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## Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Paradoxical Reading of the "Ghost"

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### **Abstract:**

A general trope of Shakespearean dramas, or more importantly his tragedies is to bring out the human interiority onstage. What is meant by interiority is however a historical problem. A widespread re-imagining of the subject in the early decades of the nineteenth century opens new ways of imagining the relation between the subject and object, and the location of truth. This transition is fundamentally related to the changes in the concept of subjective vision and to the very subjective notion of truth, or perception in our contemporary world. In this context, the paper tries to interpret the 'ghost' in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, paradoxically from a psychoanalytical viewpoint rather than treating it as a supernatural phenomenon in adherence to the conventional Elizabethan beliefs in ghosts and witchcraft, taking clues from several romantic and modern critics, and from the philosophical ideas of Descartes and Hegel.

### **Keywords: Hamlet, Ghost, Psychoanalysis, Subjective vision**

Since the romantic age, the 'ghost' in *Hamlet* has been susceptible to various interpretations. But before that the general tendency remained to identify the ghost as a sort of some weird, supernatural or other-worldly object which happily went with the Elizabethan habit of mind. However, modern readers have held that the murkiness of Hamlet's inner life is the source of the play's complexity and power, giving birth to the 'ghost' which is closely related to the entire thematic design of the play. In a word, the "within" of Hamlet is privileged, and this shift in critical emphasis is the characteristic of the Romantic critics since Coleridge who holds that ". . . everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from the its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without-giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all common-place actualities" (Coleridge, *Essays and Lectures* 137). Almost all of Shakespeare's plays are preoccupied with the 'visceral interior' of the human body. A curious thing in this provocative argument is Hamlet's search for the material knowledge due to the 'ghost', the spirit or the impetus that instructs Hamlet's soul and seems to epitomize an in-between space.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is faced with the problem of theatre, of literally making visible subjects and objects of knowledge. The ghost's appearance, its entrances and exits across the boundaries of the stage are emblematic of that problem, bringing out the dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' which is understood by Hamlet as "that within which passes show" (I. ii. 85). But the question of the modern self is, however, not just restricted to what is inside or what

is outside, rather what constitutes the inside and what constitutes the outside. A key feature of what is generally understood as modern consciousness is that knowledge or truth is authorized not by an external order, but as Charles Taylor says: "the certainty of clear and distinct perception is unconditional and self-generated" (Taylor 157). However, a close reading of the play makes us aware that the ghost in *Hamlet* first appears to the sentinels on the ramparts of Elsinore who were anticipating an action of some kind to be precipitated from 'without.' The moment we learn from the ghost's appearance that something is 'rotten in the state of Denmark,' the rampart wall and the borders of the castle seem to become the metaphors for the boundaries of the 'self' which makes its own division between the inner and the outer, the visible and the invisible, the 'exterior [and] the inward man.' Edward Dowden in his *Shakespeare: A critical study of his Mind and Art* writes "In presence of the ghost, a sense of his own spiritual existence, the immortal life of the soul grows strong within him. In presence of the spirit, he is himself a spirit" (118).

However, going through the play, we may realize that 'doubt' is an important motif that we come across at the very beginning of the play. Following Descartes, the famous Greek philosopher and mathematician, we may affirm that 'doubt' is a sign of thinking, and by virtue of thinking, one's very existence comes into being. Descartes, like Hamlet, thinks of knowledge in terms of representation, using the term 'mind's eye' which seems to denote a truth that normally lacks this representation. The cogito is represented, that is objectified, for the subject which recognizes 'itself' that is the 'ergo sum.' Following Descartes, we may argue that Hamlet exemplifies the notion that to exist, the human being has the burden of proving that he or she exists, and this burden is discharged in his or her thinking or rather doubting his or her existence. The ghost lacks this kind of self-consciousness, and a theatrical rendering of it would perhaps appear absurd and risible. On the other hand, Hamlet doubts the origin of the ghost and the very motive of its appearance. Freud's (the father of psychoanalysis) response to such issue will be that the ghost originates from the sources of his [Hamlet] own 'desire.' However, the emphasis placed by Freud and Lionel Trilling seems to be not just upon the interiority of the self [Hamlet as the self], but on the interiority of the relationship between the self and the 'other' within the self, which reminds us of the concept of 'cognitive dissonance' that we come across in Freud's famous essay *The Unheimlich*, and in the book called *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* by Leon Festinger. Following Trilling and his concept of sincerity and authenticity, the discrepancy in Hamlet's character is found when we contrast his first full speech where he affirms his sincerity by saying that he knows not 'seems' (I. ii. 76), and his speech before *The Mousetrap* where he tells his friend Horatio "when thou seest that act afoot . . . Observe my uncle" (III. ii. 86-88). In the latter speech, Hamlet actually intends to make a judgment based on how Claudius 'seems' whereas he himself paradoxically does not know how to 'seem,' or more precisely how to exhibit his hypocrisy or practice his glib like Claudius in this play, and like Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*, and this shows us how Hamlet's self is divided from within and is divided between two contrary states of belief-systems intertwined with each other.

*Hamlet* manifests ample self-consciousness about the relation between vision and imagination, questioning the separation of the vision from the body, of the mental image from the concrete reality. The first exchange between Hamlet and Horatio after the ghost's initial appearance represents a momentary confusion of bodily and spatial metaphor of seeing:

Hamlet: . . . My father-methinks I see my father

Horatio: Where, my lord?

Hamlet: In my mind's eye, Horatio

[I. ii. 183-85]

But Horatio also had referred to the ghost after its initial appearance, and out of his fear and anxiety he puts the remark: "a mote it is to trouble the mind's eye" (I. i. 112). Even the ghost is visible to the sentinels (apart from Hamlet) in the first act on the ramparts in the open air, but only to Hamlet in the closet scene, leaving a question behind such dubious appearance. Even the sentinels, like Barnardo and Marcellus, cannot rely upon their own eyes regarding the veracity of the ghost and have to depend upon the scholar Horatio who ironically becomes sceptic about its truthfulness, saying "tis but our fantasy" [I. i. 23]. Even if the ghost's existence is taken for granted, we need to probe the inconsistency of its appearance and must not only consider the different characters involved in these scenes, but also the different kinds of spaces they occupy. The architectural logic of the place- the walls of Elsinore-serves as a spatial metaphor for the parameters of the self, a trope generally used in modern drama. Once we enter the play's most disquietingly private space, we move deeper into the problems of subjectivity. In space and dialogue, the scene seems to present a structural homology between ghost-seeing and soul-searching which here happens to none other than Hamlet. Even for a modern reader, Hamlet's speech "There are more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your Philosophy" [I. v. 166-67] may suggest an alternative reality, where the earth may be taken to be a liminal space that divides the lighted heaven and the dark underworld, the conscious and the vast unconscious of human psyche. Nonetheless, A.C Bradley argues unconvincingly in *Shakespearean Tragedy* that "a ghost, in Shakespeare's day was able for any sufficient reason to confine its manifestation to a single person in company" (111-12). Since Bradley's argument sounds inadequate, and since the ghost appears to Hamlet alone at least in the closet scene, we can well assume that the ghost is the product of Hamlet's subjective vision, which neither Gertrude, who was present in that scene along with Hamlet, nor anyone in the theatre, can verify. So when Hamlet turns his eyes upon the theatrical representation of the ghost, the audience should not and in fact cannot suspend their disbelief and share Hamlet's points of view, rather can adhere to the viewpoint of Gertrude, which in this case deserves to be privileged: "How is't with you,/ that you do bend your eye on vacancy,/ And with th' incorporeal air do hold discourse? (III. iv. 116-118). Hamlet talks to the apparition in this scene, but his mother is unable to either see it or interact with it. However, Granville Barker and Dover Wilson suggest a symbolic interpretation that goes against my own argument. Barker says that Gertrude is "spiritually blind," and therefore cannot see the spiritual element (Barker 116). On the other

hand, Wilson says that Gertrude cannot see the 'gracious figure' because her eyes are corrupted by the adultery she has committed (Wilson 254-55). Barker and Wilson's arguments may be symbolically true, but are not convincing either from a psychoanalytical or a theatrical perspective, which not only includes the actors playing on the stage, but also the audience, all of whom cannot be at the same time spiritually blind, or their eyes held by adultery, although the play's incidents may be said to refer to the general socio-historical condition of the period.

Even if the ghost is taken to be an illusion of Hamlet, it can no longer have an inferior status to any other kind of optical experience. In fact, all optical experience may be thought to be the experience of some kind of illusion, which is a highly personal and even private. To establish my point, I may fetch Goethe's theory of 'after-image,' which is closely related to Hamlet's imaginings of the ghost. Goethe writes: "images may remain on the retina in the morbid affections of the eye" even longer than they do on healthy eyes, indicating "extreme weakness of the organ, its inability to recover itself; while visions of persons or things which are the objects of love or aversion indicate the connexion between sense and thought" (Goethe, *Theory of Colours* 10). This morbidity of the eye is apparent in Wilhelm who also lost his father and played a terrific Hamlet (especially resembling the ghost scene in *Hamlet*) when awakened at night, he saw the image of his father's spirit in arms, a product of his heated imagination. We may fairly say that the same sort of thing happens to Macbeth in the dagger scene, where he saw the dagger hanging in the air which was a product of his 'heat-oppressed brain' in Shakespeare's word, and the subsequent banquet scene where he saw the bloody ghost of Banquo. In fact, in *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe proposes to represent a subjective vision by using a life-sized portrait of the king with the ghost posing exactly like the figure in the portrait. To further this argument, I quote Lamb writing in 1802: "nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does, are transactions between himself and his moral sense, they are the suffusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth" (Coldwell 18). Critics, like Charles Lamb, were keen on representing the problem of the solipsized mind. Even, it can be well assumed that Richard's dream in the tent or Caesar's ghost to Brutus, are a kind of proto-expressionist things that appear in private space and only to a single person. This kind of understanding of the character refers to the "unsubstantial" representation of the ghost, although Oscar Wilde explained to a journalist in 1884: "in Shakespeare's day ghosts were not shadowy, subjective conception, but beings of flesh and blood, only beings living on the other side of the border of life, and now and then permitted to break bounds" (qtd in Ellmann 251). But on the contrary, the modern audience or reader may support Terry Castle's argument that an artificially produced spectral illusion which is wholly internal or subjective or the phantasmic imagery of the mind begets itself from an initial connection with something external or public (Castle 141). Even in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Pip is subject to such phantasmic visions, and after seeing a production of *Hamlet*, he imagines himself to "play Hamlet to Miss Havisham's ghost" (236). While pointing out the shift in the usage of the 'ghost' as a metaphor in modern literature, Castle claims:

[a] significant transformation [has occurred] in human consciousness over the past two centuries. . . Even as we have come to discount the spirit-world of our ancestors and to equate seeing ghosts and apparitions with having ‘too much’ imagination, we have come increasingly to believe, as if through a kind of epistemological recoil, in the spectral nature of our own thoughts-to figure imaginative activity itself, paradoxically, as a kind of ghost-seeing. (141)

This spectral nature of one’s thought she refers to as ‘spectralization’ or ‘ghostifying’ of mental space, meaning the ‘absorption of ghosts into the world of thought.’ She says that in our every day conversation, we affirm that our brains are filled with ghostly shapes and images that we ‘see’ as figures and scenes in our minds and are ‘haunted’ by such thoughts which, as it were, materialize before us like phantoms in moments of hallucination, waking dream or reverie. She further says that such thoughts and beliefs, which we consider to be rational in an important sense, provide a conceptual foundation for the rationalist point of view. So ghosts are of course only the “things of the mind” (Castle 142-43). In his collection of essays, August Strindberg talks about the “subjective perception” which is according to him “Something outside me or within” (165). Even Coleridge, while talking about the hyperactive imagination of persons, says that “in all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, as in that of Brutus, of Archbishop Cranmer, that of Benvenuto Cellini recorded by himself, and the vision of Galileo communicated by him to his favourite pupil Torricelli, the ghost-seers [remain] in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly” (Coleridge, *Essays and Lectures* 139). Although these are romantic conceptions, they clearly suggest how the internal is made external. Same is the situation with Hamlet who also says: “. . . the spirit that I have seen . . . perhaps out of my melancholy . . .” [II. ii. 637].

However, like Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* poses a basic problem of theatrical representation in case of the presentation of the ghost onstage, for it resists any kind of corporeal existence and must appear as insubstantial or shadowy. But how can an actor playing the role of the ghost appear so shadowy? In theatre, especially in modern theatre, visibility obtains importance in term of physical form and content. So, the presentation of the ghost in Shakespeare’s play or in the theatre remains an enigma which needs to be eroded by applying a perspective which adheres to the notion of camera-obscura that, as Crary says, performs an individuation and defines an observer as isolated, enclosed and autonomous within its dark confines, impelling a withdrawal from the world, so as to regulate and purify one’s relation to the manifold contents of one’s ‘exterior’ world (9). In this, the observer is nominally a free sovereign individual as well as a privatized subject severed from a public exterior world. In his famous essay, “Hamlet and His Problems”, T.S Eliot propounds the concept of ‘objective co-relative’ which establishes the interrelation between the subject and the object, grounding the argument that “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion . . .” (Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* 92). A brilliant execution of this idea of ‘objective co-relative’ is to be found in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* in which the emotional and spiritual conflict of Thomas Becket is embodied in the Tempters in a medieval

morality-play setting, objectifying the psychic turmoil of Becket. But this objective equivalence is severely lacking in *Hamlet*, and therefore, it becomes difficult for us to understand Hamlet's psychological state. This leads Eliot to claim that *Hamlet* is an "artistic problem" (92). What actually Eliot does through 'objective correlative' is that he advocates a hypostatic concept of the 'ghost,' and in his essay, he seems to imply the notion that that the world of 'things' in *Hamlet* becomes intelligible only through the analysis of Hamlet's mind is a romantic conception and an ideological development of the late-eighteen or early nineteenth centuries. However, we are not in a mind to authenticate whether *Hamlet* is an 'artistic problem' or not, since Eliot takes other theatrical issues for making comment on this particular point, but we must acknowledge the fact that the shift in critical emphasis which has radical ramifications for writing, staging and performing of what we consider as modern drama is plainly derived from the writings of the early nineteenth-century, that present those radical new views on subjectivity and subjective vision. So my critical take on this issue is both agreeable and irrefragable with Eliot's views. From this point, another theatrical inconsistency that can be traced in *Hamlet* is that the ghost in the first scene appears visible, although shadowy, before the sentinels and a Wittenberg educated scholar like Horatio, and perhaps to the audience also, but quite contrarily does so in the closet scene, where it shows itself only to Hamlet and not to Gertrude and perhaps not even to the audience also. Here again, we can remember Bradley's view on the ghost's ability to appear to specific places and people for specific purpose, but that will be quite unconvincing and totally unreliable in the modern day situation. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the fact that the modern theatre with infinitely more supple technologies of lighting than that Shakespeare possessed is literally shaped by the incomplete distinctions between light and dark and may play more or less self-reflexively with the fraught space between visible and invisible, and with the new theories of vision eroding the subject-object division. However, following Ibsen's *Ghosts*, we may say that a modern audience will accept the figurability of ghost in language alone as a metaphor for memory which is psychological and is entirely natural rather than something being 'supernatural.' The ghostliness in modern drama seems to be a form of unconsciousness conformity, a lack of freedom, and a sense of radical instability and liminality which privileges the internal space and implies a more fluid process of meditation and self-consciousness. Stanley Cavell, in his *Disowning Knowledge*, says that our eagerness [like Hamlet] to believe the existential veracity of the ghost refers to "the potentially foul condition of our own imaginations" (183). By his 'imagination,' Hamlet not only refers to "Claudius as a murderer but to the vivid pictures he paints of Claudius as his mother's lover" (183). Finally, we may take refuge to Lacan's reading of Ophelia's account on Hamlet's terrifying experience of the ghost-seeing in these lines

“My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,/ Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,  
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd/ ungart'er'd and down-gyved to his ankle,  
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,/ And with a look so piteous in purport

As if he had been loosed out of hell/ To speak of horrors, he comes before me . . . He  
falls to such perusal of my face . . . Long stay'd he so." [II. i. 77-93].

Ophelia's above description accords with Lacan's analysis of the perfect 'mise-en-scène' of the subject's relation to fancy. Moreover, Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia becomes a search to position his self and to take up a place within a discursive inter-subjectivity (Thurston 42-43).

However, reaching at the very concluding point of my argument and of my paper as well, I firmly agree with what Hegel says that the mind invests the sensuous world with spiritual reality and forms something which, far from having any absolute existence apart from the mind, is "born-born again, that is-of the mind" (Hegel, *Introductory Lectures* 4) Metaphorically speaking, the 'ghost' in *Hamlet* vanishes when the lights come on. Claudius's cry-"Give me some light" (III. ii. 283)-dissolves the play-within-play, just as the dawn dissolves the specter. On rising of the Sun, the ghost departs to the place from where no 'traveler' returns. Yet on future nights, they come again and again.

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