

Hamlet's Introspection

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TALKING TO BARNARDO AND MARCELLUS about the ghost that is haunting Elsinore, Horatio says:

A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.
In the most high and palmy state of Rome
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell
The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets
(I. i. 111-15)¹

According to the *OED*, this is the first time the literally introspective phrase 'the mind's eye' is used in English. Actually, the philosophical poet John Davies used it in 1596;² and Horatio's 'mind's eye' is a variation on a traditional metaphor used more and more widely in this period. But few critics have been drawn by the 'mind's eye' metaphor in *Hamlet* specifically, and that seems odd, since this clear, commonplace description of insight must be an important rhetorical presence in a play all about the question of how to decide what to do.³ As Horatio sees it, the ghost is a 'mote', a bit of grit or dust, which irritates the mind. The description immediately ties the reality of a ghost in Elsinore to the mind's introspective experience of it: Horatio draws attention to the way in which the appearance of the ghost in the world and in his thoughts overlap. The play thus early on establishes a crucial structural isomorphism: mental objects on the inside – the stuff of introspective reflection – are somehow akin to things such as ghosts on the outside.

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Shakespeare describes thinking similarly as something ghostly in *Julius Caesar*, the play that he probably wrote just before *Hamlet*. There, Brutus anticipates Horatio in blending ghosts and introspection: 'Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream' (II. i. 63-5). A 'phantasma' can denote both 'an apparition, spirit, or ghost', and also 'a mental image, appearance, or representation': Brutus easily blends the two senses.⁴ For both Brutus and Horatio the experience of manifest ghostly presences is certainly disturbing, but Shakespeare provocatively suggests, additionally, that their experience is the experience of introspection writ large: omens, signs, and meanings are ghostly presences in mind and world alike. The strong likeness between ghosts and introspective thought arises again when Hamlet says to Horatio that he sees his father:

Hamlet. Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral baked meats
 Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
 Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
 Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio.
 My father, methinks I see my father.
Horatio. Where, my lord?
Hamlet. In my mind's eye, Horatio

(I. ii. 179-84)

There is that phrase for a second time: 'In my mind's eye'. Like Horatio, Hamlet is looking inside, and this time the 'mote' that Horatio felt was troubling the mind's eye is shown to be yet more irritating than before. Hamlet suddenly 'sees' his father, and his reaction to this experience is so strong that Horatio thinks he has seen the ghost itself. The ghost that Horatio refers to is the one that is perceived in the world, yet Hamlet's reference is to the ghostly presence he perceives inside his mind. Is the play meant to suggest that we are surrounded by ghostly forms of meaning? And if we see ghostly presences both in the mind and in the world, might that make it difficult to 'see' anything assuredly real at all?

Recently in these pages Peter McCullough made the vital point that the religious identity of the ghost is a moot point,

which is the point about the ghost: 'the impulse to define the play as either broadly Catholic or broadly Protestant flies in the face of its own relentless effort to assert both possibilities in a dramaturgical process that cancels the signifying power of each'.⁵ McCullough argues that we do not know what to make of the ghost, theologically speaking; more generally, the play might imply that if the ghost lacks a certain spiritual identity then that is because it is, in turn, only meaningful as the dubious experience of a human mind. Horatio and Hamlet are shown something very close indeed to their sharply conscious thinking, a simulacrum of introspective thought which is simultaneously abstract and concrete, shimmering, elusive – ghostly. The ghost is apprehended by a 'godlike reason' (IV. iv. 37, my emphasis) that does indeed try to seek out certain metaphysical meanings or higher truths, but which is nevertheless a down-to-earth aspect of human psychology. E. Pearlman has recently written that the daring originality of the ghost in *Hamlet* lies in its dramatisation of the shadowy nature of human agency and human communication: Shakespeare's ghost 'has been reimagined as a fellow creature who just happens to be a spirit. For the ghost, simply to be ordinary is extraordinary'.⁶ Seeing how the ghost functions as a dramatisation of ordinary thinking begins to suggest how the challenge the ghost poses to Hamlet forces him to confront no less a question than how it is that he thinks in the first place.

The double occurrence of the 'mind's eye' idiom in the first scenes of the play suggests that introspection is going to be the way in which characters in this play will find out what they are thinking, even if that introspective turn does result in ghostly signs that might be troublesome. A characterisation of thinking as witnessing the goings-on in an inward, mental theatre is ancient. It reappears in the first of Hamlet's soliloquies, and though this time it is the mind's voice, rather than the 'mind's eye', which is the idiomatic focus, Hamlet seems no less confident about the power of introspection:

O god, a beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
 My father's brother (but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules). Within a month,
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
 She married.

(I. ii. 150-6)

Hamlet's mother has abandoned the 'discourse of reason' that any human being would usually expect to use to bring sense to their grief. The phrase implies that the forms of thought or 'reason' are to be equated with the 'discourse' or language used in ordinary speech or writing. The latest Arden edition of *Hamlet* does not sense much depth to the phrase 'discourse of reason': it says, succinctly, 'OED lists uses of this formulaic phrase from 1413'.⁷ It is certainly true that the phrase is widespread in the period: in his earlier Arden edition, Harold Jenkins notes that 'discourse of reason' was 'a regular term' – 'sometimes apparently used as a cliché for "reason"';⁸ but, nevertheless, the temporal and philosophical roots of the 'discourse of reason' go much deeper than 1413, and they matter to the play. The 'discourse of reason' was originally an idea of Plato's, as Abraham Fraunce shows his fellow Elizabethans in *The Lawyers Logike*.⁹ Plato writes in several places that thought and speech are the same; even more widespread in Aristotle is the notion that 'Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words'.¹⁰ So, although Protestant dialecticians such as Fraunce, working under the influence of Petrus Ramus, aggressively popularise the principle that man has a natural dialectical style of reason that enables him 'to think as God thinks',¹¹ the ancient principle was remarkably unchanged in its fundamentals throughout its post-classical life. As with the ghost, so too with Hamlet's 'discourse of reason': there is certainly a Protestant topicality to such psychological entities, but any notably sectarian elements to Hamlet's perceiving and thinking are functioning mutually within, and being relativised by, the context of an extremely capacious and consensual mechanism for representation that mediates a variety of specific hermeneutic doctrines – one in which mental objects and mental voices are viewed as at

bottom the same kind of thing as words and meanings and objects in the world.¹²

With two sets of mind's eyes linked to the appearance of a ghost, and a discourse of reason, the opening scenes of *Hamlet* establish what amounts to a familiar view of human thought as the basis for judgement and subsequent action. Thought is introspective, centred upon internal eyes, ears, and mouths that perceive mental things and project their meanings outwards. So, in the first act of the play, Hamlet and Horatio between them seem to provide a framework for how rational thought works that combines materiality and metaphysics. Much recent criticism has focused on the material conditions of *Hamlet's* world, and concomitantly on ways in which a characterisation of Hamlet as brooding and introspective might be jettisoned as a post-Romantic critical imposition.¹³ A focal point for such criticism is the fraught doctrinal identity of the ghost, a symbol of how ideological systems emerge only fragmentally and unstably from the material conditions of their socio-historical moment. But some other critics are more willing to see a purposeful combination of materiality and metaphysics in the character of the play; to see that the conditions of the play's production might create enormous metaphysical questions about the sheer strangeness of the ideologically particular world that *Hamlet* inhabits. R. A. Foakes, for one, writes: 'It seems we can have materiality or the supernatural, but not both convincingly at the same time, whereas Shakespeare could, I believe, assume that his audience would find both plausible in the staging of the play',¹⁴ and his remark has broad implications for an understanding of the double philosophical plot of the play and its hero.

Early in the play, introspection is not a troubling model for Hamlet: he begins his path to action by embracing it and its ghostly outcomes. In his very first speech, Hamlet says of his grief that 'I have that within which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe' (I. ii. 85-6). Katherine Eisaman Maus opens her celebrated work on Renaissance inwardness by making an example of this speech. She notes that here Hamlet is identifying an inward truth whose 'validity is unimpeachable',¹⁵ and she finds this kind of utterance to be

emblematic of a Renaissance anxiety about the gap between an 'unexpressed interior and a theatricalised exterior'.¹⁶ Yet if the inability to communicate an inward life whose 'validity is unimpeachable' is really Hamlet's anxiety here then the identification of that anxiety must be qualified by an appreciation of how the early part of the play makes much more of Hamlet's sustained belief that the inner and the outer worlds *do* in fact work together. Once he has seen and spoken to the ghost, Hamlet proclaims during his second soliloquy that 'thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain' (I. v. 102-3). These inner words in the book of the brain are to be transferred outwards, onto a writing tablet, as pictures of things as they exist: 'My tables! Meet it is I set it down' (I. v. 107). Hamlet is confirming what his and Horatio's 'mind's eye' metaphors have encouraged us already to believe about the ghost: that it is '*Hic et ubique*' ('here and everywhere', I. v. 156). The ghost is both a vigorous, burrowing 'mole' (I. v. 161) (a counterpart to Horatio's earthy 'mote') and an ethereal voice which cries 'Swear' (I. v. 149) from under the stage, first in one place, then another. This voice now makes the ghost 'wondrous strange' (I. v. 163) for Horatio, and comically ghoulish for the audience, and so a dilemma develops: Horatio's doubt, and perhaps the audience's, is the foil for Hamlet, who wants to believe in the ghost, and who insists that 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I. v. 165-6). This ghost is not to be limited by the precepts of philosophy, but philosophy should be extended to include it: if it can be thought about, it can exist too. The play's early cognitive metaphors suggest this possibility and so, by the end of the first act, Hamlet is placed in a peculiar position: a ghost which might seem nothing less than extraordinary (as it does to Horatio) for Hamlet works to validate things already seen within the normal inward theatre of his mind.

Maus's account of Hamlet's anxiety may need some modification, then. For, on the evidence of the first act, Hamlet retains, overwhelmingly, a belief that the products of introspective thought provide a basis for meaning and action in the world. In complex situations of the kind that Hamlet faces, some

psychological and moral strengthening and untangling might be needed, but the delay is to be seen as maturational rather than aporetic. The initial frustration that Maus detects in Hamlet's first utterance (I. ii. 85-6) needs to be looked at in the larger context of the strength of Hamlet's predominant belief in the reality of that correspondence, one which the introspective metaphors of the first act place in the foreground. However, this central belief is one that Hamlet does indeed come to struggle with: the first signs are there when he reappears, as the author of a love letter, in the second act. The problem here is very close to that which Maus identifies, namely, the impossible communication of an undoubted private state of being. Hamlet's wobbly stanza for Ophelia, the lack of literary quality in which has long troubled critics, seems like an eloquent statement of his desire to make perfectly real what he feels within, just as when he suddenly sees his father 'for all in all' (I. ii. 186): 'I have not art / to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best / believe it. Adieu. Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst / this machine is to him' (II. ii. 118-21). Hamlet the frustrated, groaning voice, ends up appearing like an unhappy ghost in that machine:¹⁷ in the declarative prose coda to his letter Hamlet wants to bear testament to his love as an inner certainty of cosmic proportions, with Ophelia as both 'the celestial and my soul's idol' (II. ii. 108) – a conjunction of individual and world soul which bypasses the body as a merely mechanical part.

During the course of the first act, Hamlet successfully overcame any initial anxiety about making his feelings known; but now in the second act Shakespeare starts to suggest a more complex and troublesome experience of the relationship between mind, body, and soul. In the next part of II. ii Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As it appears in the Folio text of the play, the early part of the conversation between Hamlet and the two friends includes this bit of dialogue, following Hamlet's announcement that 'Denmark's a prison':¹⁸

Rosencrantz. We think not so, my lord.

Hamlet. Why then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing

either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

Rosencrantz. Why, then your ambition makes it one: 'tis too narrow for your mind.

Hamlet. O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams.

Guildestern. Which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.¹⁹

Rosencrantz and Guildestern conclude that frustrated ambition is the source of Hamlet's melancholy behaviour. What this ambition of Hamlet's might be is a shadowy question (perhaps they think of Hamlet's desire for the throne) and Hamlet's reply eschews any causal relation between ambition and his feelings of oppression. He follows Guildestern's remark about ambition being a dream by ignoring the diagnosis of ambition and pursuing instead the notion that 'A dream itself is but a shadow': that is, a dream is itself a simulacrum of the thinking that makes reality ('there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so'). Rosencrantz then misconstrues him: he seems to think that Hamlet is still underestimating the flimsiness of ambition as a motivation, 'a shadow's shadow'.²⁰ By now the characters are talking at cross purposes: Hamlet makes it clear, by way of a *reductio ad absurdum*, that in fact ambition tends to have very real results, for if it is made of only the merest of ephemera, 'Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows'.²¹ Shakespeare goes out of his way to show that Hamlet's dreams are not manifestations of an excess of defined ambition but grow from something more nebulous, the shadowy world of his own thinking.

What Hamlet is struggling with here is a commonplace in psychological theory of this period. Here, for example, is Montaigne drawing on a mixed Platonic and Pyrrhonian tradition that reappears in some of his most prominent essays:

If the original essence of the thing which we fear could confidently lodge itself within us by its own authority it would be the same in all men. For all men are of the same species and, in varying degrees, are all furnished with the same conceptual tools and instruments of judgement. But the diversity of the opinion which we have of such things clearly shows that they enter us only by means of compromises: one man in a thousand may perhaps lodge them within himself in their true essence, but when the others do so they endow them with a new and contrary essence.²²

But in the speech Hamlet makes a few lines further on, the play characteristically dramatises the instability of human thought, imbuing it with metaphysical urgency:

What a piece of work is a man – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so. (II. ii. 269-76)

'My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts' (II. ii. 277-8), replies Rosencrantz, repeating the play's recurrent idiom of thought as a kind of substance, and, likewise, Horatio's 'mote' lives on here as the 'quintessence of dust'. However, man is made not of dust exactly but more particularly of its 'quintessence', a pure fifth essence – what heavenly bodies are composed of. There is a down-to-earth component to the idiom of dust and debris in the play, and Margreta de Grazia makes that a centrepiece of her recent materialist study; but here, as with Horatio's 'mote', dust also has an explicitly *metaphysical* quality, and the force of Hamlet's utterance lies in its hybridity: man's noble reason, his infinite faculties, his action, are both physical and yet more than physical, creating a being both like and unlike animals, angels, or gods. Hamlet is wondering more about what he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: thought, and man's very nature too, are starting

to seem incorrigible, things that cannot be understood from within the experience of them.

It has long been recognised that Hamlet's rhetoric here closely resembles a famous passage in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's oration *De hominis dignitate*, but the tenor of what Hamlet and Pico are similarly saying has perhaps not been fully understood:

We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayst from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.²³

Pico became famous for celebrating the liberty of man, and it is only more recently that scholars have elaborated his full significance: for Pico the same *total* liberty which allows one to be reborn into the higher forms can at each moment fling one in the other direction. This unique and full liberty is ultimately a condition that can make man's relation to the cosmos as much isomorphic in one, downward direction (unlike a god and resembling the 'lower forms of life') as in the other, upward one ('to be reborn into the higher forms', like an angel). Indeed, the more closely Pico is read, the more apparent it is that he senses the unique potentiality of humanity's mode of being as a mixed blessing. Isolated between heaven and earth, man is not of the world, yet he is in it nevertheless.²⁴ If Pico's *De hominis dignitate* is humanism at its most celebratory, its most optimistic about the individual's freedom of thought and action, also apparent in the oration is the suggestion otherwise widespread in Pico's work (and that of other contemporary Neoplatonist thinkers such as Leone Ebreo) that man starts from a thoroughly precarious, medial position when trying to make his thought and action unite with the higher forms of being. Pico holds on to introspection as the principal means of thought, but he is emphatic about

eliminating virtually all ontological difference between signs and objects in the world and mental signs and objects (except in very special circumstances). Cognition and experience are almost always enmeshed, thinking symbolising its experience, and thinking is thus as changeable and ghostly as experience itself, reflecting back at the individual the world as his mind allows him to contextualise it, but keeping its own principles hidden. That introspective thought might see into the things of the world their creational, intellective nature is certainly Pico's final goal, but, like Hamlet, he cannot develop a systematic theory of the mind or the self to that end: instead, he has a vivid idea about the elusive experience of those things.²⁵

In the second act of the play Hamlet starts to wonder about reality as Pico does – not that Shakespeare was necessarily thinking of Pico when constructing 'What a piece of work is a man' (though the verbal echoes appear highly suggestive) but that he was able, like Pico, to see human rationality as a vortex of possibility and limitation, a condition of being which the subject is barely able to think of *as* its condition, its form of life, because it can only think at all in virtue of the singular particularity of its faculty of thought. The anxiety in the speech that Hamlet makes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an anxiety about man's lack of context, about a freedom of intellect that frustrates at least as much as it enables. Worries about man's insignificance are commonplace in this period – the sources brought into relation with *Hamlet* include Montaigne, the theory of melancholy, nostalgia for pre-Reformation certainties – but Hamlet's speech contains the inkling that man's place in the universe is barely understandable *at all*. Hamlet is not so much worried about the insignificance of man (which is the way in which the passage is normally glossed) but about ascribing to man's intellect *any* particular kind of significance. During the second act of the play, then, we are given different grounds for modifying Maus's account of Hamlet's preoccupation with insides and outsides. In the Picoesque speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is not worrying about the ability of thoughts to become meanings and actions, but about the nature of human thought itself: this is a deeper and more complex kind of doubt – a frustration

not just with the inability to act as one thinks, but with the possibility that thought itself might simply lack a validity which is unimpeachable.

Perhaps we are meant to suppose that Hamlet is not speaking entirely seriously during these two episodes – rather, that he is making full use of the ‘antic disposition’. Even if that were the case, there is at least the possibility that his remarks will ironise the squarely traditional view of the primacy and security of introspective thought that he articulated in the first act. Then again, these Act II speeches of Hamlet’s do feel much more like entirely authentic disclosures than, say, the way he speaks to Polonius: ‘Words, words, words. /... Slanders, sir.../... all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down’ (II. ii. 189-99). The advice to keep one’s thoughts to oneself functions well as a gloss on Hamlet’s own self-conscious ‘antic disposition’, leading the hapless Polonius to misread the speech as indicative of a ‘method’ which is not self-aware but the paradoxical result of pure madness. In contrast, Hamlet clearly enjoys Rosencrantz’s description of himself and Guildenstern as ‘indifferent children of the earth’ (II. ii. 222), which Hamlet says puts them in the ‘middle’ (227) of Fortune – so much so that his enthusiastic greeting (‘Good lads, how do you both?’, II. ii. 220-1) comes across as a leading question designed to set off his badinage, and to legitimate the subsequent, thrilling depiction of man’s own acutely ‘middle’ condition which he shares with the friends. The self-confident, knowing ‘antic disposition’ is in truth a thin, taut cover for a more darkly ironic inkling about the incorrigible psychological origins of human action.

According to Hamlet’s ferocious third soliloquy, it is certainly possible to make meanings known:

Now I am alone.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit

.

his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing –
 For Hecuba?

(II. ii. 484-93)

A revitalised Hamlet will no longer be ‘Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause’ (II. ii. 503), and he carries this belief through the soliloquy: ‘guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions’ (II. ii. 524-7) – ‘The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King’ (II. ii. 539-40). An important notion now comes into the play that relates intimately to the mechanisms of inner sight and inner hearing: the ‘conceit’ (ll. 488 and 492). As with the traditional metaphors of the ‘mind’s eye’ and the ‘discourse of reason’, little critical attention has been given to the deep psychological assumptions expressed by the ‘conceit’ – it is, like the other two, so commonplace a notion in Renaissance poetics as to seem largely impervious to a more particularising analysis. It is certainly the case that, like the cognitive metaphors of Act I, the ‘conceit’ has roots stretching back to Plato: it emerges in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates says of his conversation partners that ‘I watch over the labour of their souls’ (150b).²⁶ Socrates likens himself to a midwife, helping to give birth to the conception that has taken place in his interlocutor: the concept, the act of conceiving, and the conceit (in Latin, *conceptus*, in Italian, *concetto*) are all part of the smooth conveyance of internal ideas outwards. *Hamlet* is a play that is very good at making old commonplaces newly significant, and the ‘conceit’ that Hamlet speaks of at length here is another of his unusually explicit statements about the naturalness of thought and of reason. Hamlet’s frustration now is not with the impossible gap between inner and outer worlds, but, contrarily, with the ease with which that gap could and should be meaningfully bridged. ‘How pregnant sometimes his replies are’, says Polonius, thinking Hamlet unambiguously mad, ‘... a happiness... which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of’ (II. ii. 205-8). But where Polonius sees the pregnancy of the mind, its aptness to form conceits, as constituting

a kind of pathology, Hamlet holds to his belief that the freedom of the mind about which he is starting to feel anxious is tied to, and can be managed by, natural reasoning powers. It is just these powers that Hamlet feels he is taking full advantage of in his 'antic disposition', and yet, in this soliloquy, it is just his inability truly to take advantage of them that is the source of his frustration.

Such frustration – a feeling of not living up to an achievable goal of making meaning and turning it into an action in the world – is what frames Hamlet's introduction of another key word at the close of this third soliloquy, namely the 'conscience' that he believes he can capture by way of the play. 'Conscience', the moral sense, one's inward knowledge of morality, needs to be understood in the broader context of introspection as the predominant model for thought within *Hamlet* and its culture; the moral sense is a specialised kind of introspection operating within the scope of the general faculty of reason. Critics normally focus on this word and its connotations when it appears in the 'To be or not to be' speech of the third act; but for the moment I want to note that the word 'conscience' is introduced in this soliloquy, and it arises while Hamlet is wishing to firm up the meanings created in the form of the ghost: 'I'll have grounds / More relative than this [the ghost]' (II. ii. 538-9), 'relative' normally being glossed as 'cogent' and 'material'. This more cogent and material thing will be a conscience – a state of mind perceived as a foundation for moral behaviour. Echoing the earlier onset of doubt about thinking during II. ii, Hamlet suddenly finds he needs to move back from the ghostly sign to the originating state of mind that underpins Claudius's actions: the adjective 'relative' thus quivers with ironic instability. The most certain thing that has been produced by what Hamlet wants more than ever to believe in as 'cogent' – that is, a conscience or state of mind itself – is his 'antic disposition', and that has not been able to ward off worries about thought as 'relative' and uncertain in its very nature. In this soliloquy Hamlet becomes more and more passionate in his desire to believe in the cogency of human action, and by the end of the second act irony has blossomed into a critical part of the pleasure of watching Hamlet. The play is building a devastating

answer to the question of why Hamlet's revenge is perpetually delayed: one's cognition does shape one's experience, but in ways that seem more and more impossible to fathom the more one uses the very cognitive powers that the would-be agent has at his disposal. Hamlet the introspectionist experiences two types of frustration – with the initial belief that motivating action should be and can be easy and, alongside that, with the growing realisation that motivating action is in fact amongst the very hardest things to explain.

Such interplaying frustrations inculcate a form of self-debate which is entirely consonant with the kinds of rhetorical framework one would expect Renaissance dramatists to work with when representing a character in a revenge tragedy: generally speaking, the psychomachic conflict between reason and passion; more specifically, argumentation *in utrumque partem*; at a still more local level, the dialectical *quaestio*. These characteristics are focused yet more intensely in Hamlet's next soliloquy, which is cast as a *quaestio* (with Ophelia as an audience) on the advantages and disadvantages of human existence. The speech begins normatively with a series of commonplaces and proverbs: 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' and the 'sea of troubles' (III. i. 57); the 'calamity of so long life' (68); 'the whips and scorns of time' (69); 'Th' oppressor's wrong' and the 'law's delay' (71); 'a weary life' (76), and so on. This first part of Hamlet's speech expresses what Hilary Putnam calls a division of linguistic labour: the development of a common vocabulary of terms and ideas amongst different historical and cultural traditions and their individual experts or authorities on the matters of life, death, and everything else.²⁷ These commonplace sentiments are the kind of heuristic, practical products that should emerge from the humanistic 'discourse of reason', but Hamlet ends up wondering about how they stand as utterances, what the value of their existence is. Hamlet's cataloguing of human problems illustrates the way that the communal authority responsible for establishing a culture's ideas about life's injustices, lacks, and sheer chanciness ends up revealing its own constructedness and instability as an authority. The irony that has been growing in the play continues to develop apace, as Hamlet's appreciation of a rational

discourse capable of shaping action occurs increasingly within conditions of experience that his accumulated and acculturated wisdom can do little to act upon, lying as they do at the very limits of its explanatory powers. The humanist ‘discourse of reason’ produces insights, but this activity ends up revealing how nevertheless it does not produce insights capable of getting a handle on the ‘thousand natural shocks’ that affect the individual’s experiences. So, Hamlet makes manifest the phenomenon that Jonathan Bate observes in another Shakespearian speech which is laden with commonplaces but does not result in action, that given by Marcus to Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*: ‘the speech could be said to show that having all the rhetorical tropes at your fingertips doesn’t actually help you to *do* anything’.²⁸

Having ironised the notion of a stable and culturally secure epistemology as the fruit of natural reason, Hamlet then turns to look at the alternative, and the notion of ‘conscience’ reappears:

But that the dread of something after death
 (The undiscovered country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns) puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of.
 Thus conscience does make cowards –
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pitch and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry
 And lose the name of action.

(III. i. 77-87)

Critics often try and separate out the likely meanings of ‘conscience’ in line 82 – one being ‘moral sense’, the other being ‘consciousness’ – but, given the usage of the word at the end of the second act, I think we are here meant to understand ‘conscience’ as showing off the dependence of moral identity upon one’s access to one’s states of mind. When Hamlet says that, as a consequence of ‘conscience’, ‘the pale cast of thought’

covers the 'native hue of resolution', he uses a visual metaphor, and so links both 'thought', and its particular faculty of 'conscience' to the experience of introspecting a 'pale' – perhaps ghostly – cognitive inscape. Though less obviously than 'pale', 'cast' also helps to capture the admixture of the phenomenal and objective that Hamlet understands as the stuff of thought. The *OED* cites Hamlet's use of 'cast' in the definition 'A "dash" of some colour, thrown over or into ... another' – so here is thought's dashing or dynamic quality – but in this period there is also a solid sense of 'cast' meaning things like a 'specimen', a 'set of things', a 'quantity'.²⁹ (Both these vectors of 'cast' are present in the frequent use of 'cast' to mean 'mental device, contrivance, artifice, trick'.)³⁰ Hamlet is still conceiving thought in the ancient way: an introspective experience of psychological content, objects, conceptions, conceits. But now he points out, as well, that we cannot do *other* than we do in the course of preparing for conscious action: we are rigidly constrained by the particular mode of being that, for Hamlet and his culture, is provided by the introspective 'conscience'. He does not dismantle the idea of the private introspection of thought in this speech – which is to say, unsurprisingly, that he does not anticipate by several centuries the special achievements of post-Wittgenstein systematic philosophy. Rather, the irritations of introspection open up for him questions on an even bigger horizon – questions about the mind and its place in the world. Hamlet gives us his most deliberately ironic answer yet to the question of how to act: we have to make do with our faculty of reason, and we cannot shake off the mind, despite the fact that it is so fragile and peculiar a link to the world, one which only lets us act without our being able to know why. We have to live with ghosts, and not know them.

Hamlet's remarkable intuition – that the mind can neither be ignored nor explained, that it puts us in our own nutshell of infinite space – remains a current question for all those interested in human nature. The radically incomplete understanding of how the mind interacts with the world that emerges from recent linguistic and cognitive sciences is akin to the open-ended situation that he arrives at: as Wittgenstein found, 'The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious'.³¹ By this late stage of the play, it

seems clear that Hamlet is getting seriously irritated by introspection: he has not made progress with the particular problem of how to know our minds, but he has come to look beyond philosophy and gives us a sight of the qualities – hope, fear, anger, incomprehension – that might forever be our unshakeable experience of the mind, of its relation to and use in the world. ‘To be, or not to be’? Neither, and that’s the problem. Hamlet’s raw recognition of his own inability to account for his rationality also underlies the brutal lines he speaks to Ophelia:

I am very proud,
 revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck
 Than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give
 them shape, or time to act them in. What should such
 fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?
 We are arrant knaves – believe none of us.

(III. i. 123-8)

Compare with this:

If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for
 Thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,
 thou shalt not escape calumny

(III. i. 134-6)

‘Crawling between earth and heaven’ – this is the forever medial condition of man. Hamlet’s terrible yet thrilling disclosure in the first set of lines is that there are unknown breaches between self and world ahead of him that he simply cannot think about; turning to Ophelia, he reminds her that, conversely, however good her behaviour, people will always think differently. This rejection of a uniform, predictable pattern to human behaviour displaces the moral sense that shapes this period’s view of the value of personhood: the extreme, misogynistic injunction to Ophelia, ‘Get thee to a nunnery’, is a sign of Hamlet’s new intensity of despair about the irreparable variance of thinking and acting. Peter McCullough sees a particularly religious form of despair at work in this scene, which he compellingly describes

in terms of Hamlet's rejection of the on-stage Ophelia's Marian pose: 'Hamlet wants nothing to do with making words flesh, with incarnation'.³² I should say, further, that the value of making thought incarnate is exactly what Hamlet *has* wanted to believe in throughout the play: for such a mixture of words and world is what his culture takes to be an essential characteristic of human reason. McCullough has Hamlet reject the flesh because he aspires to a pure *logos*, where I would see Hamlet as much more immediately concerned with his humanistic belief in the incarnation of thought in the world but driven to wonder whether any such primary link between mind and world can be thought of at all. Hamlet is completely unclear about what reason is, so much so that his attack on the flesh is a kind of last resort, a bully's cry for help: *that's* not reason, he scorns, and no one can possibly show me what reason or its *logos* is if they are in the clutches of the flesh.

So the speech beginning 'To be, or not to be' does not 'float above the rest of the play', as Douglas Bruster suggests,³³ but is embedded within it as one richly suggestive extension of a psychomachia which is making Hamlet increasingly giddy. There is a nihilistic freedom in the expectant moments before the Mousetrap, as he takes an eerily childish delight in taunting Ophelia with tired old jokes, and after the performance he lurches in the opposite direction, bringing an equally manic energy to bear on tired old beliefs. Framed by a jejune Senecanism ('Now could I drink hot blood', III. ii. 380) what Hamlet says now seems just as mindless as his earlier adolescent bullying of Ophelia:

O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever
 The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom –
 Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
 I will speak daggers to her but use none.
 My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites.

(III. ii. 383-7)

Hamlet has regressed: in asserting that he can manipulate a gap between his thoughts and his actions, he looks back to the first act, where he overcame his initial frustration (noted by Maus

at I. ii. 85-6) about not being able to express himself as he wished. When he is talking to Ophelia before the Mousetrap, Hamlet evokes the infantile freedom of a man who can say what he likes because no one else knows any better what they are doing when they speak. Encouraged by the Mousetrap's ability to draw out the truth, Hamlet reverts to an equal and opposite fantasy of self-awareness, a knowledge of 'tongue' and 'soul' and the difference between them; and his behaviour here goes on to shape his response to the King praying (III. iii. 26-97). Isn't Claudius now engaged in the one activity that, above all others, endeavours to push thoughts out from the self, even as far as heaven itself? Yet the King echoes what Hamlet has increasingly experienced throughout the play when he says that the harder one tries to liberate the soul, the harder it gets to do so: 'O limed soul that struggling to be free / Art more engaged' (III. iii. 68-9). Hamlet tells himself what he wants to believe: that the King's intensely introspective efforts might allow him to bridge that gap between mind and world, heaven and earth, in which Hamlet more and more feels himself to be stuck. But out of earshot of Hamlet, the King himself says that 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go' (III. iii. 97-8): ironically, Claudius is beginning to experience problems in making his thoughts accountable just when Hamlet is most desperate to forget that those problems exist. It is Claudius, the object of Hamlet's course of action, who ends up reminding the audience of the endless frustrations in trying to account for action; and thus the play grinds to this most spectacular of halts.

Reason must take its particular place: during his last soliloquy, Hamlet's realisation continues to grow. In a breathless sentence spanning eight lines, he presses the intuition that we have seen in 'What a piece of work is a man' and 'To be or not to be': he cannot know whether it is 'Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple' (IV. iv. 39) that blocks the passage from thought to action, but, in a series of excitedly elaborate speculations, he realises that, lost somewhere between these poles, action can be natural and necessary while also being unknowable, even absurd: 'Exposing what is mortal and unsure / ... / Even for an eggshell' (IV. iv. 50-2). We have to make do with what we

have, a ghostly existence somewhere in the middle of the world that (as V. i makes plain) is transience itself. 'Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep' (V. ii. 4-5), but now it seems to him that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will' (V. ii. 10-11).

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NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, references are to *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden 3 (2006).

² Sir John Davies, *Orchestra or A Poeme of dauncing* (1596), sig. C6^v; cf. the 'reasons eye' on sig. A7^r.

³ There is a historical survey of the phrase in Alwin Thaler, 'In My Mind's Eye, Horatio', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 7/4 (1953), 351-4.

⁴ See *OED*, 'phantasm', n. 3b and 4a-b.

⁵ Peter McCullough, 'Christmas at Elsinore', *E in C*, 58 (2008), 311-32: 311.

⁶ E. Pearlman, 'Shakespeare at Work: The Invention of the Ghost', in Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *Hamlet: New Critical Essays* (2005), pp. 71-84: 80.

⁷ *Hamlet*, ed. Thompson and Taylor, p. 178.

⁸ *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden 2 (1982), pp. 438-9: 439.

⁹ Abraham Fraunce, *The Lawyers Logike* (1588), sigs. B1^r-2^v. The 'discourse of reason' is the description of thinking that emerges during the simile of the divided line in Plato's *Republic*, 7.534e3-536d6.

¹⁰ See e.g. Plato, *Sophist* 263e, *Theaetetus* 189d, and Aristotle, *On Interpretation* 16a2-8.

¹¹ Craig Walton, 'Ramus and Socrates', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 114/2 (1970), 119-39: 122.

¹² In medieval thought two broad developments illustrate a movement towards the general naturalisation of metaphysical objects as a part of both the human mind and the human world: the existence of the introspectible mental object is secured and formalised by Aristotelians during the late thirteenth century, at about the same time as ghosts appear to achieve

acceptance as essentially earthly objects who deliver messages to their audiences as humans do with each other. Cf. e.g. Lawrence Dewan, 'Objectum: Notes on the Invention of a Word', *Archives d'histoire doctrinate et litterarium du moyen age*, 48 (1981), 37-96, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, 2007), esp. pp. 171 ff.

¹³ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge, 2007), is typical of a surge in materialist, anti-interiority readings of *Hamlet*: 'It was not sharper vision that brought Hamlet's complex interiority into focus. Rather, it was a blind spot' (p. 1).

¹⁴ R. A. Foakes, "'Armed at Point Exactly": The Ghost in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 58 (2005), 34-47: 44.

¹⁵ Katherine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1995), p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ This phrase was famously used by Gilbert Ryle to describe Cartesian mind-body dualism in his *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

¹⁸ *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, II. ii. 243.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, II. ii. 248-59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II. ii. 262.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II. ii. 263-4.

²² Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth, 1995), I. 14 (p. 53).

²³ Pico della Mirandola, 'On the Dignity of Man', in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago, 1956), pp. 223-54: 225. The correspondence between Hamlet and Pico was first detailed by Frank M. Caldero in 'The Source of Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man!"', *Notes and Queries*, 196 (1951), 421-4.

²⁴ See e.g. Michael J. B. Allen, 'The Birth Day of Venus: Pico as Platonic Exegete in the *Commento* and *Heptaplus*', in M. V. Dougherty (ed.), *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 81-113. This important volume exemplifies the growing new approach to Pico as not just an esoteric

mystic but a voracious thinker about human nature and its place in the cosmos.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion, see esp. Carl N. Still, 'Pico's Quest for All Knowledge', in Dougherty (ed.), *Pico della Mirandola*, pp. 179-201.

²⁶ As translated by *The Theaetetus of Plato*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 269-70.

²⁷ For notes on the various analogues, see *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, pp. 484-93.

²⁸ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford, 1993), p. 112.

²⁹ OED, n. 13-17.

³⁰ OED, n. 23-4.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1979), p. 80.

³² McCullough, 'Christmas at Elsinore', p. 327.

³³ Douglas Bruster, *To Be or Not to Be* (2007), p. 46.