

CHAPTER 2

"Invisible Bullets"¹ (1988)

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In his notorious police report of 1593 on Christopher Marlowe, the Elizabethan spy Richard Baines informed his superiors that Marlowe had declared, among other monstrous opinions, that "Moses was but a Juggler, and that one Heriots being Sir W Raleigh's man Can do more than he."² The "Heriots" cast for a moment in this lurid light is Thomas Harriot, the most profound Elizabethan mathematician, an expert in cartography, optics, and navigational science, an adherent of atomism, the first Englishman to make a telescope and turn it on the heavens, the author of the first original book about the first English colony in America, and the possessor throughout his career of a dangerous reputation for atheism.³ . . .

At Raleigh's 1603 treason trial, for example, Justice Popham solemnly warned the accused not to let "Harriot, nor any such Doctor, persuade you there is no eternity in Heaven, lest you find an eternity of hell-torments."⁴ Nothing in Harriot's writings suggests that he held the position attributed to him here, but the charge does not depend upon evidence: Harriot is invoked as the archetypal corrupter, Achitophel seducing the glittering Absalom. If the atheist did not exist, he would have to be invented.

Yet atheism is not the only mode of subversive religious doubt, and we cannot discount the persistent rumors of Harriot's heterodoxy by pointing to either his conventional professions of faith or the conventionality of the attacks upon him. Indeed I want to suggest that if we look closely at *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), the only work Harriot published in his lifetime and hence the work in which he was presumably the most cautious, we can find traces of material that could lead to the remark attributed to Marlowe, that "Moses was but a Juggler, and that one Heriots being Sir W Raleigh's man Can do more than he." And I want to suggest further that understanding the relation between orthodoxy and subversion in Harriot's text will enable us to construct an interpretive model that may be used to understand the far more complex problem posed by Shakespeare's history plays.

Those plays have been described with impeccable intelligence as deeply conservative and with equally impeccable intelligence as deeply radical. Shakespeare, in Northrop Frye's words, is "a born courtier," the dramatist who organizes his representation of English history around the hegemonic mysticism of the Tudor

myth; Shakespeare is also a relentless demystifier, an interrogator of ideology, "the only dramatist," as Franco Moretti puts it, "who rises to the level of Machiavelli in elaborating all the consequences of the separation of political praxis from moral evaluation."⁵ The conflict glimpsed here could be investigated, on a performance-by-performance basis, in a history of reception, but that history is shaped, I would argue, by circumstances of production as well as consumption. The ideological strategies that fashion Shakespeare's history plays help in turn to fashion the conflicting readings of the plays' politics. And these strategies are no more Shakespeare's invention than the historical narratives on which he based his plots. As we shall see from Harriot's *Brief and True Report*, in the discourse of authority a powerful logic governs the relation between orthodoxy and subversion.

I should first explain that the apparently feeble wisecrack about Moses and Harriot finds its way into a police file on Marlowe because it seems to bear out one of the Machiavellian arguments about religion that most excited the wrath of sixteenth-century authorities: Old Testament religion, the argument goes, and by extension the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, originated in a series of clever tricks, fraudulent illusions perpetrated by Moses, who had been trained in Egyptian magic, upon the "rude and gross" (and hence credulous) Hebrews.⁶ This argument is not actually to be found in Machiavelli, nor does it originate in the sixteenth century; it is already fully formulated in early pagan polemics against Christianity. But it seems to acquire a special force and currency in the Renaissance as an aspect of a heightened consciousness, fueled by the period's prolonged crises of doctrine and church governance, of the social function of religious belief.

Here Machiavelli's writings are important. *The Prince* observes in its bland way that if Moses' particular actions and methods are examined closely, they appear to differ little from those employed by the great pagan princes; the *Discourses* treats religion as if its primary function were not salvation but the achievement of civic discipline, as if its primary justification were not truth but expediency.⁷ Thus Romulus's successor Numa Pompilius, "finding a very savage people, and wishing to reduce them to civil obedience by the arts of peace, had recourse to religion as the most necessary and assured support of any civil society" (*Discourses*, 146). For although "Romulus could organize the Senate and establish other civil and military institutions without the aid of divine authority, yet it was very necessary for Numa, who feigned that he held converse with a nymph, who dictated to him all that he wished to persuade the people to." In truth, continues Machiavelli, "there never was any remarkable lawgiver amongst any people who did not resort to divine authority, as otherwise his laws would not have been accepted by the people" (147). From here it was only a short step, in the minds of Renaissance authorities, to the monstrous opinions attributed to the likes of Marlowe and Harriot. . . .

Harriot does not voice any speculations remotely resembling the hypotheses that a punitive religion was invented to keep men in awe and that belief originated in a fraudulent imposition by cunning "jugglers" on the ignorant, but his recurrent association with the forbidden thoughts of the demonized other may be linked to something beyond malicious slander. If we look attentively at his account of the

first Virginia colony, we find a mind that seems interested in the same set of problems, a mind, indeed, that seems to be virtually testing the Machiavellian hypotheses. Sent by Raleigh to keep a record of the colony and to compile a description of the resources and inhabitants of the area, Harriot took care to learn the North Carolina Algonquian dialect and to achieve what he calls a "special familiarity with some of the priests."⁸ The Virginian Indians believe, Harriot writes, in the immortality of the soul and in otherworldly punishments and rewards for behavior in this world: "What subtlety soever be in the *Wiroances* and Priests, this opinion worketh so much in many of the common and simple sort of people that it maketh them have great respect to the Governors, and also great care what they do, to avoid torment after death and to enjoy bliss" (374).⁹ The split between the priests and people implied here is glimpsed as well in the description of the votive images: "They think that all the gods are of human shape, and therefore, they represent them by images in the forms of men, which they call *Kewasowak*. . . The common sort think them to be also gods" (373). And the social function of popular belief is underscored in Harriot's note to an illustration showing the priests carefully tending the embalmed bodies of the former chiefs: "These poor souls are thus instructed by nature to reverence their princes even after their death" (De Bry, p. 72).

We have then, as in Machiavelli, a sense of religion as a set of beliefs manipulated by the subtlety of priests to help instill obedience and respect for authority. The terms of Harriot's analysis — "the common and simple sort of people," "the Governors," and so forth — are obviously drawn from the language of comparable social analyses of England; as Karen Kupperman has most recently demonstrated, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen characteristically describe the Indians in terms that closely replicate their own self-conception, above all in matters of *status*.¹⁰ The great mass of Indians are seen as a version of "the common sort" at home, just as Harriot translates the Algonquian *veroan* as "great Lord" and speaks of "the chief Ladies," "virgins of good parentage," "a young gentlewoman," and so forth. There is an easy, indeed almost irresistible, analogy in the period between accounts of Indian and European social structure, so that Harriot's description of the inward mechanisms of Algonquian society implies a description of comparable mechanisms in his own culture.¹¹

To this we may add a still more telling observation not of the internal function of native religion but of the impact of European culture on the Indians: "Most things they saw with us," Harriot writes, "as mathematical instruments, sea compasses, the virtue of the loadstone in drawing iron, a perspective glass whereby was showed many strange sights, burning glasses, wildfire works, guns, books, writing and reading, spring clocks that seem to go of themselves, and many other things that we had, were so strange unto them, and so far exceeded their capacities to comprehend the reason and means how they should be made and done, that they thought they were rather the works of gods than of men, or at the leastwise they had been given and taught us of the gods" (375–6). This delusion, born of what Harriot supposes to be the vast technological superiority of the European, caused

the savages to doubt that they possessed the truth of God and religion and to suspect that such truth "was rather to be had from us, whom God so specially loved than from a people that were so simple, as they found themselves to be in comparison of us" (376).

Here, I suggest, is the very core of the Machiavellian anthropology that posited the origin of religion in an imposition of socially coercive doctrines by an educated and sophisticated lawgiver on a simple people. And in Harriot's list of the marvels — from wildfire to reading — with which he undermined the Indians' confidence in their native understanding of the universe, we have the core of the claim attributed to Marlowe: that Moses was but a juggler and that Raleigh's man Harriot could do more than he. The testing of this hypothesis in the encounter of the Old World and the New was appropriate, we may add, for though vulgar Machiavellianism implied that all religion was a sophisticated confidence trick, Machiavelli himself saw that trick as possible only at a radical point of origin: "If any one wanted to establish a republic at the present time," he writes, "he would find it much easier with the simple mountaineers, who are almost without any civilization, than with such as are accustomed to live in cities, where civilization is already corrupt; as a sculptor finds it easier to make a fine statue out of a crude block of marble than out of a statue badly begun by another."¹² It was only with a people, as Harriot says, "so simple, as they found themselves to be in comparison of us," that the imposition of a coercive set of religious beliefs could be attempted.

In Harriot, then, we have one of the earliest instances of a significant phenomenon: the testing upon the bodies and minds of non-Europeans or, more generally, the noncivilized, of a hypothesis about the origin and nature of European culture and belief. In encountering the Algonquian Indians, Harriot not only thought he was encountering a simplified version of his own culture but also evidently believed that he was encountering his own civilization's past.¹³ This past could best be investigated in the privileged anthropological moment of the initial encounter, for the comparable situations in Europe itself tended to be already contaminated by prior contact. Only in the forest, with a people ignorant of Christianity and startled by its bearers' technological potency, could one hope to reproduce accurately, with live subjects, the relation imagined between Numa and the primitive Romans, Moses and the Hebrews. The actual testing could happen only once, for it entails not detached observation but radical change, the change Harriot begins to observe in the priests who "were not so sure grounded, nor gave such credit to their traditions and stories, but through conversing with us they were brought into great doubts of their own" (375).¹⁴ I should emphasize that I am speaking here of events as reported by Harriot. The history of subsequent English–Algonquian relations casts doubt on the depth, extent, and irreversibility of the supposed Indian crisis of belief. In the *Brief and True Report*, however, the tribe's stories begin to *collapse* in the minds of their traditional guardians, and the coercive power of the European beliefs begins to show itself almost at once in the Indians' behavior: "On a time also when their corn began to wither by reason of a drought which happened extraordinarily, fearing that it had come to pass by reason that in

some thing they had displeased us, many would come to us and desire us to pray to our God of England, that he would preserve their corn, promising that when it was ripe we also should be partakers of their fruit" (377). If we remember that the English, like virtually all sixteenth-century Europeans in the New World, resisted or were incapable of provisioning themselves and in consequence depended upon the Indians for food, we may grasp the central importance for the colonists of this dawning Indian fear of the Christian God.

As early as 1504, during Columbus's fourth voyage, the natives, distressed that the Spanish seemed inclined to settle in for a long visit, refused to continue to supply food. Knowing from his almanac that a total eclipse of the moon was imminent, Columbus warned the Indians that God would show them a sign of his displeasure; after the eclipse, the terrified Indians resumed the supply. But an eclipse would not always be so conveniently at hand. John Sparke, who sailed with Sir John Hawkins in 1564–5, noted that the French colonists in Florida "would not take the pains so much as to fish in the river before their doors, but would have all things put in their mouths."¹⁵ When the Indians wearied of this arrangement, the French turned to extortion and robbery, and before long there were bloody wars. A similar situation seems to have arisen in the Virginia colony: despite land rich in game and ample fishing grounds, the English nearly starved to death when the exasperated Algonquians refused to build fishing weirs and plant corn.¹⁶

It is difficult to understand why men so aggressive and energetic in other regards should have been so passive in the crucial matter of feeding themselves. No doubt there were serious logistic problems in transporting food and equally serious difficulties adapting European farming methods and materials to the different climate and soil of the New World, yet these explanations seem insufficient, as they did even to the early explorers themselves. John Sparke wrote that "notwithstanding the great want that the Frenchmen had, the ground doth yield victuals sufficient, if they would have taken pains to get the same; but they being soldiers, desired to live by the sweat of other mens brows."¹⁷ This remark bears close attention: it points not to laziness or negligence but to an occupational identity, a determination to be nourished by the labor of others weaker, more vulnerable, than oneself. This self-conception was not, we might add, exclusively military: the hallmark of power and wealth in the sixteenth century was to be waited on by others. "To live by the sweat of other men's brows" was the enviable lot of the gentleman; indeed, in England it virtually defined a gentleman. The New World held out the prospect of such status for all but the poorest cabin boy.¹⁸

But the prospect could not be realized by violence alone, even if the Europeans had possessed a monopoly of it, because the relentless exercise of violence could actually reduce the food supply. As Machiavelli understood, physical compulsion is essential but never sufficient; the survival of the rulers depends upon a supplement of coercive belief. The Indians must be persuaded that the Christian God is all-powerful and committed to the survival of his chosen people, that he will wither the corn and destroy the lives of savages who displease him by disobeying or plotting against the English. Here is a strange paradox: Harriot tests

and seems to confirm the most radically subversive hypothesis in his culture about the origin and function of religion by imposing his religion – with its intense claims to transcendence, unique truth, inescapable coercive force – on others. Not only the official purpose but the survival of the English colony depends upon this imposition. This crucial circumstance licensed the testing in the first place; only as an agent of the English colony, dependent upon its purposes and committed to its survival, is Harriot in a position to disclose the power of human achievements – reading, writing, perspective glasses, gunpowder, and the like – to appear to the ignorant as divine and hence to promote belief and compel obedience.

Thus the subversiveness that is genuine and radical – sufficiently disturbing so that to be suspected of it could lead to imprisonment and torture – is at the same time contained by the power it would appear to threaten. Indeed the subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers its ends. One may go still further and suggest that the power Harriot both serves and embodies not only produces its own subversion but is actively built upon it: the project of evangelical colonialism is not set over against the skeptical critique of religious coercion but batters on the very confirmation of that critique. In the Virginia colony, the radical undermining of Christian order is not the negative in might but the positive condition for the establishment of that order. And this paradox extends to the production of Harriot's text: *A Brief and True Report*, with its latent heterodoxy, is not a reflection upon the Virginia colony or even a simple record of it – it is not, in other words, a privileged withdrawal into a critical zone set apart from power – but a continuation of the colonial enterprise. . . .

Shakespeare's plays are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder, and the three practices that I have identified in Harriot's text – testing, recording, and explaining¹⁹ – all have their recurrent theatrical equivalents, above all in the plays that meditate on the consolidation of state power.

These equivalents are not unique to Shakespeare; they are the signs of a broad institutional appropriation that is one of the root sources of the theater's vitality. Elizabethan playing companies contrived to absorb, refashion, and exploit some of the fundamental energies of a political authority that was itself already committed to histrionic display and hence was ripe for appropriation. But if he was not alone, Shakespeare nonetheless contrived to absorb more of these energies into his plays than any of his fellow playwrights. He succeeded in doing so because he seems to have understood very early in his career that power consisted not only in dazzling display – the pageants, processions, entries, and progresses of Elizabethan statecraft – but also in a systematic structure of relations, those linked strategies I have tried to isolate and identify in colonial discourse at the margins of Tudor society. Shakespeare evidently grasped such strategies not by brooding on the impact of English culture on far-off Virginia but by looking intently at the world immediately around him, by contemplating the queen and her powerful friends and enemies, and by reading imaginatively the great English chroniclers. And the crucial point is less that he represented the paradoxical practices of an authority deeply complicit

in undermining its own legitimacy than that he *appropriated* for the theater the compelling energies at once released and organized by these practices.

The representation of a self-undermining authority is the principal concern of *Richard II* which marks a brilliant advance over the comparable representation in the *Henry VI* trilogy, but the full appropriation for the stage of that authority and its power is not achieved until *1 Henry IV*. We may argue, of course, that in this play there is little or no "self-undermining" at all: emergent authority in *1 Henry IV* – that is, the authority that begins to solidify around the figure of Hal – is strikingly different from the enfeebled command of Henry VI or the fatally self-wounded royal name of Richard II. "Who does not all along see," wrote Upton in the mid-eighteenth century, "that when prince Henry comes to be king he will assume a character suitable to his dignity?" My point is not to dispute this interpretation of the prince as, in Maynard Mack's words, "an ideal image of the potentialities of the English character,"²⁰ but to observe that such an ideal image involves as its positive condition the constant production of its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion.

We are continually reminded that Hal is a "juggler," a conniving hypocrite, and that the power he both serves and comes to embody is glorified usurpation and theft.²¹ Moreover, the disenchantment makes itself felt in the very moments when Hal's moral authority is affirmed. Thus, for example, the scheme of Hal's redemption is carefully laid out in his soliloquy at the close of the first tavern scene, but as in the act of *explaining* that we have examined in Harriot, Hal's justification of himself threatens to fall away at every moment into its antithesis. "By how much better than my word I am," Hal declares, "By so much shall I falsify men's hopes" (1.2.210–11). To falsify men's hopes is to exceed their expectations, and it is also to disappoint their expectations, to deceive men, to turn hopes into fictions, to betray.

At issue are not only the contradictory desires and expectations centered on Hal in the play – the competing hopes of his royal father and his tavern friends – but our own hopes, the fantasies continually aroused by the play of innate grace, limitless playfulness, absolute friendship, generosity, and trust. Those fantasies are symbolized by certain echoing, talismanic phrases ("when thou art king," "shall we be merry?" "a thousand pound"), and they are bound up with the overall vividness, intensity, and richness of the theatrical practice itself. Yeats's phrase for the quintessential Shakespearean effect, "the emotion of multitude," seems particularly applicable to *1 Henry IV* with its multiplicity of brilliant characters, its intensely differentiated settings, its dazzling verbal wit, its mingling of high comedy, farce, epic heroism, and tragedy. The play awakens a dream of superabundance, which is given its irresistible embodiment in Falstaff.

But that dream is precisely what Hal betrays or rather, to use his own more accurate term, "falsifies." He does so in this play not by a decisive act of rejection, as at the close of *2 Henry IV*, but by a more subtle and continuous draining of the plenitude. "This chair shall be my state," proclaims Falstaff, improvising the king's part, "this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown." Hal's cool rejoinder

cuts deftly at both his real and his surrogate father: "Thy state is taken for a join'd-stool, thy golden sceptre for a leaden dagger, and thy precious rich crown for a pitiful bald crown" (2.4.378–82). Hal is the prince and principle of falsification – he is himself a counterfeit companion, and he reveals the emptiness in the world around him. "Dost thou hear, Hal?" Falstaff implores, with the sheriff at the door. "Never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit. Thou art essentially made, without seeming so" (2.4.491–3). The words, so oddly the reverse of the ordinary advice to beware of accepting the counterfeit for reality, attach themselves to both Falstaff and Hal: do not denounce me to the law for I, Falstaff, am genuinely your adoring friend and not merely a parasite; and also, do not think of yourself, Hal, as a mere pretender, do not imagine that your value depends upon falsification.

The "true piece of gold" is alluring because of the widespread faith that it has an intrinsic value, that it does not depend upon the stamp of authority and hence cannot be arbitrarily duplicated or devalued, that it is indifferent to its circumstances, that it cannot be robbed of its worth. This is the fantasy of identity that Falstaff holds out to Hal and that Hal empties out, as he empties out Falstaff's pockets. "What hast thou found?" "Nothing but papers, my lord" (2.4.532–3).²² Hal is an anti-Midas: everything he touches turns to dross. And this devaluation is the source of his own sense of value, a value not intrinsic but contingent, dependent upon the circulation of counterfeit coin and the subtle manipulation of appearances:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend, to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(1.2.212–17)

Such lines, as Empson remarks, "cannot have been written without bitterness against the prince," yet the bitterness is not incompatible with an "ironical acceptance" of his authority.²³ The dreams of plenitude are not abandoned altogether – Falstaff in particular has an imaginative life that overflows the confines of the play itself – but the daylight world of *1 Henry IV* comes to seem increasingly one of counterfeit, and hence one governed by Bolingbroke's cunning (he sends "counterfeits" of himself out onto the battlefield) and by Hal's calculations. A "starveling" – fat Falstaff's word for Hal – triumphs in a world of scarcity. Though we can perceive at every point, through our own constantly shifting allegiances, the potential instability of the structure of power that has Henry IV and his son at the pinnacle and Robin Ostler, who "never joy'd since the price of oats rose" (2.1.12–13), near the bottom, Hal's "redemption" is as inescapable and inevitable as the outcome of those practical jokes the madcap prince is so fond of playing. Indeed, the play insists, this redemption is not something toward which the action moves but something that is happening at every moment of the theatrical representation. . . .

One might add that *1 Henry IV* itself insists upon the impossibility of sealing off the interests of the theater from the interests of power. Hal's characteristic activity is playing or, more precisely, theatrical improvisation – his parts include his father, Hotspur, Hotspur's wife, a thief in buckram, himself as prodigal, and himself as penitent – and he fully understands his own behavior through most of the play as a role that he is performing. We might expect that this role playing gives way at the end to his true identity: "I shall hereafter," Hal has promised his father, "Be more myself" (3.2.92–3). With the killing of Hotspur, however, Hal clearly does not reject all theatrical masks but rather replaces one with another. "The time will come," Hal declares midway through the play, "That I shall make this northern youth exchange / His glorious deeds for my indignities" (3.2.144–6); when that time has come, at the play's close, Hal hides with his "favors" (that is, a scarf or other emblem, but the word favor also has in the sixteenth century the sense of "face") the dead Hotspur's "mangled face" (5.4.96), as if to mark the completion of the exchange.

Theatricality, then, is not set over against power but is one of power's essential modes. In lines that anticipate Hal's promise, the angry Henry IV tells Worcester, "I will from henceforth rather be myself, / Mighty and to be fear'd, than my condition" (1.3.5–6). "To be oneself" here means to perform one's part in the scheme of power rather than to manifest one's natural disposition, or what we would normally designate as the very core of the self. Indeed it is by no means clear that such a thing as a natural disposition exists in the play except as a theatrical fiction: we recall that in Falstaff's hands the word *instinct* becomes histrionic rhetoric, an improvised excuse for his flight from the masked prince. "Beware instinct – the lion will not touch the true prince. Instinct is a great matter; I was now a coward on instinct. I shall think the better of myself, and thee, during my life; I for a valiant lion, and thou for a true prince" (2.4.271–5). Both claims – Falstaff's to natural valor, Hal's to legitimate royalty – are, the lines darkly imply, of equal merit.

Again and again in *1 Henry IV* we are tantalized by the possibility of an escape from theatricality and hence from the constant pressure of improvisational power, but we are, after all, in the theater, and our pleasure depends upon there being no escape, and our applause ratifies the triumph of our confinement. The play operates in the manner of its central character, charming us with its visions of breadth and solidarity, "redeeming" itself in the end by betraying our hopes, and earning with this betrayal our slightly anxious admiration. Hence the odd balance in this play of spaciousness – the constant multiplication of separate, vividly realized realms and militant claustrophobia: the absorption of all of these realms by a power at once vital and impoverished. The balance is almost perfect, as if Shakespeare had somehow reached through in *1 Henry IV* to the very center of the system of opposed and interlocking forces that held Tudor society together.

If the subversive force of "recording" is substantially reduced in *Henry V*, the mode I have called explaining is by contrast intensified in its power to disturb. The war of conquest that Henry V launches against the French is depicted as carefully founded on acts of "explaining." The play opens with a notoriously elaborate

account of the king's genealogical claim to the French throne, and, as in the comparable instances in Harriot, this ideological justification of English policy is an unsettling mixture of "impeccable" reasoning (once *its* initial premises are accepted) and gross self-interest.²⁴ In the ideological apologies for absolutism, the self-interest of the monarch and the interest of the nation are identical, and both in turn are secured by God's overarching design. Hence Hal's personal triumph at Agincourt is represented as the nation's triumph, which in turn is represented as God's triumph. When the deliciously favorable kill ratio – ten thousand French dead compared to twenty-nine English²⁵ – is reported to the king, he immediately gives "full trophy, signal, and ostent," as the Chorus later puts it, to God: "Take it, God, / For it is none but thine!" (4.8.11–12).

Hal evidently thinks this explanation of the English victory – this translation of its cause and significance from human to divine agency – needs some reinforcement:

And be it death proclaimed through our host
To boast of this, or take that praise from God
Which is his only.

(4.8.114–16)

By such an edict God's responsibility for the slaughter of the French is enforced, and with it is assured at least the glow of divine approval over the entire enterprise, from the complex genealogical claims to the execution of traitors, the invasion of France, the threats leveled against civilians, the massacre of the prisoners. Yet there is something disconcerting as well as reinforcing about this draconian mode of ensuring that God receive credit: with a strategic circularity at once compelling and suspect, God's credit for the killing can be guaranteed only by the threat of more killing. The element of compulsion would no doubt predominate if the audience's own survival were at stake – the few Elizabethans who openly challenged the theological pretensions of the great found themselves in deep trouble – but were the stakes this high in the theater? Was it not possible inside the playhouse walls to question certain claims elsewhere unquestionable?

A few years earlier, at the close of *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe had cast a witheringly ironic glance, worthy of Machiavelli, at the piety of the triumphant: Ferneze's gift to God of the "trophy, signal, and ostent" of the successful betrayal of Barabas is the final bitter joke of a bitter play. Shakespeare does not go so far. But he does take pains to call attention to the problem of invoking a God of battles, let alone enforcing the invocation by means of the death penalty. On the eve of Agincourt, the soldier Williams had responded unenthusiastically to the disguised king's claim that his cause was good:

But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp'd off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, "We died at such a place" – some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afraid there are few die well that die

in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of **any** thing, when blood is their argument? (4.1.134–43)

To this the king replies with a string of awkward “**explanations**” designed to show that “the King is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers” (4.1.155–6) – as if death in battle were a completely unforeseen accident or, alternatively, as if each soldier killed were being punished by God for a hidden crime or, again, as if war were a religious blessing, an “**advantage**” to a soldier able to “wash every mote out of his conscience” (4.1.179–80). Not only are these explanations mutually contradictory, but they cast long shadows on the king himself. For in the wake of this scene, as the dawn is breaking, Hal pleads nervously with God not to think – at least “not to-day” – upon the crime from which he has benefited: his father’s deposition and killing of Richard II. The king calls attention to all the expensive and ingratiating ritual acts that he has instituted to compensate for the murder of the divinely anointed ruler – reinterment of the corpse, five hundred poor “in yearly pay” to plead twice daily for pardon, two chantries where priests say mass for Richard’s soul – and he promises to do more.

Yet in a moment that anticipates Claudius’s inadequate repentance of old Hamlet’s murder, inadequate since he is “still possess’d / Of those effects” for which the crime was committed (*Hamlet* 3.3.53–4), Hal acknowledges that these expiatory rituals and even “contrite tears” are worthless:

Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon.

(4.1.303–5)²⁶

If by nightfall Hal is threatening to execute anyone who denies God full credit for the astonishing English victory, the preceding scenes would seem to have fully exposed the ideological and psychological mechanisms behind such compulsion, its roots in violence, magical propitiation and bad conscience. The pattern disclosed here is one we have glimpsed in *2 Henry IV*: we witness an anticipatory subversion of each of the play’s central claims. The archbishop of Canterbury spins out an endless public justification for an invasion he has privately confessed would relieve financial pressure on the church; Hal repeatedly warns his victims that they are bringing pillage and rape upon themselves, but he speaks as the head of the invading army that is about to pillage and rape them; Gower claims that the king has ordered the killing of the prisoners in retaliation for the attack on the baggage train, but we have just been shown that the king’s order preceded that attack.²⁷ Similarly, Hal’s meditation on the sufferings of the great – “What infinite heart’s ease / Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!” (4.1.236–7) – suffers from his being almost single-handedly responsible for a war that by his own earlier account and that of the enemy is causing immense civilian misery. And after watching a scene in which anxious, frightened troops sleeplessly await the dawn, it is difficult to be fully persuaded by Hal’s climactic vision of the “slave” and “peasant” sleeping

comfortably, little knowing “What watch the King keeps to maintain the peace” (4.1.283).

This apparent subversion of the monarch’s glorification has led some critics since Hazlitt to view the panegyric as bitterly ironic or to argue, more plausibly, that Shakespeare’s depiction of Henry V is radically ambiguous.²⁸ But in the light of Harriot’s *Brief and True Report*, we may suggest that the subversive doubts the play continually awakens originate paradoxically in an effort to intensify the power of the king and his war. The effect is bound up with the reversal that we have noted several times – the great events and speeches all occur twice: the first time as fraud, the second as truth. The intimations of bad faith are real enough, but they are deferred – deferred until after Essex’s campaign in Ireland, after Elizabeth’s reign, after the monarchy itself as a significant political institution. Deferred indeed even today, for in the wake of full-scale ironic readings and at a time when it no longer seems to matter very much, it is not at all clear that *Henry V* can be successfully performed as subversive.

The problem with any attempt to do so is that the play’s central figure seems to feed on the doubts he provokes. For the enhancement of royal power is not only a matter of the deferral of doubt: the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it, precisely as they heighten the theatrical interest of the play; the unequivocal, unambiguous celebrations of royal power with which the period abounds have no theatrical force and have long since fallen into oblivion. The charismatic authority of the king, like that of the stage, depends upon falsification.

The audience’s tension, then, enhances its attention; prodded by constant reminders of a gap between real and ideal, the spectators are induced to make up the difference, to invest in the illusion of magnificence, to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror. The ideal king must be in large part the invention of the audience, the product of a will to conquer that is revealed to be identical to a need to submit. *Henry V* is remarkably self-conscious about this dependence upon the audience’s powers of invention. The prologue’s opening lines invoke a form of theater radically unlike the one that is about to unfold: “A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, / And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!” (3–4). In such a theater-state there would be no social distinction between the king and the spectator, the performer and the audience; all would be royal, and the role of the performance would be to transform not an actor into a king but a king into a god: “Then should the warlike Harry, like himself, / Assume the port of Mars” (5–6). This is in effect the fantasy acted out in royal masques, but Shakespeare is intensely aware that his play is not a courtly entertainment, that his actors are “flat unraised spirits,” and that his spectators are hardly monarchs – “gentles all,” he calls them, with fine flattery.²⁹ “Let us,” the prologue begs the audience, “On your imaginary forces work. . . For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings” (17–18, 28). This “must” is cast in the form of an appeal and an apology – the consequence of the miserable limitations of “this unworthy scaffold” – but the necessity extends, I suggest, beyond the stage: all kings are “decked” out by the

imaginary forces of the spectators, and a sense of the limitations of king or theater only excites a more compelling exercise of those forces.

Power belongs to whoever can command and profit from this exercise of the imagination, hence the celebration of the charismatic ruler whose imperfections we are invited at once to register and to "piece out" (Prologue, 23). Hence too the underlying complicity throughout these plays between the prince and the playwright, a complicity complicated but never effaced by a strong counter-current of identification with Falstaff. In *Hal*, Shakespeare fashions a compelling emblem of the playwright as sovereign "juggler," the minter of counterfeit coins, the genial master of illusory subversion and redemptive betrayal. To understand Shakespeare's conception of *Hal*, from rakehell to monarch, we need in effect a poetics of Elizabethan power, and this in turn will prove inseparable, in crucial respects, from a poetics of the theater. Testing, recording, and explaining are elements in this poetics, which is inseparably bound up with the figure of Queen Elizabeth, a ruler without a standing army, without a highly developed bureaucracy, without an extensive police force, a ruler whose power is constituted in theatrical celebrations of royal glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory. Power that relies on a massive police apparatus, a strong middle-class nuclear family, an elaborate school system, power that dreams of a panopticon in which the most intimate secrets are open to the view of an invisible authority – such power will have as its appropriate aesthetic form the realist novel;³⁰ Elizabethan power, by contrast, depends upon its privileged visibility. As in a theater, the audience must be powerfully engaged by this visible presence and at the same time held at a respectful distance from it. "We princes," Elizabeth told a deputation of Lords and Commons in 1586, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world.³¹

Royal power is manifested to its subjects as in a theater, and the subjects are at once absorbed by the instructive, delightful, or terrible spectacles and forbidden intervention or deep intimacy. The play of authority depends upon spectators – "For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings" – but the performance is made to seem entirely beyond the control of those whose "imaginary forces" actually confer upon it its significance and force. These matters, Thomas More imagines the common people saying of one such spectacle, "be king's games, as it were stage plays, and for the more part played upon scaffolds. In which poor men be but the lookers-on. And they that wise be will meddle no farther."³² Within this theatrical setting, there is a notable insistence upon the paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions of authority, but this apparent production of subversion is, as we have already seen, the very condition of power. I should add that this condition is not a theoretical necessity of theatrical power in general but a historical phenomenon, the particular mode of this particular culture. "In sixteenth-century England," writes Clifford Geertz, comparing Elizabethan and Majapahit royal progresses, "the political center of society was the point at which the tension between the passions that power excited and the ideals it was supposed to serve was screwed to its highest pitch. . . In fourteenth-century Java, the center was the point at which such tension disappeared in a blaze of cosmic symmetry."³³

It is precisely because of the English form of absolutist theatricality that Shakespeare's drama, written for a theater subject to state censorship, can be so relentlessly subversive: the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, helps to contain the radical doubts it continually provokes. Of course, what is for the state a mode of subversion contained can be for the theater a mode of containment subverted: there are moments in Shakespeare's career – *King Lear* is the greatest example when the process of containment is strained to the breaking point.³⁴ But the histories consistently pull back from such extreme pressure. Like Harriot in the *New World*, the Henry plays confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis that princely power originates in force and fraud even as they draw their audience toward an acceptance of that power. And we are free to locate and pay homage to the plays' doubts only because they no longer threaten us.³⁵ There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us.

Notes

- 1 Greenblatt's title refers to the way the English colonists duped the natives of North America into believing that the English god had shot those natives who were dying of diseases imported from Europe by the colonists with invisible bullets. This subterfuge had the effect of augmenting the natives' awe at the powers of the colonists. [Eds.]
- 2 John Bakeless, *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 1, p. 111. *Juggler* is a richly complex word, including in its range of associations con man, cheap entertainer, magician, trickster, storyteller, conjurer, actor, and dramatist.
- 3 On Harriot, see especially *Thomas Harriot, Renaissance Scientist*, ed. John W. Shirley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Muriel Rukeyser, *The Traces of Thomas Harriot* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Jean Jacquot, "Thomas Harriot's Reputation for Impiety," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 9 (1952), pp. 164–87. Harriot himself appears to have paid close attention to his reputation; see David B. Quinn and John W. Shirley, "A Contemporary List of Harriot References," *Renaissance Quarterly* 22 (1969), pp. 9–26.
- 4 Jacquot, "Thomas Harriot's Reputation for Impiety," p. 167. In another official record, Popham is reported to have said ominously, "You know what men say of *Hereiat*" (John W. Shirley, "Sir Walter Raleigh and Thomas Harriot," in *Thomas Harriot, Renaissance Scientist*, p. 27). The logic (if that is the word for it) would seem to be this: since God clearly supports the established order of things and punishes offenders with eternal tortments, a criminal must be someone who has been foolishly persuaded that God does not exist. The alternative theory posits wickedness, a corruption of the will so severe as to lead people against their own better knowledge into the ways of crime. The two arguments are often conflated, since atheism is the heart of the greatest wickedness, as well as the greatest folly.
- 5 Northrop Frye, *On Shakespeare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 10 (see also p. 60: "Shakespeare's social vision is a deeply conservative one"); Franco Moretti, "'A Huge Eclipse': Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim

Books, 1982), p. 31. On the histories as occasioning an interrogation of ideology, see Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, "History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*," in John Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 205–27.

6 Here is how Richard Baines construes Marlowe's version of this argument: "He affirmeth . . . That the first beginning of Religion was only to keep men in awe. That it was an easy matter for Moyses being brought vp in all the artes of the Egiptians to abuse the Jewes being a rude & grosse people" (C. F. Tucker Brooke, *The Life of Marlowe* [London: Methuen, 1930], app. 9, p. 98). For other versions, see Strathmann, *Sir Walter Raleigh*, pp. 70–2, 87.

7 "To come to those who have become princes through their own merits and not by fortune, I regard as the greatest, Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and their like. And although one should not speak of Moses, he having merely carried out what was ordered him by God, still he deserves admiration, if only for that grace which made him worthy to speak with God. But regarding Cyrus and others who have acquired or founded kingdoms, they will all be found worthy of admiration, and if their particular actions and methods are examined they will not appear very different from those of Moses, although he had so great a Master [che ebbe si gran precettore]" (Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci, revised E. R. P. Vincent [New York: Random House, 1950], p. 20). Christian Detmold translated the *Discourses*, in the same volume.

The delicate ironies here are intensified in the remarks on ecclesiastical principalities:

They are acquired either by ability or by fortune; but are maintained without either, for they are sustained by ancient religious customs, which are so powerful and of such quality, that they keep their princes in power in whatever manner they proceed and live. These princes alone have states without defending them, have subjects without governing them, and their states, not being defended are not taken from them; their subjects not being governed do not resent it, and neither think nor are capable of alienating themselves from them. Only those principalities, therefore, are secure and happy. But as they are upheld by higher causes, which the human mind cannot attain to, I will abstain from speaking to them; for being exalted and maintained by God, it would be the work of a presumptuous and foolish man to discuss them. (*The Prince*, pp. 41–2)

The sly wit of this passage depends not only on the subtle mockery but also on the possibility that the "ancient religious customs" are in fact politically efficacious.

8 Thomas Harriot, *A breife and true report of the new found land of Virginia: of the commodities there found and to be rayseed, as well marchantable, as other for victuall, building and other neccesarie uses for those that are and shal be the planters there; and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants* (London, 1588), in *The Roanoke Voyages, 1584–1590*, 2 vols, ed. David Beers Quinn, Hakluyt Society 2nd series, no. 104 (London, 1955), p. 375.

The illustrated edition of this account includes John White drawings of these priests and of the ceremonies over which they presided, along with a striking drawing of a dancing figure called "the conjurer." "They have commonly conjurers or jugglers," Harriot's annotation explains, "which use strange gestures, and often contrary to nature in their enchantments: For they be very familiar with devils, of whom they enquire what their enemies do, or other such things. . . The inhabitants give great credit unto their speech, which oftentimes they find to be true." (Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True*

Report, facsimile of the 1590 Theodor De Bry edition [New York: Dover, 1972], p. 54). I will refer to this edition in my text as De Bry.

In the next generation, William Strachey would urge that when the colonists have the power, they should "performe the same acceptable service to god, that Iehu king of Israell did when he assembled all the priests of Baal and slue them to the last man in their owne Temple" (*Historie of Travell*, p. 94).

The best introduction to the current scholarship on the Algonquians of southern New England is Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *Northeast* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1978).

- 9 Harriot goes on to note that the disciplinary force of religious fear is supplemented by secular punishment: "although notwithstanding there is punishment ordained for malefactors, as stealers, whoremoonger, and other sortes of wicked doers; some punished with death, some with forfeitures, some with beating, according to the greatness of the factes" (De Bry, p. 26).
- 10 See Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).
- 11 I should add that it quickly became a rhetorical trope to describe the mass of Europeans as little better than or indistinguishable from American savages.
- 12 *Discourses*, p. 148. The context of this observation is the continuing discussion of Numa's wisdom in feigning divine authority: "It is true that those were very religious times, and the people with whom Numa had to deal were very untutored and superstitious, which made it easy for him to carry out his designs, being able to impress upon them any new form. . . I conclude that the religion introduced by Numa into Rome was one of the chief causes of the prosperity of that city" (147–8).
- 13 When in 1590 the Flemish publisher Theodor De Bry reprinted Harriot's *Briefe and True Report*, he made this belief explicit: along with engravings of John White's brilliant Virginia drawings, De Bry's edition includes five engravings of the ancient Picts, "to shoue how that the Inhabitants of the great Bretannie haue bin in times past as sauage as those of Virginia" (De Bry, p. 75).
- 14 In his notes to the John White engravings, Harriot also records his hopes for a widespread Algonquian conversion to Christianity: "Thes poore soules haue none other knowledge of god although I thinke them verye Desirous to know the truthe. For when as wee kneeled downe on our knees to make our prayers vnto god, they went abowt to imitate vs. and when they saw we moued our lipps, they also dyd the like. Wherefore that is verye like that they might easelye be brought to the knowledge of the gospel. God of his mercie grant them this grace" (De Bry, p. 71).
- 15 In Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 vols (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1903–5), 10, p. 54.
- 16 The situation is parodied in Shakespeare's *Tempest* when the drunken Caliban, rebelling against Prospero, sings:

No more dams I'll make for fish,
Nor fetch in firing
At requiring,
Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish.
(2.2.180–3)

- 17 Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, 10, p. 56.

- 18 For an alternative explanation of the principal sources of the Europeans' apparent apathy, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown," *Journal of American History* 66 (1979), pp. 24–40. Kupperman argues that there are significant parallels between the deaths of early colonists and the deaths of American prisoners in Korean prison camps.
- 19 By recording, Greenblatt means Harriot's noting of alternative explanations of events, especially those offered by the natives, that come perilously close to a certain accuracy that undermines the official English account (of such things as the deaths caused by the newly imported diseases). By explaining, Greenblatt means Harriot's apologizing to the natives for not being able to wish disease on their enemies. Harriot is obliged to say that his God is not amenable to such requests, and this explanation undermines or subverts the official English account of the all-powerfulness of their deity and of his willingness to help the English conquer the natives with "invisible bullets." [Eds.]
- 20 John Upton, *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (1748), in Brian Vickers, ed., *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 3, 1733–1752 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 297; Maynard Mack, introduction to the Signet Classic edition of *I Henry IV* (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. xxxv.
- 21 Who is the "we" in these sentences? I refer both to the stage tradition of the play and to the critical tradition. This does not mean that the play cannot be staged as a bitter assault upon Hal, but such a staging will struggle against the current that has held sway since the play's inception and indeed since the formation of the whole ideological myth of Prince Hal.
- 22 In the battle of Shrewsbury, when Falstaff is pretending he is dead, Hal, seeing the body of his friend, thinks with an eerie symbolic appropriateness of having the corpse literally emptied. As Hal exits, Falstaff rises up and protests. If Falstaff is an enormous mountain of flesh, Hal is the quintessential thin man: "you starveling," Falstaff calls him (2.4.244). From Hal's point of view, Falstaff's fat prevents him from having any value at all: "there's no room for faith, truth, nor honesty in this bosom of thine; it is all filled up with guts and midriff" (3.3.153–5).
- Here and throughout the discussion of *I Henry IV*, I am indebted to Edward Snow.
- 23 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 103.
- 24 "This does not sound like hypocrisy or cynicism. The Archbishop discharges his duty faithfully, as it stands his reasoning is impeccable. . . Henry is not initiating aggression" (J. H. Walter, in the Arden edition of *King Henry V* [London: Methuen, 1954], p. xxv).
- 25 The kill ratio is highly in the English favor in all accounts, but Shakespeare adopts from Holinshed the most extreme figure. Holinshed himself adds that "other writers of greater credit affirm that there were slain above five or six hundred" Englishmen (Holinshed, in the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Henry V*, ed. Gary Taylor [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984], p. 308). Similarly, Shakespeare makes no mention of the tactical means by which the English army achieved its victory. The victory is presented as virtually miraculous.
- 26 In a long appendix to his edition of *Henry V*, Gary Taylor attempts to defend his emendation of "all" to "ill" in these lines, on the grounds that an interpretation along the lines of Claudius's failed repentance would be difficult for an actor to communicate and, if communicated, would make "the victory of Agincourt morally and dramatically incomprehensible" (p. 298). The interpretive framework that I am sketching in this chapter should make the Folio's reading fully comprehensible; the effect of the victory is, by my account, intensified by the play's moral problems.

- 27 Taylor makes a subtle and, I think, implausible attempt to reduce the unintended irony of Gower's line, "wherefore the King, most worthily, hath caus'd every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat" (4.7.8–10): "Gower is not saying (as all editors and critics seem to have understood him) 'the king caused the prisoners to be executed because of the attack on the baggage train' but 'given the barbarity of the subsequent French conduct, the king has quite justifiably caused the death of his prisoners'" (p. 243). Even were we to understand the line in Taylor's sense, it would open a moral problem still worse than the political problem that has been resolved.
- 28 See the illuminating discussion in Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 33–62.
- 29 This is flattery carefully echoed in Hal's promise to his troops on the eve of Agincourt that "be he ne'er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition" (4.3.62–3). The promise is silently forgotten after the battle.
- 30 For a brilliant exploration of this hypothesis, see D. A. Miller, "The Novel and the Police," in *Glyph* 8 (1981), pp. 127–47.
- 31 Quoted in J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1584–1601*, 2 vols (London: Cape, 1965), 2, p. 119. For the complex relation between theater and absolutism, see Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983); Greenblatt, *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*; Steven Mullaney, "Lying like Truth: Riddle, Representation, and Treason in Renaissance England," *ELH* 47 (1980), pp. 32–47; Paola Colaiacomo, "Il teatro del principe," *Calibano* 4 (1979), pp. 53–98; Christopher Pye, "The Sovereign, the Theater, and the Kingdome of Darknesse: Hobbes and the Spectacle of Power," *Representations* 8 (1984), pp. 85–106.
- 32 Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R. S. Sylvester, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 80.
- 33 Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in Joseph Ben David and Terry Nichols Clark, eds, *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 160.
- 34 The nameless servant in *Lear* who can no longer endure what he is witnessing and who heroically stabs his master Cornwall, the legitimate ruler of half of England, inhabits a different political world from the one sketched here, a world marked out by Shakespeare as tragic.
- 35 Perhaps we should imagine Shakespeare writing at a moment when none of the alternatives for a resounding political commitment seemed satisfactory; when the pressure to declare himself unequivocally an adherent of one or another faction seemed narrow, ethically coarse, politically stupid; when the most attractive political solution seemed to be to keep options open and the situation fluid.