... so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads...

Hamlet.

SHAKESPEARE AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL:
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND INTENTIONAL MOTIVES

The fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull

All's Well that Ends Well.

When the ghost appears to Hamlet in the queen's bedchamber (III. iv. 103 ff.), it tells him that 'this visitation/Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose'. That purpose is to avenge his father by killing Claudius. It is a purpose imposed on Hamlet from outside, and we have seen the difficulty he experiences making it into something of his own. Shakespeare experiences the same difficulty over exactly the same thing – but on a dramatic rather than an existential level. For his purpose – imposed on him by the story of Hamlet he found in Saxo, Belleforest and Kyd – was also to kill the king. Like the ghost, he imposes this duty on Hamlet. When Hamlet has fulfilled his purpose in killing the king, Shakespeare will have fulfilled his purpose in writing the play about killing the king. There is a sense, then, in which the action of the play is regulated by a purpose not of
the author’s own contriving, but inherent in the narrative he has chosen to dramatize. Since this purpose can be completed only with the connivance of the principal character, the character must be instrumental to the author’s purpose of satisfying the demands of the narrative he controls. We have seen, though, how Hamlet spends so much time evading his duty to satisfy his author’s requirement of him. Looking at any episode in the play, we are likely to be struck by the way Hamlet’s intentional acts fail to fit easily into a sequence of intentional acts which unambiguously look forward to killing Claudius as their raison d’être. The ulterior intention which will swallow them up in an explanation of what all that the play was for is as elusive as the ghost is enigmatic.

This aspect of the play fascinated Goethe, who discussed it in Book V of Wilhelm Meister. Before Serlo’s troupe of travelling players begin to rehearse Hamlet, Wilhelm draws their attention to a discrepancy between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ relations of the characters. Internal relations are ‘the powerful effects which arise from the characters and proceedings of the main figures’. Wilhelm is perfectly satisfied with these. But the external relations – the means by which the characters ‘are brought from place to place, or combined in various ways by certain accidental incidents’¹ – are unsatisfactory, and Wilhelm improves the play by subordinating them to a political subplot dominated by Fortinbras and the Norwegian business. This is what leads Wilhelm to his description of the play as one that is ‘full of plan’ but that has at its heart a hero who is ‘without a plan’. The play he is referring to, however, is his own adaptation of Hamlet, not the play we know from the Quarto and Folio printings.² Wilhelm says that ‘if the former background were left standing, so manifold, so fluctuating and confused, it would hurt the impression of the figures.’ The puzzling concatenation of Chance and Fate in Shakespeare’s version of the story invites a response pitched somewhere between the purely tragic and the proto-novelistic:

The hero in this case, it was observed, is endowed more properly with sentiments than with a character; it is events alone that push him on; and accordingly the piece has in some measure the expansion of a novel. But as it is Fate that draws the plan; as the story issues from a deed of terror, and the hero is continually driven forward to a deed of terror, the work is tragic in the highest sense, and admits of no other than a tragic end.