

Hamlet and the Narrative Construction of Reality

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In an article published in 1991 that is widely considered to represent a seminal contribution to the topic, Jerome Bruner employs the expression “narrative construction of reality” to describe the process whereby “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative”.¹ The phrase encapsulates an awareness of the crucial role played by narrative in ordering events and rendering them meaningful that has in recent decades infiltrated areas of inquiry remote from those in which the word *narrative* is most obviously to be expected, reflecting what Bruner himself describes as a “paradigm shift” in the human sciences that in certain respects parallels developments in both the theory and the practice of postmodernism.² Basic to the narrativist perspective in all of its many disciplinary manifestations is a recognition of the tendency on the part of human beings to “make up stories about the world and to a large degree live out their plots”,³ or, in a somewhat different formulation, “both to organize their experience and to interpret their social lives according to narrative plots”.⁴ The more adventurous theories of narrative go even further than this, arguing not only that narrative is a “primary act of mind”,⁵ or “fundamental instrument of thought” indispensable to our cognitive engagement with the world,⁶ but that it is a mechanism essential to the forging of individual identity itself. Bruner’s belief that “it is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood”,⁷ so that “in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives”,⁸ is one which, though not entirely without its detractors,⁹ has been endorsed without significant qualification by numerous writers on the subject.

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¹Bruner, “Narrative Construction,” 4.

²Ibid., 5.

³Pearson, 17.

⁴Sarbin, 15.

⁵Hardy, *Tellers and Listeners*, 1; *Shakespeare’s Storytellers*, 24.

⁶Turner, 4.

⁷Bruner, *Making Stories*, 85.

⁸Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 694.

⁹E.g. Strawson.

Notwithstanding the air of fierce contemporaneity it sometimes assumes in theoretical writing, this perception of the fundamental role played by narrative in human thinking and experiencing is by no means an entirely recent phenomenon, and is indeed, as various critics have observed,¹⁰ already fully manifest in Shakespearean drama. Though perhaps less explicit in formulation, the conception of life as constituting a kind of story is as pervasive in Shakespeare as the more familiar notion of the world as a stage, and is premised on very much the same assumption that the various parts played by human beings in the course of their existences are in some respects analogous to the scripted roles of drama and other literary genres. This assimilation of life to a story can assume a variety of forms, each of them calling for a different kind of intellectual and imaginative response. While in its most elementary manifestation it is simply a trope, making no claim to any significance beyond the purely metaphorical, there are occasions as well in which the implication emerges that there is a very real sense in which human beings live their lives as stories, shaping not only the realities they inhabit, but also their identities as subjects, through what are essentially strategies of narrative elaboration.

But if Shakespeare's works evince a profound consciousness of the centrality of narrative to the process of forging individual identity, so also are they no less deeply concerned with the negative implications of this situation. The conception of life as a more or less deliberately fabricated story, and of identity as a narrative construction, is at least potentially deeply problematic. Anyone can tell a story, and not only the person who is the nominal protagonist of that story. The inevitable corollary of this is that the identity of the subject is not a purely private possession, nor a product of individual self-fashioning only, but vulnerable to manipulation on the part of anyone possessing narrative authority. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Leonato asks whether his daughter Hero "Could... here deny / The story that is printed in her blood?" (4.1.120–1),¹¹ but the audience of the play knows that the story he is referring to is a fraudulent one that has been imprinted *on* her blood through the devious machinations of Don John and not a veridical one of which that blood is the testimony. In view of what has been described as "the inevitable power of narrative to construct its own proofs",¹² the capacity of stories to generate the evidence used to confirm them, it is interesting that Hero's blushes, provoked by a story we know to be spurious, should ironically be adduced as a further demonstration of its truth. The story not only serves to interpret reality, in other words, but is actually instrumental in creating it. This is even more evidently the case in *Othello*, in which it is Iago who seizes narrative control and uses it to construct realities of his own invention.¹³ When Cassio's mistress Bianca denies having had any part in an attempt to murder her lover, Iago tells her that "you

¹⁰Among those critics whose contributions to our understanding of this aspect of Shakespeare are particularly valuable are Barbara Hardy, James L. Calderwood and R. Rawdon Wilson.

¹¹All references to Shakespeare's works are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*.

¹²Wilson, 144.

must tell's another tale" (5.1.125), and obliging other people to alter their stories is in fact the strategy he pursues throughout the play. As he inveigles the unsuspecting Cassio into "tell[ing] the tale anew" (4.1.85) of his dealings with Bianca he invites Othello to interpret the young man's words as referring to Desdemona, and Othello—himself a consummate story-teller prone to constructing his own identity exclusively through the medium of narrative—remarks that "Iago beckons me: now he begins the story" (4.1.131) without realizing the ironic reverberations of what he is saying.

Even more relentlessly exploratory of the potentially sinister aspect of narrative construction, in my view, is *Hamlet*, and it is in terms of such a perspective that I intend to discuss certain aspects of the play in the following pages. What I propose to do is attempt the experiment of reading Hamlet's behaviour in the light of the examples furnished by Don John, Iago, and all those other characters in Shakespeare who construct their own versions of the world by narrative means and prevail upon others to acquiesce in them. Hamlet's own explicit consciousness of the importance of story emerges in the final moments of his life, when it appears that the chief preoccupation besetting him is not so much the imminence of death as such as that Horatio, a trusted friend and one to whom he has confided his darkest speculations, should be willing to "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (5.2.346–7). When Horatio protests that he cannot undertake to perform such an office since he intends to join the prince in death, Hamlet becomes considerably more emphatic about the nature of the responsibility with which he is investing his friend:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
 To tell my story. (5.2.351–6)

The clear implication of Hamlet's speech is that what he calls *name* and *story* are each in some way a function of the other, or that the two are in some crucial respect interdependent. The only way that the dying prince can be certain that his "name"—by which is denoted his posthumous reputation, the public identity that will survive the subjective self now poised on the brink of its own annihilation—will be transmitted to posterity in acceptable form is by ensuring that the story in which it is inscribed is a worthy one. Lying on a palace floor strewn with dead bodies, knowing that the country to whose throne he was heir has been subjugated by a foreign invader while he himself has been wandering in the labyrinth of his private obsessions, Hamlet is only too vividly conscious that the story most likely to be

¹³For analyses of *Othello* from the point of view of its deep concern with narrative, see Greenblatt; Calderwood; Bates; Wilson; Tsomondo; Macaulay.

perpetuated is one in which his own role is that of a self-deluded bungler. His dying injunction to Horatio is an effort to forestall that destiny, to impose on events a logic of his own devising. Horatio's charge is not to recount what he dispassionately considers to be history but what, in a final spasm of revealing egocentricity, Hamlet refers to as "my" story.

No sooner is Hamlet dead, however, than he becomes subject to narrative exigencies wholly different from his own. Horatio himself, though professing to "speak...from his mouth whose voice will draw on more" (5.2.398–9), is by no means unambiguous about what he actually means to say. While Hamlet has enjoined him to tell a story that will confer a semblance of order upon the events that have transpired at Elsinore, what Horatio seems more inclined to embark on is a chronicle of random carnage destitute of any coherence whatsoever:

And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver. (5.2.386–93)

To judge by this summary, which as one critic has suggested is as descriptive of *Titus Andronicus* as it is of this play,¹⁴ the tale that Horatio intends to relate bears little resemblance to what the prince has had in mind. There is every reason to believe that Hamlet will figure not as the protagonist of a clearly delineated narrative plot with its own internal logic, but as an agent of destruction swept up in a whirlwind of fortuitous happenings of the kind that Horatio, whose "blood and judgment are so well commeddled/That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger" (3.2.70–1), will necessarily find repugnant. It may well be that from the point of view of this rational Horatio Hamlet is no more than an instigator of chaos, an exalted schemer who murders a harmless old man, drives an innocent young girl to distraction and suicide, sends his erstwhile boon companions to their deaths at the hands of the English king, extinguishes the dynasty of which he is the last scion, and installs the son of his father's enemy on the very throne that he was destined to occupy. If this is so, then it is only through the purging of such a radically unstable element that any prospect of restoring order to Denmark can be envisaged, even if the price to be paid is that of accepting the advent of the foreign prince Fortinbras. While Hamlet will doubtless have a significant role to play in whatever story Horatio feels called upon to recite, there is no certainty that it will have any relation to the one in which he has cast himself.

¹⁴Shapiro, 335.

Fortinbras too, who has been enacting a story of familial retribution of his own when he invades Denmark, no sooner arrives at Elsinore than he begins to convert Hamlet into something adapted to his own purposes, absorbing him within a narrative totally alien to the one he has been living by:

Let four captains
 Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
 For he was likely, had he been put on,
 To have prov'd most royal; and for his passage,
 The soldier's music and the rite of war
 Speak loudly for him. (5.2.402–7)

The phrase “like a soldier” might be construed ironically, for whatever Hamlet has been acting like it is not a soldier. Since he can no longer speak for himself, it is now the “rite of war” that will “Speak loudly for him”, and thus his identity will be articulated by voices other than his own. With his “dying voice” he has nominated his successor (5.2.363), but that voice has now been appropriated by others.¹⁵ Fortinbras’s main concern at this juncture, notwithstanding the former enmity between the two nations and their respective royal houses, is to create a lineage of ethos if not of blood, to represent the Danish prince as having been a worthy predecessor to himself by assimilating him to the chivalric code that lies at the foundation of his own system of values. Hamlet the brooding scholar is thus transformed into a fallen warrior, the irresolute prince into a designated monarch of great but blighted promise, and the obsequies of this most deeply introspective of Shakespeare’s characters into a Viking funeral attended by all the ostentatious panoply of war.

I have mentioned that Hamlet makes his awareness of the interrelationship of narrative and identity explicit when, in order to obviate the possibility that it is a “wounded” name that will be transmitted to posterity, he tries to ensure that events will be related in the form he considers most creditable to himself, that Horatio will “tell my story” since he will not be in a position to tell it himself. The suggestion I now wish to make is that this might be an imperative operating in the prince from the very beginning, that from the outset of the play he is in possession of—or possessed *by*—a story that he is determined to read into events at all costs. This is a story that affords him a stable identity, furnishing him with a determinate role to play that in a certain sense underwrites and lends continuity to the various more or less counterfeit roles he deliberately assumes in the course of the tragedy. By its very nature as an existential program—a means of establishing a personal ontology—this story cannot be other than a totalizing one. Any story that in any way conflicts with Hamlet’s own has to be suppressed or simply ignored, and other people induced to assent to the shape that the prince projects into events just as Polonius is at one point

¹⁵See Kinney, 94.

browbeaten into acquiescing in the successive shapes he arbitrarily imposes on a cloud:

Ham. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Pol. By th' mass and 'tis—like a camel indeed.

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Pol. It is backed like a weasel.

Ham. Or like a whale.

Pol. Very like a whale. (3.2.378–84)

This episode, curiously reminiscent of that in *The Taming of the Shrew* in which Petruchio bullies Katherina into deferring to his renaming of the sun and moon—“What you will have it nam'd, even that it is” (4.5.21)—is in some respects emblematic of Hamlet's mode of proceeding throughout the play. The degree to which he is successful in silencing those stories that might clash with his own is indirectly attested in the number and variety of recent works of literature in which, with greater or lesser degrees of ironic intent, these latent narratives have been allowed to emerge. If the events of the tragedy have lent themselves to being retold from the points of view of characters as diverse as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Horatio, Ophelia, and even Claudius,¹⁶ it is to be supposed that these alternative stories are not inherently implausible or devoid of their own kind of credibility.

There are two sections of the play in particular which, for the purposes of this discussion, I wish to focus on here. The first consists in the sequence of events leading up to, and including, Hamlet's colloquy with the apparition. The Ghost is very clearly situated in, and in some measure defined by, a story-telling context, since it is through the medium of narrative that Barnardo and Marcellus apprise Horatio of the anomalous happenings that have been taking place on the castle ramparts during the night watch:

Sit down awhile,
And let us once again assail your ears,
That are so fortified against our story,
What we have two nights seen. (1.1.33–6)

This introduces an intricately wrought pattern of imagery based on the ear and its auditory function, and incorporating allusions to the voice as the vehicle of language in general and of narrative in particular. Stories are represented more than once as infiltrating the fortified ear just as, according to the account of his death that Hamlet

¹⁶The works I am alluding to are Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1967), Margaret Atwood's short story “Gertrude Talks Back” (1992), and the novels *Horatio's Version* by Alethea Hayter (1972), *A Trial of Faith—Horatio's Story* by Meg Harris Williams (1997), *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia's Story* by Lisa Fiedler (2002), and *Gertrude and Claudius* by John Updike (2001). Various critics have also adumbrated an alternative *Hamlet* in which it is Claudius rather than Hamlet who figures as the tragic hero (Knight, 33–8; Frye, 93), while Terence Hawkes suggests that Hamlet contains the embryo of a very different play that he archly entitles *Telmah*.

comes to espouse, his father has been murdered by means of poison instilled into his ear. Hamlet will later inform Horatio that “I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb” (4.6.23–4) only a short time before Fortinbras manages to penetrate the fortified walls of Elsinore. Horatio’s fortified ear is breached by the sentinels’ story as well, for it is while they are rehearsing the events of the preceding nights that the Ghost materializes, at precisely that point in the narrative in which his appearance on the previous night is about to be recounted, and as if in fulfilment of the demands made on reality by the story itself. In the report of this episode that Horatio later supplies for Hamlet’s benefit, the boundary between words and the world seems to dissolve altogether as the story itself assumes corporeal form:

... as they had deliver’d, both in time,
 Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
 The apparition comes (1.2.209–11)

Whatever prodigies have actually occurred on the castle ramparts before the opening of the play, as far as Shakespeare’s audience is concerned it is the story itself that is antecedent to what is being witnessed on the stage, and words that have primacy over the events in which they are “made true”. The relation between story and life is thus rendered problematical from the beginning, because if narrative precedes that reality in which it is embodied the question inevitably arises of the degree to which it might contribute to constituting that reality.

When the sentinels recount the circumstances of the Ghost’s appearance it is without hazarding any guesses whatsoever as to the significance of what they have seen. Horatio’s first impulse once he is persuaded of the veracity of their story, however, is to seek an explanation for what is happening, and he does so by surmising that the uncanny event they have witnessed must portend “some strange eruption to our state” (1.1.72). Although this comment is somewhat vague as it stands, Marcellus immediately proceeds to read into it the kind of significance that most readily springs to the mind of a military man such as himself, soliciting information as to the reasons for the feverish preparations for war that are currently under way (1.1.73–82). Horatio obliges by furnishing a detailed account of Fortinbras’s ambitions with respect to Danish territory, adding that it is this emergency that is responsible for the watch they are keeping. Taking his cue from this, Barnardo draws an explicit, though not entirely logical, connection between the appearance of the Ghost and the menace posed by Fortinbras, remarking

Well may it sort that this portentous figure
 Comes armed through our watch so like the King
 That was and is the question of these wars. (1.1.112–14)

At this point an explanation seems to have been arrived at that accounts not only for the presence of the Ghost but also for the manner of his attire, and what that explanation amounts to is a fully worked-out story with a conventional plotline and a familiar repertory of human motives. It is an epic of revenge, as it happens, though

one that the Danes are perceiving from the point of view of the potential victim rather than of the protagonist, and as such one that is the mirror image of the revenge drama that Hamlet will later construct for himself.

Horatio himself, it is to be noted, gives no overt sign either of endorsing or of rejecting the construction placed by the sentinels on the Ghost's presence. What he does instead is invoke what he claims to be a historical precedent, evidently attempting to buttress up his original theory that the apparition must presage "some strange eruption to our state" by alluding to the portents preceding Caesar's assassination in the "most high and palmy state of Rome" (1.1.116). One of the eerie phenomena he mentions as having taken place on that occasion is that of the "sheeted dead" that "Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets" (1.1.118–19), a detail recalling—in what would seem to be a deliberately pointed reference to another play that had been staged at the Globe only a short time before *Hamlet* was first performed—the report that "ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets" in *Julius Caesar* (2.2.24). Horatio's phrase "strange eruption", interestingly enough, also reiterates one used in the earlier play (1.3.78), once again in connection with the "gliding ghosts" and various other prodigies witnessed on the eve of Caesar's assassination (1.3.63), and that this is no mere matter of coincidence might be inferred from the fact that the phrase occurs in only one other place in Shakespeare (*1H4* 3.1.25).

The reference to *Julius Caesar* would seem to be a deliberately contrived one, calculated to capture the attention of the audience and invite intertextual comparisons. The speech of which it is part is not present in the Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, which suggests that it may have had some sort of contemporary relevance which was lost with the passage of years. One possible explanation is that these lines "serve as an advertisement for *Julius Caesar*" at a time that the latter was still in the repertory,¹⁷ but it seems probable that there is something more to the matter than this. In its immediate context, of course, the reference to the preternatural happenings of the earlier play lends a certain amount of dramatic credibility to Horatio's theory by placing it within a recognized convention that Shakespeare himself had exploited only a year or two previously, according to which one of the things that the appearance of ghosts can signify is a perturbation in the political and social order. But the deliberate recollection of the omens preceding Caesar's death may have another function to perform as well, because what it does is insinuate the suspicion that Horatio's interpretation of the significance of the apparition might have been determined by his reading in the field of Roman history or—as seems even more likely—by the example of a historical play such as Shakespeare's own. It may in other words be a *pre-existent text* that supplies the story that Horatio is attempting to project onto events in order to make sense of them, the cognitive process involved being essentially that described by Mark Turner as *parable*.¹⁸ The possibility that it is Shakespeare's own *Julius Caesar* that, through a

¹⁷Hibbard, ed., 355.

bizarre warp in the space-time continuum of the literary imagination, has anachronistically influenced Horatio's reading of events is supported by Polonius's later account of how he enacted the role of Julius Caesar in a university play (3.2.104–5).¹⁹ And that Horatio never desists from thinking in terms of this “Roman play from which *Hamlet* sprang”, as it has been described in a recent critical work,²⁰ is suggested by the fact that he describes himself as being “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.348) at the conclusion of the tragedy, and prepares to end his own life in the manner of Brutus and Cassius.

By the time that Hamlet is informed of the Ghost's nocturnal visitations, then, there already exists more than one story that might account for them, the most complete of these being that pieced together by the sentinels. Horatio seems to regard his own story as being no more than one among many, and when he addresses the Ghost for the second time goes so far as to propose a number of alternative plot scenarios as well:

If there be any good thing to be done
That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,
Speak to me;
If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
O speak;
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
For which they say your spirits oft walk in death,
Speak of it, stay and speak. (1.1.133–42)

None of these potential stories contains the suggestion that the Ghost's purpose might be to incite anyone to acts of revenge, or indeed that there has been anything in the least suspect in the circumstances of King Hamlet's death. When Hamlet learns of the appearance of a mysterious entity roaming about the ramparts, however, he instantly assimilates it to a narrative pivoting on precisely such assumptions. Whereas the sentinels have attributed the appearance of the Ghost to the military crisis, and Horatio to the imminence of a “strange eruption” to the state, Hamlet produces a hypothesis of another kind altogether:

My father's spirit—in arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come.
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. (1.2.255–8)

¹⁸Turner, 5.

¹⁹This is generally supposed to be an allusion to the fact that the same actor played both Caesar and Polonius on the Globe stage. Among those critics who have discussed Polonius's reminiscence in these terms, see Bates, 6; Honan, 282; Shapiro, 367.

²⁰Nuttall, 204.

Hamlet thus appropriates the Ghost for his own imaginative purposes, construing his significance in the light of personal obsessions that have already become clearly manifest earlier in the same scene. What is to be noted in this connection is that Hamlet suspects “foul play” even before interviewing the Ghost, and that he is already prepared to invoke a narrative scenario according to which the apparition is the agency through which “foul deeds” will make themselves known. Even prior to actually encountering the Ghost, in other words, Hamlet attaches a significance to him that reflects his own private preoccupations, and that would justify those preoccupations were it to be borne out by circumstances. He has the ingredients of a story already prepared, and only requires confirmation of that story in order to chart his course of conduct in accordance with that preordained script, essentially literary in origin, which has been described by one critic as “the familiar tunnel-vision pursuit of revenge drama”.²¹

The story-telling motif already introduced in the first scene of the play is pursued in the private conversation that eventually takes place between Hamlet and the apparition. When the Ghost declares that an account of the ordeals he suffers in his “prison-house” would be “a tale . . . whose lightest word/Would harrow up thy soul” (1.5.14–16), what he is affirming is that the story would exert an effect on the listener hardly less terrible than the torments to which the teller himself is subject, that in this respect as well narrative has the power to shape reality in its own image. Instead of reciting this particular tale, however, the Ghost embarks on another that in its own way is even more potent in its effects. He reveals that the story that he was stung by a serpent is fraudulent,

so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd' (1.5.36–8),

a metaphor that assumes its place in the pattern of imagery developed around ears and hearing I mentioned earlier. Hamlet’s response to the intelligence that the “serpent” that killed his father is none other than Claudius is to exclaim “O my prophetic soul! My uncle!” (1.5.41), and whatever else might be inferred from his curious choice of epithets what is certain is that anything that the Ghost has to say will only come as corroboration of a story that Hamlet has *already* embraced as his own. It happens to be the case of course that this story is right, in the sense that Claudius really has murdered his brother, but that fact does not in itself make the story any less a story. Even had King Hamlet been murdered by someone other than his brother, or in fact been poisoned by a serpent as popular report has it, Hamlet would still have blamed Claudius for the death. Nor does the fact that his story is right mean that it is necessarily superior to that of Horatio, because Horatio’s story is also right in its own way, and will as it happens be fully vindicated by events. Even

²¹Goldman, 452.

more importantly, perhaps, the fact that the story is right does not mean that the method by which Hamlet sets out to substantiate it is right.

This latter consideration leads us to the second episode I wish to examine from the point of view of the narratological concerns I am discussing here. The means that Hamlet devises to demonstrate Claudius's guilt publicly is to stage a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play which mirrors to perfection the circumstances of the murder of King Hamlet as the prince supposes it to have been committed. The theory inspiring the prince's stratagem is that guilty individuals can be galvanized into proclaiming their crimes when they witness a theatrical representation of their misdeeds, and the play he has selected—"the image of a murder done in Vienna" (3.2.240)—would seem ideally suited to the purpose. Both the play itself and the dumb-show preceding it depict the murder of a king by a kinsman, who treacherously pours poison into his ear while he is sleeping in his garden, and subsequently possesses himself of his victim's crown and widow. This is of course precisely the fate that the Ghost has reported to have befallen the late king of Denmark, and that Hamlet has "prophetically" guessed at even before conversing with the apparition. At this point the question irresistibly presents itself of how it is that there happens to exist a play that so providentially reflects the exact circumstances surrounding the death of King Hamlet as the prince imagines them to have occurred. While it is true that Hamlet interpolates a "speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" of his own into the play (2.2.541), there is no intimation that he makes any adjustments to the actual plot. We learn from Hamlet's own comments not only that *The Murder of Gonzago* is a well-known drama, but that "The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian" (3.2.264–5). What is to be wondered at, then, in view of such clearly pointed indications as these, is whether it might not be the play itself, or the story from which it is derived, that has influenced Hamlet's interpretation of recent events at Elsinore. If such were in fact the case, then a close analogy might be discerned between the mechanisms through which the prince construes events and those I have suggested may be operating in Horatio's efforts to interpret the significance of the Ghost. Perhaps it is not simply narrative, but more specifically literary narrative and indeed drama itself, that is shaping the reality inhabited by this intensely bookish student from Wittenberg, just as it is literary precedents of a not wholly dissimilar order that have inspired his fellow student's interpretative endeavours as well.

If an implication of such a kind is indeed latent in the text, then it would be no exaggeration to suggest that what we are dealing with in *Hamlet* is a remarkably sustained exploration of precisely that process referred to by Bruner as the "narrative construction of reality". The fact that this particular product of narrative construction happens to correspond, in certain particulars at least, with what we learn actually to have taken place does not make it any less a product of narrative construction, just as a story is no less a story because it happens to be true. What begins as a fortuitous correspondence, however, assumes another character altogether when narrative actively impinges on the world and refashions it in its own likeness.

As occurs in the case of Hero and the “story that is printed in her blood” in *Much Ado About Nothing* (4.1.120–1), the picture of reality that narrative constructs can become paradoxically self-validating by reason of the fact that it can generate its own confirmatory evidence. When Hamlet stages a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* in order to provoke Claudius into a demonstration of guilt what he is effectively doing is using it to determine events in the present as he has already used it to construe events in the past. It would seem indeed to be less the contents of the play as such than Hamlet’s own summary of it that triggers the agitated reaction on Claudius’s part that the prince chooses to interpret as an unequivocal sign of guilt:

A poisons him i’th’ garden for his estate. His name’s Gonzago. The story is extant,
and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the
love of Gonzago’s wife. (3.2.263–6)

Although this commentary is ostensibly supplied for Ophelia’s benefit, the fact that Claudius overhears it is revealed by Hamlet himself when he later asks Horatio whether he remarked the King’s response to the “talk of the poisoning” (3.2.291). It is, in other words, a narrative that acts as the specific catalyst for Claudius’s reaction, and this reaction in its turn that precipitates subsequent events in the real world.

There are very strong indications embedded in the text, then, that it is in fact a story already “extant” before Shakespeare’s play gets under way that Hamlet is reading into events taking place at Elsinore, and that whether consciously or not he is actively manipulating circumstances and people in the real-life world so as to bring them into conformity with the demands of that story. If this is so, then it is perhaps metadramatically significant that when Guildenstern asks to exchange a “word” with him in the aftermath of the Mousetrap play, Hamlet should reply “Sir, a whole history” (3.2.299), for a whole history is in fact precisely what he is elaborating in this play. Just as the narrative of Hecuba’s anguish at her husband’s death has wrung tears from the actor reciting it, “his whole function suiting / With forms to his conceit” (2.2.556–7), so in the case of Hamlet’s story as well has narrative exercised a determining influence on reality. Read in such terms as these, *Hamlet* would seem to afford full confirmation of Bruner’s argument that “the mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair: that is to say, just as art imitates life . . . so . . . life imitates art”.²² The relation that narrative has with respect to reality is not so much that of “hold[ing] . . . the mirror up to nature”—as the prince himself argues it is the true function of the player’s art to do (3.2.23)—as that of holding one mirror up to another, art and life reflecting one another and reciprocally *altering* one another in such a way that the question of where one leaves off and the other begins becomes a virtually meaningless one.

It is not my intention to claim for the foregoing remarks any status other than that of an experiment in interpretation. Any stronger claim would indeed be ultimately self-defeating, for it has implicitly been my argument that one of the things that

²²Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 692.

Hamlet problematizes is the act of interpretation itself, the effort that is to impose a coherent narrative on experience in order to invest it with form and significance. What I do wish to suggest is that the play contains a discernible pattern of allusion to stories and story-telling that seems quite deliberately to hint at the possibility of such a reading as that I have sketched out here, and that insofar as it does so this pattern reflects not only upon the contents of the work itself, but upon our own activity in viewing or reading it. There is a sense in other words in which the reader too is implicated in the issue of story-telling that the tragedy itself dramatizes, and in which Hamlet's problem becomes our problem as well. This would account for the curious twist by which, in the final moments of the play, the text seems directly to interpellate the spectator and draw him into itself:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. (5.2.341–5)

Nor does the process of interpellation end here, for when Horatio gives instructions that the bodies of the dead “High on a stage be placed to the view” (5.2.385), what he is doing is creating a kind of *mise en abyme*, establishing a specular relation between the audience on the stage contemplating the body of Hamlet, and the audience before the stage contemplating the drama *Hamlet*. This tableau constitutes a visual emblem of what is occurring at the verbal level as well. Horatio is invited to tell Hamlet's story, but we do not know whether what he will finally produce will reflect the prince's version of events or his own. We as spectators or readers are also invited to tell Hamlet's story, in the sense that we are stimulated to seek a coherent pattern in the play of which he is the protagonist, but there appear to be as many potential narratives as there are witnesses to recount them. One of the things that the play seems to do, in other words, is deliberately elicit the very impulse it calls into question, reproducing its problematics in the external world and making itself the object of precisely the kind of interpretative activity it enacts. Hamlet's mystery defies reduction to any single set of terms, yet efforts to delineate his meaning have proliferated exponentially in the course of the last four hundred years, and what they testify to is the tendency almost irresistibly provoked in readers to project onto the prince those narratives that are most congenial to themselves, to tell their stories and not his own.

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