SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE'S LOFTY SCENE

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WE are in the recently opened Globe Theatre in the early autumn of 1599, and there is being recreated for us on the stage the most famous political assassination of all time. In fact it took place sixteen hundred and forty-three years ago, so we are viewing it in a sufficiently long historical perspective. Julius Caesar is dead; he has become abruptly a mere huddle of blood-soaked garments at the foot of a statue. This drastic change in the state of affairs in Rome has produced for some minutes mere hubbub as its result. A grave legislative assembly has become a huddle of scared old men bolting for the exits from Pompey's theatre. 'Exeamus e theatro', they might be crying in the words of their distinguished colleague Cicero. The conspirators run around, disorganized by their own success, shouting at one another, gesturing. Then, sharply, comes the voice of Caius Cassius:

> Where is Antony?

Cassius' mind is alert to the unfolding situation. Not so Brutus'. What a crisis is most likely to draw from Brutus is an edifying philosophic generality, admirably expressed. 'There is a tide in the affairs of men'—he is to assure Cassius in a fatal moment—'which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.' Here, he chooses to invocate the Fates:

> Fates, we will know your pleasures:
> That we shall die, we know; 'tis but the time,
> And drawing days out, that men stand upon.

Ironically, we have heard this quite recently, and on a higher thrasonical note, from the man Brutus has now murdered; have heard it from Caesar speaking to Calpurnia:

> Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
> It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
> Seeing that death, a necessary end,
> Will come when it will come.

Here in the theatre, Pompey's theatre, it is Casca who speaks next:

> Why, he that cuts off twenty years of life
> Cuts off so many years of fearing death.

Perhaps Casca too is a Stoic. Or perhaps, in thus overgoing his sententious friend, he is taking leave of us (for he will not again speak in the play) on his note as what Dover Wilson calls 'the humorous cynic'. Certainly Brutus accepts Casca's speech as a grave and appropriate contribution to the post-mortem occasion, for he at once expands it gratefully:

> Grant that, and then is death a benefit:
> So are we Caesar's friends, that have abridged
> His time of fearing death.

The reflection is at least soothing in the circumstances in which it is uttered. But now Brutus remembers that there is other than soothing work to do:

> Stoop, Romans, stoop,
> And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood
> Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords:
> Then walk we forth, even to the market-place,
> And waving our red weapons o'er our heads,
> Let's all cry 'Peace, freedom and liberty!'

This sudden haematic enthusiasm in Brutus may startle us. 'We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar'—he has told his fellow conspirators—'and in the spirit of men there is no blood':

> O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,
> And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
> Caesar must bleed for it!

Well, Caesar is bleeding for it now, and it is apparently incumbent upon his executioners to be not only bold and resolute, but literally bloody as well.

Cassius, who has heard Brutus out, speaks next, and the fourth word he uses is notable.

> Stoop then, and wash.

In *Macbeth*, Macbeth and Banquo 'bathe in reeking wounds' when fighting the Norweyan lord, but later Macbeth is to ask:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand?

The normal human impulse is to wash blood off, not to wash blood on. So Cassius has produced a taut antilogy which

expresses a moment's resistance—a fleeting semantic resistance —to Brutus' mood. But Cassius is a man in whom there exist great inner tensions, even contradictions. The politician has made an instrument of Brutus, and has even taken unscrupulous means to that end:

> I will this night,
> In several hands, in at his windows throw
> As if they came from several citizens,
> Writings, all tending to the great opinion
> That Rome holds of his name . . .

There was nothing very nice, as there was a great deal that was adroit and penetrating, about that. But we have been inattentive to Shakespeare if we are unaware that between these two patricians there is not merely a compact, but also a bond that goes deeper than the political passions. (That there are such bonds is a fact which, as we shall have to remind ourselves, some critics today are inclined to ignore.) And what is noble in Cassius acknowledges that the instrument, the tool is of the finer grain, is the more exalted spirit of the two. And this is why, hard upon that icy 'Stoop then, and wash', he finds himself carried away by his friend's elation, so that he cries:

> How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

Brutus, as he has taken up Casca's speech, takes up this one:

> How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
> That now on Pompey's basis lies along
> No worthier than the dust!

And to this, finally, Cassius responds:

> So oft as that shall be,
> So often shall the knot of us be called
> The men that gave their country liberty.

We have had here the most extended use in *Julius Caesar* of the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor—and how immensely effective is Shakespeare's making Cassius its initiator! It has already made one brief appearance on Brutus' lips as he dismisses the conspirators after their conference:

> Good gentlemen, look fresh and merrily;
> Let not our looks put on our purposes;
> But bear it as our Roman actors do,
> With untired spirits and formal constancy.

One might expect that it would be Brutus whose mind would turn this way again. Or Caesar, who of all these men has the strongest theatrical sense of himself. Or Mark Antony, who is a playgoer. Cassius—unless Caesar's intelligence service is at fault—doesn't care for the drama. But it is Cassius who, standing over Caesar's corpse in Pompey's theatre, has this sudden vision of ourselves in the Globe.

2

What the passage we have been considering presents in the first place is a simple historical reflection. An event of such historic magnitude as the present—the chief conspirators are agreeing—is bound to be made the subject of theatrical representation in future times. Cleopatra is to envisage a similar but less agreeable likelihood when she tells Iras that, should they both be carried off to Rome, they will be obliged to witness themselves presented in humiliating burlesque in the theatre:

> . . . the quick comedians
> Extemporally will stage us and present
> Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I'th'posture of a whore.

We have only to reflect that these lines were written to be spoken by a squeaking boy to realize that matter of this kind, offered in a theatre, can operate at various levels.

That all the world's a stage, and that life is but a walking shadow, a poor player; that a good fighting man has no need of a prompter; that a fallen monarch attracts no more interest than an inferior actor eclipsed by one well-graced: these are traditional assertions which gain piquancy from a dramatic setting. Sometimes the device is wholly naïve: 'If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.' Again with no great subtlety, this kind of image can take, as it were, bodily form, as when Pirandello plays a trick on us, and we realize that what we are witnessing is some sort of quasi-theatrical deception operative within the illusion constituted by the play as a whole. But it need not be all that simple, and it can be pervasive rather than fugitive: in a programme-note written for *Cymbeline* Granville-Barker acutely points out how part of the imaginative effect of the play proceeds from

Shakespeare's care to preserve throughout our sense of the illusion as illusion; we are allowed only to hover on the border of a suspended disbelief.

Novelists, too, can play tricks, whether crude or refined, with the integrity of their fictional world: often by some form of authorial incursion upon the page, sometimes by mockingly beckoning into our consciousness the fact that their novel is only a novel. Again, there are analogous devices in the fine arts. Vermeer's *Painter in his Studio* is sometimes known as the *Allegory of Painting*—this because a system of mirrors (none of them visible in the canvas) has been employed to jolt us into the persuasion that the artist has mysteriously got himself inside his own picture, so that something that may be called a philosophical puzzle-painting results. Again, the momentary dislocation of reference which Memlinc or Massys effects with a small convex looking-glass in the depths of a room becomes in Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (particularly when we turn round and view the picture in the further, and real, looking-glass which the Prado provides) a tremendous conjuring with the bases of representative fiction, becomes a meditation upon appearance and reality. André Gide, while working on the *Tentative amoureuse* in 1893, was drawn to comment in his Journal on the aesthetic principle that thus unites *Las Meninas* with the scene of the puppets in *Wilhelm Meister* and the play scene in *Hamlet*.

Here in the third act of *Julius Caesar* the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor, operative for eight lines in all, becomes a fairly complex engine. One general effect of such dodges is a momentary impairment of the illusion; we are jerked back into a realization that it is play-acting that is going on. But the effect can also be to make us feel that play-acting is going on *within* the illusion; that here are persons striking postures, concerned for effect, putting on a turn. There has already been a small instance of this near the beginning of the play, when Casca describes how Antony three times offers Caesar a crown, and Caesar three times rejects it—under such emotional stress that he faints away. Casca expresses his sense of all this as mummery:

> If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man.

We get something of this effect as we listen to these eight lines, but we get a good deal else as well. 'How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene . . .' Cassius' mind moves in the direction

it does, we may suppose, because, however little a playgoer he may be, he has the canons of poetic drama conveniently to hand to render plausible an elevated view of the *coup d'état* which has been achieved. Skip a little reality, accept enough of the poet's feigning, and this piece of butchery to the accompaniment of shouts for peace, freedom, and liberty becomes a lofty scene. Future ages will be cozened into admiring it, just as Cassius is cozening himself into admiring it now.

John Palmer, when considering the scene in his *Political Characters in Shakespeare*, speaks of 'the self-conscious posturing of the assassins over Caesar's body'. When this aspect of the occasion is prominent in our minds, it is no doubt the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor that is in part responsible. It is also the invitation that the metaphor has held out to those generations of actors who have established a stage tradition in the matter. But there may be a further influence through ways of visualizing heroic occasions which we derive from painting: from Jacques-Louis David in such a typical work as *The Oath of the Horatii*, from the fashionable *tableaux vivants* from which David in part took his cue, and beyond that from the Baroque Classicism of Nicolas Poussin.

However this may be, Cassius, in the two and a half lines in which he launches into the future history of the theatre, is perhaps saying a little more than he intends or knows. Certainly Brutus is so doing in his succeeding *amplificatio*. 'How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport.' This is an acceptance of, and embroidery upon, the surface value of Cassius' speech as concerned with stage-plays to come. Caesar shall bleed in *sport* in the sense alike of *make-believe* and of *entertainment*. He will be butchered to make a French or English, a German or Italian or Spanish holiday, but the actor undertaking his part will not really be coming to any harm; he will return home to the supper for which he has been singing. Brutus' 'bleed', however, takes us back to his injunction to bathe up to the elbows in Caesar's blood and, further, to 'besmear' in that blood the same weapons which have just achieved its lethal effusion. Lurking in this is a new notion: the notion that the entire exercise has been another kind of sport, a blood sport. Brutus and his companions are to act as hunters act after a kill. They are, in a sense, novices; they have not been out after this particular quarry before; as in fox-hunting, they are to be 'blooded' accordingly. With this we have come close, too, to the idea of ritual slaughter. We recall *Hamlet*, that play haunted by Julius Caesar's ghost:

Polonius. I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th'Capitol, Brutus killed me.

Hamlet. It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. Be the players ready?

Caesar has become a sacrificial animal, a scapegoat who happens to be a man after all. And here Brutus' 'bathe' and Cassius' 'wash' come to the same thing, since blood is a cleansing and not a defiling agent when brought within a mystical or sacrificial context.

3

Although *Julius Caesar* is not to be called a tragedy of blood, there is plenty of real blood in it; Caesar himself, the poet Cinna, Cassius, Brutus all bleed to death before us on the stage. Yet blood is mentioned far more often than it is seen. 'Flagrant and excessive', is Wilson Knight's comment on the blood imagery in the play. It comes again and again: sometimes passingly, sometimes with a certain rhetorical elaboration, and more than once with a muted reference to blood's magical properties. Calpurnia dreams that Caesar's statue

> like a fountain with an hundred spouts
> Did run pure blood, and many lusty Romans
> Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.

Decius has no difficulty in explaining to Caesar that this dream (which Shakespeare has substituted for one in Plutarch which has no blood-letting in it) is the happiest of omens:

> Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
> In which so many smiling Romans bathed,
> Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
> Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
> For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.

Antony assures the citizens that, did they know the contents of Caesar's will, they would 'dip their napkins in his sacred blood'. The only trope his tremendous oration contains turns on Caesar's blood:

> Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabbed;
> And as he plucked his cursed steel away,
> Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it,
> As rushing out of doors, to be resolved
> If Brutus so unkindly knocked or no.

Pompey's statue, he tells them, 'all the while ran blood' during the assassination—a touch of the supernatural which Shakespeare comes by, it seems, through a mistranslation of North's. Before the conspirators, too, when he boldly confronts them, Antony has plenty to say about Caesar's blood:

> Pardon me, Julius! Here was thou bayed, brave hart,
> Here dids't thou fall, and here thy hunters stand,
> Signed in thy spoil and crimsoned in thy lethe.

Here again, and reduplicated within a line, is the image of the conspirators ritually blooded. But Antony's finest stroke in this speech is simpler and comes earlier. He speaks of the 'slippery ground' on which he stands before them—a phrase with the same kind of force as Angus's

> Now does he feel
> His secret murders sticking on his hands

in *Macbeth*.

The strongest and strangest appearance of the proposition that there is something sacrificial in the brisk and brutal killing of Caesar comes in a speech by Brutus from which I have already quoted:

> Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
> We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,
> And in the spirit of men there is no blood . . .
> gentle friends,
> Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;
> Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
> Now hew him as a carcass fit for hounds:
> And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
> Stir up their servants to an act of rage
> And after seem to chide 'em. This shall make
> Our purpose necessary and not envious:
> Which so appearing to the common eyes,
> We shall be called purgers, not murderers.

Political assassination is not really Brutus' thing, and this speech succinctly exhibits the fatal muddle he has got himself into. Caesar's life is to be offered to the gods in a propitiatory rite designed by 'purgers' to ward off evil from the land. Or anyway, it must be fixed as 'so appearing to the common eyes'. And so our hearts, and their servants or instruments our hands, must be conceived (we may comment) in something of the relationship of Henry Bolingbroke to Sir Pierce of Exton. 'They love not poison that do poison need.'

4

A play is performed, a ritual is enacted, over and over again. Has history the same character? Is it a kind of *Finnegans Wake*, that ever moves full circle and returns to the point of its departure? We ourselves are brought back by these questions to Pompey's theatre. 'How many ages hence'—Cassius exclaims:

> Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

And Brutus responds: 'How many times shall Caesar bleed . . .' Cassius' words may mean 'In how remote a future', but the further sense of 'over and over again' comes unequivocally in with the plurals, 'states unborn and accents yet unknown'. The audience in the brand-new Globe would be aware that the prediction had been fulfilled at the level of theatrical history. The groundlings, for example, would remember *Caesar's Revenge* and the Admiral's men in *Caesar and Pompey* not many years before; and the learned could list dramatic versions of Caesar's death in half the languages of Renaissance Europe. But what of 'the wiser sort'—who, Gabriel Harvey tells us, found satisfaction in that somewhat sombre play, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*? Did they leave the theatre feeling that in this play, *Julius Caesar*, so outward and simple and heroic, so concise and crystalline in its command of the English language, there had at last arrived the ideal text for reading aloud in English schools? Or did they feel both this, and that the tragedy embodies a dispassionate and disenchanted anatomy of man as a political animal, even a tragic vision of history? All through the action we see men deceiving themselves. Caesar believes that always he is Caesar, whereas he is really Caesar for only so long as he clings to the role through a desperate exercise of the will. Cassius sees himself as a hard man, a practical realist, even a scurvy politican; but in fact he is an emotional being—sensitive, unstable, affectionate. Brutus has a fatal itch to know all the answers, and an equally fatal proclivity for getting everything wrong; so tangled is our human skein—we are being told—that a man may be thus and thus helplessly blind and self-deceived, and yet be the noblest Roman of them all. When Casca, somewhat surprisingly, gets into quite a state over a night of dirty weather in Rome, Cicero sedately points out to him that

> men may construe things, after their fashion,
> Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.

Is this perhaps being shown to us, through the medium of a formidable tragic irony, in our lofty scene?

'How many ages hence . . . How many times . . .' This sort of thing—twenty-three treacherous wounds, much shouting about liberty, a new gang in power, an Antony lurking and waiting, confederates destined to be at one another's throats—precisely this sort of lofty scene, we need make no mistake, the future holds in store to the last syllable of recorded time. And it will all be 'in sport'—if not for men then for the gods. The gods kill us for their sport, as they killed Julius Caesar and Alexander, and laughed to see that haughty clay patch a wall or bung a barrel. Here is the nightmare of history.

5

Eight lines from *Julius Caesar*, then, have brought us within hail of that view of Shakespeare's historical dramas as a whole which has within recent years been forcefully propounded by a Polish critic, Professor Jan Kott. The Grand Mechanism is at work. Caesar has mounted that staircase from the highest step of which there is only a leap into the abyss. Brutus, Cassius, Antony are mounting it now. And so, with their successors, will it always be. 'How many ages hence . . . How many times . . .' Shakespeare's genius, which is also his cruelty, reveals, through the very speeches in which men think to proclaim themselves servants of a moral order and an elevated political ethic, the tooth-and-claw struggle to survive which alone constitutes history when distilled from its irrelevancies. Men who sit at a common table and drink from a common cup rise only to hunt one another down like beasts, to bathe in one another's blood—mouthing, it may be, whether through hypocrisy or in mere obtuse self-delusion, high-sounding maxims of philosophy the while. Between the moral order and the order of history there is a total discrepancy. And unfortunately the order of history is the real one. We are *in* history, *in* the nightmare. We can awake from it only to the black comedy of our own ultimate indignity in a senseless universe.

This view of Shakespeare—that he is a pessimist in the strict sense of the word—has its basis for Professor Kott in an examination of the history plays, both English and Roman. The English plays are seen as positively monolithic in this regard; and in their raw material one can already see the outline of all the later great tragedies. *Richard III*, for example, which exhibits

history as 'one continuous chain of violence, an unending stormy week', helps us to interpret *Hamlet* as essentially a political drama; and *Hamlet* reflects back on *Richard III* a light enabling us to discern in the chronicle a philosophic drama exhibiting the imbecility and irrelevance of moral conscience in the world in which we are called upon to live.

As well as monolithic, the history plays are static. 'For Shakespeare history stands still. Every chapter opens and closes at the same point.' The Grand Mechanism, the Great Staircase, are always before us:

> In the different plays different people are brave, or cruel, or cunning. But the drama that is being played out between them is always the same. . . . From the highest step there is only a leap into the abyss. The monarchs change. But all of them—good and bad, brave and cowardly, vile and noble, naïve and cynical—tread on the steps that are always the same.

Good and bad? No, not even that:

> For there are no bad kings, or good kings; kings are only kings. Or let us put it in modern terms: there is only the king's situation, and the system. This situation leaves no room for freedom of choice.

And again:

> There are no gods in Shakespeare. There are only kings, every one of whom is an executioner, and a victim, in turn.

What are we to say to all this?

> O world! no world, but mass of public wrongs,
> Confus'd and fill'd with murder and misdeeds!

We may feel that Kott's Shakespeare is Thomas Kyd with a dash of genius. We may feel that too much ought not to be extrapolated, as it were, from *Richard III*, that high-spirited bravura Senecan piece. But on the centrality of this play for the study of Shakespeare, on the centrality, indeed, of two or three scenes in it, Professor Kott has no doubts. The high point is Richard's seduction (if that be the word) of Lady Anne—'one of the greatest scenes written by Shakespeare, and one of the greatest ever written':

> Once again Shakespeare reminds us that the action takes place on earth, the cruellest of planets, and among men, who are more cruel than beasts. . . . He reduces the world to elemental forces of hate and lust. Lady Anne still hates Richard, but is already alone with her hate,

in a world in which only lust exists. . . . If history is no more than a gigantic slaughter, what remains, except a leap into the darkness, a choice between death and pleasure?

And the conclusion is absolute:

In Shakespeare's royal Histories there is only hate, lust and violence. . . . All human values are brittle, and the world is stronger than men. The implacable roller of history crushes everybody and everything.

Professor Kott concludes this remarkable and (as it has proved) influential essay—influential, in particular, in the theatre—with some notice of a production of *Richard III* at the Ateneum Theatre in Warsaw in 1960. Peace has come—the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York. A misshapen buffoon, Richard of Gloucester, comes upon the stage, crowing with laughter; as he does so, iron bars are lowered behind him, making a background to the scene. The action of the play transacts itself, and is over; the bloody dog is dead. On comes Richmond:

A new, young king will now talk of peace. Rows of bars are lowered from above. Henry VII speaks of peace, forgiveness, justice. And suddenly he gives a crowing sound like Richard's, and, for a second, the same sort of grimace twists his face. The bars are being lowered. The face of the new King is radiant again.

6

I have followed Professor Kott so far because his formidable reading of the English history plays can certainly be carried over to the Roman ones. He has, indeed, written on *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, though I do not know whether he has anywhere written on *Julius Caesar*. But consider: might not the final scene of *Julius Caesar* be played in the key of that Warsaw *Richard III*? As each pronounces his formal eulogy over the dead Brutus, may not Octavius and Antony be eyeing each other as once Caesar and Pompey eyed each other—or Caesar and Cassius? Of course they may, and if we seek to underscore the fact in production we can think up some such expressive device as that of the bars coming down. Only Shakespeare's plays are not neon-lit affairs; they are composed in the finest light and shade; the picture is full of delicate balances which we destroy if we garishly plug one thing or another.

It is critical commonplace that these plays have spoken variously to the minds and hearts of men during the several

ages, the many generations, that have passed since they were written. Paradoxically perhaps, a grand sign of what we call their universality is their high applicability, their searching relevance, to the specific problems and urgencies of the time—any time. Swinburne acclaims in Brutus 'the very noblest figure of a typical and ideal republican in all the literature of the world', and we know that behind this estimate lie strong feelings about the liberation and unification of Italy. We know too that our sense of the reality and complexity of Shakespeare's characters is enhanced when we see them thus passionately, even if partially, perceived. Every interpretation of Shakespeare is prizeable that comes to us from a sensitive mind wrought upon by present human aspiration, struggle, suffering. Of course the occasional existence of unacceptable extravagance in this liberty of interpreting is not to be denied. Thus when I went recently to see what proved to be an excellent production of *The Tempest* I was handed a programme-note telling me that the theme of the play is colonial racialism, and that it thus deals in infantile complexes not properly resolved in adolescence. We may safely call this a partial view. And I believe that Professor Kott's view of Shakespeare, although far removed from nonsense, is partial because it is unhistorical (as many of his critics have insisted) and also because it is, in a sense, all too historical—obsessively framed in the light, or amid the darkness, of a single dreadful time.

Again, every critic has his temperament, his idiosyncrasy; and the play of this upon the dramas can greatly enrich them. Coleridge is the exemplar here; yet it is curious how comparatively narrow, in its survey of Shakespeare's achievement, is that powerful and comprehensive mind. To Coleridge whole plays spoke not at all. Now, Professor Kott is another who tells us what plays he likes. And, as with Coleridge, temperamental factors may be at work.

Professor Kott tells us that he prefers *Richard II* and *Richard III* to *Henry IV*, since they example 'a far deeper and more austere kind of tragedy'. Perhaps they do. But what in Shakespeare moves this brilliant critic would also constrain him, I suppose, to prefer *Titus Andronicus* (on which, indeed, he has a good deal to say) to *Julius Caesar*. And what he goes for in the mature comedies is some point at which they are 'split by inner contradictions'. In *As You Like It*:

> Harmony is only a brief and fleeting moment of stillness. The idyll is disturbed by Jaques's bitter mockery.

I am reminded of the close of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in which Elizabeth-Jane reflects upon herself as 'she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain'. Kott's Shakespeare would have appealed to Hardy. To a sombre mind Shakespeare can be sombre indeed.

We may agree that a reading of Shakespeare 'exacts a full look at the worst', however, without banishing all other aspects of the plays from our regard. When we have read Kott's book our simple experience of the plays tells us that there is a balance to be regained. How are we to achieve this in our reception of *Julius Caesar*? Obviously, in the first instance, by allowing more to the private life and the domestic affections. Portia chooses a dreadful end. But it is not for nothing that Brutus has said to her:

> You are my true and honourable wife,
> As dear to me as are the ruddy drops
> That visit my sad heart.

Brutus' comportment to Lucius cannot be rubbed out, or even Caesar's amenity amid his guests. And so with friendship. Brutus kills Caesar, but there is still an authenticity, albeit muddled enough, in his continuing to feel and value their friendship; 'our Caesar', he calls the dead man in a strange and poignant phrase. And when he cries at the end

> My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
> I found no man but he was true to me

the irony (for his friend Caesar had not the fortune to die while able to proclaim anything of the kind) and the pathos of a self-deceiver, as T. S. Eliot would say, cheering himself up, do not alienate our sympathies, for here is a generous thing to believe and to give thanks for at death. Again, the playboy Antony, a masker and reveller who is to turn swiftly and ruthlessly to the power game ('These many then shall die; their names are pricked'), is of all these men the one capable of the most sincere grief at Caesar's death, and of the most courageous reaction to it. But the great place in this kind is, of course, the quarrel and reconciliation of Brutus and Cassius in the fourth act. It is a childish affair, if coldly examined; and being without significance for the sequence of events may be regarded as weakening the structure of the tragedy. Yet it is a scene upon which criticism has visited almost universal praise. Coleridge declared that he knew no passage in all the plays that more certainly

attested the supreme genius of Shakespeare. In what does its appeal—say, rather, its power—lie? The best answer is given, I think, by Palmer:

> Shakespeare, in his political plays, presents political situations and characters, but his supreme interest is always in the private person. The essential business of his political plays is to show how the private person comes to terms with his political duties, offices or ambitions, and the dramatic climax is always to be found when the protagonists come before us stripped of their public pretensions. . . . Brutus, the stoic moralist and man of preconceived ideas, is to unmask. We are to see him deeply moved by the simplest of human feelings. He is to quarrel with his friend and make it up under the stress of an emotion which compels him in the end even to overlook the cause of his displeasure and bury all unkindness in a cup of wine. Cassius, the political leader who drove Brutus to the killing of Caesar and would have killed Antony as well, is to be revealed in a mood which levels him with the least sophisticated of men, to appear simply as one who loves his friend, acknowledges his rash humour and cannot drink too much of Brutus' love. The effect of this abrupt descent from the political to the human plane of experience is poignant in the extreme.

There is a truth here applicable, in varying degree, to all Shakespeare's history plays. The figures on his Great Staircase are men and women. His kings and queens *have* faces. And when they put off their robes and furred gowns it is not necessarily great vices that these are seen to have hidden. What is revealed is a company of enjoying and suffering human beings, levelled, despite their rank, with the general surface of life, much like ourselves. They differ from ourselves, indeed, in this: that Shakespeare has created them, and Shakespeare is all absorbed attention before them—quite as much in their closet as their council-chamber. For Professor Kott, Shakespeare is one who, most characteristically, 'searched for the confirmation of his bitter, most pessimistic and cruel philosophy of history'. I do not think he had such a philosophy, disenchanted though his view of human character and motive often is. I do not think he put in much time searching for the confirmation of *any* philosophy. He had too many people on his hands: Falstaff, and Iago, and Hamlet, and Perdita, and Macbeth.