Grammatic Action and the Art of Tautology

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Whether or not Aristotle's definition of drama as the imitation of an action is sufficient or satisfactory, let me presume here that, at the least, action constitutes drama and that action is something that drama "does," not something it "has." Our habits of description and critical theory tend to look at action as an attribute of drama and therefore as a basis of aesthetic judgement. When we (or, more likely, our children) say of a play or a film, "too much talk, not enough action," we are presuming that drama is a kind of container for action that can be measured and quantified as well as qualified and interpreted. But action is problematic when we begin to think harder about it. What constitutes an action and how do we construct the meaning of an action? What is the relation of a thinking, speaking subject to an act?[1] And more specifically, what is the grammar by which we conceive of an action?

In this paper I want to use drama to help display the problems of action and its phenomenology by focusing on how drama helps us find the questions pertaining to the problem of action. Such questions appear in highest relief where we find moments of arrested action: where the momentum of dramatic action does not seduce us into forgetfulness and we are reminded that action is not only difficult to define, it is difficult to "do."

Such a moment occurs briefly and particularly in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Pozzo has risen from his campstool to leave. He would like to sit down again, but "doesn't quite know how to go about it." He knows what to do and even has the desire to do it, but is unable to move from standing to sitting. This moment of arrested action reflects the larger action of the play in which the hesitations of thought, particularly by Vladimir, present the questions of *why* and *how* to go on waiting. In Pozzo's statement and his incapacity to move, it appears that something has intruded between desire and

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physical motion, as the character implicitly poses the adverbial question: *how* do I get from here to there? Pozzo is stuck. And rather than calling it an intrusion of some *thing* between thought and motion, we might say that for Pozzo at this moment a void gapes between himself and the campstool: a void opening out of thought because of thought. We cannot know the content of his thinking, but it is not the content that inhibits him; it is thinking itself with its inability to answer the question and its fundamental incompatibility with doing. The "how to" of an action can be answered as though it were a simple objective question. How do you do it? You "put one foot in front of the other;" or you "send certain neuro-muscular messages from your brain to your foot." But these responses reside in essentially technical description that may be accurate and, at some point, useful, but will leave us in despair of an answer.[2] They will lead only to further questions that we cease asking only out of fatigue or compromise. The adverbial questions such as "how" and, worse, "why" have, of course, been discovered by children as torments to the adult who is carried along by the momentum of "adult" actions. But the questions persist and become "adult" questions to torment the innocence of even the faithful Didi and Gogo.

The manner of the adverb that is crucial to action can be imitated ("Do it this way") but not "thought." Quite simply there is no fully satisfactory linguistic answer to the question, "how?" Pozzo's hesitation is without identifiable content and without language, so he is arguably not exactly thinking: but the intrusion itself is an arrested action that suggests how fragile the connection and how enormous the gap between desire, thought, and motion can be.

Pozzo needs, he says, an invitation. In order to help, Estragon begs him to be seated. After the conventions of polite exchange and a second invitation ("take a seat I beseech you, you'll get pneumonia") Pozzo is enormously relieved. The invitation provides his cue, which as I discuss further on, is a "theatrical" term for saying it provides the impulse for his motion from standing to walking to the stool to sitting. Furthermore, the mutual acceptance of a fiction ("you'll get pneumonia") provides, we might suppose, a kind of "belief," if not faith, in the possibility of a reason for action that then allows Pozzo to move. The impulse and the fiction get Pozzo out of the stasis of thought and pave over the void. The cue for action provides the means of saying, "the time is now." It bridges the gap of thought by means of social convention and, moreover, affords relief from the effort of willful self-assertion. For one of the problems of action is not what to do, but when to do it. Deciding the moment for action requires an assertion not only of the mind or the motive but of the body. As I will discuss later, this problem is not simply

"psychological" but a problem of being in time. The question of how one joins consciousness to one's action is also a question of *when* consciousness is present in the act. In Beckett, the problem can be defined as one of inertia: bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. In this Pozzo-scene, the impulse energy of the invitation is all that he needs to allow "thought" and the hesitations of thought, to disappear in deed. The cue, that is, throws Pozzo back into the flow of time, and motion is possible.

We perceive the problem of action when we become aware of the gaps between desire, thought, physical motion, and time. Athletes recognize the problem acutely. For the athlete, too much consciousness can ruin performance. As San Francisco Giant Joel Youngblood put it: "The worst thing you can do when you're hitting the ball really well is to talk about what you're doing . . . because the next thing that happens is, you start thinking about what you're doing instead of just doing it. Then you don't do it any more." This is not wholly an anti-thought posture. Teammate Mike Aldrete says it this way: "I like to think I'm not unconscious up there, but . . . I'm not getting all caught up in what I'm doing and I'm not trying to do anything I can't do."[3] What these athletes are describing, I think, is what I call the tautology of action and the perfect conformity of mind, body and time.

Most dramas eliminate gaps between desire, motion and time by presuming a coherence of these elements contained in the agency of a character. Action can be taken for granted as characters combat the obstacles of external forces. Pozzo gives us a small clue that not all such obstacles can be identified externally. The mystery of the phenomenon of action, however, appears on a larger scale, as we might expect, in *Hamlet*. It is a play constituted by hesitation, delay, arrested action: an enlargement and elaboration of the problem, "I'd like very much to (sit down or hit a home run or kill the king) but I don't quite know how to go about it."

Let me suppose first that our own grammar supplies clues to the difficulties. The chasm between mind and motion, thought and action, finds an analogue in the difference in function between nouns and verbs. In the nominative form, the notion of an "act" is possible only from a conceptual vantage point outside "acting." To conceive of an act and to name it is to project a completion. We can make such a projection or objectification either before or after the doing. But to "nominate" an act is to create a fiction by extricating an object from the mode of verbs. It is the verbal, active mode that takes time into account.

We name something "revenge," for example, by postulating the completion of a deed that corresponds to the unity of motive and

doing. Revenge constitutes a "thing" in which a deed of killing reciprocates a desire for the symmetry of justice. But the thingness of the act is an illusion of grammar that enables thought to stop the flow of on-going events in the momentary stillness of the noun. We sense that Hamlet delays because we imagine with him, an idea of the completed act. Hamlet's problem, in grammatical terms, is how to make the leap between the nominative projection of the act into the verbal "presencing" or doing of the act. Like Pozzo, he needs something that will throw him into the present tense of motion.

Part of Hamlet's difficulty, of course, is that his mind and reason are antithetical to deed. I do not mean just Hamlet the character seems to have an aversion to the act of revenge or that he cannot seem to find the means or the time to join the conception of the act (Revenge) to its verb (revenge). Reason is an obstacle to action, but not because revenge is unreasonable. Reason, like the noun, is constitutionally a separate mode for functioning in the world. It separates, as Hamlet suggests, humans from beasts and is as much an integral part of human nature as nouns are to grammatic nature. But there is no obvious site at which the mental act--which is capable of conceiving the completed act--transforms into the doing in the concreteness of time and space. The habits of the mind to name and to conceive an act as a thing do not immediately conform to the capacities of the body to do. A simpler way of putting this might be simply to pose an old question: how does thought become action? What relationship does the mental act have to the physical and what do either have to do with signification or definition of an "act?"

Character, especially as it implies embodiment, is our most convenient means of giving a site for action because character is the site for both reason (thought) and doing. I mean to suggest a definition of character that is anti-mimetic: character is not that which imitates a real or imaginarily real person with a definable collection of traits but that which locates specific qualities at a junction of act (as idea) and acting. In discussing what appears to be Hamlet's difficulty, I assign the problem of action to the agency of the character but that is largely because character is such a convenient metaphor. It also happens, however, that the problem of Hamlet (if he were a "real" character) and the problem of *Hamlet* are virtually identical.

Pretending that Hamlet represents a "real" character, we might say that he lives--acutely and painfully aware--in the gap between thinking and doing. His first articulated desire ("O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew") is to be relieved of the burden and pollution (solid or sullied) of materiality that is the necessary physical agency for action. Hamlet bears the burden of materiality, but it is that very "matter" that the ghost

requires for revenge; spirit alone is incapable of concrete action. Hamlet is further aware that the motive and cue for action are somehow insufficient to create an act. As long as one can isolate the motive and the cue from the deed, as long as they are visible as separate entities, the action cannot be fully constituted. Hamlet has plenty of models to imitate, if imitation were all that were required for action. Fortinbras and Laertes demonstrate what to do and even how to do it. But to ask Hamlet to imitate them is equivalent to asking Pozzo to put one foot in front of another to get back to his campstool or to showing Hamlet a revenge manual. It is not the physical act or the observable deed or even the convention that comprises action. Any action from Hamlet requires the full conformity of mind and doing. But that conformity is not simply a matter of setting one's mind to the task, as though will or judgment or decision were simple predicates to doing.

A specific speech in the play helps to anatomize the problem of action as we see it in Hamlet and also offers a strategy for understanding its phenomenology. As we might expect, the speech comes from the Gravedigger.

> If I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches--it is to act, to do, and to perform. (5.1.9-11)

We rarely pause over this speech. It is yet another echo of the "problem of action" that dominates the play and gives us a new dimension, if not relief, in a comic moment. Using the formalities of logical proof, the character of the Clown proves by tautological definition that an act is an act is an act, and at the same time proves himself a rustic who does not know how to make a logical form "get somewhere." Humor rises in the disparity between the presumable conviction of the clown that he is actually proving a point, and the nonsense that there is substance in his proof. If we were concerned that all the spoofing of academic pretentiousness had been murdered with Polonius, the clown brings back the verbal ghost of the old counsellor, reminding us of an emptiness and impotence in logical forms.

However, if Polonius had too many distinctions for the representation of an act, the clown has none: "to do, to act, and to perform" competes with "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" to win the nonsense prize. Yet more than one critic has noticed the potential for making distinctions between the self-defining terms of the clown. This speech, Harry Levin points out, "rings the

changes on a momentous word."[4] The lines become the cryptic diagnosis of Hamlet's conundrum. Joan Hartwig suggests that the gravedigger's speech "helps us to understand the befuddling distinctions that each term insists be made between them."

> 'Acting' with its punning significance of the theatrical putting on of a role other than what the person is; 'doing' with its ambivalent sexual and direct physical action implied; and 'performing' with its adjustments according to the performer's sense of how the audience perceives him *are* distinct values of the 'act.'[5]

Rather than looking at the thematic significance of the speech, however, let me look first at a feature of the clown's grammar. He puts the three branches of an act in the infinitive. The infinitive is the form of a verb as it becomes a noun in the syntax of a sentence. The infinitive is our grammatical means of resolving the differences between nouns and verbs, but as such is the most meditative and abstract and the least bound to the concreteness of subjectivity, time or objects. The infinitive form thus exposes its own kind of void in language: it is empty ("not limited," according to Webster's New World Dictionary) of person, number, or tense. We know, thanks to Maynard Mack, that the interrogative mood dominates the play. But Hamlet poses many of his interrogatives--especially in his meditation on action and death--in the infinitive forms of the verb. (To be/not to be; to suffer; to take arms; to die, to sleep; to grunt and sweat). Hamlet's problem, and the problem of the dramatic action in general, is how to move from the abstraction of the infinitive into the active, from the nominative to the verbal. The course of the plot carries us through the verbal back to the nominative, from playing to the play, acting to the act just as the temporal unfolding of action in time may lead us to a name for the act but that name costs us the presence of action that is forever receding or proceeding in time. Hamlet keeps hold of his action rhetorically by naming the possibilities in the infinitive: but it is clearly a means of keeping consciousness aloof and uncommitted and a way of stopping time at least in thought. The infinitive is an attempt to speak with both dimensions of noun and verb but the compromised result is an atemporal conception that withholds from both body and consciousness their participation and presence in time.

The clown, then, is a philosopher, using his infinitives as abstract conceptions that in some sense are empty grammatical constructions. We can quite rightly interpret distinctions as Hartwig has done. But I want to look instead at the relation of the clown's

tautology to one of Heidegger's who, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," makes a characteristically enigmatic statement: "The *world worlds*." I am not concerned here with the specifics of the philosophical context and meaning of such a statement but with my sense that what makes such statements difficult is that Heidegger is forced to use grammar to invoke our understanding for a "pre-grammatic" condition, even though understanding is conditioned by grammar. It is impossible to think about being and time without the analytic tools of grammar, but such analysis leads us away from understanding insofar as it falsifies the totality or unity of time, space and consciousness. Consciousness formed by grammar separates itself from the concretes of time and space then tries to overcome its emptiness and reunite with being and "speak" the concreteness of being. The old question of language and knowledge asks, always, the degree to which a concept can be, if ever, identical to that which it conceives. The difficulty arises because the most accurate grammatical representation of the unity of being is an almost unintelligible tautology, such as "the world worlds" or "appropriation appropriates." Such phrases are attempts to recognize time, characterized by the verb, as an essential element, an inseparable feature, of things. Our grammar conceals the fact that we are capable of naming a thing (whether that thing is an object or an act) only by excising it from the reality of time.

The noun allows us to function conceptually. It holds time in abeyance, taking the temporal dimension out of our consideration of things. The verb allows that objects are predicated in time and throws the object into time in the sentence. But a person or an object "has" its being insofar as it is identical to itself and is identical to itself when it is apart from my grammar that conceives it. Even to say "this is a table" divides the "being" of the table at the same time that the grammar creates a table in ways that the mind can understand. The closest grammar can get to being is the tautology but the tautology subverts analysis. Language carries within itself a nostalgia for self-identify and a desire to recreate the self-identical nature of being and at the same time resists self-defining forms.

The problem becomes more acute when we attempt to understand an act. The word itself suggests the paradox insofar as it is a noun that circumscribes a process as well as a verb that includes an object. It is a word that wears both temporal and conceptual disguises. Saying the word "act" we identify the "thingly" aspect of time. We identify a temporal collocation of motion, desire and place, as a means of conceiving change as it filters through a human agency. Our language, nonetheless, consistently points out the conceptual paradox in the number of words that can function as nouns and verbs. Unlike Heidegger, we may rarely use the same word in both functions to

create a sentence, but such formulations as "the actor acts" or "the revenger revenges" begin to take us into the tautological territory of action.

James Calderwood can help me join this abstract discussion to *Hamlet* by pointing out the nature of the proper noun and its relation to Hamlet's difficulties. The proper noun is a version of the grammatical tautology I have been describing.

> As a class, proper names are the linguistic ultimates--the verbal quarks and neutrinos--of particularizing, the point at which an existentialist reduction would have to stop, since it is at that point that meaning is stripped from words and we are left to confront sheer being. Thus Wittgenstein observed that "a name cannot be dissected any further by means of definition: it is a primitive sign;" and Gilbert Ryle adds that "dictionaries do not tell us what proper names mean--for the simple reason that they do not mean anything."[6]

The proper name of the play, shortened by convention, is *Hamlet*, corresponding to the featured character, Hamlet, and this unity suggests one kind of tautology between play, process and character. But given the earlier discussion, the aspect of proper name might also be a basis for suggesting that in some sense the play projects no significance insofar as it is a self-identical thing, an act that acts the problem of the actant. This further allows us to say that any play can be understood as an occasion for meaning. The drama is a temporal process *when* meaning occurs, but its tautological nature prevents us from speaking the "truth" of its meaning.

Let me return now to the ways in which the clown's speech suggests an analytic of action in spite of its tautological formulation. Michael Goldman has explored the problem in *Acting and Action in Shakespearean Tragedy*. He identifies the questions: "how does action begin, where does it end, and how do we identify its course."[7] These questions, of course, are the very materials of dramatic action and every drama in some degree is a strategy for answering them. Goldman cites Austin's tri-partite distinctions of action: the stages (mental preparation), the phases (discreet physical doings) and stretches (the effects or results).[8] These distinctions clearly recall Austin's speech-act theory of the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary elements of speech: the statement, the intention and the result. Both Goldman's formulation of the questions and Austin's speech-act model imply a dramatistic model: that is, both rest upon the form of a "beginning, middle and end" as the shape of an action.

But action as that which unfolds in time, as something that "has" a beginning, middle and end, is only a partial conception.

Suppose that the gravedigger anticipated both Austin and Goldman and that he makes similar distinctions so that an interpretation of his terms yields us the behavioral, the motivational and the performative aspects of an act.

"To do" might then distinguish itself as the behavioral or observable aspect of an act. It is the most concrete element and is most easily removed from intentions or consequences. In this sense, "doing" is most available to description and hence, to science, like the locutionary aspect of the speech act. Out of behavior, the observer might perceive characteristic patterns or habits that create a form. That form, in turn, would be susceptible to analytic as well as descriptive analysis.

When we look at Hamlet's behavior through the course of the play we see more variation than pattern. Hamlet's pattern of behavior resists classification. As Bert States has said, Shakespeare found "a blend of what might normally be considered incompatible forms of behavior that not only co-exist in one temperament but in their restless commotion create the impression of a mystery that can be only partially explained through the text."[9] We may be as uncertain as Claudius or as mistaken as Polonius in trying to account for the cause of Hamlet's many behaviors. The variations in his behavior lead us to speaking of Hamlet as the consummate actor or "behaviorist" who can function in every new situation in a new way: one who has no core of consistency. Consistency is more of a problem for the observer than for the doer inasmuch as the observer seeks pattern in behaviors. As scientific observers we might say that Hamlet consistently thinks, talks or delays, but the dramatic character, Hamlet, never asks himself for the "through line" of his behavior; he asks how he can do what he wants to do, and when he can (or must) do it.

The clown appears to know that a crucial concern is not behavior alone but intent as well. "If a man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself." (5.1.14-16) As the proverb goes, in terms of the event, whether the pot hits the pitcher or the pitcher hits the pot, it's going to be bad for the pitcher. In terms of human action, however, the problem of motive or intention intrudes upon the definition of the act. In any conventional sense, Hamlet "has" sufficient motive to act. Regardless of whether the ghost is a self-projection or a reality, a "spirit of health or goblin damned," it constitutes a call to action. The ghost is the invitation and the cue for revenge. One of the play's mysteries is that it offers no demonstrable correlation between Hamlet's behavior and that

motive. He is "motivated" to take revenge on Claudius, not to put on an antic disposition, to torment Ophelia or to tease Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By the very disjunction between motive and behavior, however, the play allows us to distinguish two discreet elements of action. The play dislocates motive and behavior and shows them as separate entities. This is very different from suggesting that Hamlet has secret motives for his behavior or that his motive cannot overcome his inertia or his scruples.

The third part of the clown's tautology is "to perform." I would look at the element of "performance" not simply as analogous to the "stretches" or consequences in Austin's trinity, although Hamlet is certainly concerned with consequences. He is fully aware in "to be or not to be" that clear intentions do not necessarily lead to known consequences. And he is clearly concerned with futurity and the unknowns of the undiscovered country. Performance, rather, asks us to look at the context in which action occurs. In the most specific way, performance implies the need for an audience or observer to the action. But this does not mean that performance is simply the culmination or consequence of some previous process or exercises in motive gathering. Performance is not a result or a goal but rather the occasion of the action where an audience (or consciousness) participates.

The issues of performance in *Hamlet* are more clearly related to theatricality than with consequence. We can presume Hamlet's skill as an actor and a playwright. If he feigns madness, he is certainly convincing enough to Polonius and Ophelia and the court. His advice to the Players is sound; his additions to their play, effective. But as an analytic of action, "to perform," concerns more than the character's theatrical skills.

Certainly by the time Hamlet actually stabs and poisons Claudius in his double-dose of revenge, he has the full court for his audience. We might enlarge the sphere of performance, however, to include not simply witnesses to the act but to indicate the requirement of the appropriate context for the act. And context, in the theatrical implications of "performance" includes the concreteness of time and place. Hamlet cannot perform his act until he finds himself in the right "theatre" which is to say, in part, in the right place at the right time. Regardless of behavior or motive, the act is not complete until it is put into the theatre. And this is not simply a matter of having witnesses to the act or insisting that the play does not exist until it is actually performed. I mean rather, that part of the completion of an action is in finding "form" in the concreteness of time and space. Form, however, does not follow the action. Form occurs simultaneously, at least in drama, by means of the consciousness that

forms. It is a matter of having a consciousness present; a consciousness, moreover, that not only participates but can tell of it: can in fact create the story or the fiction that says, something was *done*. The playwright has the advantage of distance from a fictional action; he has only to conceive. The actor has the advantage of working within a preconceived pattern of actions; he has only to do. Hamlet's paradigmatic problem is that he is both actor and author, working under the imperatives of doing, conceiving and performing, of conforming thought, motive and deed. And this is where Horatio comes in. Horatio needs neither to conceive action nor to act nor does he have any particular motive. But as friend and confidant he will bring the infinitive forms of Hamlet's verbs to the indicative mood, albeit past tense, and tell the "occurents, more and less" as well as the motives "which have solicited." Futurity is implicit in Horatio's capacity to tell the plot of the motive and deeds.

Horatio is obviously Hamlet's perfect audience who will make known what has happened. In his plea to Horatio, Hamlet says, "what a wounded name, Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!" (5.2.33-34) Horatio is there to redeem Hamlet's name by telling his story. So with the recognition of the need for audience and storyteller, Hamlet returns us to the idea of behavior as the "observable" element of action. Behavior is "unknown" without the observer who perceives and creates pattern out of inchoate gestures or deeds. To make behavior known is to bring it into the sphere of the intelligible; but such intelligibility is at the cost of "being" and is necessarily a fiction that severs the irretrievable moment of an action in time from the flow of time, yet redeems it by making it repeatable.

To perform, then, is more than a further definition of "do" and "act." *How* Hamlet came to be able to conform motive and action remains a "mystery" that needs further exploration. We know, approximately, when it happened, but cannot know quite how. We do witness, however, that his act finds completion in a performance that includes not simply the killing of the king but the production of the play, *Hamlet*. It is not just that Hamlet self-references *Hamlet*, but that the dramatic action performs for us the three branches of the problem of action as well as its tautological nature.

Aristotle gives a clue to the dramatic tautology in the *Poetics* when he says on the one hand that plot is the "heart and soul" of tragedy and then, further, that plot is the goal or *telos* of tragedy. Aristotle's own circularity, as Reuben Brower has pointed out, suggests that plot is both the animating principle that structures events as well as the destination. The process of selection that presumes a pattern of action is also the process that creates the pattern. Plot as "soul" or animating principle is the manifestation of a desire for coherence

in the on-goingness of incoherent change. Time and change are the materials of plot in the sense that plot makes an "object" out of past, present and future. To that extent, it falsifies time and change--the mode of verbs--even as it makes them perceptible. Plot thus presumes an event even as it creates that event. And plot names an event by imagining coherence. The very act of finding pattern brings pattern into being and hence is the destination, result or goal of plot making. Peter Brooks says it this way:

> Plot as a logic of narrative would hence seem to be analogous to the syntax of meanings that are temporarily unfolded and recovered, meanings that cannot otherwise be created or understood. . . . It is my simple conviction, then, that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and the plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality.
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> Walter Benjamin has made this point in the simplest and most extreme way, in claiming that what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning. 'Death,' says Benjamin, 'is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.'. . . Only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality.[10]

To perform is to display the act to view; taking the corpse of the act "like a soldier to the stage." In this sense, it is not Hamlet who finally performs. By the time he kills Claudius, revenge is virtually irrelevant. The plot, however, completes the act, puts the act on stage and brings action into being. The plot itself is a self-identical tautology that does, acts and performs.

But what, then, of the human agency? In what sense can consciousness participate in action? "If I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act." This is the predication of the clown's proof. "Wittingly," in other words, qualifies the nature of the verb and identifies the manner or what we might call the style of the drowning. Wit, then, is not a thing that acts, it is something that enters action. Style, which is the "manner of the adverb," cannot be prior to the verb and does not function outside the activity of the verb. Style is the *"je ne sais quoi"* in drama as well as fashion because it is nothing that can exist on its own; it fully depends upon action for its presence.

Now Hamlet clearly functions for most of the play with a witty style: it is thus a style of the mind that attaches itself primarily to

the action of speaking and thinking not to the action of killing. Hamlet introduces himself to us wittily, opening his character with a joke ("A little more than kin and less that kind"). And Hamlet acts wittily through four acts of the play, producing a character that is almost purely playful because it is not engaged in the brute physicality of corporeal action. Wit is the style of the mind of Hamlet that disengages him and allows him the free play of the mind through an enormous range of rhetorical digressions and elaboration. The plot of the play follows this technique of digression in an almost endless series of deferrals and indirections that continually resist forward action. The plot is as witty as Hamlet because its structure follows the forms of rhetorical argument rather than dramatic action, as Calderwood has illustrated:

> In retrospect we can see that the form of the play, so stressed by Shakespeare, can be likened to several rhetorical constructions--what Puttenham calls 'tmesis,' 'parenthesis,' and 'parabasis.'[11]

The free play of the structure is thus kin to the mind--which is to say, rhetoric--of Hamlet. Such kinship gives the play itself a form of subjectivity that appears to be self-creating. The play, in this sense, is a subject, not an object. Tautologically speaking, the play is a subject in play, not an object that is played. Character, furthermore, is a means of locating the subjectivity that is in play through the course of action. This is just to say, as Marion Trousdale has suggested, that character is a rhetorical place rather than the simple representation of a person.[12] But more than that, the character Hamlet locates consciousness in the action, and the troubles that Hamlet has in acting highlight the troubles that consciousness has in the material dimension of action.

Play and play consciousness, following Hans-Georg Gadamer's lead in *Truth and Method*, is a mode of being and a mode of action into which a player throws himself. In these terms, Hamlet is the subjectivity that plays *Hamlet* and who is "taken" by the nature of the play itself.

> . . . the primacy of play over consciousness of the player is fundamentally acknowledged. . . . Play obviously represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself. The ease of play, which naturally does not mean that there is any real absence of effort, but

> phenomenologically refers only to the absence of strain, is experienced subjectively as relaxation.[13]

In the course of *Hamlet* we witness Hamlet's playfulness. But this playfulness is not identical to play for it is a mode of his mind rather than "action." Hamlet's playfulness lacks the corporeality of actual play. He is not, so to speak "in the game," and we constantly see the strain of his efforts. A crucial change occurs when he hears of the exploits of Fortinbras and Poland, where Fortinbras is going to risk thousands of lives for a worthless plot of land. "Exposing what is mortal and unsure To all that fortune, death and danger dare, Even for an eggshell." (4.4.51-53) Fortinbras provides a model not just as a man of action but as one who will risk all for nothing, who is thus a genuine player in a game that signifies nothing. Fortinbras, we hear, is risking all for nothing, and what is that if not play? After this, Hamlet resolves, "O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4.65-66) This is a resolve to make thought corporeal but it is also a resolve to throw himself into play. And here Hamlet leaves the scene for the rest of the act. It is a period for the actor and character to relax, and when Hamlet returns to the scene, we see him at ease. The strain of his mind against action relaxes and he is fully in play, and (we imagine) more fully himself.

The witty Hamlet disappears and the witting Hamlet returns. We may say that the witty style that has kept Hamlet from engagement in action, that has kept him self-involved, becomes a style of "understanding." His language changes style. He reports to Horatio how it happened that he found the letters ordering his own death. The discovery of those letters is something that happened to Hamlet through no will of his own: the discovery required no self-assertion.

> Rashly,
> And praised be rashness for it--let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will---
> (5.2.6-11)

Hamlet puts his happy accident in providential terms. Even in happening to have his father's signet ring to seal the warrant "was heaven ordinant." But this notion of Providence could also be described by Gadamer's notion of play: Hamlet has finally submitted to the sphere of play and a game whose rules do indeed shape the ends of the play.

Such submission of the will to play is an act which itself generates understanding. By his "rash" action, Hamlet loses the kind of consciousness or will that is prior to an action. Hamlet and most of his critics rely on a conceptual model of action that presumes consciousness is prior to action or that it is a preparatory phase that is organized before action occurs physically. Such a model, as I suggested above, is behind Austin's speech act theory that Goldman takes up in his question of action. It is composed of a trinity that structurally corresponds to the Aristotelian form of beginning, middle, end; to the mechanistic form of cause, action, effect; to the Freudian form of id, ego, super-ego; to the Stanislavski model of acting formed on the idea of motive, behavior and effect; and, of course, to the temporal model of past, present and future as well as the spatial model of inside, outside and context. The conceptual model organizes event and action diachronically. It presumes that the assertion of will, like the assertion of a sentence, unfolds in sequence. Such a form of unfolding does not wholly account for the tautology of self-identity that includes self-understanding. Gadamer suggests that understanding "cannot be grasped as a simple activity of the consciousness that understands," nor is it "self-evident certainty" or something that "happens to the self, something through which it becomes an authentic self." Instead, says Gadamer, "understanding involves a moment of 'loss of self' that is relevant to theological hermeneutics and should be investigated in terms of the structure of the game."[14]

Hamlet's absence from the stage is the structural equivalent to such a "loss of self." Even in the contemplation of death at the graveside, there is in Hamlet a kind of "buoyancy" that Gadamer describes as a feature of one who is possessed by the game, because buoyancy is a feature of the game itself. Hamlet has relinquished the wit and autonomy of the earlier scenes and appears, in his absence, to have submitted to the action of the game. He is carried, as it were, by the flow of time but is carried in the mode of understanding. But he further represents the consciousness within the action who wins understanding. "Whoever 'tries,'" says Gadamer, "is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game . . . is not the player, but instead the game itself. The game is what holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there."[15] The plot itself is thus what animates Hamlet and "shapes his ends:" the *psyche* and the *telos* of consciousness in action. Hamlet, the consummate player, is mastered by the game that is represented by plot, but he is mastered with full understanding.

Hamlet's understanding at one point takes the form of self-identity, when he leaps into the grave crying, "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." It later takes the form of recognizing the tautology of time

itself as a mode of being. Echoing the clown's tautological proposition he says,

> . . . 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. (5.2.208-211)

His readiness is equivalent to the athlete who is fully "in the game," who like the baseball pitcher or the jazz musician is "in the groove" and has found the rhythm. As a recent basketball hero said, "I felt like I got in a rhythm and I didn't feel anybody could stop me . . . I wanted to get it all out."[16] Hamlet's readiness is not preparation but presence. And he is ready to "get it all out." That is: to exhaust identity in action. Action as that which is present and in which consciousness participates breaks the conceptual barriers between past and future, is represented in Hamlet's speech as another tautology. Readiness is the presence of consciousness in the present. Conversely, the analytic model of action that divides motive, behavior and performance allows the problem of sequence to intrude and fear of futurity to hinder it. The analytic becomes the kind of self-consciousness that inhibits action.

Action cannot be identified without a subject. But the subject is not simply the agent nor is it the motive because each of these concepts implies something that exists prior to or outside the action. In play, however, the act of playing creates the subject. The dramatic form of action, in Kenneth Burke's words, "dances an attitude." The agent does not determine the action but "finds himself" in the action. In the most extreme formulation of the tautology, we could say then that "*Hamlet* hamlets Hamlet."

Hamlet represents the end of the strain of the individual consciousness against the problem of action as an end of the strain of language against experience. Hamlet the character ceases to ask how action is possible, how to join consciousness with behavior, how to align motive, behavior and performance. The poetic desires that sought but never achieved a totality of language, identity and action are, at the end of Act 5, disconnected, discontinuous. The dying sentence is cut off and "the rest is silence." Such silence is the final tautology where being speaks. Without language, being that has been present but concealed by the problem of action, is briefly revealed in the moment of silence. And *Hamlet* is silent in reference to its meaning. The work of art plays itself so its action is "true" but its meaning rests in silence.

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Notes

1. An extensive and useful development of these questions and their relationship to literary analysis can be found in Charles Altieri, *Act & Quality* (Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1981). See especially the chapter, "The Concept of Action" 97-159.

2. Altieri 99. "On the one hand, the values inherent in a dramatistic approach are not easily reconciled with any type of structuralist formalism, and, on the other, they challenge the often disputed but by now almost standard tendency in the social sciences to imagine that adequate explanations of human behavior must take the form of causal laws on a scientific model." An example of a scientist taking a "dramatistic" approach to neurological problems is Oliver Sachs in his popular book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat.*

3. Quoted by Ray Ratto, *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 1987 47.

4. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1959) 79.

5. Joan Hartwig, *Shakespeare's Analogical Scene* (Lincoln, Nebraska: U Nebraska P, 1983) 11-12.

6. James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 5.

7. Michael Goldman, *Acting and Action in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1985) 17.

8. 18.

9. Bert O. States, "Hamlet's Older Brother," *Hudson Review* 39 (Autumn 1986) 543.

10. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1984) 21-22.

11. Calderwood 23.

12. Marion Trousdale, *Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina P, 1982) 8-14.

13. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) 94.

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976) 50-51.

15. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 95-96.

16. C.W. Nevius, "In Short, It Was a Splendid Moment," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 2, 1987. The article concerns the heroics of Purvis Short.

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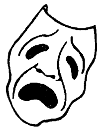

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