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“Each Word Made True and Good”: Narrativity in *Hamlet*

GUILDENSTERN: Good my lord, vouchsafe me a word with you.

HAMLET: Sir, a whole history.

ANY PLAY THAT CONCLUDES with a plea on the part of the dying protagonist to recount the story of his final vicissitudes is one which, whatever other themes it might address, calls attention to its own underlying concern with the vindicatory powers of narrative. Although there are a number of Shakespearean tragedies that culminate in exhortations of this sort, the instance that will perhaps most readily spring to mind is that of *Hamlet*, the hero of which dies after enjoining his friend Horatio to “Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story.”¹ The question that arises in this work as in others with comparable endings is whether the story-telling impulse asserts itself only at the conclusion of the play, when the hero is obliged to confront the image of himself that will be transmitted to posterity, or whether—as Stephen Greenblatt has argued is the case with *Othello*²—it might not in some degree be a determinant of events within the drama itself. My own view is that *Hamlet* is as deeply interested in the implications of story-telling as it is by now

¹*Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982) 5.2.352–54. Subsequent references are to this edition.

²*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 232–52.

generally understood to be in the nature of drama,³ that if, as Anne Barton suggests, it “is a tragedy dominated by the idea of the play,”⁴ it is no less deeply imbued with a sense of the demiurgical potentialities of narrative. The object of the present discussion is to investigate *Hamlet* from the point of view of this pervasive concern with the narrative impulse, with the stories that men tell about themselves and the world about them in their efforts to confer order and meaning on experience. More specifically, by elaborating what will doubtless appear to be a fairly tendentious ‘story’ of my own, an admittedly circumscribed reading of the tragedy based on those elements which seem to me to illustrate the issue with particular pertinency, I wish to explore the play’s preoccupation with what might be termed self-actualizing narrativization, the process that is by which narrative not only reflects but in some sense constitutes the reality with which it engages.

Like many of Shakespeare’s clowns, together with those villains who, like Iago, are peculiarly adept at exploiting the disparity between appearance and reality for their own purposes, Hamlet is for much of the play a relentless “corrupter of words” whose most typical verbal gambits undermine the conventional links binding sign and significance.⁵ In what might from this point of view be regarded as an emblematic exchange between Hamlet and Polonius, the prince gives a practical demonstration of the radical disjunction between words and the world, at the same time implying that what goes by the name of truth consists in nothing more substantial than the consensus of the moment:

Ham. Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?

Pol. By th’ mass and ’tis—like a camel indeed.

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.

³Among those who have dealt with the metadramatic aspect of *Hamlet* see for instance Anne Righter Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962; Westport, [CT]: Greenwood, 1977) ch. 6, and James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in “Hamlet”* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983). Maurice Charney touches on the issue at a number of points in *Hamlet’s Fictions* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁴*Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* 155.

⁵*Twelfth Night* 3.1.37.

Pol. It is backed like a weasel.

Ham. Or like a whale.

Pol. Very like a whale. (3.2.367–73)

Later Hamlet plays a very similar trick on that paragon of courtly affectation Osric, whose love of “golden words” (5.2.129) is surpassed only by his incapacity to use them with anything resembling propriety (5.2.94–100). Although Hamlet’s profound scepticism concerning the stability of language is clearly aggravated by his sense that words and their meanings have been conscripted into the service of a corrupt social order of which people such as Osric are representative, and in which he himself “must hold my tongue” (1.2.159) if he is to survive, it is not wholly reducible to the specific circumstances in which he finds himself. As M.M. Mahood points out in her classic study of Shakespeare’s wordplay, the Elizabethans were profoundly aware of the problematic nature of the relation between words and the things they were meant to designate, and of the consequent liabilities attendant upon any uncritical use of language.⁶ The arbitrary character of the sign, its contingent and potentially severable relation to its referent, was as familiar a concept to Shakespeare’s contemporaries as it is to us, and Juliet’s question “What’s in a name?” sums up a philosophy of language that enjoyed considerable currency,⁷ though it was perhaps not one that a professional playwright could contemplate without anxiety. What is true of words at the level of signs or names applies also to the larger structures in which words cohere, and in particular to those narratives through which experience is invested with moral meaning and direction. If events, especially the events for which human beings are personally or collectively responsible, are not random or arbitrary, they must be assimilated to some sort of narrative, must fit into the story that the individual or a society is telling about him or itself.⁸ The questions that arise at this juncture

⁶*Shakespeare’s Wordplay* (1957; London: Routledge, 1988) esp. 169–88.

⁷*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2.43. I have examined the attitude to language implicit in this play in my article, “That Which We Call a Name: The Balcony Scene in *Romeo and Juliet*,” *English* 44.178 (Spring 1995): 1–16.

⁸For a discussion of how this principle operates in historical discourse, see Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 5–27.

concern the nature of the correspondence between reality and the story that is being told about it. Does the story in some elementary sense “hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature,” as Hamlet declares that theatrical representation should do (3.2.22), or does it condition our perception of reality, interposing itself as a cognitive filter between the world and our understanding of it?⁹ Expressed in metaphysical rather than epistemological terms, does ‘Reality’ exist at all in any absolute sense, or like Hamlet’s polymorphous cloud is it no more than a function of the verbal structures used to describe it?¹⁰

I would suggest that these issues are present from the beginning of *Hamlet*, the opening scenes of which depict the efforts on the part of various personages to make sense of an experience that is essentially inchoate, pointedly nameless, first alluded to in the most neutral possible terms in Horatio’s enquiry to the sentinels patrolling the walls of Elsinore: “has this thing appear’d again to-night?” (1.1.24). The event in question is, of course, the appearance of what the scene directions refer to as a Ghost. Even at this early stage, however, there is a respect in which the story precedes its enactment in material events, the audience having been forewarned of the existence of the apparition before witnessing it for the first time. The motive for Horatio’s presence on the castle battlements is precisely that the phenomenon has been observed on other occasions, and the scepticism of this student from Wittenberg provides a pretext for another character to relate the circumstances of the previous episode. When the Ghost does actually materialize, it would seem almost to be in direct response to narrative exigencies, as if he has been evoked by the story that is being told about him:

⁹In a footnote White points out that there is an etymological connection between the words *narrate* and *know*, which both derive from the Sanskrit root *gnâ* (“The Value of Narrativity” 5n).

¹⁰I have discussed these issues in relation to one of Henry James’s most famous novellas in my essay, “Telling Tales in *The Turn of the Screw*,” *Durham University Journal* 87.1 (1995): 63–71. The affinity between James’s story and Shakespeare’s play is at points so close that it is tempting to speculate whether James might not have had *Hamlet* at least distantly in mind when he wrote his tale.

- Bar.* Sit down awhile,
 And let us once again assail your ears,
 That are so fortified against our story,
 What we have two nights seen.
- Hor.* Well, sit we down.
 And let us hear Barnardo speak of this.
- Bar.* Last night of all,
 When yond same star that's westward from the pole,
 Had made his course t'illuminate that part of heaven
 Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
 The bell then beating one—

Enter GHOST.

- Mar.* Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.
 (1.1.33–43)

The Ghost enters upon the scene as if in fulfillment of the expectations aroused by Barnardo's narrative, temporarily effacing the boundary between words and the world and rendering redundant further recitation of what, to judge from the preliminaries, threatens to be a somewhat long-winded tale. With the Ghost's appearance words are translated into facts, story becomes history. Horatio himself implies that such a transformation or transposition has taken place, when in his report of the episode for Hamlet's benefit he emphasizes the continuity between the tale that Marcellus and Barnardo have been recounting and the event that subsequently occurs: "Where, as they had deliver'd, both in time, / Form of the thing, each word made true and good, / The apparition comes" (1.2.209–11). The Word is made ectoplasm, if not quite flesh.

Though he has arrived on the scene in response to narrative, however, the larger narrative function of the Ghost remains for the moment undefined. Summoned into existence by one story, he remains a cipher, in need of another story to explain him. He himself does not speak, does not disclose his reasons for being there, does not narrate himself. Marcellus ingenuously urges Horatio to address the Ghost, the grounds for Horatio's qualification to transact with the supernatural being his superior education: "Thou art a

scholar, speak to it, Horatio" (1.1.45). But although Horatio repeatedly enjoins the Ghost to speak, the apparition remains enigmatically silent. Horatio therefore ventures his own hypothesis as to the Ghost's motives for being there. He infers that the apparition "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.72), and it is apparently this remark that provokes Marcellus's sudden access of curiosity as to the reasons for the military preparations in which Denmark is currently engaged, an oddly pedestrian preoccupation in a man who thinks he has just seen a ghost. Horatio explains this mobilization by furnishing a brief account of Fortinbras's ambitions with respect to Danish territory. He makes it clear that it is this emergency which is responsible for the watch that they are keeping, and since it is because of the watch that the Ghost has been encountered there might seem to be a connection between the two events. Barnardo suggests indeed that "Well may it sort that this portentous figure / Comes armed through our watch so like the King / That was and is the question of these wars" (1.1.112-14). Like the inveterate scholar he is, Horatio instinctively draws on his stock of classical parallels in his effort to make sense of what is happening, alluding to the portents that preceded Caesar's assassination in the "most high and palmy state of Rome" (1.1.116), and observing that similar prodigies have been witnessed even in darkest Denmark.

What is clearly occurring at this point is that between them Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo are elaborating a somewhat bizarre but on the whole self-consistent story which accommodates and therefore 'explains' the apparition. Denmark is being menaced by the son of a man whom King Hamlet once defeated in single combat, and a presage of the impending peril therefore appears in the guise of the late king attired exactly as he was when he vanquished his opponent. Such things are on record as having occurred in ancient Rome, and in Denmark itself happenings of a similar order have been reported, so the event is not entirely without precedent. The story, though admittedly far-fetched, is as cogent as can be expected under the circumstances. The three men do not automatically rule out other possible explanations, and indeed, when the Ghost appears again, Horatio offers him a choice of several alternative plot scenarios, in an exhortation to speak that is almost incantatory:

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
 Speak to me.
 If there be any good thing to be done
 That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,
 Speak to me;
 If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
 Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
 O, speak;
 Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
 Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
 For which they say your spirits oft walk in death,
 Speak of it, stay and speak. (1.1.131-42)

Notwithstanding the range and diversity of the hypotheses they are prepared to entertain, however, it seems to occur to no one to suggest that the explanation for the Ghost's presence might be that there was something sinister in the circumstances of King Hamlet's death. It is improbable that any suspicions were excited by this event at the time, or they would presumably emerge to the surface now. There is therefore technically no need to refer the matter to Prince Hamlet, since the crisis signified by the Ghost's appearance would seem to be of a national rather than a private character. It is only the Ghost's persistent silence, his failure either to confirm or deny any of the scenarios that have been submitted to him, that prompts Horatio to suggest that the younger Hamlet be informed of the event, the supposition being that "This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" (1.1.176). And at this point, of course, other narrative possibilities open up.

It is not until these preliminary efforts at interpreting events have been witnessed—and their implications as regards the relativity of interpretation at least subliminally registered—that we first meet Prince Hamlet. Initially, the prince is no less ambiguous and difficult to pin down than the Ghost himself. His ostentatiously black attire—his "nighted colour," as his mother describes it (1.2.68)—may conceivably link him with the blackness of the night in which the Ghost appears, but whether this is accepted or not, it is certainly suggestive not only of protracted mourning but also of the condition of social and existential negativity in which the young man finds himself. To risk an analogy that, though anachronistic in

the extreme, may yet have a certain illustrative utility in the present context, the prince's "inky cloak" (1.2.77) in the gaudy court of Elsinore makes him appear as a radically indeterminate figure in a sort of large-scale Rorschach Test, susceptible to any interpretation that anyone, including he himself, should wish to place on him. He too is destitute of a role, having been deprived of his anticipated one by the unexpected accession to the throne of his uncle.¹¹ In a certain sense, the narrative of his life has been interrupted, his voice forced underground (as, to pursue the parallel, the Ghost's voice will later be heard from below the stage¹²). He remains silent until he is directly addressed by Claudius, and when he does speak his opening remarks are deliberately equivocal. The reasons for Hamlet's eccentric conduct, insofar at least as Hamlet himself understands them, are revealed in his first soliloquy, in which he gives vent to his disgust at the precipitous marriage of his mother with Claudius. At this point, before Hamlet has been apprised by Horatio of the events of the previous night, the audience is acquainted with the fact that, whether justly or not, Hamlet feels he has an axe to grind. He harbours a grudge of overwhelming proportions towards his uncle, yet can impute nothing to him that might objectively warrant such animosity other than what he—but not, apparently, other members of the court or the ecclesiastical authorities which solemnized the marriage¹³—regards as the incestuous union between Gertrude and Claudius.

¹¹This is not the place to consider whether Shakespeare was thinking of Denmark as a hereditary or an elective monarchy, or by what mechanism he imagined the throne devolved upon Claudius rather than Hamlet upon the previous incumbent's death. What is important in the present context, however, is that Hamlet himself evidently feels that he has been wrongfully deprived of the throne he enjoyed some kind of entitlement to: he declares as much when he charges Claudius with having "Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes" (5.2.65). For a discussion of the legal aspect of the question of succession in this play, see Harold Jenkins's extended note on 1.1.1 (*Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins 433–34).

¹²Later Ophelia will reinforce the identity between Hamlet and the Ghost still further when she reports that the prince burst into her closet "As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (2.1.83–4).

¹³Claudius explicitly mentions "Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along" (1.2.15–16) as having constituted court endorsement of his marriage to Gertrude. While it might seem curious that the Church, which later proves so punctilious in the matter of Ophelia's funeral, should in Shakespeare's

In a lecture entitled "The Paths of Symptom-Formation" Sigmund Freud, speaking of the infantile experiences that lie at the origin of neurosis in adults, remarks that one of the most curious aspects of such experiences is that in the majority of instances they are entirely without foundation in reality. They are retrospective inventions, the expression of neurosis and not its cause:

All this seems to lead to but one impression, that childhood experiences of this kind are in some way necessarily required by the neurosis, that they belong to its unvarying inventory. If they can be found in real events, well and good; but if reality has not supplied them they will be evolved out of hints and elaborated by phantasy. The effect is the same, and even to-day we have not succeeded in tracing any variation in the results according as phantasy or reality plays the greater part in these experiences.¹⁴

What we see operating in such cases in other words is a process of reverse causality: a situation in the present retrogressively generating its own antecedents, a morbid state of mind recreating the past in its own image. In Hamlet's case, it is to be supposed, we are not talking about childhood experiences, real or imagined.¹⁵ But we are speaking about a highly strung personality with a deeply unsettled vision of life and an intolerable burden of unfocused resentment which is desperately seeking for what T. S. Eliot famously

view have sanctioned a marriage which is technically contrary to its precepts, it is perhaps worth remembering that it was a papal dispensation granted in 1503 that made possible the marriage of the future Henry VIII with his brother's widow Catherine of Aragon, and that the debate leading up to the promulgation of the Act of Succession in 1534 revolved very largely around the question of whether that union was to be considered incestuous or not.

¹⁴*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Joan Riviere (1922; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968) 310.

¹⁵It ought in justice to be acknowledged that not everyone would agree with this statement. Stanley Cavell has suggested for instance that we regard the dumb-show that introduces the Mousetrap play "as Hamlet's invention, let me say his fantasy, and in particular a fantasy that deciphers into the memory of a primal scene." See *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 182–83.

described as an “objective correlative” in the external world that is commensurate with itself.¹⁶

In view of this evident predisposition, it is not in the least surprising that when Horatio recounts the events of the preceding night Hamlet should immediately leap to his own conclusions as to their import. Whereas Horatio has earlier attributed the appearance of the Ghost to the national emergency, or to the possibility that King Hamlet might have hoarded wealth, Hamlet instantly produces a much more ominous hypothesis:

My father's spirit—in arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come.
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.
(1.2.255–58)

Hamlet, in other words, even before personally encountering the Ghost, attaches a significance to him that is consonant with his own preoccupations, and that would justify those preoccupations were it to be borne out by circumstances. He has the elements of a story already prepared, and only requires confirmation of that story in order to establish a role for himself, if in the short term only that of avenger. Thus it is that from the beginning there is something dubious, and from the point of view of the national interest even negligent, about Hamlet's handling of the situation. So jealous is he of the Ghost that he immediately takes steps that no one else should be able to appropriate him for his own purposes, immediately enjoining silence upon the men who have witnessed the apparition:

If you have hitherto conceal'd this sight,
Let it be tenable in your silence still;
And whatsoever else shall hap tonight,
Give it an understanding but no tongue. (1.2.247–50)

¹⁶“Hamlet,” *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1951) 145. Eliot's deliberately provocative argument is of course that there exists *no* objective correlative proportionate to the intensity of the protagonist's feelings in *Hamlet*, and that the play is deficient for that very reason.

Only Hamlet should be permitted to give voice to the event, to assign it a significance, to incorporate it into a story. The Ghost who has elected to appear on the ramparts of the castle in battle attire, and to persons other than Hamlet, and whose significance might therefore reasonably be presumed to be public rather than personal, is summarily confined to a role in Hamlet's own interior drama, privatized, subordinated to purely subjective exigencies.

Hamlet's insistence on secrecy would seem to be fully vindicated when the necessary confirmation of his suspicions comes in a colloquy with the Ghost to which, however, no other character within the play is privy. Significantly, in view of Horatio's circumspect use of a personal pronoun in attempting to communicate with the Ghost, the prince immediately addresses the apparition by what he has decided must be its name—"I'll call thee Hamlet" (1.4.44)—a name which is of course also his own. The Ghost is now in a narratorial vein, and although he refrains from relating the story of his purgatorial ordeals, "a tale ... whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul" (1.5.15–16), he tells another that is no less lurid. Everything that the Ghost says bears out Hamlet's supposition that "foul play" has been involved in his father's death. The Ghost reveals that the story that he was stung by a serpent is fraudulent, "so the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abus'd" (1.5.36–38)—an interesting image, in view of the fact that King Hamlet has purportedly been slain by his brother pouring poison into his ear, and one that perhaps reflects an association of ideas. Hamlet's response to the intelligence that the "serpent" that killed his father is none other than Claudius is to exclaim "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5.41). But, as I have already suggested, if he has known all along that Claudius must be guilty of something even more heinous than incest it is not because he has possessed any specific information but only because he has wanted it to be so, indeed required it to be so. Since the Ghost is doing nothing more than confirming Hamlet's own pre-suppositions, it is not surprising that his language should resemble the idiom in which Hamlet communes with himself during his soliloquies. The emotively charged epithet "foul," which Hamlet has earlier employed no less than twice in three lines (1.2.256–58), occurs four times in the Ghost's speeches (out of a total of eleven occurrences over the entire text). Claudius is referred to as "that

incestuous, that adulterate beast" (1.5.42), inferior in every respect to the brother he has murdered, charges that Hamlet will later echo closely when he arraigns his mother directly in her closet.¹⁷ Most revealing of all, perhaps, as Freudian critics have been quick to point out, the Ghost's injunction to proceed against Claudius without harming Gertrude, to wreak exemplary vengeance on the one while leaving the other to the discretion of heaven, answers so precisely to what we know of Hamlet's own desires that it is difficult to believe it does not originate in them.

This is not in the least to imply that the Ghost is in any simple sense a mere figment of Hamlet's imagination: by opening with the conversion from scepticism of Horatio, whom one assumes is not the kind of man to succumb either to hallucination or to suggestion, the play establishes the 'objective' existence of some sort of preternatural presence before Hamlet appears on the scene for the first time. Nor is there any serious question as to the reality of Claudius's guilt, which is also established independently of Hamlet's tortured lucubrations on the subject. The prayer scene (3.3.36–72) discloses his guilt unequivocally, to the audience if not to Hamlet, although it is to be observed that the king does not enter into the particulars of how the murder of his brother was committed. Not only is he guilty, but it is this guilt which, ultimately, sets in motion the machinery that will finally bring retribution upon his head—a machinery of which, it is to be noted, Hamlet himself is merely an agent and not the propelling force. The question, however, is not whether Claudius is objectively guilty or not, but whether Hamlet believes he is guilty for the right reasons, whether he has adequate grounds for proceeding against a man's life. And it is precisely in the light of this all-important question that Hamlet's ambiguous conduct arouses misgivings. There is something disturbingly despotic about the manner in which he arrogates to himself exclusive interpretative authority in the matter of fathoming the reasons for the Ghost's presence although, as we have seen, other personages have proved themselves equally capable of arriving at plausible explanations for the apparition. Hamlet is aware of the problem, of

¹⁷It is perhaps significant that it is at the moment that Hamlet is most closely reiterating the purport of the Ghost's words while he is haranguing Gertrude that the Ghost appears again, though only to himself (3.4.96–103).

course, and the notorious vacillations to which his will is subject may be occasioned by his intuition that the story he is trying to substantiate with inconfutable evidence is, quite literally, simply too good to be true, that it meets too perfectly the requirements of his personal case, that it is suspect by virtue of its total sufficiency. The circumstance that the story happens in fact to be true is, from this point of view, merely incidental, having nothing whatsoever to do with the logic or ethics of Hamlet's behaviour.

The means Hamlet devises to demonstrate Claudius's guilt irrefutably and publicly is to arrange for the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play which seems to a quite remarkable degree to mirror the circumstances of the murder of King Hamlet as this is supposed to have been committed. However creditable Hamlet's desire for objective confirmation of the Ghost's accusations might seem, however, his methods do not withstand close inspection. The theory according to which the prince proceeds is that guilty individuals can be galvanized into proclaiming their crimes when they witness a theatrical representation of their misdeeds, and the play he has selected—"the image of a murder done in Vienna" (3.2.233)—seems to answer perfectly to the exigencies of the case. Although Hamlet interpolates a "speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.535) of his own, presumably in order to sharpen the relevance of the drama still further, there is no suggestion that he makes any adjustments to the actual plot. All the same, the parallel between that plot and events as they are supposed to have transpired at Elsinore is close, so close in fact that it is difficult not to regard it with the deepest suspicion. Both the play itself and the dumb-show preceding it depict the murder of a king by a kinsman, who treacherously pours poison in his ear while he is sleeping in his garden, and subsequently possesses himself of his victim's crown and widow. This is of course exactly what the Ghost has recounted as having happened to King Hamlet. Now it is perfectly possible that there is nothing more in this than mere coincidence: murders were being committed all the time, not infrequently with wives and crowns in view, and poison was a fairly routine method of dispatching the victim. But it may also be that coincidence has nothing to do with what is occurring. It is made apparent that *The Murder of Gonzago* is a well-known stage-piece, as familiar to Hamlet as to the players visiting Elsinore. It also emerges from

Hamlet's comments that the play has a narrative source with which he is equally familiar, that "The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian" (3.2.256–57). What is to be wondered, then, in view of these overt indications, is whether it might not be the play itself, or the story from which it is derived, that has influenced Hamlet's interpretation of recent events at Elsinore. That interpretation would, in its turn, have supplied the outlines of the story that, whether under the effect of hallucination or through some other psychological mechanism, Hamlet ascribes to the Ghost. If this is indeed the case—and it seems to me that Shakespeare's play is sufficiently noncommittal on the subject as to admit of such a hypothesis—then matters do not end even here, for when Hamlet uses that same play to provoke Claudius into a demonstration of guilt what he is effectively doing is using it to influence events in the future as he has already used it to interpret events in the past. What we are witnessing, in other words, is the literary equivalent of a self-fulfilling prophecy: a narrative that actualizes itself in events, a structure of words that transforms itself into the structure of reality.

If these conjectures are valid, then Hamlet is not being entirely candid when he affirms that theatre should "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22).¹⁸ The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* at that place and time represents an attempt to manipulate Claudius's behaviour in a manner that will fulfil the narrative demands the prince is making on reality, to determine the course of nature and not to mirror it. In a paradoxical sense, it is life that is made to imitate art at this point, and not the reverse. The likelihood that in the context of a theatrical enactment of a murder some sign of perturbation will manifest itself in the king's conduct, irrespective of whether he is actually seized by a paroxysm of guilt or not, is sufficiently evidenced by elements within the play itself. A common player has "turned his colour and has tears in's eyes" (2.2.515–16) after merely reciting a speech about the murder of Priam, a circumstance that inspires Hamlet with his idea for the

¹⁸The disparities between Hamlet's own mimetic theory and practice in a play that is itself thematically concerned with the variegated modes of mimesis are examined in depth in Robert Weimann, "Mimesis in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (1985; London: Routledge, 1990) 275–91.

Mousetrap scheme. During the soliloquy in which he formulates his plan, Hamlet goes so far as to remark that if a player had “the motive and the cue for passion” that he has, he would be capable of performing his part with such intensity as to “Make mad the guilty and appal the free” (2.2.555–58). But if there are circumstances, however remote, in which dramatic representations can arouse such extreme emotive responses in the innocent as well as the guilty, then the problem emerges of determining the criteria according to which the two categories of response can be distinguished in a practical context. It is precisely this problem, of course, that presents itself in connection with Hamlet’s assessment of Claudius’s behaviour.

What the prince later chooses to construe as a damning manifestation of Claudius’s diseased conscience occurs when the king suddenly rises, calls for light, and abandons the hall (3.2.259–63). Yet, as has frequently been noted, Claudius has sat through a dumb-show enacting all the salient details of the crime as Hamlet supposes it to have been committed without betraying the least symptom of agitation,¹⁹ and even when he has finally lost his composure he has not “proclaim’d [his] malefactions” in the unequivocal manner that Hamlet has anticipated (2.2.588). There is, furthermore, one very obvious reason why the king might suddenly become nervous, a reason having nothing to do with his guilt or innocence as such. The assassin in *The Murder of Gonzago* is identified by Hamlet himself as “Lucianus, nephew to the King” (3.2.239), and shortly afterwards, following the scene in which the Player King is murdered, Hamlet glosses the action of the nephew by explaining that “A poisons him i’th’garden for his estate” (3.2.255). It does not seem improbable, then, given Hamlet’s by now notorious predilection for revelatory doubletalk, that Claudius thinks he discerns in his nephew’s comments a thinly-veiled announcement of his own intentions with respect to himself. This would certainly afford a sufficient explanation of why he starts up so suddenly, as well as why he resolves to implement immediately his plan to dispatch the prince to England. It is only a short step from this to the speculation that Hamlet might at some level of awareness know

¹⁹This problem, which has occasioned much critical debate, is discussed by Harold Jenkins in an extended note (*Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins 501–5).

perfectly well what he is doing when he supplies his commentary, that he is deliberately, though not necessarily consciously, underscoring those particulars of *The Murder of Gonzago* that will provoke a response in his uncle, thereby generating the evidence that he will subsequently adduce in corroboration of his own version of the facts.

These are of course only surmises, and as such susceptible neither to verification nor refutation. The fact that the text affords latitude for such speculation, however, is significant in itself, since it enables the reader to glimpse the outlines of an alternative *Hamlet* in which Claudius figures as much as victim as villain.²⁰ What is clear is that any token of perturbation on Claudius's part, at any point in the proceedings, whether due to the play itself or to his nephew's aberrant behaviour or to a sudden attack of indigestion, can and will be interpreted as evidence of his guilt. But precisely because almost anything can be construed as evidence, nothing can be accepted as such. What Hamlet's Mousetrap scheme amounts to, in other words, is an object lesson in how not to set up an experiment. Even Hamlet's confederate Horatio, called to witness after the interruption of the Gonzago play, does not seem very convinced that his friend's stratagem has met with success. Though he does not contest Hamlet's interpretation of the king's abrupt departure, he does not exactly ratify it either:

Ham. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Hor. Very well, my lord.

Ham. Upon the talk of the poisoning?

Hor. I did very well note him. (3.2.280–84)

²⁰Terence Hawkes has named this latent play "*Telmab*" in his essay of that title in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Parker and Hartman 310–32. Various critics have evinced a certain sympathy for Claudius, in some cases going so far as to attribute to him a tragic stature superior to that of Hamlet. See for instance G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949) 33–38; Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) 93; and Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 92–93. Frye's statement that "Claudius is someone of great potential fatally blocked by something he has done and can never undo" is fairly representative of this stance (*On Shakespeare* 98).

These words constitute, at most, merely a tacit acknowledgement that the king has behaved in a somewhat erratic manner, and can hardly be construed as betokening unreserved endorsement of Hamlet's thesis. As Horatio perhaps perceives, the prince's inferences at this point are the product of interpretation and not of rational demonstration. "I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying" (3.2.241-42), Hamlet has archly remarked to Ophelia before the play commences, and it is precisely such a process of interpretation that he is engaged in all the time. The point is emphasized by the dialogue with Polonius concerning cloud-shapes which follows in the aftermath of the Mousetrap play (3.2.367-73), in which Hamlet half cajoles and half browbeats the old man into acquiescing in his own successive versions of the truth. In view of the essential indeterminacy of experience, reality would seem to consist solely in the construction individuals choose to place on it, whether this assume the lineaments of a camel, a weasel, a whale, or the guilt ensuing from murder most foul.

At a certain point in the play a nameless Gentleman makes a revealing comment concerning Ophelia's distracted ramblings, a senseless jumble of words issuing in so poignant a form as to engender an irresistible, though inevitably futile, interpretative response in the listener:

Her speech is nothing,
 Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
 Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
 Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (4.5.7-13)

Once again the image of the Rorschach Test comes to mind. What Hamlet has been doing, like Ophelia's listeners in their misdirected pursuit of meaning, is botching the essentially ambiguous actions of others up fit to his own thoughts. And although, in the end, he does in a way achieve his tacit goal of moulding the world according to his own narrative pattern, his success in this undertaking can in the circumstances only be regarded as ironic. If the prince be-

gins to narrate himself when he assumes the role of avenger,²¹ Claudius recognizes the role he has assumed, and charts his own course accordingly. As Philip Brockbank points out in an illuminating essay on *Hamlet*,²² the play involves an inordinate amount of espionage, and at the same time as Hamlet is subjecting the world to his own narrative exigencies others are doing precisely the same thing to him. Polonius 'reads' him as a disappointed lover driven to distraction. The crafty little piece of staging he contrives with Ophelia as decoy in order to substantiate his hypothesis for Claudius's benefit is a pendant to the Mousetrap play, designed to manoeuvre Hamlet into an unequivocal admission of his love as the play was designed to manoeuvre the king into an open confession of his guilt (3.1). Claudius is trying all the time to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of his nephew's behaviour, and grasps at straws. "There's matter in these sighs, these profound heaves, / You must translate. 'Tis fit we understand them" (4.1.1-2), says the king to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, yet these fail egregiously to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery. It is of course in relation to his erstwhile friends from Wittenberg that Hamlet most blatantly and most deliberately fabricates reality according to his own pattern. When he substitutes his own version of the letter that Claudius has sent to the King of England, thereby consigning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the executioner's block, he is not merely interpreting events but consciously writing them.

"I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb," Hamlet promises in his letter to Horatio as he makes his way back to Elsinore after the fateful voyage from which he was expected never to return (4.6.22-23). His assumption is that his story will have the power to silence all others, that his voice will prevail in the end. But there are other stories contesting his story, stories in which he figures not as the redeemer of disjointed time but as a

²¹Cf. L.C. Knights's pertinent comments concerning "Hamlet's habitual tendency to make everything, even what he deeply feels, into a matter of play-acting. Again and again intrinsic values, direct relations, are neglected whilst he tries out various rôles before a real or imagined audience." *Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to 'Hamlet'* (1959; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 201.

²²"Hamlet the Bonesetter," *On Shakespeare: Jesus, Shakespeare and Karl Marx, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 177.

thoroughly noxious villain, as the murderer of a harmless old man and the destroyer of a young girl's sanity. The final duel with Laertes involves an ironic counterpointing of two parallel revenge scenarios, in which both revengers achieve their purposes and both are destroyed. But Hamlet, though he has technically executed his project of revenge, brought his personal saga to a triumphant conclusion, cannot let it go at that. He insists even as he is dying that his story must be told, must be elevated to the sphere of public history, and at this point it is the audience itself that threatens to be drawn into the vortex of his compulsive self-narrativizing:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. (5.2.339–43)

But he does not let it be. Like Othello at the moment of death, he delegates narrative responsibility to a man he hopes will be sympathetic to his memory: “Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” (5.2.344–45). Horatio at first declines to accept the charge, saying that he prefers to accompany the prince in death, but Hamlet is adamant. Surveying the carnage around him, he recognizes that he risks being judged in an adverse light by posterity, and entreats Horatio to ensure that this will not occur:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story. (5.2.349–54)

Having been nominated by Hamlet as successor to historiographical authority, as the Norwegian prince Fortinbras has received Hamlet's “dying voice” (5.2.361) as successor to political authority, it is in the end Horatio who is invested with narrative control. Horatio has made no promises to Hamlet as to what he will and will not relate, however, and when the ambassadors arrive

from England his preliminary explanation of the desolating spectacle that meets their eyes might be regarded as a finely poised exercise in calculated ambiguity:

And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world
 How these things came about. 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. All this can I
 Truly deliver. (5.2.384-91)

There is no formula in this speech that does not apply as appositely to Hamlet's conduct as it does to that of other characters in the play, and the phrase "forc'd cause" might reasonably be construed as a token of the speaker's reservations as to the adequacy of Hamlet's motives. What Horatio will, in the event, feel called upon to "truly deliver" remains an open question as the tragedy draws to a close. It must not be forgotten that his interpretation of the significance of the apparition was never taken into consideration by Hamlet, yet in a certain sense this interpretation, his early intuition that the Ghost "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.72), has after all been fully borne out by events. Hopelessly enmeshed in the toils of his personal drama, Hamlet has so contrived matters that the throne of Denmark has passed out of Danish hands altogether, falling into the possession of the son of his father's enemy. The distant threat of foreign incursion with which the play opens has thus transformed itself into an ironic reality. Under these circumstances, and in view of the phrasing of the preliminary summary he produces for the benefit the English ambassadors, it is by no means obvious that the version of events Horatio is going to relate will correspond to what Hamlet had in mind when he asked his friend to "Report me and my cause aright," to perpetuate his interpretation of reality, to tell *his* story, and no one else's.