

Hamlet's Theater of Resentment

Richard van Oort

I

In a series of important and original commentaries on Shakespeare's "theater of envy," René Girard argues that Hamlet is caught in the tragic double bind of mimetic desire.¹ Hamlet defers his usurpation of the center in the face of the ghost's demand for revenge. Girard argues that this nonviolent deferral, in which Hamlet lurks on the periphery of a scene infected with the mimetic violence of both the old king Hamlet and the new king Claudius, is the true "hidden" meaning of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare was tired of the sacrificial assumptions of revenge tragedy and so composed a tragedy that held two messages, one for the groundlings who desired the blood and guts of the traditional revenge story, and one for an elite circle of intellectuals who would appreciate the double entendre of an anti-revenge theme within the revenge genre. When Hamlet ultimately consummates his revenge in the final bloodbath, this is a concession to the general audience and to the genre that fulfills the audience's bloodthirsty expectations. But we miss the deeper point Shakespeare wished to make, Girard insists, if we accept this as the main point of the text itself.

As Eric Gans points out, it is in fact possible to retain the essential insight of Girard's theory of mimetic desire without further burdening the argument with the assumption that tragedy either succeeds or fails depending on how forcefully it sides with the renunciation of violence.² For ultimately all tragedy fails when it comes to representing nonviolence, for the simple reason that a tragedy is not a doctrine but an aesthetic work. The biggest difficulty for Girard's theory is that it cannot explain the difference between aesthetic and ritual representations of what Girard, like Freud before him, takes to be a founding act of violence. For Girard, both religious and aesthetic works stand or fall depending on the clarity with which they reveal the scapegoat mechanism that Girard explicitly situates at the very origin of the human and cultural order.³

Girard's ambivalence concerning the discovery power of the artwork reflects a deeper ambivalence concerning the status of the aesthetic in his anthropology. Generative anthropology confronts this ambivalence head on; the aesthetic is a category of the originary hypothesis. What makes the artwork

anthropologically “revelatory” is its reproduction within the individual of the aesthetic effect, an effect that can be traced to the originary event. “Esthetic experience,” Gans writes in *Originary Thinking*, “is our only socially unmediated link with the originary event.”⁴ Whence the intuitive sureness of our experience that a particular art work possesses fundamental anthropological content.

Let us briefly recall Gans’s analysis of the aesthetic in the originary event. The originary sign defers the conflict of exacerbated mimetic attention. But this deferral does not enable humanity to transcend mimetic conflict once and for all, as must be assumed by Girard in his apocalyptic interpretation of the art work “against itself.” Generative anthropology’s more minimal notion of the “deferral of violence through representation” is an “etic” description of the aborted gesture of the originary scene. What makes the aborted gesture a specifically aesthetic sign is not the self-conscious desire to defer conflict, but the desire to imagine oneself the sole occupant of the center. But this desiring representation of the center can only be experienced by the individual if the original appetitive goal remains unfulfilled. The experience of this unfulfillment, or in other terms, of the self’s necessary exclusion from the center is the “second moment” of desire, powerfully described by Gans as the moment of “originary resentment.” Aesthetic experience is the individual’s attempt to cope with resentment. “The source of [aesthetic] pleasure in the sign,” Gans writes, “is the temporary relief (or deferral) it provides from originary resentment. Through the sign, we replace, or supplement, our originary alienation from the center” (*OT* 118).

This account of the aesthetic moment of the originary event has significant consequences for understanding the passage from ritual to market society. Only in the latter does literature become the central cultural institution, and only in the West has there developed an aesthetic “high culture” distinct from ritual. From the cave paintings of the late Paleolithic to the monumental sculpture of ancient Egypt, humans have decorated sacred sites with aesthetic images. But only in relatively recent human history, beginning with the artistic experiments of the ancient Greeks, has the aesthetic evolved to found institutions of its own. The history of the aesthetic is the history of art in the West since the Greeks.

Though Girard certainly grasps the radicality of the Western aesthetic experiment, he ultimately subordinates it to its moral counterpart in Judeo-Christianity. For Girard, literature must always ultimately fail because it depends for its full force upon a misrecognition of the victimage mechanism. Hence Girard’s insistence that his literary analyses are grounded in Judeo-Christian revelation and, in particular, in the text of the gospels. Only an anthropology informed by an awareness that scapegoats are innocent is able to demonstrate the historical truth of the victimage mechanism. More secular and more resolutely anthropological

than Girard, Gans argues that humans are aware of their own violence from the beginning. The originary desire to imagine oneself in the center is the first step in recognizing the dependence of the center on the desires of the periphery. For most of human history, aesthetic experience remains a necessary but subordinate element of ritual, which is by definition suspicious of individual desire. But beginning with the ancient Greeks, desire is released from its containment in ritual to become the explicit object of an independent cultural institution. The classical aesthetic does not restrict individual desire by sacralizing the center in order to guarantee its inviolability outside the collective context of ritual distribution. On the contrary, it encourages you to imagine yourself in the center by presenting fictional models of the center's usurpation by the periphery. In classical tragedy, this imaginary usurpation is "punished" when the protagonist's occupation of the center is demonstrated to be the result of a monstrous crime, as when Oedipus discovers that his heroic rise to the throne of Thebes is in reality the fulfillment of the prohibited narratives of parricide and incest. Having released desire from its stasis in collective ritual, the classical aesthetic opens the center to increasingly profound explorations of it.

Aesthetic history tells the story of this expansion from center to periphery. When drama reemerges as the central cultural institution in the Renaissance, Shakespeare thematizes the classical protagonist's relationship to the center by representing it as a contested space among equals rather than as inherent to the being of the protagonist. Whereas Oedipus unselfconsciously believes his existence to be synonymous with the center's immortality, Hamlet imagines the center as permanently divorced from him. Hamlet understands, where Oedipus does not, that the achievement of central being is a dream rather than a reality. Hence the preponderance of soliloquizing in the play, the most famous example of which is Hamlet's reflection on the gulf between peripheral selfhood and central immortality in the "To be or not to be" speech. The classical aesthetic is historicized and ultimately anthropologized. Aesthetic history becomes a history of increasingly developed thematizations of the center-periphery configuration of the originary event. The rise and fall of literature as the central cultural institution in the West reflects "the rise and fall of the aesthetic as an anthropological discovery procedure" (OT 25).

This is ultimately a less sensational account of modernity than Girard's. In his essay on *Hamlet*, Girard argues that we are poised precariously between absolute violence and absolute nonviolence. We continue to be fascinated by revenge, but we are also too self-conscious of its immorality to carry it out in good faith. "Like Hamlet," Girard says, "we are poised on the brink between total revenge and no revenge at all, unable to make up our mind, unable to take revenge and

yet unable to renounce it" ("HDR" 298). In an arch-romantic move, Girard suggests that Hamlet's predicament resembles that of modernity:

In *Hamlet*, the very absence of a case against revenge becomes a powerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieux as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even a play of reluctant revenge, could strike a really deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled and the strange void at the center of *Hamlet* becomes a symbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the problem, such as Dostoyevsky's underground revenge. Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnameable paralysis of will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit that affect[s] not only Hamlet, but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, the general disease of human relations make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no man's land between revenge and no revenge in which we are still living. ("HDR" 296)

Girard's sense of the devious voyeurism at the core of *Hamlet* accurately describes both the prince and the play. As the romantics were the first to realize, it is in fact impossible to separate the two. The dramatic action is an externalization of the prince's mind. The celebrated "play within a play" at the center of the work is a self-conscious staging of a violent scene that Hamlet first *imagines*.

II

Many spectators and readers still accept Hamlet's representation of the murder in the "Mousetrap" play as a straightforward reproduction of Claudius's crime. But the only evidence Hamlet has for the latter is the testimony provided by the ghost. And why should the ghost be trustworthy? In a subtle and closely argued reading published almost a century ago, W. W. Greg underscored this point when he remarked that Claudius's failure to respond to the dumb show that precedes the Mousetrap play — and which graphically depicts a usurper pouring poison into the king's ear and then making love to the queen after her husband's body has been dragged offstage — suggests that Claudius cannot have murdered his brother in the manner reported by the ghost.⁵ When Claudius does

eventually react and call for light, Greg concluded, it is not because his guilt has been discovered, but because he has been threatened by Hamlet, who has indicated during the ensuing performance that it is the king's *nephew* who murders his uncle.⁶ In a reading of the play that was published thirty-four years after Greg's, but which confirmed and developed many of Greg's original intuitions, Harold Goddard pointed out that Hamlet's aggression toward Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia reaches a truly menacing pitch during the play within a play.⁷ Far from holding the "mirror up to nature," he is literally throwing himself into the role of vengeful destroyer. It is worth recalling that the next time we find Polonius, Gertrude, and Hamlet in the same room, Hamlet kills Polonius (whom he mistakes for the king) and then has the gall to accuse Gertrude of her supposed "crime" of sexual infidelity! Clearly this is a man who has lost all sense of proportion. Greg's reading does not, of course, excuse Claudius of the original murder, but it certainly throws into question the objectivity of the ghost. Hence Greg's controversial conclusion that the ghost, who only ever talks to Hamlet and who is invisible to Gertrude, must be a "hallucination."

Greg's 1917 essay sparked considerable debate.⁸ I have no wish to revisit its various polemics except to observe that most of Greg's original critics believed the problem to be settled by pointing out that since Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo have also seen the ghost it therefore must be real and the ghost's testimony be granted a similar objective status. But this objection misses the point. The ghost is not an instrument of metaphysical objectivity, a camera on the wall passively recording whatever data passes before it. It exists as a representative of the sacrificial violence of the center.⁹ The images of disease, pollution, and death that run through the play emanate from this center. The hint that the ghost also seems to come from purgatory, a Catholic institution much ridiculed by Protestants, is no doubt suggestive for those interested in reconstructing the religious controversies of the period.¹⁰ But no amount of historical research will tell us why Hamlet is so attracted to this "questionable" shape's sacred ambivalence:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. (1.4.40-44)¹¹

The rapid oscillation between positive and negative images of the ghost mirrors the oscillation of the originary aesthetic sign. The sign points to the object we desire. But the sign without the object is insignificant, so we return to the

sign. In the first moment, the sign appears to be a blessing because it promises deliverance of the center. As in Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, the self dreams of the paradise of occupying the center, which appears as "a consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd" (3.1.63–64). This moment is reflected in Hamlet's positive designations of the ghost as "a spirit of health," "charitable," and bringing "airs from heaven." But since the center's significance cannot be delivered in reality but only imagined, the subject experiences the center as a locus of dis-possession. This is the second moment of desire — what Gans calls "originary resentment" — and it is reflected in Hamlet's negative designations of the ghost as a "goblin damn'd," "wicked," and bringing "blasts from hell."

Readers tend to forget that Hamlet's contact with the ghost follows rather than precedes his first stage appearance. We first find the prince dressed in black, sulking on the periphery of Claudius's court. In 1930 Wilson Knight remarked that Claudius's villainy pales in comparison to the violence of the center imagined by Hamlet.¹² Only Hamlet imagines a violence that knows no bounds. Calling Hamlet the "ambassador of death," Knight interpreted the tragedy as documenting the path from life to death, from peaceful periphery to violent center. Unable to defer his resentment any longer, Hamlet gives full vent to his imagination and drags his fellows into death. By the end of the play he is responsible for six of the play's eight deaths. The Danish royal family is annihilated and the Norwegian threat, so adroitly averted by Claudius in his first act of international diplomacy, reappears menacingly on the doorstep. The "leperous distilment" (1.5.64) that transforms the old king's "smooth body" into a "lazar-like," "vile and loathsome crust" (1.5.72–73) figures the absolute monstrosity of the center, which infects all those who dare to come into contact with it.

Like Knight, Goddard, and Greg before him, Girard emphasizes the disease of the center's violence. Hamlet's failure is a failure to extricate himself from the cycle of violence represented by the ghost. But Hamlet's failure, Girard says, is also our failure. As long as we ignore the message of the gospels, as long as we ignore the choice between revenge and no revenge, we will be caught in the same vicious cycle as Hamlet. Thus Girard advocates an apocalyptic transcendence of representation altogether, a veritable end of history: "Hamlet is no mere word game. We can make sense out of *Hamlet* just as we can make sense out of our world, by reading both against revenge. This is the way Shakespeare wanted *Hamlet* to be read and the way it should have been read long ago. If now, at such a time in our history, we still cannot read *Hamlet* against revenge, who ever will?" ("HDR" 302).

Girard's specific target here is poststructuralist nihilism ("Hamlet is no mere word game"). But one can preserve the essential insight of deconstruction

without also accepting its nihilism. In his more polemical moments, Girard would have us believe that language *is* a mere word game, that beneath the words there is a reality that transcends the human scene of representation. But this reality — if it really is an anthropological reality and not a biological mechanism — is as dependent upon the scene of representation as humanity itself.

Girard ultimately demands too much of the texts of the aesthetic tradition. On the one hand he requires them to demonstrate his theory. On the other he rejects them as a partial truth on the road to full mimetic disclosure. In Girard's analyses one sometimes gets the impression that his anthropology exists *despite* the misleading games played by poets.

Gans's originary hypothesis avoids — or more accurately, minimizes — this paradox of the “end of history” by returning it to its source in the originary scene. “The postmodern esthetic,” Gans writes, “is constituted by its exit from esthetic history, by its rejection of the idea that a vision exists that transcends all other visions, or at least all previous ones. But this refusal of art is an invitation to science. What cannot be figured as an object of experience must become the object of a hypothesis” (OT 219). The postmodern aesthetic is characterized by its radical skepticism concerning the status of the referent: “it rejects the very term ‘representation’ as implying a presence prior to the sign. Since there is no prerepresentational state, signs point back only to other signs, not to a preexistent referent” (OT 218). The postmodern “invitation to science” is thus not to be understood as an invitation to empirical science. On the contrary, it is an invitation to an anthropology that grasps the irreducibly hypothetical and symbolic status of its object. The originary hypothesis is a bootstrapping operation that seeks to conceptualize its own emergence in the minimal human scene of symbolic interaction. The existence of generative anthropology as a disciplinary “method” or “practice” — what Gans calls “originary analysis” — is interpreted in terms of the coming into existence of humans in general. A rule of thumb rather than a scientific or empirical “methodology,” its guiding assumption is that the most powerful anthropological explanation begins by situating itself within the context of the minimal condition of human existence. And the minimal condition of humanity is simply presence on the originary scene of representation. Humans are symbolic creatures, in the sense that their existence is defined not by their physical and biological make-up, but by their participation in and reflection on the “symbolology” of the originary scene.

The privileged position of the aesthetic in generative anthropology's conception of human history derives from the deferring function of the sign in the originary scene. The sign defers the conflict of exacerbated mimetic attention. In René Girard's original conception of the “mimetic crisis,” violence is not

deferred but rather unleashed by the victimage mechanism. Collective rivalry among undifferentiated “equals” is vented upon an “unequal” scapegoat. The latter’s marginality with respect to the group allows the majority to inflict violence without fear of mimetic reprisal. In this passage from violence to peace, universally replayed by different societies in their diverse myths and sacrificial practices, the scapegoat is transformed into a god, the bringer of peace and therefore of collective life. Hence the ambivalence of the victim, who is both scapegoat and god, both periphery and center.

Gans accepts the historical significance of Girard’s theory of sacrifice, but he disputes its originary or foundational status. For Gans, the ambivalence of the victim is not in the first place a founding misrecognition on the part of the community concerning the source of its own violence. Ambivalence or “mimetic paradox” describes rather the very condition in which humanity comes into being. Humans are aware of their own violence from the beginning. This does not mean that we must attribute to the first sign-users a hyper-rational “etic” awareness that they are inaugurating an anthropology in which human origin is explained as the “deferral of violence through representation.” Human history is not predetermined by the originary hypothesis. The openness of human history is the openness of symbolic representation, which is without precedent among animal communication systems. Whence the paradox of the “end of history.” If history really were at an end it would mean that the mimetic conflict of the originary hypothesis had finally been transcended. But then humans would no longer require representation to defer it. Historical consciousness of the originary would be forgotten, and any attempt to formulate either its beginning or end would be superfluous. The need to formulate the end of history assumes that we have yet to reach it.

Thus no theory of the aesthetic can begin by expelling the aesthetic. Hamlet indeed defers his relationship to the center, but this deferral is not an end in itself. The specifically aesthetic moment of originary signification is the oscillation between the sign and the central object. This oscillation, which implies minimally the cognitive construction of a purely symbolic image of the object, delays rather than triggers the kind of motor response characteristic of nonsymbolic “genetically assimilable” patterns of behavior, including so-called “Skinnerian” or behaviorist modes of perceptual conditioning.¹³ Hamlet does not merely seek models to imitate. He seeks to represent those models aesthetically in his “mind’s eye” (1.2.185), as he says to Horatio, echoing Horatio’s own characterization of the ghost as a “mote... to trouble the mind’s eye” (1.1.115). This internalization of the public space of collective ritual is the source of the historicity of the aesthetic, which influences individual behavior not by communal

coercion, but by eliciting an aesthetic response in the individual hearer/spectator/reader. In relying exclusively upon the dynamic of symbolic deferral for its aesthetic effect, the aesthetic work makes clear, in a way that its ritual precursors cannot, this dependence of the divine figures of the center on the representations constructed by the periphery. Hamlet's obsessive fascination with "this too too sullied flesh" (1.2.129) which nonetheless contains "that within which passes show" (1.2.85) — that is, a mind capable of counting itself "a king of infinite space" (2.2.255) — reflects an awareness that sacrality is an anthropological rather than transcendent or otherworldly phenomenon.

III

Hamlet's ambivalent relationship to the center is explicit from the beginning. But this ambivalence is not reserved for Claudius alone. It is directed at all who appear to accept the status quo of the center, which for Hamlet includes everyone in the Danish court. Even an outsider like Horatio is not free of suspicion. When the latter unexpectedly appears in Denmark, Hamlet's response is ambivalent. On the one hand he is genuinely pleased to receive into Elsinore an old school friend; on the other, suspicious that his friendship with Horatio has been compromised by the latter's proximity to the center. Why has Horatio come to court? For several anxious moments Hamlet fears that his closest friend has aligned himself with his imaginary persecutors. Might Horatio be a secret spy for Claudius? As in his subsequent treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet wants to know if this is a "free visitation." Hence the menacing edge to Hamlet's ostensibly joking remark, "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart" (1.2.175), which is not simply a comment on the drinking habits of Danes, but also a probe to uncover Horatio's underlying intentions. Is he just another party guest like Laertes come to enjoy Claudius's open-handed generosity in the celebration of the king's marriage and coronation? When Horatio's reply contradicts this suspicion — "My lord, I came to see your father's funeral" (1.2.176) — Hamlet's response contains the paradoxical emotion of the man who sees the object of his resentment suddenly disappear, so denying him the satisfaction of indulging his appetite for irony: "I prithee do not mock me, fellow-student. / I think it was to see my mother's wedding" (1.2.177–78). On the one hand Hamlet is relieved to hear Horatio is not a "spy"; on the other, disappointed that his paranoia has been so effortlessly brushed aside.

In a kind of perverse reverse snobbery, Hamlet tolerates only those who can demonstrate their credentials as fellow resenters of Claudius's court. Hence the disproportionate degree of vituperation he directs at Gertrude, which is

motivated simply by the fact that she is closest to Claudius.¹⁴ The same benchmark is used to measure the loyalty of his one-time circle of friends and intimates. Horatio passes. Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern fail (and they suffer rather massively for it). Through the course of their first exchange, Hamlet manages to ask Horatio three times why he has visited Elsinore, so he obviously is dissatisfied with Horatio's initial answers. It is only when Horatio reveals the secret of the ghost that Hamlet lets his guard down and desists from interrogating Horatio about his reasons for playing truant from his studies. What enables Horatio to enter so thoroughly into Hamlet's "heart of heart" (3.2.73) is that he has seen the ghost. The ghost is a mark of conspiratorial membership; it signifies the privileged status of this small "band of brothers," who stand alone in recognizing the injustice of the new king's reign.

The ghost is an index of the level of resentment in Denmark. Whoever is capable of seeing it is guaranteed a spot in Hamlet's "theater of resentment." As fellow witnesses of the ghost, we are automatically included among the conspirators. This group includes at most five members: Hamlet, Horatio, Barnardo, Marcellus, and the audience. But really there are only two significant parties: Hamlet and the spectator/reader.¹⁵ We alone are fully of Hamlet's party because we alone are willing to see him die for his cause. The contrary position that the ghost does not exist is represented by Gertrude. She cannot see the ghost because she has no reason to invent one. Like all the others in the opening court scene except Hamlet, she is happy with Claudius as her king.¹⁶

But the play very pointedly begins not with the court scene but on the cold, dark battlements of Elsinore castle. In this ghostly mist-bound scene, resentment appears to exist only on the furthest margins of the Danish court, among a few grumbling guards who cannot understand why they are patrolling the new king's borders. Horatio and the two guards are the only ones to see the ghost, and their creditability is subtly undercut by the presence of the third guard, Francisco, who has seen nothing, not even a mouse stirring. We never hear of Francisco again. His incapacity to see the ghost makes him a poor candidate for mediating our desire, and Shakespeare dispatches him from the scene altogether. The task of mediating our desire instead falls to Barnardo and Marcellus, the original witnesses of the ghost. Horatio functions as a proxy for the audience, when he sits down to listen to their story. Horatio is also the mediating figure between the original witnesses and Hamlet, to whom he decides to communicate their tale. Hamlet thus arrives "late" on the scene, but he turns out to be the ghost's strongest and most eloquent interpreter. Only Hamlet is sufficiently self-conscious of his difference from the center to be able

to interpret this center as a locus of usurpation. Hamlet's celebrated capacity for soliloquizing is directly linked to his ability to conjure the ghost, to make it speak where to all others it remains either invisible or mute.¹⁷

Hamlet's soliloquies have justly received a great deal of critical attention, most notably after the romantics first saw in them evidence for the entire play as a "tragedy of thought."¹⁸ But what is easily forgotten if too much emphasis is placed on the interior life of the prince is that this expression is not purely verbal. On the contrary, it first manifests itself theatrically in Hamlet's wordless overshadowing of Claudius's marriage and coronation. Dressed in black and pointedly turning his back on the festivity, our eyes cannot fail to be attracted by the stance of this singular individual. Not until we are well into the scene (after Claudius has thanked the court, dispatched Voltmand and Cornelius to Norway, and attended to Laertes's suit) does Hamlet deign to speak. And his words are intended not for those who share the stage with him, but for us. As curious spectators of this scene, we too eye it with ironic and critical detachment. Reacting to a scene he affects to dismiss but really requires for his own sense of being, Hamlet's first words depend for their force not on their literal meaning, but on their ironic undercutting of Claudius's:

King. But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son —
Ham. A little more than kin, and less than kind. (1.2.64–65)

If I am both your cousin and your son, Hamlet ironically implies, then this is a little more kinship and a little less kindness than I am prepared to accept. By expressing this sentiment in an aside to the audience, Hamlet implicitly identifies us as "equal" resenters of Claudius. Only we, fellow masters of aesthetic irony, are able to appreciate the ironist's superiority over the object he ridicules. When Hamlet finally does address Claudius directly, the tone has been set. The literal meaning is for Claudius (and the court), the ironic meaning for us:

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Ham. Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun. (1.2.66–67)

When Gertrude sides with her husband and admonishes Hamlet for taking excessively to heart the "common" fact of death, Hamlet reduces the strategy of the ironist to its bare minimum. Like a master deconstructor, all that is necessary is to notice the subtle addition of quotation marks around the word he effortlessly repeats: "Ay, madam, it is *common*" (1.2.74; my emphasis).

But if today's postmodern ironists have taken Hamlet's strategy to its minimal originary source in the play of the differing and deferring signifier, Hamlet himself is far less minimal in his conclusions about the ultimate source of his significance. What enables him to ironize Claudius repeatedly is quite simply his sense that he is more authentic than those he ironizes. It is no surprise that Hamlet's first sustained speech comes as a vehement defense of his authenticity when he detects (mistakenly, as it happens) a criticism of it by the queen. In response to her query, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75), Hamlet pounces on the word "seems" rather than the word Gertrude stresses, which is "particular." (Imagine if Gertrude had instead said, "Why *is* it so particular with thee?") Hamlet the pun-master needs no further encouragement:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'
 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play;
 But I have that within which passes show,
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.76–86)

We should not let our identification with the protagonist's resentment lead us to overlook the self-serving and moral self-righteousness implied by this bitter attack on the majority, who, as Claudius notes, have "freely gone / With this affair along" (1.2.15–16). Hamlet's frustrated outburst to Gertrude amounts to the now all-too-familiar claim of the victimary other: "How dare you presume to speak for me since you cannot possibly know what I'm feeling!" To which of course there is no possible argument except to be struck dumb.¹⁹

Hamlet's desire to plumb the depths of his inner soul in order to locate a personal scene more significant than the public one monopolized by his uncle is genuine enough, but it remains trapped within the only context Hamlet knows: the ritual context of sacrificial violence. In the letter he writes to Horatio after he returns from his abortive trip to England, Hamlet promises to strike Horatio dumb: "*I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb*" (4.6.22–23). This promise echoes his earlier reaction to the player's Pyrrhus speech (which echoes the ghost's account of a sacrificial tale so terrible it would make Hamlet's blood "freeze" [1.5.16] and his hair "stand an end" [1.5.19]):

What would he do
 Had he the motive and passion that I have?
 He would drown the stage with tears,
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
 The very faculties of eyes and ears. (2.2.554-60)

In seeking to strike his audience dumb, Hamlet hopes to reproduce the asymmetry of the reader's/spectator's aesthetic relation to the text, in which reciprocal dialogue between the text's authorial or narrative "voice" and its audience is impossible. In attending to the play, we have no choice but to be engaged, to be momentarily struck dumb by its spectacle. This is not to deny the possibility that an aesthetic work may fail to sustain our interest. Inattention occurs precisely when the work fails to live up to the asymmetry granted to it by the subordinate position required by the spectator or reader. In opening a novel that we have never read before, or sitting down to a movie we have never seen, we expect this self-enforced asymmetry with respect to the text to be rewarded by a satisfying aesthetic experience, where this experience is itself ultimately a descendent of the originary mimetic paradox upon which all representation depends. In the most revelatory cases, in which category we can certainly count *Hamlet*, this aesthetic experience becomes the object of reflection by the work itself.²⁰

If we are to understand the ultimate source of Hamlet's moral indignation, we must go beyond the sterile opposition of victim and victimizer that motivates the traditional interpretation of *Hamlet*. In his reading of "*Hamlet* against revenge," Girard goes a long way to unsettling this orthodoxy, and this places him in an important counter-tradition that includes earlier twentieth-century critics like W. W. Greg, Wilson Knight, and Harold Goddard. Greg's attempt to counter the traditional reading, however, was largely unsuccessful, partly because of limitations within his own theory, which tended to interpret the problem of the dumb show in terms of the question of the ghost's ontological objectivity, but also partly because of the weight of the tradition itself, which was unprepared for the heresy implied by a Hamlet more resentful (and thus also capable of more virulent forms of violence) than Claudius himself. The significance of Wilson Knight's and Harold Goddard's subsequent interpretations was to point out the degree to which this early modern tragedy is structured around a form of violence that begins not with Claudius, nor indeed with the heroic man-slayer King Hamlet, but with the displaced prince, whose festering resentment haunts

his mind for three acts before exploding in a series of murders that culminates in the final bloodbath.

As the romantics understood in their idolization of the Danish prince, Hamlet is the prototype of the modern individual, for whom personal value is the basis for all ethical action. But Hamlet's tragedy is that he has no real possibility for integrating his personally held difference from the center into a publicly marketable personal identity that can circulate freely (and bloodlessly) on the periphery. There are doubtless a few highpoints that indicate the promise of a fulfilling "career" functioning on the margins of the Danish court, for example, Hamlet's brief career as director of "The Mousetrap." Here the prince's function as an "author" offers a brief liberation from the ritual constraints of the Danish monarchy. But this freedom, exhilarating while it lasts, is also short-lived. The scene of Hamlet's triumph as a writer of fiction is immediately followed by a reminder of his inadequacies as a participant in the old ritual agon, when he passes up on the opportunity to kill Claudius. The latter's iconic position of penitence at the altar reminds Hamlet all too vividly of the sacrificial context he wishes to escape. Hamlet's private "theater of resentment" is destined to remain subordinate to the sacrificial context figured by the ghost and his command to revenge. Hamlet delays for as long as possible, but ultimately he cannot extricate himself from a scene that assumes the absolute sacred/profane hierarchy of the old ritual center. As Nietzsche understood, in the face of the cultural monopoly exerted by the ritual center, the peripheral protagonist's attempt to assert his independence becomes a tragic impossibility.²¹ But if this monopoly was already weakening in the Greek world so admired by Nietzsche, in the Christian world of Renaissance England it had experienced an irreversible revolution. By the time of the romantics, Hamlet had become an icon for the alienated self-consciousness of the peripheral subject, whose dependency on the old ritual center is now seen to be a mere contingency. What made Hamlet such an attractive figure to romantics like Goethe and the Schlegels in Germany and Coleridge in England was that they understood Hamlet's delay on the model of this alienated self-consciousness. But even before Goethe wrote *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (but not before *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*), Rousseau had already set the agenda for romantic Hamlets all over Europe in his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.²² With the romantics, Hamlet's posture of alienation from the center had become a form of praxis to be carried out in real life.

Notes

1. See René Girard, "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*, eds. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 280-302; hereafter cited in the text as "HDR." For the full argument as applied to Shakespeare's career as a writer for the stage, see Girard, *A Theater of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
2. See Eric Gans, "Form Against Content: René Girard's Theory of Tragedy," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 56 (2000): 53-65.
3. It is nonetheless worth reminding ourselves that were one to seek from the social sciences today a theory that was as attentive as either Freud's or Girard's to the heuristic power of literature, one would be sorely disappointed. This attentiveness to the specifically anthropological knowledge provided by literature is especially true of Girard, whose fundamental ideas concerning mimesis were drawn from a study not of ethnography but the modern novel. See René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). Generative anthropology's differences with Girard, and to a lesser extent Freud, are thus differences of emphasis rather than ontology. From the perspective of a fundamental historical anthropology, it is the empirical sciences, not psychoanalysis or mimetic theory — or indeed the ubiquitous contemporary discourse of "theory" — that presents the biggest stumbling block. Current scientific thinking cannot countenance the notion of a minimal originary hypothesis that works "backwards" (deductively) on the basis of existing cultural institutions rather than "forwards" (inductively) on the basis of more elementary categories that are held to be transparently empirical rather than mediated by cultural representation.
4. Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 123; hereafter cited in the text as *OT*.
5. See W. W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination," *Modern Language Review* 12 (1917): 393-421.
6. As Greg points out, Claudius rises only *after* Hamlet intervenes: "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 control. 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" (406).
7. See Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 331-86, esp. 362-68. Goddard identifies this scene as the critical turning point of the play as a whole: "There are many crises in *Hamlet*, but this is the crisis of crises — this, and not the sparing of the praying King or the killing

of Polonius, which are the inevitable outcome of what happens here. Now, for the last time, Hamlet is free. A second more and he will be bound by the fatality of his act.... The second passes, and Hamlet's blood finally overwhelms his judgment. Seeing Lucianus pour poison, he must pour poison too — all that is left in the vial" (367). Though Goddard explicitly acknowledges Greg's precedent, he insists that his reading evolved independently. From my point of view, it hardly matters who was the first to discern the radical ambiguity of a scene in which both Claudius and Hamlet merge into the single murderous figure of Lucianus. The point is that this dedifferentiation between villain and hero, persecutor and persecuted, exists at the core of the play, in a scene that is explicitly presented as an aesthetic doubling of the revenge genre. Hamlet's mimetic attraction to the spectacle of revenge mirrors our own attraction to it, with the notable difference that our release from it comes not with death but, rather less violently, with the last lines of the play.

8. For an overview of the debate, see Harold Jenkins's long note in his Arden edition of *Hamlet* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 501-505. In 1935 J. Dover Wilson published *What Happens in "Hamlet"* and dedicated it to Greg, with whom he vehemently disagreed. Not many people read Greg's essay anymore, but Dover Wilson's book has become a classic and is still in print today. As I hope to show in this analysis, I think we can still learn something from Greg's unorthodox and controversial interpretation.

9. Compare Girard on Shakespeare's use of the supernatural: "Supernatural apparitions in the tragedies are assimilated to monsters; it can easily be shown that, more or less discreetly, they are all rooted in the context of the mimetic crisis and the hallucinations that go with it. This is true of Caesar's phantom in *Julius Caesar*, of old Hamlet's phantom in *Hamlet*, as well as of the Weird Sisters and the other apparitions in *Macbeth*" (*A Theater of Envy* 70).

10. See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). In an earlier attempt to address the same problem, J. Dover Wilson, in *What Happens in "Hamlet"*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), counters W. W. Greg by suggesting that a historical reading of Elizabethan "demonology" will settle the debate concerning Shakespeare's ghost.

11. William Shakespeare, *The Arden Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen, 1982). All *Hamlet* quotations are from this edition.

12. Knight's essay "The Embassy of Death" was first published in 1930 in the first edition of *The Wheel of Fire*. In the fourth edition, published in 1949, Knight included a second essay on *Hamlet*, "Hamlet Reconsidered." See G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy with Three New Essays*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949), 17-46, 298-343.

13. For the impossibility of genetically assimilating the symbolic function, see Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), esp. 331-32. The aesthetic oscillation between sign and object is the anthropological correlate of the kind of interactional paradoxes that Gregory Bateson proposed as the source for schizophrenia and which Anna K.

Nardo, in "Hamlet, 'A Man to Double Business Bound,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34 (1983): 181-99, finds depicted in Hamlet's relationship to his uncle-father and aunt-mother. See also Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967). I have discussed the similarity between generative anthropology and Deacon's evolutionary notion of "symbolic reference" in "Cognitive Science and the Problem of Representation," *Poetics Today* 24 (2003): 237-95.

14. In 1919, T. S. Eliot suggested, in a now notorious essay, that *Hamlet* was a "failure" because it lacked an "objective correlative" for Hamlet's resentment, which consequently appears excessive and irrational. For Eliot, the ostensible object of Hamlet's resentment was Gertrude, but Gertrude's sins hardly justified the enormity of Hamlet's disgust: "Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is this feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action" (125). Eliot put his finger, as Shakespeare did before him, on the fundamental problem of resentment, but he gets it backward. Resentment does not merely react to its object, it defines it. Eliot is right that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear" (125). But this expression is "in excess of the facts" because representation is from the beginning in excess of the empirical reality of the appetitive object. Desire is not the same as appetite. And the denial of desire leads to a resentment that is by definition in excess of objective reality. See T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and his Problems," *T. S. Eliot: Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1932), 121-26.

15. A case could be made to add Horatio to this elite company. (Compare Henry V's unforgettable lines of victimary resentment in *Henry V*, which Shakespeare wrote just before he began work on *Hamlet*: "But we shall ... be remembered, / We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.") An interesting question to ask is, Why is the foreigner Horatio so well informed of recent Danish and Norwegian history? Horatio's characterization of Fortinbras's army as a "list of lawless resolute" (1.1.101) bears a clear parallel to his own position vis-à-vis Hamlet. The big difference of course is that Horatio, like the audience, does not lift a finger for Hamlet (unlike, for example, the rabble that forms around both Fortinbras and Laertes). In this sense, Horatio functions as a model of our aesthetic relationship to Hamlet's "theater of resentment." Like Horatio, we participate in the protagonist's resentment, but we do not suffer the consequences of it. Our function, like Horatio's, is merely to "consume" Hamlet's theater with pleasure, and then to pass on our good report of it to others, as Hamlet begs Horatio to do at the play's end. Hamlet's death is not a model to be imitated, as Horatio attempts to do by drinking from the poisoned cup, but a spectacle to be observed with ironic — which is also to say, theatrical — detachment.

16. For a brilliant interpretation of the events leading up to the opening court scene, I recommend John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (New York: Ballantine Books,

2000).

17. The passage of desire from periphery to center is illustrated by the progression of the narrative as it passes from the guards, to Horatio, and thence to the prince. Shakespeare takes great care to underscore the point that the ghost appears only to those who are prepared to accept the asymmetry of the aesthetic sign. Though most readers regard Horatio as a philosophical “skeptic” whose conversion proves the reality of the ghost, it is in fact Francisco who most undermines the significance of the ghost; this workmanlike figure removes himself with minimal fuss and evident relief from the mystery of the scene that is about to unfold. Horatio, on the other hand, has not only agreed to accompany the original witnesses, but he responds favorably to Barnardo’s insistence that their “originary” narrative be related once more for his (and our) pleasure:

<i>Bar.</i>	Sit down awhile, And let us once again assail your ears, That are so fortified against our story, What we have two nights seen.
<i>Hor.</i>	Well, sit we down. And let us hear Barnardo speak of this. (1.1.33–37)

No sooner does Barnardo begin his narrative than the ghost, as if waiting for its cue, usurps the stage, its sudden appearance designed to “freeze” our blood, make our “eyes like stars start from their spheres,” and “each particular hair to stand an end / Like quills upon the fretful porpentine” (1.5.16–20). The story has begun.

18. August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1810, quoted in *Critical Responses to “Hamlet,” 1600–1900*, ed. David Farley-Hills, 4 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1996), 2:49.

19. For a recent reading of this scene quite different from mine, see Paul A. Cefalu, “‘Damnéd Custom . . . Habits Devil’: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Anti-Dualism, and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind,” *ELH* 67 (2000): 399–431, esp. 403–5. Cefalu’s main objective is to counter the “innatist” readings of *Hamlet* that, since the romantics, have dominated the critical tradition. I applaud this desire to return the self back to the public scene from which it emerges, but I think that there is a simpler explanation for Hamlet’s strategy of authentication than either the romantic or historicist readings of Hamlet’s psychology are capable of grasping. When Hamlet says he has “that within which passes show” he is indeed referring to his difference from the rest of the court, but this difference is not in the first place a difference between outward appearance and inner being. It is, more fundamentally, a difference between the multiple beings of the human periphery and the singular being of the sacred center. For Hamlet, what “passes show” — what is unrepresentable or, more precisely, sacred — is this originary difference between center and periphery. The ghost is Hamlet’s attempt to represent the unrepresentable, a task that is paradoxical but not historically or culturally impossible. On the contrary, it is mimetic paradox

that generates the ghost and Hamlet's theater of resentment.

20. For a provocative interpretation of literary history as founded on the paradoxical supplementarity of representation, see Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Felperin's deconstructive intuitions serve him well in his readings of Shakespeare and Homer, but without a hypothesis for the origin of what Felperin at least implicitly accepts as a necessary (aesthetic) category of language, he is forced to place this origin, rather implausibly, in the Homeric text rather than in the origin of language, where it belongs.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967).

22. Compare, for example, the opening lines of the *Rêveries*: "I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend, or society other than myself. The most sociable and the most loving of humans has been proscribed from society by a unanimous agreement" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth [Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000], 3). In *Originary Thinking* Gans argues that the resentment of the (modern) subject, thematized in such early modern tragedies as *Hamlet* in England and *Phédre* in France, is a response to the scandal posed by the old ritual center, the asymmetry of which toward the peripheral subject could not survive the challenge brought to it by universal Christian morality. In Rousseau, this asymmetry is understood to be a contingency with respect to what the romantics accepted as more foundational, namely, the private scene of representation within the originary self.