played by the actors), splits actions in two and with the fictitious part, the second convention, obliterates and

conceals the absurdity of the first "real" part.

Let us take an example. The actor recites the pathetic monologue of Pyrrhus, becomes emotional, and weeps. Hamlet points out immediately that the tears are only an act, that the actor weeps for Hecuba (about whom he does not care), but that all the emotion and passion are fictitious. But when Hamlet juxtaposes these fictitious feelings to his own, we suddenly realize that Hamlet's emotions are true, and we are almost violently taken by them. Shakespeare uses the same device of introducing a fictitious action in the famous scene of the "Mousetrap." The player king and queen play the fictitious murder scene, while the real king and queen sit horrified by the representation. This juxtaposition of actors and spectators on two different planes of action makes us vividly realize that the king's discomfiture is quite real. The paradox on which the tragedy is based remains intact, because it is protected by two reliable guardians: outright lunacy on the one hand, compared to which the tragedy acquires an obvious sense and significance, and outright fictitiousness on the other; this is the second convention, next to which the actions occurring on the first plane appear real. It is as if another picture were superimposed on the first. In addition to this contradiction, there is another one in the tragedy which is of equal importance for the artistic effect of the play. The dramatis personae chosen by Shakespeare somehow do not quite fit the action; moreover, Shakespeare convincingly disproves the widespread belief that the individual characters of the dramatis personae must determine their own actions. It would appear, however, that if Shakespeare wanted to represent a killing that is somehow never carried out, he must either follow Werder's recommendation—to surround the execution of the task with as many complicated obstacles as possible in order to block the protagonist's way, or he must follow Goethe's prescription—show that the task assigned the hero exceeds his strength and requires of him a titanic performance, irreconcilable with human nature. But Shakespeare had a third way out. He could have followed Berné's formula and made Hamlet a coward. However, not only did he choose none of the three possibilities above, but he operated in the exactly opposite direction. He so thoroughly removed all objective obstacles from the hero's path that there is no indication in the tragedy of what prevents Hamlet from killing the king immediately after the ghost's revelations. Furthermore, he gave Hamlet a fully feasible objective (since in the course of the play, in totally incidental and unimportant scenes, Hamlet kills three times). Finally, he portrayed Hamlet as a man of exceptional energy and tremendous strength, making him into a character opposite to the one actually required by the plot.