



Hamlet's Hallucination

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HAMLET'S HALLUCINATION¹.

SOMEBODY has doubtless written a comprehensive study of the supernatural in Shakespeare, but I must confess that I do not know the work. I regret this, since I should like an authoritative statement of what Shakespeare thought about ghosts. I feel that if one wishes to discuss an author's treatment of any particular matter, one should take into consideration his general attitude towards the subject, or what I may call his habitual manner of approach. Consequently, having in mind certain questions relating to the ghost of Hamlet's father, I should like to be told what Shakespeare's views were of ghosts in general. Failing this I am forced to turn to Shakespeare's other plays for suggestions as to how he represented these phenomena. Did he offer them to his audience in all naïveté? or are they to be taken as having their existence merely in the brains of their beholders? Or does Shakespeare here again elude us and escape committal?

Besides *Hamlet*, three plays of Shakespeare's are usually quoted as affording ghosts: *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar*. The first of these offers no difficulty. The eleven ghosts who, appearing between the sleeping armies, address the rival claimants on Bosworth Field (v, iii. 118), are admittedly but dream phantoms, and neither Richard nor Richmond supposes them to be anything else. They have in fact no greater objective validity than, let us say, the six spirits who dance round the dying Katharine in *Henry VIII* (iv, ii. 82), nor am I aware that any weight of critical opinion has ever pretended the contrary.

The ghost of Banquo at the feast in *Macbeth* (III, iv. 40, 92) has roused more debate. Yet, though it has been freely questioned whether

¹ This essay was originally drafted some years ago and laid aside as unsatisfactory. As there appeared to be no immediate prospect of refashioning it, I published a brief statement of the problem in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* in 1916. An enforced holiday of convalescence has since afforded an opportunity for attempting a more complete exposition. In this venture I have enjoyed the sceptical criticism of several friends. Of these none has been more acute or more helpful than Mr A. W. Pollard, who must in a manner, I feel, stand sponsor to a changeling he by no means approves.

the ghost should be represented upon the stage or not, the suggestion that it is anything but the creation of Macbeth's conscience has never found much favour with English critics. And rightly so. It is visible to Macbeth alone. It is conjured up each time by Macbeth's own reference to Banquo's absence. It vanishes whenever Macbeth braces himself to defy it. Macbeth himself treats it as an illusion when, at the end of the scene, he says: 'My strange and self-abuse Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.' It is impossible to regard this ghost of Banquo as any more objective than the dagger which haunted Macbeth on a previous occasion¹.

The appearance of Caesar's ghost to Brutus has been less discussed, and I suppose that most critics have accepted it as genuine. Yet this view is hardly forced upon us, or indeed borne out, by an examination of the scene in question (iv, iii. 274). True, we have not here to do with an avowed dream as in *Richard III*, and Caesar's ghost, unlike Banquo's, speaks. But it is Brutus alone who sees or hears it. The only other persons present, Lucius, Varro, Claudius, are asleep. And Brutus? He is supposed to be watching, but the song, over which the boy dozed, was soporific to him likewise: 'This is a sleepy time,' he declared. He tries to read, but his drowsy brain wanders vaguely in search of the place. Nodding over the page he complains of the dim light. The ghost appears, and his address to it is perfectly coherent; but all the ghost has to say to him is that it will appear again at Philippi². The dialogue proceeds:

Brutus. Well; then I shall see thee again?

Ghost. Ay, at Philippi.

Brutus. Why, I will see thee at Philippi, then.

Do not these dazed replies, coming after the previous speech, suggest a

¹ The fullest and most cogent analysis of Macbeth's hallucination is that worked out by Bucknill (*The Mad Folk of Shakespeare*, 1867, p. 27, *apud* Furness' Variorum, *Macbeth*, 1873, p. 171). The external evidence is well summed up by A. C. Bradley (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, p. 492). He concludes: 'On the whole, and with some doubt, I think that Shakespeare (1) meant the judicious to take the Ghost for an hallucination, but (2) knew that the bulk of his audience would take it for a reality. And I am more sure of (2) than of (1).' But he can hardly have had any doubt when he wrote: 'The deed [Banquo's murder] is done: but, instead of peace descending on him [Macbeth], from the depth of his nature his half-murdered conscience rises; his deed confronts him in the apparition of Banquo's Ghost, and the horror of the night of his first murder returns' (p. 361). That the ghost was, and should be, represented on the stage is certain. But that is no criterion. As Professor Wilson says: 'Shakespeare and his audience had no difficulty... about the bodily representation of Thoughts—the inward by the outward' (*Macbeth*, ed. H. Cunningham, 1912, p. xliv). As regards the other apparitions in *Macbeth*, I think it will be admitted that they are not *in pari materia*; moreover it is very doubtful whether they are Shakespeare's.

² Bradley (*ut supra*, p. 493) remarks that 'Caesar's Ghost says nothing that Brutus' own forebodings might not have conjured up.'

mind just struggling out of dreams? Brutus now pulls himself together—and the ghost vanishes (just as Banquo's vanished on Macbeth's defying it):

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

Then still half dazed, and wondering whether the vision were real or fancy, he rouses his companions, accuses them of disturbing him with their cries, questions them as to whether they have seen anything. Upon their denial he sets about giving orders as though the night were over and the business of a new day begun. Clearly, he is merely awaking from a bad dream. This is at Sardis. The ghost appears to him again at Philippi (*see* v, v. 19), but we are not allowed to see it. Unquestionably Brutus took the ghost for real (*see* v, v. 50), but that is not to the purpose. Shakespeare did not.

Leaving *Hamlet* out of consideration, therefore, Shakespeare's attitude towards ghosts may be described as frankly sceptical. That is to say, those he represents in his plays are either confessedly the illusions of sleep or distemper, or may be readily explained as such¹. This is an important fact, but it is one, the relevance of which must not be unduly pressed. There is no reason why, however sceptical he may have shown himself elsewhere, Shakespeare should not have introduced a genuine objective ghost as a fundamental element in the plot of *Hamlet*. But his practice elsewhere does justify a very close inquiry whether he *has* done so, and, if he has, whether he has shown himself conscious of a departure from his habitual attitude.

Belief in the genuineness and objectivity of the Ghost in *Hamlet* has been almost universal. It is the natural view, based on the obvious and naïve interpretation of the text. Any other view supposes a considerable amount of subtlety on the part of the author in hinting that statements, and even apparent action, are not to be taken at their face value; a kind of subtlety which may, indeed, possess high dramatic value, but

¹ Whence we may infer his *intention*, whatever may have been his *expectation* of the interpretation that would generally be placed upon them. Against the view advanced above I may quote a recent opinion of W. Creizenach: 'It cannot be correct to attribute a belief in spirits to the poet who speaks of "the undiscover'd country from whose bourne No traveller returns."' But it is equally certain that the ghostly apparitions in *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth* are not meant merely to be subjective visions conjured up by a heated imagination, as some critics opine; they are genuine and authentic ghosts, of the same race as the ghost in *Hamlet*' (*The English Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, 1916, p. 114). These two assertions appear to me equally ill founded. But I do not think that the view is representative of modern criticism, and it is pretty clear that in Creizenach's case, as possibly in others, it is mainly the evidence of *Hamlet* that induces a belief in the reality of the ghosts in the other plays. That they are, in fact, 'of the same race as the ghost in *Hamlet*' is the thesis of the present essay.

is not of a kind commonly credited to Shakespeare, and certainly not to be presumed without cogent reasons.

Now the claim of the naïve view to be obviously correct is based, it seems to me, upon two considerations: the elaborate external evidence for the reality of the Ghost, and the fact that the Ghost reveals to *Hamlet* true information which he could not otherwise have acquired. But observe that these two arguments are not of equal importance. For should the second, upon examination, break down (through the information proving false), its collapse would leave the orthodox view a chaotic mass of ruins; whereas, so long as it holds, it is of itself ample to support the conclusion, no matter how weak the other may prove to be. We may as well, therefore, consider the more important point first.

Familiar as is the action of the play, its outline has been so blurred by comment that I will venture to state baldly the main points relevant to our discussion as they appear to the naïve view. Hamlet the elder, King of Denmark, has died suddenly, and his widow, with somewhat unseemly haste, has remarried with his brother Claudius. Whether by right of some relic of matriarchal custom, or merely by that of the strong man on the spot, Claudius has assumed the style and function of king, to the exclusion of his nephew, prince Hamlet the younger. The latter, shocked rather at the scant respect shown to the memory of his father than resentful at the ignoring of his own claims, has lately returned to the palace, a moody and discontented courtier. To him word is brought that the ghost of his father has been seen walking the battlements at Elsinore. He at once seeks an encounter with the Ghost, who reveals to him the secret of his death. This, it seems, was not due to accident, as had been made to appear, but was the deed of his own brother Claudius, who, while he slumbered in his orchard, poured poison into his ears. The murderer had previously, we are told, seduced to his will the royal consort whom he afterwards married. Armed with this knowledge, Hamlet turns his thoughts to revenge, and keeps watch upon his uncle. But he desires confirmation of the Ghost's story; the king shall be led, if possible, to betray his own guilt. With this object Hamlet arranges a play—the 'Mouse-Trap,' as he facetiously calls it. He will have the actors play 'something like' the murder of his father. In fact he has them play a minutely accurate representation of the whole story as told by the Ghost. The player king and queen—Gonzago and Baptista—appear in a garden, where the latter, after passionately protesting her love and faith, leaves her lord asleep upon a bank of flowers. To him enters a man—his nephew Lucius—who by his actions clearly manifests

his desire to possess the kingly crown. He pours poison into the ears of the sleeping king, and departs, only to re-appear shortly, make lament, woo and finally win the love of the queen, and of course thereby secure the object of his ambition. This we know to have been the plot of the play. But the action does not reach its conclusion, for, when Claudius sees his own deed of murder reproduced in its minutest details, not only before his own eyes but before those of the assembled court, his nerve gives way, he rises, and rushes, terror and conscience stricken, from the hall.

Such is the orthodox, and the obvious, interpretation of the action; it remains to see whether, upon a closer examination, it agrees with the data afforded by the text of the play itself.

There is a curious feature of the action which exponents of *Hamlet* commonly ignore, and the purpose of which has never been discovered. If we turn to the text we shall find that the regular performance of the *Murder of Gonzago*¹, the piece acted by the players, is preceded by a dumb-show. The direction runs as follows :

Enter a King and Queene, very louingly; the Queene embracing him. She kneeles, and makes shew of Protestation vnto him. He takes her vp, and declines his head vpon her neck. Laves him downe vpon a Banke of Flowers. She seeing him a-sleepe, leaues him. Anon comes in a Fellow, takes off his Crowne, kisses it, and powres poyson in the Kings eares, and Exits. The Queene returnes, findes the King dead, and makes passionate Action. The Poysoner, with some two or three Mutes comes in againe, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away: The Poysoner Wooes the Queene with Gifts, she seemes loath and vnwilling awhile, but in the end, accepts his loue².

The full significance of this dumb-show has never been appreciated. Here and there a critic has dimly apprehended what it involved, but the vast majority have passed by with obstinate blindness. Yet the difficulty it raises is obvious enough. The King, we have seen, when he beholds his secret crime reproduced before the assembled court, loses his nerve, and retires in evident agitation. How comes it then that he sat unmoved through the representation of the same action in equal detail in the dumb-show? It is impossible that, seeing that show, he could fail to understand that his secret was betrayed. Crown, poison, queen,

¹ The play may possibly have an historical foundation. 'In 1538 the Duke of Urbino, married to a Gonzaga, was murdered by Luigi Gonzaga, who dropped poison into his ear' (*Hamlet*, ed. Dowden, 1899, p. 122).

² So the direction stands in the Folio (1623). As a rule I quote from the Cambridge text, but in the present instance that represents an uncritical hybrid between the folio and quarto versions. Quarto 2 (1604) presents certain verbal differences, which, however, are not material. In Quarto 1 (1603) the direction is much shorter and verbally quite different, but represents the same action. It is, indeed, a spectator's condensed account, whereas the longer version preserves the actors' directions. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, where the play appears in dumb-show only, the action is again substantially the same, though it breaks off, of course, at the poisoning.

these might conceivably be coincidences; not so the almost unique method by which the poison is administered. That is conclusive. If the king could sit unmoved through the representation in pantomime of these events there is no imaginable reason why they should move him when acted with words. For the language of the play adds nothing to the pointedness of the allusion: the side glances at the Danish court are all aimed at the marriage of the queen, not at the crime of the usurper. The actual speech of the murderer, which is interrupted by the King's rising, is mere bombast that could not possibly discompose the tenderest criminal. The only explanation, upon the usual view, of the king's outburst is the fact *and manner* of the poisoning, and these are just as clearly represented in the show. Thus to assume that it is the representation of his own crime that breaks down the King's reserve is to involve the plot in a hopeless contradiction. On the orthodox theory the dramatic logic of the scene goes utterly to pieces¹.

There are several things to be observed about this dumb-show. To begin with, there is no getting rid of it. Not only is the textual tradition unassailable, but the show is actually the subject of comment by Ophelia and Hamlet, a fact that proves it to be no mere oversight, no intrusion accidentally foisted into the text, but an integral, and presumably rational, part of the scene in which it occurs. And there is a further and exceedingly important point to be noticed. The dumb-show is not, as one might be tempted to suppose, a fossilized relic of the original *Hamlet*. It is indeed, very possible that, in the pre-Shakespearean piece, the player's play was represented in dumb-show only, as it is in the *Bestrafte Brudermord*². But of one thing we can be absolutely certain: if the play was shown in pantomime only it broke off with the poisoning. The

¹ So far as I am aware, the only critic who clearly recognized the difficulty involved in the dumb-show was Pye, who remarked that it 'appears to contain every circumstance of the murder of Hamlet's father. There is no apparent reason why the Usurper should not be as much affected by this mute representation of his crimes as he is afterwards when the same action is accompanied by words. The subsequent conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia precludes the possibility of its having been a kind of direction to the players only' (*Comments on the Commentators*, 1807, *apud* Furness' *Variorum, Hamlet*, i, 241). But he did not pursue the matter.

I must here mention a theory (dubbed by a friend the 'second tooth' theory) which would explain, not, indeed, the presence of the dumb-show, but at least the behaviour of the King, by supposing that the latter's nerves were able to stand the shock of the first representation of his crime, but were unable to endure a repetition of it. Now this *may* be psychologically sound—I should not like to say—but it is dramatically inadmissible. Shakespeare *might* have represented the scene in accordance with this theory, but in fact he has not done so. We are bound to explain the action of characters through analysis of the text; we are not at liberty to invent motives in the abstract. And the text clearly shows that the King, though disquieted by the play as it proceeds, does not recognize in the dumb-show a representation of his own act (see below, p. 405).

² The early German play, based on some version acted by the English companies touring in Germany.

fact that in both versions¹ of the play, as we have it, the action is carried beyond this point, proves conclusively that the extant dumb-show is not the survival of an original pantomime play. It follows that the dumb-show was actually designed for its present position, and was intentionally made to anticipate the representation of the spoken play. And no theory of *Hamlet* is tolerable that does not face this fact and offer a rational explanation of it.

Critics have vaguely tried to explain the presence of the dumb-show by dwelling on the frequency with which such machinery was used in the Elizabethan drama, especially of the earlier period, and by representing Shakespeare as here in a manner bowing to a fashionable custom. Some more judicious, however, have realized that this is not the case, and that the dumb-show in *Hamlet*, far from being a concession to conventionality, is in its nature unique in the English drama². That the dumb-show was a favourite device of the sixteenth-century drama is true, and it took many forms and was put to many uses. But the mere duplication of the action of the play was not among these forms, and in the present instance it is put to no use that the ingenuity of critics has been able to discover. We cannot take seriously the suggestion that Shakespeare was in this peculiarity reproducing an actual custom of the Danish or German stage³. One or two commentators have wondered why Hamlet should have risked the success of his play by anticipating the action in the dumb-show. It has been suggested that, in order to avoid the possibility of failure through an accidental wandering of the King's attention, Hamlet presented the situation twice over, and that there should be a direction to the effect that during the dumb-show the King and Queen are absorbed in close conversation and pay no attention to the stage. The explanation is, indeed, a lame one, but such as it is it has had to serve, for no other has been forthcoming⁴.

¹ That is Quarto 1 (1603), probably representing a surreptitious text of the acting version of the play as originally re-written by Shakespeare, and the version contained in Quarto 2 (1604) and, with certain variations, in Folio 1 (1623), representing the authoritative text of a later revision.

² I need only cite Creizenach, whose wide range of observation renders his judgement particularly valuable. 'The most famous of all these pantomimic representations,' he writes, 'is that at the beginning of the play inset in *Hamlet*. This occupies a place apart, in that it is neither an essential part of the action, nor an allegorical presentment of what is to follow, but simply a silent performance of the same scenes which are afterwards acted over again with words' (Creizenach, *ut supra*, p. 390). So too Dowden notes that 'Shakespeare's use of it here is singular' (*Hamlet*, p. 116). See also Hunter's remarks (*apud* Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 242). It should be observed that we must not assume that the dumb-show represents the whole play. It may represent one act only. The play presumably included revenge as well as crime.

³ See Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 242; Creizenach, *ut supra*, p. 390.

⁴ See Caldecott and Halliwell (*apud* Furness' *Variorum, Hamlet*, i, 242). The commentators have made their usual mistake of criticizing drama as history. They have

We are now in a position to appreciate the extraordinary nature of this intrusive dumb-show. It is an integral and intentional factor of the scene, deliberately designed for the position it now occupies. It is unique in type, unparalleled by anything to be found elsewhere in the Elizabethan drama. It serves no discovered purpose of the plot. And, on the accepted interpretation of the action, it not merely threatens the logical structure of one of the most crucial scenes of the play, but reduces it to meaningless confusion. How are we to account for its presence? Is it true that Shakespeare sometimes does queer things, dramatically. He can be thoughtless and unobservant to a surprising extent; he can be culpably lazy and careless as regards both composition and construction; he can be awkward, unexpected, perverse even. But there can here be no question of laziness or want of thought—the whole difficulty arises through the elaborately calculated insertion of a superfluous piece of business—while as to perversity, we are surely asked to believe something beyond the bounds of ordinary probability. If logic means anything in dramatic construction the orthodox interpretation stands self-refuted and must go. We have to choose between giving up Shakespeare as a rational playwright, and giving up our inherited beliefs regarding the story of *Hamlet*.

And, if only we will look at the matter with our minds freed from certain prepossessions, we shall soon, I think, perceive a possible line of advance. Since there appears to be a contradiction between the dumb-show and the subsequent conduct of the King, and since the former is a hard fact which cannot be explained away, it is worth while to consider whether our view of the latter may not be at fault.

Let us for the moment suppose (what I hope later to show is the case) that the King's action in breaking up the court has nothing directly to do with either the plot or the words of the play. The gross contradiction we have been considering will then be removed, and, although we shall be no nearer explaining the motive for the dumb-show, the scene should be at least logically coherent. On examination, however, we shall find that we have only removed a glaring absurdity to be faced with a more subtle obstacle. We are bound to believe that, as soon as the dumb-show has been performed, the King is aware that the story of his crime down to its minutest details is known, and known to Hamlet.

inquired why Hamlet behaved in a ridiculous way, when the question they should have asked was why Shakespeare did—or whether he did. In spite of his many acute observations this tendency is particularly prominent in the work of A. C. Bradley. For instance he is seriously exercised by the question: 'Why has the Ghost waited nearly a month since the marriage before showing itself?' (*ut supra*, p. 401).

There can be no possible doubt on that head. But how does his subsequent behaviour (even upon our revised hypothesis, and basing ourselves solely upon the actual text of the play) square with this fundamental assumption? The answer is that it does not square at all. The King, it will be observed, gives not the smallest sign of disturbance during or after the all-important dumb-show, and yet when the play comes to be acted his uneasiness quickly makes itself apparent. Moreover, thus perplexed and harassed, he turns for reassurance, with a simplicity and confidence that is really pathetic, to Hamlet of all people!¹ I propose to develop this point further in a moment; but any unprejudiced reading of the text will, I think, make it at once apparent that the only hypothesis consistent with the King's behaviour is that in the dumb-show he actually fails to recognize the representation of his own crime. This, however, on the ordinary assumptions, is impossible. The manner in which the poison is administered makes even the shadow of a doubt absurd. There is but one rational conclusion: *Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears.*

This inference appears to be as certain as anything in criticism can be. But a far more important inference follows immediately, and as certainly, from it. If the facts of King Hamlet's death were not as represented in the players' play, then the Ghost was no honest ghost, but a liar. In other words, *the Ghost's story was not a revelation, but a mere figment of Hamlet's brain.*

Such a suggestion, though not altogether novel², will naturally provoke protest even from those who feel the difficulty of the dumb-show. Objections must at once occur to the reader, the weight of which

¹ It has been suggested to me that the King in his comments on the play purposely fixes on the allusions to the Queen, passing over the subject of the murder, and purposely appeals to Hamlet, in order to allay the latter's suspicions. But certain considerations appear fatal to this view: namely, (1) that in such a case we ought to be given some hint that the King is acting a part, (2) that it is far too subtle a line for Claudius to take, and (3) that he can have no hope of allaying Hamlet's suspicions, since he cannot possibly know that they are suspicions merely, and that he is being put to the test, but must necessarily suppose on Hamlet's part definite and absolute knowledge of the facts.

² So far as I am aware only one critic has elaborated the hallucinatory hypothesis. This is Heinrich von Struve, who wrote (*Hamlet, Eine Charakterstudie*, 1876, p. 52, *apud* Furness, *Hamlet*, ii, 391): 'How are we to regard the Ghost? It is self-evident that it can be regarded in no other light than as an hallucination.' But he did not really meet the difficulties of the position. Apparently he accepted the Ghost's story as true, and supposed that Hamlet subconsciously pieced it together out of current gossip. 'Hamlet's talk with his father,' he continues, 'is a mere soliloquy. If it were necessary, this could be proved down to the smallest particular, for everything that Hamlet's father says corresponds to a hair with the known traits of Hamlet's character; it contains nothing individual, nothing novel, nothing peculiar to a character of a different mould, but everything bears the stamp of Hamlet's inmost nature,—it is the mere reflection of himself.' But the writer makes no attempt to demonstrate this in detail, nor does he face the coincidence of the *Murder of Gonzago*.

I do not seek to deny. They are, I think, in the main two: (1) that we know from the earlier scenes that the Ghost is an objective reality and no mere hallucination; and (2) that, as a fact, the King, whatever his behaviour during the dumb-show, does break down 'upon the talk of the poisoning.' The first of these is our old friend, the external evidence for the reality of the Ghost, the consideration of which still awaits us. Meanwhile we will complete our investigation of the 'Mouse-Trap' by attending to the second objection. For if we are to re-establish the play-scene upon a new and logical basis, it behoves us to show that it can be rationally interpreted throughout on the assumptions which consideration of one point in it have forced upon us, and in particular it will be necessary for us to offer a satisfactory explanation of the King's behaviour. I believe not only that this is perfectly possible, but that a careful examination of the whole scene will tend to confirm the conclusion at which we have arrived.

To begin with, let us consider the inserted play, chosen by Hamlet as being 'something like the murder of my father.' We have already observed that this is hardly an adequate description of the *Murder of Gonzago* as actually performed: it is, indeed, a minutely applicable representation of the affairs of the Danish court, and of the alleged murder of the late King. The strangeness of this coincidence has been hidden from critics by a vague idea that Hamlet had considerably altered the play in order to make it serve his purpose. But for this belief there is no warrant. We know that, to bring home the situation, Hamlet proposed to insert in the play an original 'speech of some dozen or sixteen lines': he says nothing to justify our supposing that he intended to, or in fact did, in any way interfere with the action. It is one 'speech' which he asks the players to study. Later on he bids them 'Speak the speech...trippingly on the tongue.' When he talks with Horatio just before the play, it is still 'one speech' in which he expects the King to betray himself. Now commentators have never been able to agree as to where this speech of Hamlet's is to be found¹, and it seems probable

¹ For the interminable discussion on the 'dozen or sixteen lines,' see Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 247, &c. There are of course not a few lines which seem written to suit the actual circumstances; for instance the queen's exclamation:

In second husband let me be accurst!

None wed the second but who kill'd the first.

But there is no one speech so satisfying the necessary requirements as to enable us to say: This must be Hamlet's insertion. Sievers in 1851 was the first to suggest the poisoner's speech at the point at which the King's guilt appears to unkenel itself. This is the obvious view and has found sturdy supporters, Bradley, among others, accepting it as self-evident (*ut supra*, pp. 96, 133). Nevertheless it is inadmissible, for that speech is clearly an integral part of the play, and does not particularly point at Claudius. On the other hand the Cowden Clarkes maintained that the speech of the player king (iii, ii, 198-223)

that all Shakespeare wished to do was to prepare his audience for the striking relevance of the *language* of the play to the known circumstances of the Danish court, noticeably to the marriage of the Queen. There is no allusion to the hidden matter of the King's guilt. The only relevance here is in the *action*, and of this, startling as it is, Shakespeare gives us no hint beforehand. Indeed, he has rather gone out of his way to imply, by laying stress on the language, that the action has been left undisturbed. We are bound, on the evidence to assume that the plot of the play is untouched, and that the words alone have been altered.

But, this being so, it must strike the reader that, if Claudius really poisoned his brother in the manner described by the Ghost, it is unbelievable that the players should chance to have in stock a play, which not only reproduced so closely the general situation¹, but in which the murderer adopted just this exceptional method by which to dispatch his victim. A dramatist is, no doubt, entitled to draw in some measure upon coincidence, but to draw to this extent for a mere piece of theatrical machinery, which could quite easily have been otherwise supplied, is to make impossible demands upon the credulity of his audience. Once again the orthodox interpretation of the play breaks down lamentably, and can only hope to escape ridicule itself by shifting it on to the shoulders of the author whose work it pretends to explain. I hasten to add that any theory which would supersede the orthodox view is equally bound to supply a reasonable explanation of the problem. But we are not yet quite in a position to discuss the point.

Now for the performance of the play. The court is assembled, the King and Queen take their places, the players are ready for their parts. Earlier in the scene Hamlet has been his own self, calm and collected; his humorous and pregnant discourse to the players, his noble and manly words to Horatio, show him at his best. But with the concurrence of

was the one criticism was in search of. These meditative lines might well be an insertion (they do not appear in Quarto 1) but they are wholly irrelevant to Hamlet's purpose. Furness' own summing up is worth quoting: 'It is to task the credulity of an audience too severely to represent the possibility of Hamlet's finding an old play exactly fitted to Claudius's crime, not only in the plot, but in all the accessories, even to a single speech which should tint the criminal to the quick. In order, therefore, to give an air of probability to what everyone would feel to be thus highly improbable, Shakespeare represents Hamlet as adapting an old play to his present needs by inserting some pointed lines. Not that such lines were actually inserted, but, mindful of this proposal of Hamlet's, the spectator is prepared to listen to a play which is to unkennel the King's occulted guilt in a certain speech; the verisimilitude of all the circumstances is thus maintained.' All of which is true as regards the language of the play, but not as regards the action.

¹ Down to so minute a particular as that the murderer seduced the Queen with gifts, see I, v. 44.

many people he begins to grow excited, and, as always, tries to hide the turmoil of his mind behind a mask of strange behaviour¹. He fences with the King, jeers at Polonius, strains Ophelia's modesty, spits venom at the Queen. Then the dumb-show enters. Was Hamlet expecting it? We cannot be certain whether he had ever seen the play acted before. Presumably he had, but if so it may have been by some other company, since he asked the Wittenberg players whether they could perform it. His comment on the show affords no indication that it was part of his plan. 'What means this, my lord?' asks Ophelia. 'Marry,' returns Hamlet, 'this is miching mallecho; it means mischief.' The reply is intentionally cryptic: if anything it suggests that the show was a surprise.

Now if the dumb-show was unexpected on Hamlet's part, it must have been singularly unwelcome. The plot has been prematurely divulged, and the King has shown no symptom of alarm. Is the trap going to prove a failure after all? Of course, Hamlet ought to begin to suspect that the Ghost was, indeed, no messenger of truth; but his growing excitement and the shock of the unexpected turn of events have put his critical purpose from his mind; his attention is bent on tripping the King, he forgets the object with which he desires to trip him. At first Hamlet hardly counted on any public outbreak—such as actually occurs—'if he but blench, I know my course.' But will he even achieve this much? If the King is really endowed with such iron nerves as to watch unmoved the dumb-show, will he not be equally able to sit and smile on the play, and betray no sign of guilt? Or, if Hamlet still counts on the efficacy of his 'speech,' there is another danger. Will that speech ever be spoken? Warned by the unfortunate dumb-show, will not the King make some excuse for stopping the performance? He knows not what public exposure may be in store. However firm his nerves, can he afford to run the risk? To Hamlet the doubt and suspense must be torture. He now assumes the King's guilt, and sets himself to ensure that the play itself shall not fail as the dumb-show failed. Moreover, it is no longer some slight tremor that Hamlet looks for—he is now playing for a full and open betrayal. If only he can break down the King's defences, if only he can frighten him sufficiently, he *must* give himself away by some manifest and public act. This change in Hamlet's intention is, of course, not the work of a moment, but takes place gradually and subconsciously, as his excitement grows with the progress of the play. Small wonder that under the suspense it rises to

¹ Concerning this assumed 'antic disposition' of Hamlet's see below, p. 417.

a dangerous pitch. His brain whirls and strikes sparks from any thought that crosses it. Ophelia can only wonder at his strange mood. 'You are merry...you are naught.' And again, 'You are keen, my lord, you are keen.' Hamlet caps it. 'Still better, and worse!' The prologue is spoken, brief indeed—as a posy, says Ophelia. 'As woman's love,' snaps Hamlet, his mind on the Queen.

The play begins. It is strange stuff, with its childish crudity and directness, strange in its passionate rhetoric, strangest of all in its harping on the idea of remarriage. It is such a play as Hamlet might have dreamed. The protests of the lady are certainly too much: they are extravagant, irrational. The effect on the audience may be imagined. Whatever else the performance may be, it is a coarse insult to the Queen—gross, open, palpable. And Hamlet's question: 'Madam, how like you the play?' is a slap in the face before the whole court. The King is naturally disturbed. It is impossible to feign blindness. Can it be mere coincidence? For assurance he turns to Hamlet. To Hamlet! whom, on the usual assumptions, he must by this time know for his deadly enemy. How far is this unseemly matter to be pursued? 'Have you heard the argument? *Is there no offence in't?*' No offence in the public representation of his own crime¹! Were there still room for doubt in Hamlet's mind, this remark of the King's ought surely to shake his confidence in the Ghost. But he is now too excited to notice anything. 'No, no,' he replies eagerly, 'they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world.' Of course, as the context shows, it was of the Queen, not of the poison, that the King was thinking. 'What do you call the play?' 'The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically.' Hamlet seems bent on warning his antagonist. After all he must be sufficiently on his guard already. Hamlet's only chance is actually to frighten him into self-betrayal. His original purpose is long forgotten. In his excitement he lashes out all round: he insults Ophelia, outrages the Queen, jibes at the King and taunts him before the assembled court. In fine, he behaves like a madman; there is no telling what he may say or do next. When the poisoner appears he can hardly contain himself. Delay is torture. 'Begin, murderer; pox, leave thy damnable faces, and begin. Come: the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge².' He shouts the words across the hall at the actor on the stage. Revenge! There is no

¹ This, to my mind, emphatically disposes of the 'second tooth' theory.

² In this absurd exclamation, which Collier divined to be a quotation, Hamlet rolls into one two lines from the *True Tragedy of Richard III*:

The screeking raven sits croaking for revenge,

Whole herds of beasts comes bellowing for revenge.

The source was pointed out by Simpson in 1874 (see Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 257).

question of revenge in the play; as yet there is nothing to revenge¹. But it is not of the play that Hamlet is thinking. The word must fall ominously on the ears of the assembled courtiers, who behold the dispossessed heir first insult the Queen, and now covertly threaten the usurper. We can see them exchange looks². But Hamlet heeds them not. His excitement rises to an agony of suspense as the critical moment—to his thinking—approaches. The poisoner speaks:

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing;
 Confederate season, else no creature seeing;
 Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
 With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
 Thy natural magic and dire property,
 On wholesome life usurp immediately.

It would be difficult to imagine more stilted commonplace, a speech less calculated to unnerve a guilty spectator. But for Hamlet the supreme moment, so long anxiously expected, has arrived. The murderer empties his poison into the sleeper's ears, and—the King rises? Not a bit of it. Hamlet is unable to restrain himself any longer; he breaks out, hurling the crude facts of the story in the King's face, shouting, gesticulating, past reason and control³. It seems as though the next moment he must spring at his throat. Naturally the court breaks up, the King rises, calls for lights, and retires to his private apartments, convinced—not that his guilt has been discovered, but that Hamlet is a dangerous madman, who has designs on his life, and must, at all costs, be got quietly out of the country, and, if possible, out of the world. It is true that his conscience is touched, and that in the next scene we see its final wriggles; but, though he knows the danger he runs from Hamlet's hatred⁴, and though

¹ Dyce saw this point, and did his best for the orthodox interpretation in his note: 'Hamlet seems to mean: "Begin without delay; for the raven, prescient of the deed, is already croaking, and, as it were, calling for the revenge which must ensue"' (see Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 257). A well-intentioned effort worthy of Humpty-Dumpty.

² Bradley had a glimmering of the truth when he wrote that Hamlet's 'choice of the *Murder of Gonzago*, and perhaps *his conduct during the performance*, have shown a spirit of exaggerated hostility against the King which has excited general alarm' (*ut supra*, p. 136).

³ This is really the only legitimate interpretation of the text. Hamlet has time for a speech of four lines before Ophelia says: 'The King rises.' Note too that Hamlet's words, 'you shall see anon,' assume that the play is going forward. As the scene is usually acted the court is already in an uproar when these words are spoken, and Ophelia's observation comes ludicrously belated.

⁴

I like him not, nor stands it safe with us
 To let his madness range...
 The terms of our estate may not endure
 Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
 Out of his lunacies...
 ...we will fetters put about this fear,
 Which now goes too free-footed. (III, iii. 1, 5, 25.)

Throughout this scene, as indeed elsewhere, it is tacitly assumed that it was Hamlet's behaviour, not the King's, that broke up the court.

he justly fears the doom of heaven, he gives, throughout his soliloquy, no indication that his secret has been discovered, he shows no anxiety as to the judgement of his fellow-men¹.

We have now concluded our examination of the players' play and of the scene in which it appears. We have (1) found evidence that the circumstances of King Hamlet's death were not as represented by the Ghost, and (2) we have further discovered that the action of the scene is perfectly consistent with this hypothesis, and in particular that the behaviour of Claudius, which seemed at first sight to confirm the Ghost's story, is readily explained in another manner. It remains, therefore, to consider what I have called the external evidence for the genuineness of the Ghost.

And here it becomes necessary to distinguish two matters essentially and logically distinct, though closely related: namely, the communications of the Ghost to Hamlet, and his appearances to other characters. If the theory advanced above is to be made good, it will be necessary to maintain that the Ghost's communications to Hamlet are no more than hallucinations of Hamlet's own mind, and we shall expect to find internal evidence of this in the text. But we are not bound to maintain that the appearances of the Ghost to Horatio and the rest are mere illusion. If we are satisfied that the Ghost's narrative is mere imagination, we shall doubtless be inclined to regard him as altogether unreal; but we shall not be forced to do so. It would in no way invalidate the thesis of this essay to admit that the dumb ghost of the murdered king did actually haunt the scenes of his earthly life. I must, therefore, beg my readers to bear in mind this distinction in the discussion that follows.

At the opening of the play Marcellus and Bernardo have twice already seen the apparition, and have invited Horatio, the scholar and friend of the Prince, to come and share their watch, in the belief that it will manifest itself again. He does so, sees the Ghost, and speaks to it. The account he subsequently gives to Hamlet is very circumstantial. 'A figure like your father, Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pie.—I knew your father; These hands are not more like.—He wore his beaver up.—A countenance more in sorrow than in anger...very pale.—His beard... was, as I have seen it in his life, A sable silver'd.' All this is very

¹ In describing the play-scene I have, of course, drawn on my fancy for appropriate detail and action. Orthodox commentary and acting lays the stress otherwise and interprets differently—and, I submit, less reasonably. But it must be remembered that I am not seeking to prove a theory from my interpretation of the scene. I merely wish to show that the scene can be logically interpreted upon a theory which other considerations have forced upon us. If, as I believe, my interpretation agrees better with the data of the text than that usually current, the fact is additional evidence in favour of the theory.

satisfactory, and these details, if they can be accepted as the direct result of observation, are conclusive of an apparition so clear and definite that we shall probably be content to accept it as genuine. But they are given some hours after the occurrence; there is time for imagination to have been at work. How much of the description is due to observation, how much, possibly, to suggestion? It will be noticed that from the first the two soldiers have made up their minds that the Ghost is none other than the late King. This is clear from Bernardo's first remark when it re-appears 'In the same figure, like the king that's dead.' He is not making a fresh observation, but confirming a previous conviction. As to the grounds of his belief we are in the dark. On the other hand Horatio is cheerfully sceptical. According to him it is mere fantasy; a sober brain will see nothing: 'Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.' Hence the shock when something does appear, sufficiently plausible to account for his companions' belief. He is harrowed 'with fear and wonder.' The greater his scepticism before, the greater will be his tendency to succumb to suggestion now that he can no longer laugh away the whole story. Horatio is a simple, honest, and healthy, but not a critical, soul. He is overwhelmed by the unexpectedness of his experience, and his abnormal agitation may be traced in the words he utters at the time. We do not here find the lucid and orderly evidence he gives later on. 'Is it not like the king?' asks Marcellus, seeking confirmation of his own belief. 'As thou art to thyself,' replies Horatio, now but a mirror of the others' thoughts; and he proceeds:

Such was the very armour he had on
 When he the ambitious Norway combated;
 So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
 He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.

Now, we have very good reason to believe that Horatio, the fellow student of Hamlet, can have been at most a baby in arms at the time of the Norwegian contest, and although we know nothing as to the date of the 'angry parle,' it seems unlikely that the Wittenberg scholar should have witnessed it¹. In short, Horatio here is not giving personal evidence of value, but indulging in mere imaginative rhetoric, and incidentally sowing the seed of the suggestion that bears fruit in his subsequent interview with the Prince. Observe, likewise, that both here and in that interview he constantly speaks as though he were intimately familiar with the appearance of the late King of Denmark. Yet incidentally he lets out that, so far from this being the case, he had only set eyes on him

¹ It is possible that we ought to read 'sledded pole-ax', i.e. a pole-ax like a sledge-hammer, in which case the allusion would probably be again to the war with Norway.

on a single occasion: 'I saw him *once*; he was a goodly king!' It is also to be noticed that, in spite of all this pretended certainty, Horatio does not in the least persuade himself that the apparition really is the spirit of the dead King, for on its re-appearance he hails it with the exclamation: 'Stay, illusion!'

So much for the first scene. In the watchers' interview with Hamlet the suggestion advances a stage—the first hurried impressions gain shape and conviction—and passes from Horatio to the already brooding and suspicious Prince. We can observe it working and the pace at which it works. 'I will watch to-night,' says Hamlet, '*Perchance* 'twill walk again.' 'I warrant it will,' rejoins Horatio. '*If* it assume my noble father's person, I'll speak to it,' pursues Hamlet. His mind is still possessed by rational and critical doubt. He may see nothing; if he sees anything it may not, after all, resemble his father; and he hints that even if it does that will not prove its nature. Yet by the end of the scene the suggestion has already begun to work, and his doubts have vanished:

My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;
I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!

The second Ghost scene is not in itself very important. The chief point to observe is how Hamlet's scepticism has, by this, re-asserted itself. His mind appears quite detached as he comments on the swinish customs of the Danish court. Thus, whatever his expectations may have been, the actual appearance of the Ghost must have come as a mental shock. Nevertheless, he is at first cautious and critical; he sees the apparition, but knows not what it is. After one exclamation of surprise: 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!' he addresses the Ghost: 'Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd.' He will *call* it Hamlet, king, father, royal Dane. But, as so often happens, he is excited by his own ardour of eloquence—it is a speech splendidly worthy of the occasion. The suggestion of his own words quickly works on him, and by the end of the speech he tacitly assumes that it is indeed his father's spirit he beholds. The Ghost appears to beckon him, and in spite of his comrades he would follow. Their opposition chafes and excites him. At first he replies courteously, then seems not to hear, lastly he breaks out into swaggering rant about the 'Nemean lion's nerve,' and tears himself loose from their restraining arms, almost beside himself with excitement¹. His companions recognize his state: 'He waxes desperate with imagination,'

¹ The contrast of the speech beginning: 'My fate cries out,' with the invocation of the Ghost at its first entry, is very striking, and is an index of the state of Hamlet's mind.

says Horatio. Their doubts have returned as his have vanished, and whatever shape the Ghost may assume to their eyes they refuse to accept it at its face value. It is Marcellus who first misdoubts its intention and opposes Hamlet's infatuation. Horatio fears that it will tempt the Prince into danger, and then, assuming 'some *other* horrible form,' deprive him of reason or drive him to self-destruction.

How, then, does the question stand as regards the reality of the Ghost? The assumption that it is genuine certainly leads to no contradiction; we are perfectly at liberty to make it. But are we compelled to do so? No one will suggest that the apparition is pure fancy, but it is a long cry from that to the belief that it is supernatural. Further, it seems evident that there is about the appearance something to confirm the belief that it is the dead King in a mind in which the suggestion is already present. But we do not know how the belief originally arose; whether from an actually convincing resemblance, or whether through the opportune congress of some chance phenomenon with a preoccupation in the minds of the officers, Marcellus and Bernardo. From the freedom of Hamlet's discourse in their presence, we may suppose them to have been loyal followers of his father; and the events of the last few weeks must have given rise to speculation and suspicion in the minds of others than the Prince. They may or may not have been personally familiar with the late King's appearance. From them the suggestion passes to Horatio, who we know was not. To many people Horatio's evidence is conclusive regarding the genuineness of the Ghost. But on close examination we have found that, for all his honesty, he is a very bad witness indeed. From him the suggestion passes to Hamlet. And we may fancy we trace how the idea, once formed, works in diverse ways upon the belief of each. There is the appearance of mutual suggestion; the characters encourage one another to trace the likeness of the King. And yet, previous to the pretended revelation, not one of them is really persuaded that the Ghost is genuine. It is an 'illusion,' an 'imagination,' a 'horrible shape,' a 'spirit of health or goblin damn'd'; while, on a later occasion, Hamlet admits bluntly that it may be the devil. There is, it seems to me, a good deal here to shake our confidence in the supernatural character of the apparition. But it falls far short of disproof. If we please to accept the Ghost as genuine we may; at the same time Shakespeare seems clearly to leave the way open for an alternative, to hint that we may, if we will, regard it as a freak of collective suggestion, and explain it away as we should any other spook.

To continue: the Ghost disappears, and Hamlet, having shaken off his importunate friends, follows in the direction he supposes it to have taken. When we next see him he is alone with the Ghost at a distance from the battlements of Elsinore. He has presumably followed it some way, for he appears to have grown uneasy, and makes a stand with the words: 'Whither wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further.' What follows, till the Ghost vanishes, is a monologue broken only by interjections of the listener. I do not know how it may strike others, but to me this narrative is one of the most astonishing things in the whole play. We have here the young Prince, the noble, fine-minded, sensitive Hamlet, in the very presence of his murdered father's spirit returned from the mystery of the 'undiscovered country' to reveal to his son the manner of his death, and to call for a just vengeance upon the adulterous usurper. The situation is one of tremendous dramatic import, fitted to call forth to the utmost the imaginative power of a romantic poet. It has, indeed, its difficult and rather disagreeable side, though how far Shakespeare was of a nature to feel this is a question upon which the subtler of his critics have been divided. At least we may credit him with the capacity of perceiving that, if he was to avoid debasing the situation by obtruding the element of personal revenge and the grotesque horror that always clings about the re-appearance of departed spirits, the scene would need to be handled with the greatest discretion and the highest poetic intensity. That it is powerful, after a fashion, is true. But what fashion? Listen:

My hour is almost come,
 When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
 Must render up myself...
 I am thy father's spirit;
 Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires¹,
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
 To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
 I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part
 And each particular hair to stand an end,
 Like quills upon the fretful porpentine:
 But this eternal blazon must not be
 To ears of flesh and blood.

The verse is smooth and capable enough; there is even a touch, in the

¹ It is significant that some of this stuff has proved too much for the stomachs even of orthodox commentators. The phrase 'to fast in fires' particularly has been the occasion of frequent though futile emendation.

'eternal blazon,' of the grand Shakespearian diction. But did the dubious influence of Seneca ever produce a more frigid piece of academic declamation? Is this the way Shakespeare writes when he is in earnest? Is this how he seeks to impress his hearers with even the cruder terrors of the after-world? No one could do the horrid business more effectively than Shakespeare when he pleased:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling! (*Measure for Measure*, III, i. 118.)

Can anyone with the slightest feeling for poetry read these two passages and believe that there is no difference of intention between them?

The monologue proceeds in the same strain to the end: it is all—or nearly all—mere rhetoric and declamation. The Ghost declaims upon his own moral and physical superiority over his rival. He reminds himself that he must be brief—and embarks on a detailed account of his murder. A very remarkable murder it was. A drug unknown to science, medieval or modern, is poured into his blood through the porches of his ears, and the symptoms of the poison are described with gloating medical detail:

a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.

Another outburst of denunciation and revenge, a moment's revulsion against the idea of taking vengeance on the fallen woman, a final reminder of the approach of morning—and the Ghost vanishes.

Is such really Shakespeare's conception of an adequate treatment of this tremendous situation? There is, indeed, a curious horror in the scene, but it is the horror of a painted cloth, of a grotesque fresco

¹ The character of the Ghost's narration is all the more striking, coming as it does between the fine eloquence of Hamlet's address on its first appearance and the intensity of the remarkable 'tables' speech that immediately follows. In style the narration continues the 'Nemean lion' stuff of Hamlet's violent exit. Hamlet's excitement both before and after the revelation is natural enough, and, given the state of his mind, it need not surprise us that it should manifest itself in rhetorical rant. But why, in the name of common sense, should the Ghost, if genuine, think it necessary to talk in the same style? If, on the other hand, the Ghost's speech is a coinage of Hamlet's brain, it naturally and fitly enough agrees with Hamlet's speeches that immediately precede and follow it.

—gridirons, pitchforks, sulphurous flames, decomposition and decay—a thing we ridicule even while we shudder and our gorge rises at it. The scene produces no sense of reality, there is no serious attempt to meet the situation; the only sympathetic touch is the poor Ghost's horror and astonishment at the fall of his 'most seeming-virtuous queen,' and his desire to shield her from the ultimate penalty.

Can we accept this revelation of the Ghost's seriously? This is, of course, a question that each reader must answer for himself, and will answer according to his own feeling of dramatic fitness. I can only speak for myself when I say that this Ghost leaves me sceptical and unconvinced. The alternative is to treat the Ghost as an hallucination, and its speeches as no more than the reflection of Hamlet's thoughts. The state of his mind at the end of the interview is clearly shown in the soliloquy that follows. Hamlet breaks out at once into rant; he invokes heaven and earth—'And shall I couple hell?' All is tumult 'in this distracted globe,' as he calls his seething brain. 'O most pernicious woman! O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!' Then something snaps: he is in danger of forgetting the import of the Ghost's message unless he writes it down in his diary! And he writes 'That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain'—at least in Denmark¹.

Now, there can be no question that the revelation he has received, if genuine, was of a nature to upset a mind better balanced than Hamlet's. But we know what his state was at the beginning, and if this is the condition of his mind at the end, surely there is nothing unreasonable in supposing that his excitement was sufficiently overmastering to produce actual hallucination. The only question is whether his abnormal state of mind is the result or the cause of his supernatural experience.

I am not going to argue that the Ghost's narrative is the reflection of Hamlet's normal mind. Hamlet is a refined and cultivated gentleman in a society of barbarians, he is the courtier-scholar of Ophelia's lament. I could no more credit him with the conscious evolution of the Ghost's revelation than I can Shakespeare with its serious composition. But is there any reason to suppose that the product of suggestion and hallucination would be a reflection of the normal mind? Would it not rather represent a release of those sub-conscious feelings, memories, and almost instinctive beliefs, which have been thrust under in the process of

¹ This 'tables' speech of Hamlet's is well analyzed in Bradley's note (*ut supra*, p. 409). I think, however, that he treats Hamlet's fear of forgetting too seriously. It is not so much a sane fear that madness may drive the matter from his memory, as itself a trait of madness. Touching the state of Hamlet's mind, see below, p. 417.

education and civilization, interwoven, no doubt, with more conscious judgements and opinions? And that, it seems to me, is exactly what we have in the strange declamation of the Ghost. The secrets of the prison house are just those crude and grotesque horrors on which Hamlet's childhood in that medieval society must have been fed, and from which his maturer nature must have revolted, just as we may imagine Shakespeare's to have done. And the rest of the pretended revelation is a mere reflection, decked out with exaggerated rhetoric and fantastic detail, of Hamlet's own passions and suspicions. He already believes that his father has been murdered. When the thought first sprang in him we do not know, but as soon as he heard of the Ghost walking he jumped to the conclusion of foul play. His disgust at his mother's marriage must long ago have bred other suspicions. When the Ghost reveals to him the identity of his murderer, Hamlet as good as tells us that it is no news to him: 'O my prophetic soul! My uncle!' 'Ay,' returns the Ghost, 'Ay, that incestuous'—Hamlet has already used the word himself—'that adulterate beast'—rhetoric almost demands the second adjective. Then again, take that strange comparison:

O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!
 From me, whose love was of that dignity
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow
 I made to her in marriage; and to decline
 Upon a wretch, whose natural gifts were poor
 To those of mine!

In the mouth of the Ghost the words make us smile. But they are not the poor Ghost's words at all; they are Hamlet's own. Long before this he had expressed the same thought: 'So excellent a King; that was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr'; while later the whole of his diatribe to the Queen is on the text, 'Look here, upon this picture, and on this... Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, And batten on this moor?' Then again: the injunction to take no vengeance on the adulterous wife. Why should she be spared? Not, surely, that she is more worthy of pity:

virtue, as it never will be moved,
 Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
 So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed
 And prey on garbage.

Indeed, it is no fond recollection of the days of her love and innocence that prompts the Ghost to spare her:

But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
 Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
 Against thy mother aught;

it is the fear lest the son should incur the curse of Orestes¹. The argument moves, not along the line of the Ghost's thought, but of Hamlet's². The same characteristics mark the speech throughout: it is sufficient to have shown how the revelation is but a reflection of Hamlet's mind, how it proceeds along the natural lines of Hamlet's thought, how rhetorical and artificial it all sounds, how it lacks the stamp of reality, and on the other hand possesses all the irrelevant detail and grotesque minuteness of a dream.

The Ghost gives Hamlet one, and only one, piece of information he did not already possess. Since the death of the King could plausibly be ascribed to a serpent's bite, and since he had in fact been murdered, it is obvious that the instrument must have been poison. What is novel and strange is the administration of the poison through the ears of the sleeper. It is just this point that seems to set the seal of authenticity on the narrative, and it is just this point that we know, from subsequent events, cannot have been true. But if not true how are we to explain its presence? How should such an extravagant idea have ever found entrance into Hamlet's mind? This is a question which our theory has got to face before it can claim assent.

I have previously remarked on the extraordinary coincidence of the players' *Tragedy of Gonzago* reproducing so minutely the circumstances of King Hamlet's death, and I have pointed out that we are not at liberty to gloss over this coincidence, as is usually done, by supposing that Hamlet had altered the action of the play to suit actual events. We have now come to the conclusion that the crucial point of resemblance was not actual, but the product of Hamlet's imagination. The coincidence, however, remains just as extraordinary as ever.

But there is one other point regarding the players' play worth attention. We know, of course, that the piece was not new to Hamlet. He inquires of the players whether they can perform it; he knows that its plot will suit his purpose. But more than this. Not only has he presumably seen it acted at Wittenberg, but he knows the original Italian play or novel on which it was founded. 'The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian,' he informs the King with extraordinary irrelevance. He is familiar with the scene, and the names of the characters in the original, which do not appear in the play as represented. In short, Hamlet had bestowed attention on the story long

¹ It has not been observed that *taint* has an almost technical sense of 'infected with madness.' Shakespeare, of course, uses the phrase 'tainted in his wits,' while Beaumont and Fletcher (I think) write 'sure he's tainted,' meaning 'he is out of his mind.'

² This is the point insisted on by H. von Struve in the criticism quoted above (p. 401).

before he commanded the production of the play at court. But the ingenious reader will already have made the obvious inference. *The Ghost described this particular method of poisoning because it was already present in Hamlet's mind.* In other words it was not the Ghost's story that suggested the *Murder of Gonzago*, but the *Murder of Gonzago* that supplied the details of the Ghost's story. This simple assumption at once removes the difficulty of the coincidence, and explains the one obscure point regarding the Ghost's narrative. Our chain of evidence is complete.

We left Hamlet busy with his writing tablets. His friends, who have been seeking him during his ghostly interview, now enter. The scene that follows affords, in a way, the best evidence for the reality of the Ghost, since his underground mutterings of 'Swear' are heard by all present. At least, I think they are; though the only evidence for this is Horatio's exclamation: 'O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!' which might conceivably refer to Hamlet's strange language and behaviour. Yet at the same time this scene constitutes one of the greatest difficulties of the orthodox interpretation. Is it possible to take 'this fellow in the cellarage' seriously? I suppose that no acting, however ingenious and convinced, has ever been able to save the scene from verging on the ludicrous: after the previous tension it is hard to resist an impulse to laugh. Frankly, it seems inconceivable that Hamlet should believe that, in 'true-penny' and 'old mole,' he is really addressing the spirit with whom he late had converse. But it is by no means easy to interpret the scene upon any other assumption. Are we to regard the underground mutterings as some ventriloquistic prank of Hamlet's? One could believe a good deal of him after the 'tables' speech, but hardly this. Perhaps a more reasonable view would be that they are the chance moanings of the waves as they break in the caverns beneath the platform, that Hamlet amuses himself by pretending that they are the voice of the Ghost, and that his companions, shaken by the experiences of the night, accept his interpretation in all seriousness¹.

In considering what view we should adopt of this incident, it is important that we should bear in mind Hamlet's condition at the moment. It follows immediately upon the 'tables' speech, and there is no question that Hamlet's reason was then near breaking down. He has caught

¹ I do not pretend that this explanation is satisfactory, but merely that it is at least as satisfactory as any other I can imagine. Coleridge thought the Ghost's interference 'hardly defensible' (see Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 113). It is worth remarking, as possibly indicating some early stage tradition, that in the *Bestrafte Brudermord* the Ghost's words are 'We swear,' and that they come as the echo of those of the characters on the stage.

himself staggering upon the verge of madness, and he knows not when, or in what company, he may again give signs of derangement. In the course of the present scene he instinctively adopts an 'antic disposition' as a cloak under which signs of real madness, should they occur, may be hidden; and this cloak, towards the end of the scene, he avows and deliberately makes his own. It is impossible to say exactly how far this acting, combined with his excitement, might lead him¹.

Time passes, and Hamlet does not sweep to his revenge: on the contrary the immediate effects of the ghostly revelation begin to wear off, conviction fades and doubts arise. Was it, after all, an 'honest ghost'? He desires 'grounds more relative':

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.

Translated out of the language of medieval into that of modern psychology, this seems to be pretty much what we mean when we say that the Ghost was an hallucination produced by auto-suggestion in Hamlet's own brain. He appears to have diagnosed his own case accurately.

To satisfy himself Hamlet devises the 'Mouse-Trap' with the result we have already seen. Naturally, the effect of his experiment is to banish from his mind any suspicion of the genuineness of the Ghost's revelation, and to leave him in a state of exuberant excitement which vents itself in wild snatches of song.

Close on the play-scene follows the second communication of the Ghost, which takes place in the Queen's private chamber. Though of far less interest and importance than the revelation, it is noteworthy as affording strong confirmation of the hallucination theory, since what Hamlet sees and hears remains unperceived by the Queen². The psychological construction on this occasion complements in a remarkable

¹ Coleridge long ago remarked: 'You may, perhaps, observe Hamlet's wildness is but half false; he plays that subtle trick of pretending to act only when he is very near really being what he acts' (see Furness, *Hamlet*, i, 109). So too Bradley: 'That Hamlet was not far from insanity is very probable. His adoption of the pretence of madness may very well have been due in part to fear of the reality; to an instinct of self-preservation, a fore-feeling that the pretence would enable him to give utterance to the load which pressed on his heart and brain, and a fear that he would be unable altogether to repress such utterance' (*ut supra*, p. 120). I am convinced that this is the correct explanation of Hamlet's 'antic disposition,' and it makes it almost impossible to say what veins of real alienation may mingle with his assumed extravagance.

² This is not, of course, by itself conclusive: a dramatist would be quite at liberty to represent a genuine ghost as appearing to one character only. Still it undoubtedly raises a strong presumption in this scene, as it does in *Macbeth*. Some critics have, I believe, taken this view.

manner that of the earlier scene. There the illusion arose through the strange apparition—whatever it may have been—working on the suggestions already present in Hamlet's brain, and it left him in a state of excitement bordering on madness. Here the development is different. Hamlet, in his denunciation of the Queen's behaviour, works himself up to the pitch of frenzy, when suddenly his excitement produces a recurrence of the hallucination, and this acts as a *katharsis* to his emotion and leaves him calm again. Let anyone read the scene from the words: 'Look here, upon this picture, and on this,' and ask himself whether the wild crescendo is not leading up to a degree of passion beyond the bounds of sober reason. The Queen at first endures in silence, then breaks out in piteous protest, but her entreaties are borne under by the torrent of her son's reproaches. He is in full career when the appearance of the Ghost pulls him up short. He stares at it, speaks to it, and it replies. Yet the woman at his side sees and hears nothing:

how is't with you
That you do bend your eye on vacancy
And with the incorporal air do hold discourse?

Hamlet, again under the spell of the vision, and confirmed by the recent success of his trap, finds no warning in her incapacity of perception. 'Do you see nothing there?' he asks wondering. 'Nothing at all; yet all there is I see.' 'Nor did you nothing hear?' 'No, nothing but ourselves.' The Ghost himself says little—nothing new. His ostensible purpose is futile: 'This visitation Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.' Hamlet in the moment of his success and confidence, who has just slain the 'rash, intruding fool' Polonius by mistake for the King, is certainly in a keener mood for vengeance than at any other moment before the final catastrophe. The Ghost's words are nothing but the echo of Hamlet's own suggestion: 'Do you not come your tardy son to chide?' The real import of the visitation is the repetition of the command to spare the Queen:

But look, amazement on thy *mother* sits:
O, step between her and her fighting soul.

Hamlet has been forgetting himself; his natural instincts now rise up and through the Ghost's mouth accuse him. Once again the Ghost's words are but the reflection of Hamlet's thoughts¹.

¹ Bradley, though he apparently had no suspicion that the Ghost might be an illusion throughout, found it necessary to argue in favour of its reality in this scene. He points out that 'the Ghost proves, so to speak, his identity by showing the same traits as were visible on his first appearance—the same insistence on the duty of remembering, the same concern for the Queen' (*ut supra*, p. 139). Quite so!

The hallucination has acted as a purge to Hamlet's excitement; the Ghost gone he is cool again. The Queen says, with truth :

This is the very coinage of your brain :
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in ;

and he replies, no less truly :

Ecstasy !
My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music : it is not madness
That I have utter'd : bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word, which madness
Would gambol from.

I am bold to think that read in this light the scene gains considerably in effect. There is fine dramatic irony in Hamlet's words :

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.

He is so mistaken, yet profoundly right.

To sum up. We have seen that the interpretation of the action of *Hamlet* that has been generally accepted, though it has been recognized as not wholly free from difficulties, upon a critical scrutiny breaks down altogether, being found to involve a definite self-contradiction. Further, we have seen that it is impossible to regard the narrative of the Ghost as a genuine revelation, but that, on the contrary, it bears internal evidence of being but a figment of Hamlet's brain, and, moreover, that this hypothesis resolves most of the difficulties that have been thought inherent in the play. It is tempting to advance a step further, and to argue that Shakespeare not only constructed his play on the basis of an hallucination on the part of his hero, but that he intended the Ghost to be an illusion throughout. The temptation is all the greater in that we should thus be enabled to bring the elaborate study of a ghost in *Hamlet* into line with the comparatively slight sketches of ghosts in his other plays. Nevertheless, for this further assumption we have no definite warrant. The view seems perfectly tenable, while on the other hand it is not inevitable. Shakespeare has not committed himself.

Let me try to make clear what I conceive to be the position. Shakespeare, it must be supposed, expected his ghost and its story to be generally taken on the stage at their face value. To the bulk of his audience *Hamlet* would just be another—and the greatest—of the Senecan revenge dramas. But may we not believe that for himself, as for other humaner minds among his contemporaries, such crude

machinery would appear as a blot upon a noble piece of work?¹ For such minds he would appear to have designed an alternative explanation, and as a warning of his real intention to have introduced the dumb-show². This piece of business does not obtrude itself on the attention when the play is acted, but in reading and upon consideration its absolute redundancy and its extraordinary results *should* immediately become apparent. It is then seen that the obvious interpretation of the action, which satisfies the generality, makes Shakespeare an astonishingly perverse bungler; while the alternative shows him not only a skilful craftsman, but likewise a considerable master of innuendo. That we are not in the habit of regarding Shakespeare in this light is true, and in the case of most of his work it might hardly be legitimate to do so. But are we not perhaps justified, in the case of *Hamlet*, in looking for subtleties we do not meet elsewhere? or need we be surprised at finding literary devices employed in that play that would miss their effect under the conditions of the Elizabethan stage? *Hamlet* stands more or less alone among its author's works. In writing it Shakespeare built upon the foundation of an earlier piece by Kyd or somebody, rewriting and revising probably more than once, and it is clear that in doing so he got carried away by his interest in the story, and allowed his work to burst the bounds of its theatrical limitations³. The length of the play is excessive; it would almost make two pieces of ordinary dimensions. As a practical dramatist Shakespeare must have known that it could never be performed in its entirety, even under the most favourable conditions of the great London theatres. We know that, in fact, it was mercilessly cut by the company for which it was written⁴. In composition Shakespeare *must* have had in mind readers as well as spectators; he must have written for the closet as well as for the stage⁵. Is it

¹ The distinction between the general and the judicious is as old as Hamlet's welcome to the players, and it has ere now been applied by Shakespearian criticism to the very matter in hand. Thus, speaking of Banquo's ghost, Hudson in his second edition remarks: 'In Shakespeare's time the *generality* of the people could not possibly conceive of a subjective ghost,' and argues that in consequence the phantom had to be materially presented though such was not Shakespeare's intention (see Furness, *Macbeth*, p. 172). Bradley in his criticism of the same incident (quoted above, p. 394) draws the same distinction. It seems to be exactly applicable to *Hamlet*.

² The immediate object of the dumb-show is to prove to a critical audience that it is Hamlet's behaviour and not the King's that breaks up the court, while at the same time leaving Hamlet himself free to believe in the success of his plot.

³ We may recall Shakespeare's constant liability to be carried away by his interest in minor characters, and to allow them to develop to the detriment of the main plot.

⁴ See Quarto 1 (1603), which is undoubtedly based on an acting version.

⁵ Cf. Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare*, 1895, p. 163, etc. He goes so far as to maintain that 'Every change [made by Shakespeare in revising] the text of *Hamlet* has impaired its fitness for the stage and increased its value for the closet in exact and perfect proportion.'

reasonable to suppose that this knowledge had no influence on his treatment of his theme? It would be a rash assumption in the case of any professional writer: we certainly have no right to make it in the case of Shakespeare¹.

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The current interpretation of *Hamlet* presupposes an altogether unreasonable want of dramatic capacity in the author. Shakespeare's reputation imperatively demands that an alternative should be found. As a tentative essay in this direction I submit the above to the censure of the judicious.

W. W. GREG.

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¹ I would hazard the guess that Shakespeare was not altogether displeased when Nicholas Ling published a surreptitious and garbled version of his play (1603) and thereby forced the company to put forth the full and authentic text (1604). Possibly he revised the piece for the occasion. He may even have put in a good word for the pirate, since, contrary to the usual custom, he was not deprived of the book, but actually entrusted with the publication of Roberts' authorized edition!