

Knowledge, Reflection, and the Tragic: The Case of *Hamlet*

We are reaching a point in the term when the larger shape of our course, Knowledge and Reflection, should, we hope, be coming into view. We began with a focus upon some modern texts—Heidegger’s essay, with its luminous meditation on the character of scientific thought and how it differs from the kind of thought he calls *Besinnung*, translated into English as “reflection”; Heisenberg’s consideration of Goethe’s reaction to Newtonian science; and Buber’s exploration our tendency to reduce reality to a set of objectified “its” in ways that conceal what matters most. We then turned to an ancient dialogue by Plato, one which explored the nature of reason within a soul that is gifted with multiple forms of divine influence—most especially the form of divine mania named *eros*. We now turn to Shakespeare, a figure situated on the cusp, so to speak, between ancient and medieval wisdom about reality and the emerging epoch that calls itself modern. When we put together the syllabus for this course, we made an educated guess that Shakespeare had to be a part of it. I had a hunch that *Hamlet*, in particular, was the right work by Shakespeare to include. Now that we are studying it, I’m amazed at how good my hunch was. But I understand that my job tonight is not simply to tell you this but to try and help you see why it is so.

To that end, I will present a lecture in three parts. First, I want to say a few words about the tragic vision as such. Secondly, I will offer you a reading of *Hamlet*. Finally, I will reflect upon the significance which *Hamlet* holds for our efforts this term to

understand—if I might put it this way—that “There are more things in heaven and earth” than are “dreamt of” in the scientific understanding of reality.

The stories that we call tragic . . . the sentiments that we feel are tragic . . . the vision of reality that we sum up in the word “tragic”—at the heart of all of these uses of the word lies the deepest of mysteries: Why suffering? Why death? Why evil? Why, most especially, do the innocent suffer? Why do we suffer at the hands of nature herself? Why are we permitted to behave so treacherously toward each other? The more one hears the refrains of the creation story in Genesis 1—“God saw that it was good; . . . God saw that it was good; . . . God saw that it was very good”—the more acutely senseless suffering and death seem to become. Within Western culture the tragic vision has played an essential role in helping human beings keep their balance between these two seemingly impossible truths: that creation and its Creator God are good, and that there is so much suffering and evil and death.

The tragic has often been understood, however, in ways that are reductive, that seek to eliminate the mysteries at its heart, ways that prevent the vision from playing its critical role in helping us keep our balance. The most common reduction has been a moralistic one, one involving what Aristotle supposedly called the “tragic flaw.” We read the tragic tale of a Macbeth, an Othello, a King Lear, or a Hamlet, and we focus quickly upon the character, trying to identify his “tragic flaw.” Look at that “vaulting ambition” in Macbeth. Wow—that “green-eyed monster” jealousy sure takes hold of Othello! What ever made old Lear think he could divide his kingdom and “unburdened crawl towards death”? And Hamlet! Can you believe how long it takes that guy to make up his mind! When we focus upon the hero’s “tragic flaw,” we hold the plays’ suffering at a distance.

Confident that our free will ultimately determines our lives, we believe such catastrophic disorder could never overwhelm our world. We console ourselves, that is, with the tragic flaw as an explanation for evil and suffering and death.

These and other reductive interpretations of the tragic vision all miss what is most distinctive about the tragic: it offers no explanation of suffering. That is, it does not offer us knowledge of its causes. It does not make the mysteries of suffering, evil, and death intelligible. It does not offer recipes for solving them as problems. Rather, it acknowledges them as the ultimate mysteries. In Heidegger's language, the tragic spectacle sets these mysteries before us as that which cannot be unconcealed. This may sound fatalistic, but it is only fatalistic from the standpoint of our scientific and technological desires, from the standpoint of our will to power over life and death. By disclosing suffering, evil, and death to us as the most radical and irreducible of mysteries, by setting them before us as such, tragic spectacles offer us the chance to acknowledge them for what they are. And this, in turn, opens up a vision of human possibilities that would have been unimaginable without such acknowledgement.

There are two aspects of the human condition that are, we might say, necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of tragic-heroic action. The first is temporality, our being in time.¹ The early Greek philosopher Anaximander offered an interpretation of time that, better than any other I know, articulates what it is about being in time that makes it a pre-condition for tragic experience. Here is his dictum:

The origin of things in the Unlimited. . . . It is necessary for things to perish into that from which they were born; for they pay one another penalty for their injustice according to the ordinance of Time.²

Time is not just the one damn moment after another that we experience in the ticking of a clock. It is a process of becoming and perishing. Finite things emerge mysteriously from that which is not finite, the un-limited. There seems to be a sense of injustice, of disorder, that inheres in the very coming forth of things. Things must, therefore “pay one another penalty for their injustice” by perishing back into that from whence they sprung. Keep in mind this sense of the cosmic injustice at the very heart of temporality when reflecting upon the significance of “revenge” in *Hamlet*.

There is another necessary but not sufficient condition that makes tragic-heroic action possible. Human beings, to be sure, are one of Anaximander’s finite things. In the texts of ancient myth and philosophy and revelation, however, humans are distinguished from other finite things because they also participate in that which is immortal. The whole of reality is not exhausted by the cosmic things of Anaximander’s vision. There is also that in reality which does not come forth as a thing, symbolized here compactly as the Unlimited. When elaborated upon in myth and tragic drama and philosophy, the realm of the Unlimited is seen to include a vast array of divine and daimonic forces and beings that are immortal, that do not become and perish. Human beings are the mortal things that participate in these immortal forces. An example of what I am talking about that is now familiar to all of you is the divine force named *eros* in the *Phaedrus*. Think of *Romeo and Juliet*, think of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and you will readily see how human participation in this divinity can be a precondition for either tragedy or comedy.

There is a vast range of other immortal forces, of course, and there is no better reason for studying Greek myth and tragic drama and philosophy than to learn the many names that are given to them there—to receive the expanded vision of reality that these

names bestow upon us. Tragedy is concerned, most especially, with those immortals or “great powers” that, in the words of William Arrowsmith, are “the source of man’s very condition, the necessities which determine his life: . . . Death, Life, Sex, Grief, Joy.” To this list one might add the burdensome possibilities of human freedom. These powers “stalk the world, real with a terrible reality,” and in the tragic vision it is a primordial form of madness to live as if they did not.³

As limited, mortal things whose very being is a site of the undying struggle among these immortal, unlimited forces, human beings carry within them the potential for tragic acting and suffering, for tragic heroism. In their finitude they are frequently struck blind before the great necessities that stalk the world. In their freedom, however, they can so suffer into wisdom that a dignity shines forth from them which is not available to immortals—a dignity not possible, as Arrowsmith says, for “mere god[s].”⁴

Such is the context in which I would now like to offer you my reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Since I have spoken critically of an Aristotelian tradition in commenting upon the problems associated with the notion of a “tragic flaw,” let me return to Aristotle himself and pay some proper respect. In my reading I’m in search of what Aristotle points to when he says that plot is the most important of the elements of tragedy. If we are to hear what Aristotle means by plot, we must today translate it as “the play’s world as it emerges from the acting and suffering presented in it.”⁵ Before we can focus upon Hamlet as the play’s main character, we must ask, “What are the dimensions of the world opened up by the play—its sense of the personal, political, historical, and cosmic orders? What configures the acting and suffering it presents into a unity?”

I think the political dimensions provide a good door through which we can enter the world of *Hamlet*. In Act 4, Scene 2, we see Hamlet sparring verbally one last time with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—this time, concerning the whereabouts of Polonius’ body. Rosencrantz asks: “My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the King.”⁶ Hamlet replies: “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the Body. The King is a thing” (IV.2.27-28). Hamlet’s word play rests upon a symbol central to English political theory during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. This symbol was “the King’s two bodies.”⁷ A document written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth explains the symbol as follows:

The King has in him two Bodies, . . . a Body natural and a Body politic. His Body natural . . . is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident . . . to natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is . . . utterly devoid of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to.⁸

The document goes on to argue that the Body politic of the King represents nothing less than “the Immutable within Time.”⁹ “The King’s two bodies” is thus quite a remarkable symbol, yoking together in one concrete person both the mortality of an individual human being and the hoped for presence of what is immortal in English society itself.

The great intellectual historian Ernst Kantorowicz has demonstrated convincingly that the symbol of “The King’s two bodies” is an offshoot of Christian theological reflection. Its conjoining of mortality and immortality in one figure resembles the doctrine that Christ is both God and man. Just as Christ had been the fullness of the divine within the realm of becoming and perishing, so the King was to represent

England's immutable existence within time. Ideally, the King would anchor England and its laws within the hierarchical order of the cosmos at large, serving as the concrete figure through whom divine justice would inform the Body politic. In actuality, however, the King's efforts were inevitably affected by the imperfections of his Body natural—the injustice that, in fact, infected his soul. It is one thing, of course, to predicate both divinity and humanity to the Crucified and Risen Christ. It is quite another to say that Henry VIII is the concrete locus of that which is immortal within English society.

In spite of the idealism in this symbol—or, perhaps more accurately, because of it—the symbol tended to encourage Machiavellian behavior within the nation. That is to say, in practice it often did not matter whether the King was really an embodiment of justice or not. It mattered only that he appeared to be just or virtuous. His reality became his appearance. In fact, the King who was unjust but good at manipulating appearances might often seem a much more effective King than one who was just, but a clumsy manipulator. Is this not the kind of world we are introduced to from the start in *Hamlet*? Anxiety about appearances permeates the play from the question in its first line: “Who’s there?” (I.1.1). Indeed, the appearances with which the loyal sentries of Denmark wrestle include an apparent ghost, always the kind of figure that threatens one’s “sense of reality with madness.”¹⁰ How is one to avoid being deceived? How is one to get at the truth about the present state of affairs? The problem is sufficiently acute that the voices of common sense readily acknowledge, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.4.90).

In the second scene, however, when we first meet Hamlet, the play's first certainty emerges. Pointing out that mortality is common, that all which lives must die,

Hamlet's mother asks him why his father's death "seems . . . so particular" with him.

Hamlet snaps back:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems."
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
.....
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show. (I.2.75-85)

His state of mind is the one thing of which he is certain. It involves no seeming. And as we learn from the soliloquy that follows shortly, that state of mind is one of profound alienation from the world. After wishing that his "too too sullied flesh would melt, / . . . / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His [laws] against self-slaughter," Hamlet cries out,

..... O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world.
..... 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. (I.2.129-36).

We must take careful measure of the burdens that have brought about Hamlet's alienation. He is, remember, a college student. His father has just died. His mother has quickly remarried, entering into a relationship with his father's brother that has overtones of both adultery and incest. These factors alone could induce a state of mourning and

melancholy in anyone—a state that could bring about what we would describe today as depression. They are soon compounded by a charge laid upon him by the apparent ghost of his father. Emerging in the night from an archaic underworld in which he is suffering purgation for his sins, the ghost tells Hamlet that he was killed by the present king, the present husband of his mother. He lays upon him the duty to remember and take revenge. As we listen to more and more soliloquies from Hamlet, we come to understand that his one certainty, his mind—marked as it is by profound intelligence, painful self-consciousness, and caustic and compulsive verbal wit—is itself a burden, a cause of growing self-hatred. He is only, it seems, a man of thought, and he needs to be a man of action.

By the end of Act I, of course, Hamlet does hatch a plan: he will take up the charge placed upon him by his dead father and put on “an antic disposition” in order to “set” the time “right” (I.5.172; 189; 188). The problem with this strategy quickly becomes evident, however. All of the major actors in this world are also putting themselves forth in calculated ways that conceal their real intentions and interests. Hamlet’s strategies, therefore, trap him within the very rottenness from which he is supposed to deliver Denmark. Think about the major lines of action that unfold in the second and third acts. The King, who is obviously an accomplished manipulator of appearances, becomes suspicious of Hamlet’s motives. He plots with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on one hand and Polonius on the other to try and find out the reasons for Hamlet’s apparent madness. Polonius for his part concocts a role for Reynaldo in order that he might determine just what Laertes is up to in Paris. Hamlet himself decides to use a visit to the court by an ensemble of players in order to set a “mousetrap” for the King

(III.2.243). The players will perform “The Murder of Gonzago,” a play that presents a murder sufficiently close to the one Claudius has supposedly committed that Hamlet might be able to “catch the conscience of the King” (II.2.617). The plot has something of the character of a scientific experiment intended to confirm that the Ghost’s story was true and not just a demonic temptation. Hamlet even makes sure that there is a second observer, Horatio, who will be able to replicate the results.

We can better understand the problem here by focusing on the character of Polonius. He is an initial focus of irony in the play, an irony that keeps us oriented amidst a dizzying play of mirrors. Speaking with the King in Act 2, Scene 2, he puts himself forth confidently as one who “will find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the center” (II.2.157-59). “Hath there been such a time,” he asks, “That I have positively said, ‘Tis so,’ / When it proved otherwise?” (II.2.153-55). In fact, however, we quickly recognize Polonius as an easily duped, easily manipulated character. He is wrong when he tells Ophelia that Hamlet’s love for her was false. He is the first we see fall victim to Hamlet’s antic disposition, quickly taking the bait and concluding that Hamlet is mad because his love for Ophelia is unrequited. He is so little a match for Hamlet’s verbal wit that he remains totally unaware that he is being played like a pipe. He is the play’s primary mouthpiece for pious platitudes, sending Laertes off to Paris with a lengthy string of them. When the string comes to a climax in his famous line, “This above all, to thine own self be true” (I.3.78), we are left to ponder its irony, wondering what being true to oneself can possibly mean for a man utterly lacking in self-knowledge.

While poor Polonius may be the focus of sustained ironic commentary, none of the other schemers and plotters is any more successful than he is. The King's plot to have Hamlet sent to England and killed there is foiled by a series of accidents, and it leads, instead, to the deaths of his unwitting agents. Most significantly, Hamlet's scheme does indeed catch the King's conscience—more unambiguously than he could ever have hoped—but then shortly afterwards, when presented with a “too-good-to-be-true” opportunity to take his revenge while the King is at prayer, he does not act, determined as he is not just to accomplish the task given to him by the Ghost but to be certain of the King's eternal damnation as well. The irony, of course, is that the King is really reflecting upon how he is unable to pray, how the man who is determined to hold onto the benefits of his crime cannot ask that the crime be forgiven.

When Hamlet plays by the rotten rules that govern in Denmark, however, he does not just prove ineffective in setting the time aright. This strategy leads him to inflict his own monstrous injustices upon this world. In mistaking Polonius for Claudius, he kills the poor fool and burdens Laertes with the need to revenge his father's death. In his determination to grope the conscience of his mother, he speaks verbal “daggers” to her that almost drive her to despair (III.3.404). Indeed, he has to be stopped by the Ghost of his father from this unholy attempt to play a priest-like role, his attempt to be “kind,” he would have us believe, by being “cruel” (III.4.179). Most painfully of all, he drives the woman he loves to commit suicide. He assaults her womanhood with verbal wordplay of unspeakable cruelty—his charge, “Get thee to a nunnery” (III.1.121), involves a pun on the word: it can mean not only convent but brothel. He then kills her father. All this

comes from a man who profoundly resents it when Guildenstern appears to be playing him like a “pipe” (III.2.378).

The words Hamlet speaks to Ophelia and his mother, and those he speaks to the King and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they are seeking Polonius’ body, afford us, perhaps, the deepest insight possible into the nature of the disorder that afflicts his soul. His disgust with his mother’s sexuality and his father’s murder has left him radically alienated from the most basic conditions of human existence: becoming and perishing, life and death, Eros and Thanatos. These are, to draw upon the language we used before when discussing the nature of tragedy, among the most titanic of the daimons that stalk the earth with their great powers. As Hamlet is sent off to England, it is hard to see how he is going to turn into the tragic hero that this rotten world so desperately needs.

And yet he does—or, to put the matter more carefully, what it takes to be a tragic hero emerges within him when he alters his fundamental relationship to the world. How does this happen?

First, it is important to acknowledge that we are not able to answer this question completely. Hamlet leaves. Hamlet returns. When we see him again, he is changed in his demeanor. We do not see any of what happened to him while he was away, and we only hear about some of it. There is a mystery at the core of this play, a concealment or an earthiness to it that must be taken seriously.

And yet we do know some things, and these are worth reflecting upon.¹¹ While on his way to England, Hamlet had managed “to unseal” a letter that had been given to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It contained a “grand commission,” an “exact command”: upon the reading the letter, “no leisure bated, / No, not to stay the grinding of the ax,” his

head was to be “struck off” (V.2.17-24). We know, therefore, that he had a concrete, terrifying encounter with the imminent likelihood of his own death. Accidents also intervened to upset these best laid schemes of mice and men. As we learn from Hamlet’s letter to Horatio in Act 4, Scene 6, pirates attacked the ship that was carrying Hamlet to England. He alone boarded the pirates’ ship and became their prisoner. They dealt with him “like thieves of mercy” (IV.6.21-22), returning him to Denmark. Other coincidences that played a role in his escape and return included the fact that he had his father’s “signet” in his “purse,” and could thus change the letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying (V.2.49). From such moments he learned that “Our indiscretion sometime serves us well / When our deep plots do” fail—that “a divinity . . . shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (V.2.8-11).

We also learn much from Act 5, Scene 1, the great graveyard scene. The Hamlet who had made crude jokes about “a certain convocation of politic worms” eating away at the body of the man he had murdered (IV.3.19-20) encounters a gravedigger who “sings in gravemaking” and thus seems to have “no feeling of his business” (V.1.66-67). The gravedigger, a common rustic, turns out to be the first person in the play who is a match for Hamlet’s wits. As we watch him converse with the Prince, we come to realize that he does not lack feeling; nor is it fair to say, as Horatio seems to imply, that “custom” has made him numb to the reality of death (V.1.68). Rather, he seems simply to have come to terms with death as something human, inherently a part of life. While tossing up skull after skull, he speaks with Hamlet and accompanies him in a meditation on human mortality. Hamlet reflects, however, not just upon mortality in general, but on how Yorick, the court jester from his childhood days, has died, and Alexander, and Caesar,

with all their imperial lust for conquering the entire world. Perhaps the remains of Alexander are now “stopping a bunghole” (V.1.206). Perhaps the earth that was once Caesar patches “a wall t’ expel the winter’s” gusts (V.1.218).

For Hamlet, death, human perishing, ceases to be one of the great titans that disgusts him. He can now open himself to it, let it flow in, recognize it as inherent in the very gift of being. And when he does so, death emerges as a force that can bring order to his deeply disturbed soul. It strips him of what is ignoble and unjust, allowing only what is essential to remain. Death, that is, begins to restore Hamlet to life. What I am talking about is not really unknown to us. It inheres in our conventional wisdom about the dying. No one on his deathbed, we say, ever wished that he had spent more time at the office. When those who are beloved are near death, we feel a deep desire to make sure that they hear us speak, for one last time, the words, “I love you.” Even many of us who fancy ourselves progressive Catholics and who were looking forward to the death of an old pope had to be astonished by the way he died, by the manner in which he made his death his last gift to his people. How small-minded, I thought, on the Saturday night when I was splitting my attention between Hamlet and images of the Pope’s remarkable body—how small-minded that I had ever blamed him for not retiring. It is deaths such as his that reveal to us the truth of life.

For reasons both known and unknown, then, when Hamlet is confronted with the latest plot cooked up by Claudius, he simply agrees to take part. Horatio suspects that the wager the King has made will leave Hamlet a loser. He urges him to examine the proposal critically, saying, “If your mind dislike anything, obey it” (V.2.218). But for once, Hamlet does not put his faith in the powers of his mind. He responds:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. (V.2.220-25)

The daimons of death and chance have opened Hamlet's soul to human finitude. Thus opened, he develops a transformed relationship to time. No longer does he close himself up and take upon himself the burden of setting the time aright. He has learned, rather, simply to keep time. By doing so he becomes partner to the divinity at work in time, the one whose special providence acts through him to restore a measure of order. His mission of revenge is finally carried out; the locus of the "treachery" is disclosed (V.2.313); the "purposes mistook" fall on the "inventors' head" (V.2.385-86).

There is much more that could be said about details in the play, especially the details of Act 5. Let me move on now, however, to the third and final part of my lecture. What particular significance does *Hamlet* hold when it is studied in a course like ours?

The great but eccentric literary critic, Harold Bloom, wrote a book on Shakespeare a few years ago in which he attributed to Shakespeare "the invention of the human."¹² And in Bloom's opinion, no one play is more responsible for inventing the human than *Hamlet*. Bloom is known for using great literature as a stage on which his genius performs. He intentionally presents strong readings, mis-readings, that are filled with outrageously exaggerated claims. Yet his genius is real enough that one can often learn more from reflecting upon his extravagant assertions than by confining oneself to those arguments that are only "correct." Bloom certainly overstates the matter when he speaks of Shakespeare inventing the human as such. But there is much truth, I think, to a

more qualified version of his statement: Shakespeare gives wide-ranging articulation to the mode of being that we have since come to call “modern man,” and *Hamlet* is indeed the single work in which this is accomplished most comprehensively.

Let me do a little of what Plato does in the *Phaedrus* and tell a short story or *mythos* about how this modern human being emerged. I’m ultimately indebted to Heidegger’s many and varied inquiries on this topic, but the story is finally one I’ve pieced together myself, and if you find it silly you should blame me, not Heidegger, and certainly not Plato.¹³

Once upon a time European human beings lived in a world full of trustworthy signs. Most of these signs were gathered into two great books, the Book of Nature and the Book of History. To be sure, one had to learn to read these books just as one has to learn to read any book. But the appearances gathered together and presented in these books were, as I said, trustworthy; and if one opened oneself and worked attentively to read what was there, one could come to true understanding. These two Books were Great Books, indeed, because they had been written by God. The first was creation, which was written with the creative word that God spoke in the Beginning. The second, the Book of History, also known as the Bible, was God’s word, too, because he had spoken it through the prophets and then, climactically, through his own Son, the Word of God made flesh. Because all of Nature and all of History had been written by God, Nature and History were sacramental realms. When human beings awakened to their sin and ignorance and began to long for salvation, their longing soon met with reasons for hope: God was abundantly present in sacramental signs. Moreover, he had provided human beings with an authoritative institution, His Church, which knew how to read all the sacred signs and

could thus be a mediator between sinful human beings and the God who sought to save them.

One day, however, the fabric of trustworthiness that was so essential to this world's sacramental character began to unravel. Some people looked at the Church, for example, which was supposed to be the divinely ordained guardian of sacramental grace, and judged that it was not what it appeared to be. It was motivated by power struggles, greed, self-interest. It was abusing sacramental signs, turning them into a commodity and selling them as means of gaining grace cheaply. Others began to think that the Church also controlled readings of the Book of History for self-serving, not salvific ends. The individual person, rather than being able to turn to the Church and find salvation by participating in the sacramental orders of Nature and History, began to think that the Church was an obstacle, not a means, to salvation. These folks called for Bibles that would be printed in their own language so that they could read the word of God themselves. Still others began to look at parts of Nature through instruments like telescopes and the like. What they saw cast the Book of Nature as a whole into doubt. It appeared that Nature and History as they had made themselves manifest for centuries could no longer be trusted. Nor could the institutions that were supposed to make sure we read them rightly.

In response to these developments, a new kind of human being had to emerge. If the basic appearances of the world could no longer be trusted; if the institutions that were supposed to guide us in reading the world were likewise found unreliable; then a new foundation for the appearance of reality and truth had to be sought. Someone named Descartes took up the meditative search, starting with the untrustworthiness of

appearances. His search came to rest in the thinking self, the *ego cogito*, which found confirmation of its being in the very fact that it experienced itself as thinking. Others named Luther and Calvin found a measure of hope in the selfhood of the individual believer, which was now the primary locus of the Spirit of God in the world. Human beings began to experience their own minds as the foundation for the true appearance of other beings. That is to say, they began to experience themselves for the first time as a subject of knowledge, as the being who stands under and guarantees the true appearance of all things. Any appearance that couldn't be guaranteed by this subject's critical interrogations was to be doubted, suspected.

A number of truly liberating things happened when this new kind of human being emerged. We are quite familiar with many of them: the astrophysical universe emerged from the ruins of the ancient world's signifying cosmos; the vast field of human historicity, so diverse in both time and space, emerged from the now fractured Book of History. Human beings became more radically aware of the active role they play in shaping the political orders in which they live; hence kings started losing their heads. And so on. And so on. Perhaps Kant best captures the optimistic side of this historical development in the opening sentences of his essay, "What is Enlightenment?" when he writes,

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.

Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without

the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Have courage to use your own understanding!¹⁴

Our story would be incomplete, however, if we did not take note of a pessimistic underside that belongs to it. Remember, there is a profound experience of anxiety involved in the emergence of the modern epoch and the human being who lies at the center of it. Think of how you would feel if what you had most placed your trust in, what you had most counted upon as true in its appearance, ever turned out to be a false. Then imagine that your hopes for salvation had depended upon the truth of that appearance. The resulting anxiety would be a problem, to be sure, but not necessarily the biggest one you faced. Anxiety can turn out to be a good thing. The most problematic aspects of the experience might very well arise from the way you chose to respond to it.

Descartes, who was quite familiar with the meditative searches of medieval thinkers, knew the earth had been shaken when his method of doubt brought him first to his own thinking selfhood and not to God. He quickly tried to remedy the situation by developing a proof for God's existence on the basis of the thinking self's certain presence to itself. But the attempt was never more than a stopgap. The foundation had been set for those thinkers who, a few centuries later, would argue that the divine was really just a projection of the human. Calvin would be led to respond to the new self's anxiety about its salvation by developing a doctrine of double predestination: God not only elects some to be saved, he elects others to be damned. The purpose of such a doctrine was to provide the believer with complete certainty about his or her salvation. The effect, however, was often just the opposite: no Christian souls have ever suffered depths of anxiety about salvation to match those suffered by many devout Calvinists. The basis of the paradox is,

of course, quite simple: One's salvation may have been predestined by God, but how was one to know if one belonged among the elect? Where was one to find reliable signs, reliable appearances? One couldn't even be sure of the sincerity of one's belief. Did not the very need to experience oneself as a sincere believer become an occasion for the emergence of doubt? In extreme instances, this dynamic could give rise to witch hunts of the sort famously associated with Salem. The project of assuring oneself of one's salvation could require one to fix the locus of evil externally, and with certainty. Indeed, it is important to grasp a lesson to be learned from these pathological manifestations of modern selfhood: nothing seems to bring about more uncertainty concerning matters of ultimate significance than the quest for certainty itself. It appears, finally, to be incompatible with the quest for understanding and truth. That is to say, we can only be certain of that which, in the long run, is not of ultimate importance.

Does not *Hamlet* now appear as an exploration of the tragic underside of the modern epoch? The title character is modern man, newly emerged, who finds himself thrown into a world where no appearance can be trusted. It is a world, indeed, in which the prime activity of human beings seems to be the willful attempt to advance their own interests by projecting and manipulating appearances. Characters speak words, not because they have heard a truth that must be spoken, but as instruments that might advance their projects.

A precondition for Hamlet's heroism is that he recognizes how utterly corrupt his world is. He is thrown back upon himself, upon his remarkable mind, upon his self-consciousness, and tormented by a profound experience of alienation. Alienation in itself can be a healthy response to reality. There is much in reality from which the healthy soul

should feel alienated, especially when the world in which it finds itself is so rotten. Still, extreme rottenness in the world can trap one in a state of alienation. If alienation is to remain a healthy response to reality, the soul must find a way to turn away from what which is rotten and alienating and move toward that which gives life. Hamlet's world is so rotten at the start that it lacks any directional indices toward the Good, if you will. The Ghost of Hamlet's father points out that things need to be turned around, but he does so in archaic ways that are deeply shaped by the lusts of the cosmos' depths—what we caught glimpse of earlier in Anaximander's vision of the cosmic revenge that things take upon one another. The tragic blindness that marks Hamlet's actions when he first attempts to “set” the “time” aright cannot be separated from the fact that the world in which he finds himself lacks directional indices. He thus acts in ways that imitate the manners and methods of those who are the source of the rottenness. He thereby himself becomes a source, not of restored order, but of yet greater disorder and suffering. To be sure, he bears great personal responsibility for the compounded disorder that his actions bring about. Their peculiar perversities are inextricably linked to his greatest virtue, his mind, and the pride he takes in it. And yet even here, he is never without a measure of self-disgust; and as the play proceeds toward the point at which he is sent to England, he suffers increasingly from self-hatred.

Hence the miracle of the opening in his being that somehow emerges in Act 5. As we discussed earlier, he learns, finally, to keep time, to act in rhythm with events. He does so by being ready, by letting be. He becomes, somehow, the agency through which time begins to set itself aright—insofar as time is ever set aright—the hero through whom Denmark is purged of its rottenness. He is a hero because, by overcoming his extreme

disgust at the most basic elements of the human condition—the burdensome suffering inherent in its very becoming and perishing—he becomes, for his world, a directional index toward the Good, toward the immortal source of whatever measures of justice might be made incarnate in it. This is why Horatio must himself not seek escape in death but rather continue to bear the burdens of the human condition and make sure that Hamlet’s story gets told. Fortinbras will start his reign as the new king with possibilities for bringing about measures of justice in Denmark that have not existed for some time, if ever. Whether he is able help Denmark achieve a political order founded upon greater openness to the Good, or whether the form of justice he embodies will remain primitive, dependent upon fear of the elemental lust for revenge, will likely depend upon whether Fortinbras can hear Hamlet’s story and learn from it. (Admittedly, what we know of Fortinbras’ character does not give us much cause for hope!)

Heidegger’s efforts in “Science and Reflection” are deeply continuous with the story of modernity in which *Hamlet* plays such an early, and prophetic, role.¹⁵ One does no injustice to the achievements of modern science—achievements which lie at the very heart of the modern project—when one points out that scientism, the ideology that emerges when the essence of science is allowed to eclipse all of the other essential ways in which Being can and has happened, this scientism is a condition of tragic blindness. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in our scientific and technological drive to eliminate all elements of the tragic from the human condition. When Heidegger seeks to delimit scientific knowing in order to help us recognize and recover our capacities for reflective thinking, he is, among other things, calling us to be open once again to the tragic. In presenting to us the grotesque ways in which the character Hamlet compounds

the rottenness of Denmark, Shakespeare invites us to imagine prophetically the consequences of willfully persisting in our tragic blindness. In presenting to us his heroic death, which follows upon his turning away from the rottenness, upon his decision simply to “let be,” to be ready, his play calls upon us to embrace the burdens of becoming and perishing as a condition for sharing in its tragic wisdom.

Notes

¹ In this and the next paragraph I am indebted to the generalizations concerning tragedy offered by Northrop Frye. See his *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), 3ff.

² This is Eric Voegelin's translation of Anaximander's dictum in *The Ecumenic Age*, Vol. 4 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974), 174. I am indebted to Voegelin's meditative discussion of the dictum, 174-76.

³ William Arrowsmith, "Introduction to *The Bacchae*," in *Euripides V, The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 150.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵ My formulation is indebted to Paul Ricoeur's reflections on plot in "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry* 7(1980), 169-90.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library Signet Classic, new edition, 1998), IV.2.25-26.

Further citations will be included in the text.

⁷ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).

⁸ As quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Frye, *op. cit.*, 24.

¹¹ In the paragraphs that follow, I am much indebted to conversations with my colleague William Morse.

¹² Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

¹³ I am experimenting here with the kind of historical narrative that Heidegger constructs in “Metaphysics as History of Being,” in *The End of Philosophy*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1-54. It is not helpful to think of such a narrative as documentary historiography because what it seeks to understand cannot be explained by identifying a series of causes or origins given in the order of experience. The radical origins of an historical epoch are, finally, hidden. Nevertheless, we can gain insight into an epoch by telling “likely stories” concerning it, the way Plato tells likely stories—or philosopher’s myths—about the mysteries dialectical thinking encounters. In doing so we must remain conscious that we are seeking to interpret the mystery of an emergence. As such, when reflecting upon the nature of a historical epoch, we need to tell many stories, not just one.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” retrieved March 4, 2006 from <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt>. Kant’s discussion of this question provides an example of a philosopher’s myth that stresses the liberating achievements of modernity and tends to overlook what, from the point of view of Heidegger’s narrative, is hidden in modernity. For the purpose of my reflections on Hamlet as a tragedy, the Heideggerian type of narrative is more important.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Science and Reflection,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 155-82.

