

## Unfolding Ourselves in the Haunting of *Hamlet*

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Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Derrida.  
—Terry Eagleton

I am quite moved to be named to this distinguished group of hermeneutic thinkers who have been awarded the distinction of being *Professores honoris causa* by the International Institute for Hermeneutics (IIH). In my now three decades of hermeneutic work I have received a number of awards yet none has admitted me to such an august group. I am humbled in a measure equal to my profound gratitude for being considered fit such an honor.

I look forward and shall remain ready to make whatever contributions I am able to this important international collaboration where I feel certain I shall find kindred spirits and new avenues for collaboration in the *Agora Hermeneutica*, which President Wierciński and the IIH has created.

As others have also done, my way of commemorating this event is to offer a Commencement Addresses, where I shall endeavor to thank by thinking; that is to say, I shall share an interpretation to show my gratitude. My small contribution is in the form of a defense of hermeneutics and the humanities via the classic text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

### Preparing for the Haunting

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with  
 Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. . . .  
 I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no  
 scorn nor condescension . . . .  
 —W.E.B. DuBois

It is not quite as frightening as it sounds or at least not simply frightening: We ought always ready ourselves for being haunted. It is coming—and it has always already come in any event—and whether we are ready makes little difference to the fact that haunting *will* arrive. Precisely because of this, our attempts at readiness make a keen difference as to what will be unfolded of ourselves in what is to be encountered repeatedly. I shall call some pretty portion of this world-wide haunting with respect to thinking by one of its hermeneutic names: the classics. The classic text in this essay which I shall attempt to welcome as a ghost is *Hamlet*. We scholars, by which I mean here those who assign and are assigned the classics, have a special responsibility revolving around the welcoming such ghosts, of responding to their clamoring to be heard. We already hear an echo here no doubt from Hamlet’s words to Horatio late in the play as we try to think about how best to welcome all manners of the wondrous strange: “the readiness is all.”

One reason I feel especially moved to address and cultivate such readiness is demanded by the political atmosphere in the US in and around universities that is being set by certain discussions that once again questions the value, virtue, and ultimately the need of the Humanities and therefore hermeneutics. We might say the most ardent of STEM apologists (and let’s be clear they are but a symptom) are attempting to exorcise the Humanities altogether as if they believe the Humanities are the last but waning stronghold of ancient superstition that needs to be driven away before their dream of an enlightened culture can be secured at last. *Hamlet*, I suggest, is able to help us ward off their exorcisms by helping remain near to our nature and allow us to invite others—now and generations hence—to this spectral-based learning to which many of us have given our lives.

Claudius when chiding Hamlet for his mourning mood and the length of its stay with him, attributes Hamlet’s mistake to “an understanding simple and unschooled.” Although Claudius seems to be wrong about how either sophisticated or schooled is Hamlet’s understanding, he is right to point us toward the variable quality of our ways of understanding being as they are based in our ever changing

moods. Furthermore, we stand to gain much if we believe our understanding—which always means also our self-understanding—admits of being schooled. Even though tradition and inheritance are inescapable as hermeneutics teaches, the ability to read and interpret in the ways necessary to undertake the task well can be learned and therefore bettered, thus calling for education in the Humanities.

Reasons for writing can come from strange occasions. To wit, the design and inspiration for the first version of this essay came to me uninvited and forcefully, like daggers to my ear. It struck and addressed me directly although through a circuitous route. This experience seemed to be asking, if not demanding of me, I felt, a somewhat exacting response. Here is how the visitation came that led me back to *Hamlet* and forward to these hermeneutic reflection on finitude, freedom, and selfhood. The reader will decide if they are motivated by great argument or if they are but stirred by a quarrelsome straw because I thought the honor of the Humanities were at stake.

Late one summer I found myself ready to teach my undergraduate honors seminar in the coming fall titled Ontology as Ethics. I thought I had a wonderful set of provocations to share with the students who had signed up for the class. This all changed when—in a meeting demanded of me because of an administrative title—a colleague just recently come from another meeting reported the following. A member of the university's Board of Regents and STEM advocate said as the conclusion to his speech defending the withholding funds from the university unless such monies were used only for science, technology, engineering, or mathematics: “No one needs another book on *Hamlet*.” Un-Hamlet like I did not doubt the veracity of the claim nor did I demand to go and meet the regent myself; indeed I decided quite quickly what I would do.

Let's admit this, the claim shows some rather sharp rhetorical skill by the regent. We have to agree with him on this: *Hamlet* is able to stand as an exemplar of the virtue of the Humanities. As you already see, his claim says: if one of the greatest work of the Humanities is of no new value, then a dismissal of *Hamlet* has the force of dismissing every other lesser Humanities text we might imagine in its place—how efficient, a single dismissal dismissing them all. As we see demonstrated in this claim, often in public rhetoric *Hamlet* in particular and Shakespeare in general are names that stand for much and label the classics and the Humanities *tout court*. Consequently, we hermeneuticians are all *Hamlet* or Shakespeare in this. Not because Hamlet is some every person with whom we must identify—although we shall see we are all visited by ghosts and must learn to speak with them and we are always making impossible decisions. Rather we are Hamlets because all of us care for words, all of us care about what things mean and might be said to mean, and because we are positioned in the

academy to care for the intricacies of hermeneutic understanding. Maybe only the name Socrates has an equal claim to make in this regard yet this would leave us still sharing a (proper) name.

Upon the witness of my colleague, I thought it writ down in my duty to act in the name of *Hamlet*. I took the text from my shelf and then looked at other classic texts there and decided to cancel my planned seminar and invent a new one where we would read *Hamlet* six times with some other classic text read between each reading of the play. I wrote the students and swore I would get as close as I knew how to the lessons of the original class they had thought they would be taking. I asked them please to suffer this response to the regent and join me in this (vengeful?) endeavor. They did and we learned much. We learned about hermeneutics and reading, about philosophy and communication, about how *Hamlet* as a piece of classic literature could not stay the same after one has read Freud or Nietzsche or Marx (nor they after *Hamlet*).

That was a while ago and, of course, the calls against *Hamlet* have not abated. Indeed, recently a piece in the New York *Times* carried the title “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding.” The article quotes a STEM advocate: “We don’t want to take away Shakespeare we’re just talking about helping people make good decisions,” he says seemingly unaware of the relation between the word “decision” and one of Shakespeare’s most thought of plays. In any event, he ends by endorsing this catchy little motto: “one cannot be a life-long learner without being a life-long earner.”<sup>1</sup> Aye, there, of course, is the utilitarian rub that mocks the humanities for their real world uselessness. I shall have a word more about this in my concluding remarks. Fortunately, books on *Hamlet*/Hamlet keep appearing to haunt regents, narrow STEM apologists, and anyone else who would wish to have done with us.<sup>2</sup> Saying what we are all thinking, Adam Phillips puts it beautifully: “If one interpretation explained Hamlet, we wouldn’t need Hamlet anymore: Hamlet as a play would have been murdered.”<sup>3</sup>

My reflections, what I call with others such as Linda Martín Alcoff a left-wing hermeneutics, shall echo Jacques Derrida’s understanding of haunting and inheriting

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Cohen, “A Rising Call to Foster STEM Fields, and Decrease Liberal Arts Funding “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding” New York *Times* Feb. 22, 2016, Section B, Page 1.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the best in philosophy recently are Andrew Curttrofello’s *All for Nothing: Hamlet’s Negativity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014 ), Simon Critchley and Jameison Webster, *Stay Illusion!* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Adam Phillips, “Against Self-Criticism” in *Unforbidden Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015) p. 123

from his wonderful *Specters of Marx*.<sup>4</sup> I claim there is a connection between inheritance and tradition that takes us to the classic *Hamlet* as an illuminating measure of our having to be together with one another and suggest classics do this in a manner no amount of calculative thinking ever could. I show this by reading those passages in *Hamlet* leading toward a particular understanding of this measuring. I undertake this task in light of Pierre Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life with its strategy of a providing a diagnosis followed by a therapy reflecting on living well even if all this does not always add much, if anything, to disciplinary scholarship narrowly conceived.

I have taught this Hamlet and Hermeneutics seminar again recently, joined in the watch by a new group of students, like Horatios and Hamlets and Marcelluses on the platform to see what awaited them in learning to read the "same" book over and over, learning what this ghost *Hamlet* would say and say anew if we undertook the task, in voices influenced by other classics, to speak to it.

### Inheriting and the Classics

Very like a whale.  
—*Hamlet*, cited in Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*

As a bit a reflection shows there are many classics. This sometimes gets lost in the admittedly not unwarranted questioning of the canon. Nonetheless, many classics and everywhere. In his wonderful short set of reflections "Why Read the Classics?" Italo Calvino engages fourteen reasons in answer to the question posed by his essay's title.<sup>5</sup> Before ending with this conviction in favor of the classics: "The only reason one can possibly adduce is that to read the classics is better than not to read the classics," Calvino begins with the insight that when one reads a classic for the first time late in life one feels obliged to tell others who notice the text in one's hand: "I am re-reading X."<sup>6</sup> This, of course, is meant to produce that smile of recognition, admitting our disguises for a certain type of educative embarrassment. Acknowledging what one ought to have read means one has already been shaped in some way by the book one

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, "Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (State College: Penn State University Press, 2003) and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Italo Calvino, "Why Read the Classics?" in *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Calvino, 134

has yet to finish or even yet to begin. In more ways than we are able to know or untangle from among all the many we are made up of these texts.

In this way we are able to think the classics and ghosts together. As with ghosts, the classics are felt as something having been but also as being able to appear to us today. This example shows us classics are haunting us somehow, even when we have not addressed them directly. Who has yet to read *Hamlet* is a query with a significantly different answer than who has not yet been touched by *Hamlet*. Evidence for such is said to be found in this apocryphal story: a person unfamiliar with *Hamlet* on first seeing the play performed complained of its being boring as it was nothing more than famous quotes strung together. Somehow, it seems, *Hamlet* had already possessed this theater goer.

This always already being possessed and thus haunted by classics is able to take us to lessons in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, one the finest ghost stories one could read. I want to take from this text the concept I believe draws certain key aspect of Derrida's thinking into solidarity with my left-wing hermeneutics. In his concept of inheritance, one of the concepts that is essential when speaking of ghosts according to Derrida, we find a resemblance to the care hermeneutics displays for tradition and how best to respond to its address. Indeed, as with tradition in hermeneutics, inheritance is an inescapable structure of our having to be. Derrida puts these truths this way:

Inheritance is always a *given*, is always a task. . . . All questions of the subject of being or of what is to be (or not to be) are questions of inheritance. There is no backward looking fervor in this reminder, no traditionalist flavor. Reaction, reactionary, or reactive are but interpretations of the structure of inheritance. That we *are* heirs . . . [means] that the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not.<sup>7</sup>

From out of this fated necessity of inheritance comes as well a freedom, a series of decisions, over determined to be sure, about how to read and welcome the classics. We are asked by the ghosts of tradition—all those classics—to undertake some action on their behalf to keep safe some portion, at least, of their good name. A task given to us with no little echo in the plot of *Hamlet*. If I say the name of the Ghost is Hamlet,

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 54. Italics Derrida's. Being haunted is the condition given to all of us. Derrida writes: "I have my own feelings on this subject (I insist that it is a *feeling*, my feeling and I have no reason to deny that it projects itself necessarily into the scene I am interpreting: my "thesis," my hypothesis, or my hypostasis, precisely, is that it is never possible to avoid this precipitation, since everyone reads, acts, writes with *his* or *her* ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of another." Italics Derrida.

this amounts to a mere statement; On the contrary, if I say the name of the Ghost is *Hamlet*, this is a claim about inheritance and tradition of a world classic and not just Hamlet's family one. Especially for those who hang around universities, who have always metaphorically gone back to Wittenberg, *Hamlet* appears as a play within the play of our academic life, a classic visitation who haunts us always, somehow—in the end—by “words, words, words.”

Left-wing hermeneutic conversations revolving around the classics demands a type of reading fitting to this summons. So as to stand metaphorically on the platform at Elsinore, I shall call this type of welcoming reading *watchful*. A watchful reading is a pedagogical way of calling forth ghosts and having called them forth leads to a responsibility of speaking not only of them but with them, letting them be strange and surprising. When this hermeneutic conversation is genuine, it intermingles a variety of voices so as to disclose from the weight of tradition something new, something novel, something other, including the possibility of a new self-understanding as well. The work of inheritance and hermeneutics, when it comes to the classics, is never simply to take them over unaffected. It suffers that strange demand to alter them while leaving them recognizable. This is a challenge because a good reading is, as Derrida reminds us, “an interpretation that transforms they very thing it interprets.”<sup>8</sup> It is difficult and one is never quite sure what or our how to say what sense the encounter made.<sup>9</sup>

Hermeneutics, as we all recognize, is quite enamored with tradition and suffers many critiques for this not the least of which is it is inherently nostalgic and conservative. Yet, what I am promoting as watchful reading as a part of left-wing hermeneutics provides an ethical and political call. In the following, where Derrida is forced by those interviewing him to deny the claim “if we practice close reading we will never act,” he welcomes readers from what I imagine to be all the disciplines of the humanities when he responds:

On the contrary, I would assume that political, ethical, and judicial responsibility requires a task of infinite close reading. I believe this to be the condition of political responsibility: politicians should read. Now, to read does not mean to spend nights in the library; to read events, to analyze the

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida gives this description of what the watchful reading faces in this demand: “If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and as the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it.” Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 67

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, p. 16.

situation, to criticize the media, to listen to the rhetoric of the demagogues, that's close reading, and it is required more today than ever.<sup>10</sup>

Conceived this way watchful reading is called for here and everywhere; everything we encounter asks of us to make an interpretation of it, to be, as the word *watchful* suggests, awake to it. As a result, a left-wing hermeneutic turn to the classics and tradition could not be for reasons any more contemporary and forward looking.

Not everyone, as we have seen, is as keen to understand reading this way, to think one needs to keep the watch in this manner, or that anything much could come of inheritance understood, in part, as learning to read the classics. Fortunately, sometimes it takes just one visitation to alter things. "How now?" the initially disbelieving Horatio is asked after witnessing the ghost of Hamlet's father. After this classic encounter he exclaims: "this bodes some strange eruption." What Horatio says here I say of the visitation power of the classics if only we allow them to be strange and therefore like strangers give them welcome. Were we not to let classics be strange like ghosts, then this way of treating the classics would be to profane and betray them, pretending as do our detractors to know already what they say, as if they need not be read any longer.

Closing the first act of *Hamlet* is the line so prized and consequential for Derrida in *Specters*: "The time is out of joint/Curséd spite that ever I was born to set it right." This is the act's the penultimate line. Hamlet brings the first act to its end and in doing so sends us on our way speaking thus: "Nay, come, let's go together." The Arden edition of *Hamlet* has in the notes here the popular reading of this "Nay" as Hamlet giving a type of stage direction to hold Horatio and Marcellus so that all three might leave the platform and the first act together. This seems fair. Nevertheless, if we press this a bit, and try to think the "Nay" as directed toward negating the first person singular in the preceding line, then this "Nay" functions as an editor's pencil striking the singular "I" and replacing it with a plural "we." In "come, let's go together" the implication is that Hamlet senses he needs others, perhaps even to set things right. This is advice for all of us who have been cursed to find in our world today too many things in need of being set right.

In this manner the first act ends; but with the line "Who's there?" the play began. With these words the entire play commences by asking the question that, in essence, is the question asked by all classics: who are you? The question is doubled by the response, the play's second line: "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself."

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida, "Hospitality," p. 67

*Hamlet* goes on to provide any number of poetic measures by which responses to this twice asked question might be made. Simply put, *Hamlet* is nothing less than a series of profound poetical meters—a most excellent measure of our unfolding. And it keeps returning to the question. Just a few lines further into this opening scene the question comes a third time: “Stand ho! Who is there?” This time Horatio provides us with a now hermeneutically infused response: “friends to this ground,” he says. We might say, if we were bold enough as to venture an alteration in light of what we have said above: “Friends to this [classic/inherited/hermeneutic] ground.”

### Poetry as the Measure and Ground of Dwelling

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? Have you reckon'd  
the earth much?  
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?  
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?  
—Walt Whitman

That *Hamlet* is both poetry and play allows certain connections to hermeneutics to come to the fore. Gadamer writes late in *Truth and Method*: “Interpreting music or a play by performing it is not basically different from understanding a text by reading it: understanding always includes interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> Pick a classic set of lines from *Hamlet* and watch them preformed in any three of the most famous English-language films of the play and we see the truth of Gadamer’s insight. The same lines performed three ways disclose three differing interpretations. Simultaneously, each reading is its own unique reading and a reading of the exact same lines from *Hamlet*. Little goes so far as this in teaching an essential hermeneutic lesson on the variability of interpretation.<sup>12</sup> I take some hermeneutic comfort that it is a belief in the theater (pre-pandemic) that at any given moment somewhere in the world a performance of *Hamlet* is taking place. As an inexhaustible text, which is to say a classic in one of Gadamer’s definitions of such, somewhere these lines that cannot be said often enough are being spoken again before an audience, which means readings are being given so they might be interpreted further still by those who take them in. Somewhere, then, players are playing before

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<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Wiensheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1975) p. 400

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, p. 400.

an audience and doing what players and audiences do; which is, in some sense, what all of us are always doing.

I wish to open up what I take to be a fecund interpretive horizon by understanding the arrival of the Players in *Hamlet* as the arrival of poets and poetry and as the arrival of the conspicuous need for others and their interpretations to understand ourselves. This will serve as a way of setting into relief a hermeneutic understanding of language as essential to self-understanding. Before looking at what their arrival does for Hamlet, let's look at what Hamlet's advice to the Players does for this hermeneutic understanding. Sometime after their initial arrival, Hamlet gives the Players his famous advice and us our a hermeneutic cue: "Speak the speech I pray you" he begins. He goes on, as you recall it is a quite long speech, telling the Players much about how to act, how to suit the words to the action and the action to the words, telling them how, in a word, to do what they have come, as interpreters of the classics, to do. Hamlet advises them further on how to seek a tempered middle ground between overplaying and underplaying because the mistake of each is "from the purpose of playing," which is to say, is on a path away from what they are called upon essentially to accomplish. Hamlet glosses their time-honored purpose of playing this way:

. . . the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

We understand from the words "both at the first and now, was and is" that players have had, since ever players were, the task of this mirror holding. Let's insist: the mirror held up here is not the one said to belong the scientific method and its claims to reflect things exactly how they are. Nor is the mirror held up to nature to search for basic instincts whether good or bad, base nor noble. In contrast to these, the mirror answers the opening question "who's there?" What is unfolded in this mirror is the disclosiveness made possible by the nature of our linguisticity (*Spracheliekeit*). The Players, acting out of and into our having to dwell poetically, hold up a mirror disclosing to us how our communicative being-with is measured and moving us to the heart of our hermeneutic selves.

Through an accomplished performance of a classic as the holding up this mirror, we would be afforded a chance to measure ourselves not only as we currently are but it also affords us the opportunity to glimpse the ground out of which we become who we are. This is the same ground out of which we could become

something other. This reading of *Hamlet* here echoes that of Heidegger in “. . . poetically man dwells . . .” where he writes: “The taking of measure is what is poetic in dwelling. Poetry is measuring. . . . poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being.”<sup>13</sup> A mirror in this hermeneutic sense grants a view from a bit of a distance that brings the nearest nearer, brings what we otherwise overlook *viz.*, our communicative nature.<sup>14</sup> We do not hold up a mirror to see our hands, we do not hold it up to see what we are already able to see. It is held up instead to see what otherwise is outside our view yet which belongs essentially to us. This is the strange thing about our linguisticity, it is never not an essential part of us and yet it so difficult to see or we could say it is easy to overlook when you are looking at everything else. Our linguistic nature is easy to miss while taking the view Heidegger describes as “the cheap omniscience of everyday opinion.”<sup>15</sup>

Without being able here to provide a lengthy reading of sections 23 and 24 of *Being and Time*, nor the late essays “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” and “. . . poetically man dwells . . .” nor the many pages strewn throughout the *Zollikon Seminars* on measuring, I say with them this poetic way of understanding measuring is too much at odds with our customary understanding to be widely and readily accepted. As the beginning of setting things right with respect to measuring, Heidegger reminds us we cannot begin with the “palpable stick” nor the numbered measuring rod as the fundamental measure, they are but derivative of the poetic measure that admits our dwelling to the on-going disclosure of world. The invention, use, all the way to the popular valorization of such customary measuring is first made possible by our ecstatic openness in the world.

To be ecstatic is to be opened to meaning through language and this allowing allows us to take a poetic measure of our unfolding selves. This way of thinking

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, “. . . poetically man dwells . . .” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, Perennial Books, 1971) p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> Here is one of Heidegger’s takes on this understanding from his conversation with medical students in the Zollikon Seminars who we might take as stand-ins for those current STEM apologists who are not so keen on attending our seminars: “language is . . . the original manifestation of what is, [and] which is preserved by the human being in different ways. Insofar as the human being is being-with [*Mitsein*], as he remains essentially related to another human being, language as such is conversation. Insofar as we are conversation, being-with belongs to being human.” Medard Boss, *Zollikon Seminars*, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987) p. 140

<sup>15</sup> “Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer.” Heidegger, “. . . poetically man dwells . . .” p. 210

defends against poetry being relegated to the mere ornamentation of an otherwise utilitarian and totally administrated world, a world seemingly dreamt of in the philosophy of STEM-recommended budget cuts. One way to get closer to responding to “who’s there?” and twist away from the near constant mismeasuring of ourselves is to hold *Hamlet* (i.e., the classics) up to ourselves. Caring for the poetic measure of our intimacy with language protects against the real becoming only what can be objectively measured. It guards against the mountains of data secured and captured by derivative forms of measure—as important to us as they no doubt are—from being understood as an ontology. *Hamlet* thinks there is more to the world than that.

Perhaps *Hamlet* exemplifies such poetic measuring in the second act. We are told by Ophelia as she recounts Hamlet’s visit to her closet:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard  
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,  
And, with his other hand thus o’er his brow  
He falls to such perusal of my face  
As he would draw it. Long stayed he so.

Being held to “the length of all his arm” Ophelia lets us recognize in this an artist’s pose. In this artistic arm’s length Hamlet is taking a measuring, a measure as rigorous as any objective scale because it is properly addressed to what is being measured; an artistic measure that requires attentive perusal and adequate time (“Long stayed he so”). At arm’s length in contemporary usage means, of course, to keep something at a distance or to deny contact with the object due to suspicion. In the sense of artistic measure, to the contrary, at arm’s length means: *bringing something as close as possible* by having it at the fitting distance. An aesthetic arm’s length creates the distance necessary to take the proper poetic measure of the intimacy we have with the world. We cannot allow a literalism to deter us here. An arm’s length is here equal to the distance Hadot recommends when he offers us the spiritual exercise of seeing ourselves from the point at the furthest edge of the cosmos. It is exactly the same distance we sense in front of Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre* (*Joy of Life*) or Turner’s *Baying Hound*. It is an arm’s length as well that Rilke senses before that headless and armless archaic torso of Apollo that even so can see us, point at us, and speak to us its decisive line: “you must change your life.” Measures undertaken by an arm’s length brings nearness into view, it might even be said to point to the miracle of disclosure itself as “mirror” and “miracle” share an etymology.

Be that as it may, it is the case we are most often altogether too inartistic in our measuring and this leaves the Humanities open to attack. Mistaking that the way to get closer to everything is by subjecting it to objective measure and relying exclusively on this way of measuring, we might say, wears-down the world. Created by such unpoetic ways of dwelling this worn-down space, which Heidegger says “derive[s] from a curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating,” invites many mismeasured arguments to be built against the humanities and hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup>

Visiting a scene before the advice to the Players will show how we might measure Hamlet’s response to their imminent arrival as demonstrating a deep sense of the transforming power of words, interpretations, and the thinking that makes things so, which is at odds with objective measures. After saying to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he has—although wherefore he claims to know not—lost all his mirth—Hamlet begins thinking aloud with the well-known lines running: “what a piece of work is a man, how noble in/reason, how infinite in faculties, . . . in action how like an angel in apprehension how like a god.” Notwithstanding Hamlet’s insight into the “paragon of animals” something is still amiss.

It is against this angsty backdrop, painted too, of course, with colors from the palette of Hamlet’s first act soliloquy where he talks of “how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to [him] all the uses of the world” that sets into stark relief what comes to Hamlet’s mood with the advent of the Players. Foreshadowing Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Hamlet’s mood—whatever one it might be said to be and it is much contested—nonetheless, it is not one he can abandon for some moodless state. Gertrude’s “too much changéd son” demonstrates well that any mood can be forgone only by way of some other mood. The arrival of the Players, who provide distance from of the everyday use of language, announce something other is possible—some new understanding in Hamlet’s and our unfolding.<sup>17</sup>

Not only a play within a play, I see a similar lesson of the poetic measure disclosed by the double stage that the Players’ arrival also brings to *Hamlet*—a stage on the stage as it were. From the first Player Hamlet learns, off the stage where this lead actor and the others Players will make their official appearance, the truth disclosed by fiction.<sup>18</sup> Though Hamlet seems initially reluctant and skeptical of the power of

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, “. . . poetically man dwells. . .” p. 225.

<sup>17</sup> This initial arrival of the Players brings a new mood to Hamlet and more so new words appear, words that escape the uselessness they seemed to have just pages before; words now have a serious role to play in those “some dozen or sixteen lines” Hamlet writes and which he adds to the Players’ text. These are the words to set *The Mousetrap* wherein the conscience of his king/uncle/father will be caught by the play within the play.

<sup>18</sup> Yet, of course, on the stage staging a play called *Hamlet*

plays, after the First Player's recitation during which he shows more passion and resolve in art than Hamlet thinks he has shown in life (let's pretend this is a rigid distinction), Hamlet in a soliloquy speaks:

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

Following a list of evidences of the player's skill in forcing his soul, Hamlet wonders about the Payer's motivations in a way bringing his understanding of this off-stage performance near to our own considerations; again Hamlet speaks:

And all for nothing!  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?  
That he should weep for her?

Of course, on the reading as I am suggesting, we also hear asked in this query what a vast many others have noted before us but no less meaningful for that: what's *Hamlet* to us or we to *Hamlet* that we should be so moved and ever changed by a mere fiction?

This soliloquy ends with a rather profound reappraisal. From being suspicious of fiction as any type of real measure, Hamlet's becomes trusting of what a play might do in this regard:

[Hum] I have heard  
That 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.

If one knows how to interpret that is, measure their looks—responses to plays can make truth tellers of audience members without their once wagging their tongues. This trust of the consequences of the play within a play illustrates how profound the poetic word has become in Hamlet's self-understanding. He will allow fiction to play a role in measuring and substantiating the words of his ghostly father. This is precisely how interpretation works, one is needed to authorize the one you have and leads to the need of the measure of others still to come.

To be sure, we are not the first to note how much the play within a the play matters—then again, it is seldom, if ever, you get anywhere in a classic first. That said, we come to them with our contemporary concerns. I understand right well why STEM absolutists worry about Shakespeare and *Hamlet*. That is to say, whatever the character called Hamlet might ultimately say about fiction, the play called *Hamlet* seems pretty clear: fiction makes a difference. Who knows, it might lead to all types of eruptions within the state and state of things.

*Hamlet* on this reading confirms, I contend, Emerson’s most-exquisite hermeneutic insight: “words are a kind of action and action a kind of words.” The ambiguity of the words and actions that address us, their way of being able to mean many things at once confronts Hamlet when he tries to converse with the gravedigger in the scene that opens the fifth and final act. You recall the gravedigger listens closely to Hamlet and then answers using what Hamlet’s very words allow but not what Hamlet means by them. Hamlet attempts to arrest this word play and in doing so makes an evaluation of the gravedigger’s literalism: “How absolute the knave is!” Subsequent to this, Hamlet proceeds to the questioning that soon puts Yorik’s skull into his hands.

If, as Emerson claims “every word is a fossil poem,” then Hamlet holds up a fossil of sorts as a way to think about words in the graveyard scene. In responding to this fossil-skull—the skull acts as another mirror held up to our linguistic nature—Hamlet sees himself unfolded in it by asking some pressing questions about language and being human. As with nearly everything else in the play lines almost too famous to quote:

Alas poor Yorik! I knew him Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen?

Returning to Gadamer’s claim concerning acting as interpretation, this speech depends crucially on how it is played. Not as I have seen many players play it, players who have not, in my estimation, suited the words to the action nor the action to the words, Hamlet I feel more and more assured is most fruitfully seen here as *not* mocking Yorik’s fate. Rather let’s see him as the scholar holding the skull at arm’s length to measure things, as asking a question concerning our hermeneutic nature, as meditating on the

questions: where do words go? how are they archived? what saves them and therefore us from oblivion? how is it best that words remain? These are some the questions Hamlet shares with Horatio articulated graveside with the ground strewn about them.

Where are Yorik's or anyone's words indeed. Only where we keep them alive in our conversations—in and with our words of interpretation. As a result of our reading of the advice to the Players and Hamlet's trust of fiction we understand from *Hamlet* our having to be in words—words which might come from anywhere: from the mouths of ghosts, memories, or chapfallen fossils, indeed from texts of every kind, from an illustrated ancient manuscript to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. *Hamlet* sets into relief here the human condition and leaves us to wonder: How are the words kept alive of those whose flesh is long since turned to dust. Sappho, Plato, Seneca and Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Langston Hughes how do we take their measure and keep them near and worthy of our consideration while also understanding that from an objective perspective they might be merely reduced to a patch that keeps the wind away (Hamlet—though I think not *Hamlet*—falls into this trap showing his own capability of falling at least temporarily into absolute knavishness)? Out of a poetically grounded dwelling how, *Hamlet* can be seen as asking, are we to inherit what matters, what are our responsibilities to various ghostly calls, and what price is paid if we do not respond watchfully?

### **Look How the Poor Wretches Come Reading or Delays**

The veil is never entirely lifted. We all know that Shakespeare's dramas are inexhaustible, for no interpretation is final. What is, perhaps, less self-evident, is that we share the feeling of the hopelessness of final interpretation with the characters of the Shakespearean dramas.

—Agnes Heller

Hamlet's delay has occupied readers let's say forever. Hamlet is trying, in my estimation, to make another decision. (Always.) He has already, in some sense of this word, made the decision against taking immediate revenge and for this reason he chooses to wait, or delay as the tradition would name it.<sup>19</sup> What is called the box office reason for Hamlet's delay (i.e., we would not have a five act play without it) seems far too little to satisfy our interpretive desires. It is, I have attempted to show, what occupies *our* thinking while watching Hamlet's waiting that awakens hermeneutic

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<sup>19</sup> Curtrofello, cited above, makes much of calling this *tarrying* and not delaying. I think it keen evidence Hamlet has read *The Oresteia* at school.

wonder. Like Hamlet we are those who are called upon to interpret and to act, and as Nietzsche knew “every act is premature and must be so.” We cannot wait forever nor even until we are sure. This makes things difficult for the being whose way of being is having to be.

It is not only ghosts that sends Derrida to *Hamlet*. The consequences of Hamlet’s discourse with his father’s ghost leading to his delay, allows Derrida to treat this classic play as a meditation on his interest in undecidability:

the responsibility in front of the father’s call, for it to be a responsibility, demands that choices be made; . . . you have to filter the heritage . . . This means that to inherit, . . . implies some selection, some choice, some decision. . . . that is the question of undecidability”<sup>20</sup>

Undecidability does not mean as yet undecided. It means, if you will, exactly what it says: unable ever to be decided. Undecidability points to the impossibility of decision not to induce resignation rather to set into relief the full weight of responsibility that ought to accompany decisions that do not allow objective measure. Accordingly, this talk of Hamlet’s delay and undecidability could go on forever. And yet it will need to be arrested. What appears as if it will go on forever is always arrested because some action ends up taking place. Hamlet’s indecision so-called, belongs, on Derrida’s account, to the structure of decision itself. To have to decide, to be able to assume the responsibility for deciding, one has to make the decision without, Derrida shows, the guarantee or application of a programme, premise, or matrix. One of the best ways I know to accomplish this well is informed by my teacher Calvin Schrag. In his work on the fitting response and the gift we have a way to act both into the future present all the while keeping a reverent eye on the absolute future as well. Making the gift the “content and measure of the fitting response” Schrag elucidates what he calls a depth dimension grounded in the past that we ought to use in the present for: “informing the preenactment of [both] a justice and a democracy to come.”<sup>21</sup> Between two equally commanding futures, Schrag’s work guides a left-wing hermeneutics toward ways of responding to their never-ending address and the undecidable decisions they demand.

I believe all this talk of ghosts and classics, tradition and inheritance, undecidability and responsibly matters because, as *Hamlet* teaches and today it remains the case, the time is out of joint. You will remember Derrida articulated the disjointed situation in ten telegrams on the plagues of the New World Order; my friend Richard

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida “Hospitality,” p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002) p. 142

Dienst has done it recently in his hauntingly beautiful *The Bonds of Debt* (a book that somehow, and it amazes me still, did not become the central text of the Occupy movement).<sup>22</sup> Such a disjointedness raises pressing ethical and political issues for our learning to read. And for good reason: the worst seem to have the best of it in a world gone wrong.

The poor university regent thinks Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is about the prince of Denmark or some such thing, that the meaning of *Hamlet* has been decided and not that it is about the essential ground of our collective being-in-the-world and the responsibility incurred in every decision. It would take a Herculean effort to persuade him of this. I have little doubt he would agree to the request "Season your admiration for a while/with an attent ear, till I may deliver" our talk of learning how to read nor to the idea of humanities departments in universities being conceived of as diligent night watches waiting to welcome ghosts or seminars as a kind of séance. It is a sign of the times and the responsibility of hermeneutic pedagogy that this is as much or moreso our problem as his. Indeed, the flight of birds and the falling of sparrows do not bode well for we hermeneuticians.

Attempting to defy this augury let's leave with our problem succinctly stated even if we are far from making a decision on what to do. I remember reading Gramsci with the renowned scholar of philosophy and communication, Dennis Mumby, while he was writing his now-required text in communication studies "The Problem of Hegemony."<sup>23</sup> I could not then and still am unable to free myself from what I saw as a powerful lesson in a footnote in Gramsci's classic text on intellectuals. As I see it, one of the problems for those of us in the Humanities disciplines is the ubiquity of what common sense calls communication, thinking, and reading. This everywhere and all the time, which ought to make our work a significant part of cultural life, rather has the consequence of allowing most everyone to believe—because these things go on well enough for their narrow purposes—that these practices are not in need of critical investigation, nor is the study of their essential hermeneutic ground, nor should doubts be raised about what is being said and thought. If studied at all, then only those are admitted that come in the too restrictive confines of the methods *Truth and Method* meant to call into question. Consequently, everywhere is there seen no need of the Humanities. Yet, that footnote keeps haunting me. Is not Gramsci just right when he says—and I am quoting the note from memory here so it says just what I desire—"if I fry an egg in the morning or sew a button upon my shirt in the afternoon I am for

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Dienst, *The Bonds of Debt* (New York: Verso, 2011)

<sup>23</sup> Dennis Mumby, "The Problem with Hegemony," *Western Journal of Communication*, 61(4) pp. 343-375.

these neither a chef nor a tailor.” Everyone reads, everyone is said to think, and every one of us seems to do little else than communicate all the time; and yet some of us study such things and as a result understand how impossible it is to do any of these with a full merit of excellence and never perfectly. We take it as one of our duties to struggle with this understanding of reading, communicating, and thinking. Furthermore, we feel it as a vocation to warn against the too facile acceptance of the apparent ease of each.

We communicators, readers, and thinkers—we Hamlets—are less and less welcomed in the so-called real world—a real world the definition of which Benjamin Kunkel thinks the majority believe is captured accurately by the phrase: “the surface of the earth minus college campuses.”<sup>24</sup> Those who promote the confusion, who benefit from free market fundamentalism, those who profit from calculation, acceleration, massification, who are happy to make utility the idol of the age seem to believe we Humanists are not real, mere ghostly holdovers at best. We are not real to them and it is said we thus cannot make any difference to the world, which they pretend to master. But look around you, the something rotten is everywhere.<sup>25</sup>

“There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave/To tell us this” Horatio says in the first act after Hamlet makes a too obvious claim. Yet, both Hamlet and *Hamlet* go on and try to say something more, and more important. If I failed to bring something more than the obvious to you, then I lean again on Hadot who thinks, and I am hopeful rightly, that sometimes the truth comes by saying old truths again—reason enough to read good books and talk about them, even if only to say how much pleasure we take in doing so.

Let’s take some hope from this: our detractors admit by their attacks on the ghosts of whom we are the heirs that we are a little bit real after all. At the play’s end no one who shares the name Hamlet remains alive to carry on the name and yet some 400 years later few names remain as recognizable. Here and everywhere ghosts and classics await us, to think with them, to read and be read by them, to speak with them. I believe it is also a claim of a radical Enlightenment understood hermeneutically to say we Humanists are real and so are ghosts. With all the self-assured bluster to the contrary let’s not allow our hermeneutic capabilities to “fust in us unused.” Let’s be rather “Sure He that made us with such large discourse” expects us to suffer the other,

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust* (New York: Verso, 2014), p. 57

<sup>25</sup> But do they really think we are unreal, specters, all but dead? Derrida notes perhaps all this talk on their part is their way of making a wish that we could be made gone once and for all: really, actually, and for good because they us fear us, fear we shall come back from their pronouncement that we are dead, with Karl Marx and Shakespeare in our hands.

to mark and speak with ghosts, to undertake the task of inheritance by welcoming the wondrous strange of classical haunting, then—holding everything that matters at arm's length—do a little something to set the disjointed world as right as we are able.

Come, let's go together.