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Interpreting *Hamlet*, 1812–13

Coleridge's Romantic Hermeneutic Experiment

In 1819 Coleridge wrote: "*Hamlet* was the play, or rather Hamlet himself was the character in the intuition and exposition of which I first made my turn for philosophical criticism, and especially for insight into the genius of Shakespeare, *noticed*." The much-quoted passage reveals Coleridge's interpretation of *Hamlet* as divinatory in a double sense: firstly, because it foreshadowed his Shakespeare criticism and indeed his philosophical criticism as a whole and proved to be something like its germ, and secondly – in the sense defined by Schleiermacher – because it began with the reader's "intuition," an imaginative transformation which lead to immediate comprehension of Hamlet and insight into the author's genius. The two meanings encapsulate why it is important to study the *Hamlet* interpretation and what I want to say about it. However, a few words in explanation of these questions will not be out of place.

Even if we do not want to believe that a reading of *Hamlet* awakened the slumbering critical talent in Coleridge as he claims, it is still significant that he chooses this play for his story. By doing so he joins the tradition – represented most influentially by Goethe and Schlegel – according to which in *Hamlet* "the spirit of its Author is at its most visible."[1] His interpretation of the play is, accordingly, in many ways central to his Shakespeare criticism. He treats it as a point of reference to which other plays can be related, moreover, in his analyses

1 In Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, after Wilhelm's analysis of Hamlet, the company "applauded this method of penetrating into the spirit of the author." See Jonathan Bate, *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 305.

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of *Hamlet* he usually rephrases the general principles of his "philosophical criticism" – for (as we shall see) he regards *Hamlet* a drama that not only justifies but somehow evokes these principles of interpretation. Since he never committed to paper a coherent analysis of the play, I am going to study the 1812 and 1813 *Hamlet* lectures of which more or less detailed reports survived together with Coleridge's notes for the second lecture. I am aware that it is highly problematic to analyse texts (that of the two lectures) which hover unreachable between an outline written before and two accounts written after them. Still, I think that a careful reading of the existing sources is the only way – if there is any – to approximate the non-existent ones, even if that means that I have to construct an "ideal" *Hamlet* interpretation of 1812–13, blurring the differences between the two separate occasions as well as between the texts and hands recording them.

The two lectures were among the most successful in Coleridge's career: letters and diaries preserved enthusiastic responses and Coleridge himself was pleased.[2] Together with his marginalia to the play written around 1818, they have been recognised as cardinal interpretative events in the history of his Shakespeare criticism. The critical attention they received, however, was strangely determined by T. S. Eliot's charges expressed first in his 1919 article on *Hamlet* and later in his 1923 "The Function of Criticism." In the latter text he raises the rhetorical question: "for what is Coleridge's *Hamlet*: is it an honest inquiry as far as the data permit, or is it an attempt to present Coleridge in an attractive costume?"[3] His suggested answer is, of course, the second one – in his earlier study he already wrote of Goethe and Coleridge: "These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realisation."[4] Eliot seems to say that Coleridge's interpretation is a self-serving projection instead of being "honest": he is too "apt to take leave of the data of criticism," "his centre of interest changes, his feelings

2 Robinson called the 1812 *Hamlet* lecture "[p]erhaps his very best." (Cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor [London, New York: Everyman's Library, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960], Vol. II, p. 173; henceforward referred to as *SC*). Of the 1813 lecture Coleridge wrote to Mrs Morgan: "My Lecture of yester evening seemed to give more than ordinary satisfaction – I began at 7 o'clock, and ended at half past 9. – Mercy on the audience YOU will say; but the audience did not seem to be tired, and cheered me to the last" (*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs [Oxford and New York, 1956–71], Vol. III, p. 450).

3 Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 76.

4 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 45.

are impure."[5] What Eliot finds wanting in Coleridge's approach is the close correspondence between literary fact and interpretation – this is the other side of the „objectivity" for the lack of which he criticises romantic poetry. But interestingly enough he attributes the same fault to Shakespeare's main character and to the play as well: "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his creator is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem."[6] Eliot presents his theory of the "objective correlative" as opposed to the series of artistic and critical misconceptions represented by Hamlet, Shakespeare, and Coleridge ("No! I am not Prince Hamlet" in "Prufrock" gathers a different significance from this perspective). By doing so, however, he implies that there is a certain correspondence between the drama and its criticism: Coleridge in fact imitates the mistake of Hamlet and Shakespeare. This insight is a very valuable one in spite of its negativity. What Eliot does not take into consideration is that Coleridge's subjectivist „misreading" may arise not from his overflowing personality (as his earliest critics also thought) but from the romantic critical framework in which his interpretation is moving – and which is still very much present for Eliot, although in a negative way.

Several critics attempted to counter the effects of Eliot's verdict but they were only partly successful. This is because they consented to the rejection of romantic subjectivism as a critical mistake and tried to rescue Coleridge by pointing out that it is characteristic of only a part of his criticism. Barbara Hardy, for instance, observes: "In the 1811–12 lecture on *Hamlet*, psychological analysis of character is certainly prominent, but when we turn to the notes we find a much fuller formal analysis."[7] A very similar claim was made by David Ellis and Howard Mills in 1979, who find that the author of the notes for the 1813 lecture is critical of Hamlet's bias towards the imaginary whereas the report of the same lecture is characterised by "romantic self-indulgence" and, as a consequence,

5 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 56.

6 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 49.

7 Barbara Hardy, "'I Have a Smack of Hamlet': Coleridge and Shakespeare's Characters," *Essays in Criticism* VIII (1958), Vol. 3, 238–255, p. 245.

"Hamlet has been enrolled amongst the Lake Poets."[8] But the attempt to "defend" Coleridge by downplaying or even rejecting one part of his criticism for the sake of another must necessarily disregard the similarities of the notes and the lectures and blur the connections between the two „sides" of his criticism.

My assumption is that the critical framework in which the two approaches (a formalist and a subjectivist one) presuppose each other is to be looked for in romantic hermeneutics, a movement developing in Germany around the time of Coleridge's lectures. The theorist of "general hermeneutics" Schleiermacher thought that interpretation requires the simultaneous using of two radically different approaches: a grammatical and a psychological (technical) one. As he put it: "We must not only explain the words and the subject matter but the spirit of the author as well."[9] The latter task is the less self-evident one; it could be completed, according to Schleiermacher, by reading the contingent signs with imagination and thus by intuitively understanding the spiritual truth conveyed by them. As Tim Fulford detects, Coleridge's theory of symbolism expounded in his religious writings is a version of the same approach.[10] The Shakespeare lectures also seem to share the assumption that meaning should be detected in the subjectivity of the author, which can be reached through what Schleiermacher calls the "divinatory method": an imaginative transformation into the Other's subjectivity.[11]

By claiming that Coleridge was familiar with some of the problems of this new school of interpretation, I rely on the findings of E. S. Shaffer who already in 1975 traced Coleridge's connections with it.[12] Of course, he could have first-hand knowledge only of Biblical hermeneutics (in Göttingen he met its main

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8 David Ellis and Howard Mills, "Coleridge's Hamlet: The Notes versus the Lectures," *Essays in Criticism* 29 (1979) No. 3, 244–253, p. 250.

9 Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, transl. James Duke and John Forstman (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 212.

10 Tim Fulford, "Apocalyptic or Reactionary? Coleridge as Hermeneutist," *The Modern Language Review* 87 (1992) 26–28.

11 "[P]articularly in his Shakespeare criticism, Coleridge partakes of Schleiermacher's subjective orientation to interpretation – the 'Romantic' notion that one should 'reconstruct' the subjectivity of the author" (David P. Haney, *The Challenge of Coleridge: Ethics and Interpretation in Romanticism and Modern Philosophy* [University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2001], p. 87).

12 Elinor S. Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1800* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1975). See also Shaffer, "The Hermeneutic Community: Coleridge and Schleiermacher," *The Coleridge Connection*, ed. Richard Grevil and Molly Lefebure (Basingstoke, London: Macmillan, 1992).

proponent Eichhorn and later he read his works together with some of Schleiermacher's Biblical writings).[13] But this field of study quickly radiated towards literary criticism, also because it entailed – as in Coleridge's case – reading the Bible itself as literature. In *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* Coleridge clearly uses literary criteria in his interpretations of the Bible and sets up several parallels of biblical texts and Shakespeare (Sara Coleridge in her preface to the posthumously published *Confessions* still had to defend this unorthodox practice).[14] An altered reading of the Bible therefore must have had an effect on Coleridge's reading of Shakespeare as well. Tilottama Rajan analyses the conversational poems as "Coleridge's Conversation with Hermeneutics," implying that this system of thought had a thorough influence on his poetry.[15] In spite of this, there has been no detailed study of Coleridge's "practical criticism" with respect to romantic hermeneutics. I think that his *Hamlet* interpretation can be a good starting point – due to its self-claimed central position in his Shakespeare criticism but also due to the critical debate that issued forth from Eliot's radical questioning of Coleridge's critical trustworthiness.

The presence of romantic hermeneutic strategies in the *Hamlet* interpretation does not mean that it should be regarded a simple illustration of them. Coleridge's habit was to combine different systems of thought in order to construct his own ideal method. His individual readings are thus to be regarded as experiments with, not clear-cut manifestations of, certain critical principles. Thus his 1812–13 interpretations of *Hamlet* start out from a version of the principles of romantic hermeneutics, but the implications of these, as played out in the context of the play itself, seem to modify or even call into question the original assumptions. This can be regarded a case of what Tilottama Rajan – following Kierkegaard – calls "dialectical reduplication" of a theory: "a repetition that simultaneously enacts it and throws it into relief, translates the theoretical into the real and the proper into the figurative."[16] In other words, the *Hamlet* lectures "replay theory as fiction"; they present a framework of interpretation and make it relative at the same time, revealing its potential paradoxes.

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13 On Coleridge's Biblical hermeneutics see Fulford, p. 18–31.

14 Cf. E. S. Shaffer, "Ideologies in Readings of the Late Coleridge: *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*," *Romanticism on the Net* 17 (February 2000) [http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/17confessions.html] (ISSN 1467-1255).

15 Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theories and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

16 Rajan, p. 68.

CLEARING THE GROUND

The very first interpretative move of both the 1812 and the 1813 lectures was a gesture at the prevailing notions concerning *Hamlet*. Coleridge, as elsewhere, showed that he considered himself "not as a man who carries moveables into an empty house," but one who "entering a generally well-furnished dwelling exhibits a light which enables the owner to see what is still wanting" (*SC* II, 81). What he found wanting was, of course, an appropriate interpretative attitude, and what he found in the way was a heap of prejudices about Hamlet and Shakespeare. Collier reported on his 1812 lecture: "The Lecturer then passed to Hamlet, in order, as he said, to obviate some of the general prejudices against Shakespeare in reference to the character of the hero. Much had been objected to, which ought to have been praised, and many beauties [of the highest kind] had been neglected, because they were [somewhat] hidden" (*LL* I, 385–6).[17] The exact nature of the prejudices against Hamlet that Coleridge is referring to according to Collier is difficult to tell. Foakes in the footnote of the critical edition mentions that "there was much hostile comment on him in eighteenth-century criticism" and names Francis Gentleman, George Steevens, and Akenside as promoters of such views. He also says that Coleridge "may be thinking primarily of Dr Johnson" whose severe notes on Hamlet triggered some of his most passionate counter-arguments (*LL* I, 385).

It is true that in the lectures Coleridge answered most of Johnson's charges of Hamlet's immorality. However, it was probably not just such moral considerations that Coleridge referred to as "prejudices." He seems to have meant the general way of looking at *Hamlet* which characterised Johnson's reading and most eighteenth century interpretations. This becomes obvious if we consider the report of the opening sentences of his 1813 lecture, in which the need for a complete change of perspective is expressed. "The seeming inconsistencies in the conduct and character of Hamlet have long exercised the conjectural ingenuity of critics; and as we are always loth to suppose that the cause of defective apprehension is in ourselves, the mystery has been too commonly explained by the very easy process of supposing that it is, in fact, inexplicable; and by resolving

17 References are to this edition: S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819 on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

the difficulty into the capricious and irregular genius of Shakespeare" (*CCS* 75).[18] Coleridge here speaks about more than a single prejudice, rather a system of misconceptions that evolves from the wrong assumptions about Shakespeare. The eighteenth-century commonplace of Shakespeare's irregular and unconscious genius, the notion of the inexplicability of his writings, and the readers' inability of finding "method" in Hamlet's seemingly inconsistent behaviour (and therefore the claim that he is a great character but unexplainable, or that he is an ill-written character) all arise from an erroneous attitude towards Shakespeare.

As the passage makes clear, Coleridge's solution is "to suppose that the cause of defective apprehension is in ourselves." This means that we have, self-critically, to change our perspective in order to see the hidden coherence of the whole. The argumentation is recognisably apologetic: Coleridge seems to claim that if we cannot understand Shakespeare, the fault is in ourselves. Of course, to suppose that, he needs the complementary assumption that Shakespeare is infallible. In order to assume that an ideal whole can be reconstructed from the seemingly inconsistent parts of the play, he has to take for granted that it represents a perfect design in which every detail is equally justifiable. Therefore, "the smallest fragment of his mind not unfrequently gives a clue to a most perfect, regular and consistent whole" (*SC* II, 109). In other words, Coleridge rejects the myth of Shakespeare's incomprehensibility by proposing another "mystery," that of Shakespeare's perfect design. As Péter Dávidházi states: "To maintain that it is not hopeless for us to understand Shakespeare [...] Coleridge exhorts us to have confidence in the constancy of the superb order created by an intellect that knew even the 'most minute and intimate workings' of the human mind."[19]

As Dávidházi points it out, Coleridge's argumentation strangely resembles one of Christian apologetics – the "argument from design" – that Coleridge himself found dated.[20] However, the traditional argumentation is subtly reverted by him. The theologian William Paley "sought to prove the existence of a benevolent God by pointing to omnipresent 'evidences' of a transcendent design in nature," and therefore he was guilty of circular reasoning, as Coleridge himself

18 References are to R. A. Foakes, ed., *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989).

19 Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare: Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, London: Macmillan, 1998), 60.

20 "Coleridge (perhaps unwittingly) fuses the apologetic strategies we might call literary theodicy with the very technique of Christian apologetics he was otherwise more and more reluctant to accept: the argument from design" (Dávidházi, p. 61).

shrewdly noticed.[21] Logically, Coleridge must have assumed the divine power of Shakespeare's mind *before* setting out to prove the perfect design of the plays. The question is, of course, how could he ground such a presupposition, if not in evidence offered by the texts? Coleridge's implied answer seems to be that even if it cannot be grounded in logic, it can be *experienced* through the intuition of that transcendental Mind of which both Shakespeare's and the reader's mind partake. According to his famous definition, "Shakespeare shaped his characters out of the nature within; but we cannot safely say, out of *his own* nature, as an *individual* person. No! this latter is itself but a *natura naturata*, an effect, a product, not a *power* [...] Shakespeare in composing had no *I* but the *I* representative" (*TT*, 15th March 1834).

While rationalist critics employed their critical tools in order to judge the quality of a text, Coleridge, as we have seen, had to assumed its exquisiteness in advance, in order to be able to start his interpretation. Interpretation to him meant something quite different from what it meant to Johnson: not a fixing of meanings (finding long-forgotten usages, clearing corrupted forms, etc.) but an approximation of an infinite one. The paradox is, of course, that such a meaning can never be fully verified. Schleiermacher, whose hermeneutic theory included similar considerations about the transcendence of meaning, reflected on this problem when he asserted that "the art of interpretation is not equally interested in every act of speaking" – in other words, the critic has to decide on the significance of a text before in-depth interpretation can start. Using his terminology, Coleridge's *Hamlet* must be placed among texts of "absolute" significance "that achieve a maximum of both linguistic creativity and individuality: works of genius."[22]

PRINCIPLES IN A HERMENEUTIC READING OF HAMLET

Coleridge's critical method of defining his principles *a priori* (usually in the first few lectures of a course) and then finding them in individual texts or passages is modelled after Kant's critical method: it aims at the essential, the *sine qua non* of a subject and eliminates what is supposed to be accidental to it. As Coleridge explained in a letter in 1811, the distinguishing feature of Kantian philosophy is

21 Dávidházi, p. 61.

22 Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 77.

"to treat every subject in reference to the operation of the mental faculties to which it specially appertains, and to commence by the cautious discrimination of what is essential, i. e. explicable by mere consideration of the faculties in themselves, from what is empirical, i. e. the modifying or disturbing forces of time, place, and circumstances" (*SC* II, 184). Coleridge followed this method whenever he distinguished between what is essential to Shakespeare's genius and what is common to his age (one of his regular critical moves) and he followed it with surprising consistency in his interpretation of *Hamlet*. Each of his lectures, then, is meant as a laying bare of the essence of the play.

The central meaning in this case is undoubtedly subjective. Coleridge's notes for the 1813 lecture start with the question how Shakespeare "conceived" his main character. His exposition of *Hamlet* in the lectures themselves is closely related to this topic: in 1812, his first question was "What did Shakespeare mean when he drew the character of Hamlet?" (*LL* I, 386); in Collier's shorthand version "what meant Sh by the character of Hamlet."[23] In 1813, the first thing he showed the audience was that "the intricacies of Hamlet's character may be traced to Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy" (*LL* I, 538). All these openings, different as they are, revolve around the question of origin and origination, the scene of which is invariably the mind of Shakespeare. The seeking of a subjective *Anfangspunkt*, a point of origination that could explain the totality of the work is a classic move of romantic hermeneutics.[24] As we have seen, for Schleiermacher too, technical (psychological) interpretation involves a reconstruction of "the original psychic process of producing and combining images and ideas."[25] Coleridge indeed pursues a psychological method when he regards each individual play or poem a "fragment in the history of the mind of Shakespeare" (*SC* II, 64). In this framework it is quite natural that his interpretation of *Hamlet* should begin with a discussion of Shakespeare's mind and how it conceived the drama, instead of considering its historical background or literary context.

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23 Cf. R. A. Foakes, "What Did Coleridge Say?" *Reading Coleridge*, ed. Walter B. Crawford (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1979), p. 202.

24 According to Rajan, divinatory understanding is possible "by finding a point of inception (*Anfangspunkt*), which is also the work's center in that it unlocks its *archē* and *telos*, and thus allows the reader to grasp it as a totality" (Rajan, p. 91).

25 Quoted in Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992), p. 150.

However, the hermeneutic task of "reconstructing another life" was in this case even more difficult than otherwise. Following the opinion of Schiller expressed in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795), critics traditionally regarded Shakespeare a definitely 'objective' author, one whose subjectivity is totally absent from his works. Coleridge partly accepted this view and used a number of different strategies to counter its hermeneutic consequences. For one thing, he reconstructed the history of Shakespeare's mind starting from his poems in which a speaker (who is, however, in no obvious connection with the biographical author) is present. He, then, could regard the development of Shakespeare's genius as a gradual movement away from his own lyricism towards pure drama. But this did not solve the problem of the 'mature' plays like *Hamlet*. If Shakespeare is absent from them, how could his consciousness be reconstructed from the text? Coleridge's answer was paradoxical: Shakespeare was both present and absent at the same time. He repeated this in several versions; he claimed, for instance, that the plays are "a divine Dream / all Shakespeare, and nothing Shakespeare."[26] As Abrams observes, Schlegel also arrived at this conclusion, which is again a literary version of a theological concept: "It is possible, Schlegel thought, that the literary qualities of 'objectivity' and 'interestedness' are not incompatible, so that a modern writer may at the same time be in, and aloof from, his own dramas. This is a seeming contradiction, but one which had sanction in an ancient and persistent concept about the relation of God to the universe."[27]

If the transcendent author is immanent in his creations, then Shakespeare's spirit is present and can be felt intuitively in all his writings. Moreover, Coleridge thought that a kind of secondary source of subjectivity is represented by the fictional characters of the plays. In a *Table Talk* remark he distinguished between different kinds of subjectivity in literature: "There is no subjectivity whatsoever in the Homeric poetry. There is subjectivity of the poet, as of Milton, who is himself in everything he writes; and there is a subjectivity of the *persona* or dramatic character, as in all Shakespeare's great creations, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, etc." (*TT*, 93–4). A consequence of this distinction is that even if it would be difficult to use the psychological method with regard to Shakespeare himself, it could be still applied with regard to one of his characters. In the case of *Hamlet*, Coleridge

26 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols. (New York, 1957–73), II, p. 2086.

27 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953), p. 239.

turns quite naturally to the main character to investigate his psyche, moreover, he makes it clear that in this way he intends to gain insight into that of Shakespeare. The continuity between the two minds is the first thing he establishes in his notes for the 1813 *Hamlet* lecture: "Shakespeare's mode of conceiving characters out of his own intellectual and moral faculties, by conceiving any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then placing himself, thus mutilated and diseased, under given circumstances: of this we shall have repeated occasion to restate and enforce" (*LL* I, 539).

The "circumstances" that objectify the inner Shakespearean essence of Hamlet's character, as it can be inferred from Coleridge's interpretation, constitute the dramatic situation itself. Even though they determine the course of the tragedy, they are basically inessential to the deepest meaning of Hamlet. Coleridge, of course, knew that the story (that he usually did not distinguish from the plot) had an existence prior to the drama in mythology and literature, so it was only *received* by Shakespeare. For him, its most important characteristic was its very invisibility: the fact that people were familiar with it and so accepted it easily. As the 1812 report says, "Coleridge's belief was that the poet regarded his story, before he began to write, much in the same light that a painter looked at the canvas before he began to paint" (*LL* I, 386). This means that the story is used only as the medium through which meaning – the "portray" of Hamlet – can materialise.[28] However, Coleridge's stance towards the story is not as clear-cut as that. He asserted in the same lecture that "Shakespeare never followed a novel but where he saw the story contributed to tell or explain some great and general truth inherent in human nature" (*LL* I 390). This would suggest that Shakespeare in fact altered the canvas in order to make it fit the portrait. In other words, the story *does* contribute to the meaning of the whole after all. Coleridge's paradoxical treatment resembles romantic ideas about language: on the one hand, it is regarded as a received property determining what can be expressed, but on the other, it can be modified imaginatively in order to convey a subjective meaning.[29]

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28 Cf. also: "The plot interests us on account of the characters, not vice versa; it is the canvas only" (R. A. Foakes, ed., *Coleridge on Shakespeare: The Text of the Lectures of 1811–12* [Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1971], p. 115).

29 Cf. Schleiermacher on technical interpretation: "To recognize an author in this way is to recognize him as he has worked with language. To some extent he initiates something new in the language by combining subjects and predicates in new ways. Yet to some extent he merely repeats and transmits the language he has received. Likewise, when I know his language, I recognize how the

The tendency to rely self-consciously on linguistic models in criticism is even more recognisable in the way Coleridge approaches the main character. He treats Hamlet not only as a manifestation of Shakespeare's mind, but also one that is created for a purpose. He regards him the "character" or signifier by which Shakespeare communicates his subjectivity – as we have seen, his question is "What meant Sh *by* the character of Hamlet" (my emphasis). This reveals that he interprets the drama in the framework of intersubjective communication in which the task of the receiver (hearer) is to grasp the intention of the sender (speaker) through the interpretation of signs. In other words, he engages in a psychological interpretation which "attempts to identify what has moved the author to communicate."[30] For Coleridge, as for Schleiermacher, this is possible because signs and especially spoken words – even though they have an outward existence – can partake of the subjectivity of the sender. According to Schleiermacher, speaking is "only the outer side of thinking," this is why understanding a speech involves not only to "understand what is said in the context of language" but also "to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker."[31] Coleridge gave expression to this crucial presupposition several times.[32] Interestingly enough, he explained it in most detail in his 1813 notes on *Hamlet* where he writes about Hamlet's attraction towards words: "the half-embodyings of thought, that make them more than thought, give them and outness [i.e. a sense of being external to the mind], a reality *sui generis*, and yet retain their correspondence and shadowy approach to the images and movements within" (*CCS* 73–74).

Hamlet, the central signifier of the play, is similarly characterised by both an "outness" (in so far as he is "materialised" in the story) and a correspondence to the workings of the mind of Shakespeare. He can be called, in Coleridge's terminology, a version of those symbols that are the products of imagination and are, as expressed in *The Statesman's Manual*, "consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors."[33] Hamlet, like the symbol, is characterised by a synecdochic relationship: he is consubstantial with Shakespeare's mind, but can

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author is a product of the language and stands in its potency. These two views, then, are only two ways of looking at the same thing" (Mueller-Vollmer, p. 94).

30 Mueller-Vollmer, p. 94.

31 Mueller-Vollmer, p. 74.

32 In his fifth lecture on Shakespeare and Milton, for instance, he asserted that "words are the living products of the living mind and could not be an accurate medium between the thing and the mind unless they partook of both" (*SC* II, 74).

33 S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), p. 30.

represent only a fragment of it. Moreover, his essence – like that of the symbol – can be grasped imaginatively by the receiver. This is because both the symbol and the "character" are supposed to correspond to the deepest structure of the mind common to all humanity – and thus to convey truth. As H. C. Robinson's diary proves, Coleridge established this claim about Hamlet already in his 1808 lecture: "The essence of poetry *universality*. The character of Hamlet, &c., affects all men" (*SC* II, 8). In his 1813 lecture, he made a similar claim: "That this character must have some common connection with the laws of our nature was assumed by the lecturer from the fact that Hamlet was the darling of every country where literature was fostered" (*CCS* 75). Since Hamlet reveals something universally true about human nature, everyone can recognise himself in his ideal figure. This accords very well with what Coleridge thought of Shakespearean characters in general: "In the plays of Shakespeare every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so: as in some of the phenomena of nature, in the mist of the mountain, the traveller beholds his own figure, but the glory round the head distinguishes it from a mere vulgar copy" (*SC* II, 125). In his interpretation of *Hamlet* Coleridge makes us aware of that mainly unconscious phenomenon: he proposes that the adequate perspective of understanding the main character is that of introspection. As the 1813 report says, "He thought it essential to the understanding of Hamlet's character that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds" (*CCS* 75).

With the proposition that in order to understand *Hamlet* we have to look into ourselves, the circle of Coleridge's hermeneutic principles is completed. It started out from the assumption that understanding *Hamlet* involves understanding the mind that produced it, which is now revealed as self-understanding. Vital to this critical system is the establishment of a correspondence between the mind of the 'speaker' (Shakespeare), the symbol through which it communicates truth (Hamlet), and the mind of the receiver (Coleridge as reader). It is also vital that something transcendental (truth) is conveyed through this process, and not the individual meanings of the author – otherwise it could not be something common and communicable to all readers. Coleridge's 1812–13 lectures on *Hamlet* can be regarded as the scene of reading where the consequences of these presupposition are played out; the main character of this drama being undoubtedly the Coleridgean Hamlet.

THE MEANING OF HAMLET 1: THE SUPERIOR MIND

The critical principles of Coleridge's lectures offer a kind of preliminary interpretation of the play: the meaning of the whole is determined by the central signifier, Hamlet, the vehicle by which Shakespeare's *meaning* can find its way to the reader. Coleridge therefore starts his actual interpretation with a general characterisation of Hamlet, quite in accordance with Schleiermacher's view that interpretation must start with a general overview of the whole and then move to a detailed reading.[34] However, the overall meaning of the central signifier proves to be utterly problematic, which undermines the logic and symmetry of the original hermeneutic propositions. Schlegel in an enigmatic statement claimed that *Hamlet* as a whole "resembles those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains, that will in no way admit of solution."[35] Coleridge's lectures would be a perfect example to clarify what Schlegel could have meant. In his reading the indeterminable figure, the mysterious X is Hamlet himself, whose contradictions make the two halves of the equation always contradict each other.

For Coleridge the identity of Hamlet is determined by the way he came into being. As we have seen, he believed that Shakespeare conceived him "out of his own intellectual and moral faculties" – in other words, through meditation on his own mind. This is in sharp contradiction with the eighteenth century image of Shakespeare as the greatest observer of human nature. For Coleridge's Shakespeare, the outside world with all its people and phenomena is in itself unimportant: "Meditation looks at every character with interest, only as it contains something generally true, and such as might be expressed in a philosophical problem" (*SC* II, 85). Since one of the greatest philosophical problems (especially after Kant) concerns the thinking faculty itself, it is no wonder that Shakespeare's meditative mind has, according to Coleridge, a tendency to create images of itself. The deepest of these self-representations is thought to be Hamlet himself, but (since Shakespeare's oeuvre developed organically) he is prefigured by other characters like Jacques, Richard II and Mercutio. In his analysis of the latter figure, Coleridge recapitulates his claim that mere observation of externals is "entirely different from the observation of a mind, which, having formed a theory and a system upon its own nature, remarks all things that are examples of its truth, confirming it in that truth, and above all,

34 Mueller-Vollmer, p. 86.
35 Bate, p. 307.

enabling it to convey the truths of philosophy" (*SC* II, 98). He regards Mercutio not only the product of "observation, the child of meditation" but one characterised by the same intellectual faculty that Shakespeare used when he drew him: "Hence it is that Shakespeare's favourite characters are full of such lively intellect. Mercutio is a man possessing all the elements of a poet: the whole world was, as it were, subject to his law of association. Whenever he wishes to impress anything, all things become his servants for the purpose: all things tell the same tale, and sound in unison" (*SC* II, 98).

The Coleridgean Hamlet, like his Mercutio, is a mirror-image of Shakespeare's self-reflexive intellect. His stance to the external world is identical with that of his creator: the attitude of meditation. The 1812 report says, "He [Shakespeare] meant to portray a person in whose view the external world and all its incidents and objects were comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind" (*LL* I, 386). This Hamlet is very similar to that Shakespearean mind which forms "a theory and a system upon its own nature" and "looks at every character with interest, only as it contains something generally true, and such as might be expressed in a philosophical problem." Hamlet disregards everything that does not fit his "abstractions" and, like the Kantian philosopher, aims to grasp only the essential. As Coleridge says, his mind "keeps itself in a state of abstraction, and beholds external objects as hieroglyphics" (*CCS* 76). This implies that Hamlet's mind is continuously interpreting the outside world (most probably other people as well) in order to discover in them a system of signification. In this respect he is the image not only of the author but also of the critic who approaches the world of the play with the same curiosity for hidden connections and – in the case of Coleridge's philosophical criticism – with the same method of looking for the essentials behind accidentals.

As we have seen, Coleridge attempted to treat his object according to the task of critical philosophy, "in reference to the operation of the mental faculties to which it specially appertains." Which mental faculties can be relevant to his description of Hamlet? In so far as he is preoccupied with abstractions and what is essential to his own intellect – his mind is "for ever occupied with the world within him, and abstracted from external things" (*CCS* 76) – he can be related to the faculty of reason. Coleridge, following Kant, distinguished this from

understanding, a "merely reflective faculty [which] partook of death."[36] Clearly, Hamlet's constant generalisations and his preference for "mental forms" that are "indefinite and ideal" to realities that "must needs become cold" show that he is primarily interested in the workings of reason (*CCS* 72). However, there is another mental faculty playing a role even more central to his character: imagination. It is crucial to his meditations for it allows him to represent objects when they are not available to the senses. Coleridge has emphasised the role of imagination in Hamlet's character from the beginning of his 1812 lecture: "Hamlet beheld external objects in the same way that a man of vivid imagination who shuts his eyes sees what has previously made an impression upon his organs" (*CCS* 67). According to this, his vivid imagination makes Hamlet akin to poets like Wordsworth who can picture the dancing daffodils or the Tintern landscape in their absence, and picture them not only as outward appearances but as ideal forms "Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, / And passing even into my purer mind."[37]

Hamlet's imagination, similarly to that of the poet, transforms external objects into something ideal and thus provides him with "a world within himself" (*CCS* 68; 70). This internal world – in many respects the key to Coleridge's interpretation – is far from being a copy of the world outside; as Coleridge wrote in his notes for the 1813 lecture, "his thoughts, images and fancy [are] far more vivid than his perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplation, and acquiring as they pass a form and colour not naturally their own" (*CCS* 73). This description accords with Kant's definition of the imagination as a faculty that creates an inner world by organising sense perceptions according to the ideal laws of reason. By reflecting to that capacity, according to Kant, we gain a sense of our freedom from the empirical world (nature) and the law of association, which is attached to sense perceptions, "for although it is according to that law that we borrow material from nature, we have the power to work that material into something quite other – namely, that which surpasses nature."[38] The

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36 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. J. Bate (London and Princeton, 1982), I, 144

37 From "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, eds., *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, Second Edition (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 114.

38 *The Critique of Judgement*, paragraph 49 (quoted in G. F. Parker, *Johnson's Shakespeare* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1989], p. 125). The whole passage reads: "The imagination [...] is very powerful in creating what might be called a second nature out of the material given to it by actual nature. We

Coleridgean Hamlet gains a sense of the freedom of his mind whenever his imagination allows him to distance himself from the external world and reflect on its own images. This means that his meditations, and especially the soliloquies, are to be regarded as the most adequate manifestation of his mental disposition: they can prove the superiority of his mind over the "matter" of the play.

In Schleiermacher's terms, the monologues are the "grammatical" (formal) correlatives of the psychological content (the meaning) of Hamlet. Another "grammatical" proof of his overpowering imagination is his habit of punning, to which Coleridge pays considerable attention. In his notes for the 1813 lecture, quoting Hamlet's first line ("A little more than kin, and less than kind" [I.ii.65]) he emphasises that "He begins with that play of words" (*CCS* 73). His comments are again opposed to Johnson's opinion; he attempts to prove that the seemingly unnatural figure of punning is in fact a sign of the naturalness of Shakespeare's language: "No-one can have heard quarrels among the vulgar, but must have noticed the close connection of punning with angry contempt – add, too, what is highly characteristic of superfluous activity of mind, a sort of playing with a thread or watch chain, or snuff-box" (*CCS* 73). Hamlet's puns, then, signify both his anger with Claudius and his restless mental activity and therefore contribute to the "naturalness" of Shakespeare's textual world. However, Hamlet is also in a closer and more self-conscious relationship with words: according to his critic he is obsessed with "the prodigality of beautiful words, which are, as it were, the half-embodyings of thought" (*CCS* 73). He seems to be concerned with the material side of words, their "thingifying" capacity ("his words give a substance to shadows"– *CCS* 76), which is what puns are based on. In this respect again he is similar to the poet whose task is to treat words as things and build a kind of second nature out of them.[39] Puns and conceits are generally important for Coleridge exactly for this reason: they are not only figures of speech that are "natural" when uttered in a passionate state, but also figures in which the arbitrariness of language (the conventional connection between signifier and

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entertain ourselves with it where experience proves too commonplace, and we even use it to re-model experience, always following laws of analogy, no doubt, but also in accordance with higher principles given by reason. [...] By that means we gain a sense of our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of that power [namely, imagination]), for although it is according to that law that we borrow material from nature, we have the power to work that material into something quite other – namely, that which surpasses nature."

39 Cf. Kathleen M. Wheeler, "'Kubla Khan' and the Art of Thingifying," Duncan Wu, ed., *Romanticism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell 1995), p. 133.

signified) is covered for a moment by a secondary motivation. As McKusick claims, "Coleridge regards puns and conundrums as exemplary of the coalescence of a word with the thing signified. Puns, of course, rely on both the phonetic and semantic properties of the words that constitute them."[40] Hamlet's punning, according to this, is an attempt to create a meaningful system of words through secondary motivation – a secular version of Berkeley's "Divine Visual Language" in which there is a necessary connection between invisible and visible entities.[41]

This activity can be seen as the inverse of Hamlet's habit of seeing "hieroglyphics" in the external world: on the one hand, his imagination turns objects into signs and meanings, while on the other hand, it turns thoughts to words and thus into objects. These two processes together constitute the circular motion of the imagination that Coleridge famously describes in *The Statesman's Manual*: "that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors."[42] As we have seen, on the basis of this theory of symbolism the figure of Hamlet can be recognised as a symbol of Shakespeare's infinite mind. On closer investigation, this symbol is now revealed as itself a producer of symbols which are – presumably – similarly bearers of truth. But Coleridge's interpretation of Hamlet seems to call into question this last proposition.

THE MEANING OF HAMLET 2: THE INSUFFICIENT SYMBOL

Coleridge's Hamlet shares many qualities with the superior intellect of Shakespeare out of which he is thought to have been created. His habit of meditation, his interest in pure reason (as opposed to external phenomena), his powerful imagination, which attempts to read the language of nature and is even

40 James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language*, Yale Studies in English 195 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986), p. 32.

41 In the Divine Visual Language "God communicates his will to man through the various phenomena of nature, which functions as a series of signs for God's thoughts." G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism: A Study in the History of Philosophy* (Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1969), p. 32.

42 S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, p. 30–31.

capable of creating a secondary nature out of language – these are all proofs of his "consubstantiality" with Shakespeare's mind. No wonder that Coleridge exclaimed at the end of his 1812 lecture: "Anything finer than this conception and working out of a character is merely impossible" (*CCS* 72). However, his interpretation of Hamlet has a darker side too, which is constantly present in his notes and lectures, making his overall assessment rather contradictory. His Hamlet, representative of the superior intellect, is also characterised by a "morbid sensibility" and "self-delusion" (*CCS* 76), which make all his unique features dubious or even reprehensible. This paradox appears in everything Coleridge says about Hamlet – my separate treatment of the two sides is highly artificial – but it can be grasped most effectively at the point where the superiority of Hamlet's mind is at its most visible: in his experience of the sublime.

Coleridge regards the Kantian sublime the definitive world-experience of Hamlet; most probably this is why he practically repeats Kant's formula in his 1813 lecture: "The sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the reflection upon it; not from the impression but from the idea" (*CCS* 76).[43] This experience is of utmost importance to both Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and – as Nigel Leask points out – also "to A. W. Schlegel's theory of Tragedy, teaching us respect for the 'divine origin' of the mind and leading us 'to estimate the earthly existence as vain and insignificant.'"[44] It is also crucial for Coleridge's interpretation because the fact that Hamlet feels sublimity proves most forcefully the superiority of his reason over empirical reality. Imagination again plays a key role in this process, but in a negative way: the sublime is experienced exactly when the mind is so overwhelmed by the infinity or might of something (for instance, nature) that imagination cannot represent it, but realising this inability, the mind also realises that it still possesses a concept of these properties, which proves the superiority of reason over sense perceptions. As Kant explains, the sublime "cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather

43 Cf. with Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" in *The Critique of Judgement*: "From this it may be seen that we express ourselves on the whole inaccurately if we term any *object of nature* sublime, although we may with perfect propriety call many such objects beautiful. For how can that which is apprehended as inherently contra-final be noted with an expression of approval? All that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a *sublimity discoverable in the mind*" (David Simpson ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel* [Cambridge: CUP, 1984], p. 48).

44 Nigel J. Leask, *Coleridge and the Politics of Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 110. (Quoting from Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, 1808–9.*)

concerns ideas of reason, which although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does not admit sensuous presentation."[45]

The sublime experience is not homogenous like the experience of the beautiful but consists of a constant oscillation between a feeling of frustration (because the imagination cannot represent the infinite) and a feeling of joy over the superior ideas of human reason. In his 1813 lecture on *Hamlet*, Coleridge gave an example of this double movement: "Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something of a disappointment; it is only subsequently, by reflection, that the idea of the waterfall comes full into the mind, and brings with it a train of sublime associations" (*CCS* 76). As he added in the next sentence, "Hamlet felt this," which seems to imply that he was either in a state of disappointment with the outside world, or in the world of sublime reflections over his own superior reason. However, ideas of reason like infinity can be grasped only indirectly, as unimaginable, which requires the endless frustration of the imagination. In his lecture on *Romeo* Coleridge described this movement "where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being [...] the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image" (*SC* II, 103–4). The oscillation is without end: Hamlet is constantly "craving after the indefinite" (*CCS* 76) but his desire must needs remain unfulfilled.

As it is already evident, there is a certain amount of negativity in Kant's concept of the sublime even though it offers insight into the ideas of pure reason. Firstly, it can bring about the devaluation of all phenomenal objects that are representable – a consequence which could not be wholly accepted by Coleridge. Secondly, and more fundamentally, the sublime threatens the ability of the mind to know the world. Since the sublime feeling is based on "objects that defy conceptualization," the ensuing train of sublime associations is in a sense the admittance of failure.[46] This is well consistent with Kant's objectives who never claimed to offer a positive knowledge of the world. Coleridge, however, was

45 Simpson, p. 48.

46 Cf. Linda Marie Brooks, *The Menace of the Sublime to the Individual Self: Kant, Schiller, Coleridge and the Disintegration of Romantic Identity* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), p. 26.

reluctant to accept this and – together with Schelling – denied the inconceivability of the 'thing in itself."[47]

He seems to have faced the negative implications of the Kantian sublime in his interpretation of Hamlet – and following the diagnosis, rejected him as "unnatural." As a consequence of his sublime perception of the world, Hamlet becomes "dissatisfied with commonplace realities" because they "must needs become cold" for him (*CCS* 76; 72). Even though Coleridge speaks of him with much admiration, his preoccupation with ideal things is after all described as a "morbid craving for that which is not" (*CCS* 76). Indeed, he seems to be solipsistically in need of distancing himself from the world in order to be able to represent it *for himself*. As Coleridge said in 1812, he "yields to [the same] retiring from all reality which is the result of having what we express by the terms a world within himself" (*CCS* 70). Moreover, he not only dismisses external reality (for the sake of his ideals), but may even be incapable of getting to know it. In this case his internal world would be no more than a false interpretation of a vast and incomprehensible external reality. Coleridge could not accept such a condition as the natural human condition, therefore he had to describe it as illness.

He expresses the suspicion that Hamlet may be mad most openly in his notes for the 1813 lecture: "Add, too, Hamlet's wildness in but *half-false* – O that subtle trick to pretend to be *acting* only when we are very near *being* what we act," and connects Hamlet's behaviour to the "vivid images" of Ophelia, "nigh akin to and productive of temporary mania" (*CCS* 73–4). In his 1812 lecture he also observes that "Such a mind as this is near akin to madness" (*CCS* 70). In the light of this suspicion, the "inward brooding" of Hamlet is a sign of his inability to face reality: "Hamlet's running into long reasonings – carrying off the impatience and uneasy feelings of expectation by running away from the *particular* into the *general*; this aversion to personal, individual concerns, and escape to generalisations and general reasonings a most important characteristic" (*CCS* 74). Similarly, his wordplay and irony is an effect of his "disposition to escape from his own feelings of the overwhelming and the supernatural by a wild transition to the ludicrous – a sort of cunning bravado, bordering on the flights of delirium"

47 "In spite therefore of his [Kant's] own declarations, I could never believe, it was possible for him to have meant no more by his *Noumenon*, or Thing in Itself, than his mere words express; or that in his own conception he confined the whole *plastic* power to the forms of the intellect, leaving for the external cause, for the *materiale* of our sensations, a matter without form, which is doubtless inconceivable" (*Biographia Literaria*, ed. Nigel Leask [London: Everyman, J. M. Dent, 1997], p. 90).

(*CCS* 77). This Hamlet is no longer the figure who demonstrates man's freedom from the external world but one who tries to escape from it because he *cannot* face it, and therefore all signs of the superiority of his mind are revealed as symptoms of a disease.

The main cause of Hamlet's unhealthiness as Coleridge sees it is his "overbalance of imagination" (*CCS* 76): this faculty creates "a world within himself" which has more or less lost its connections with the world outside. Although Kant thought the inner "second nature" superior to the empirical world, he also described such malignant working of the imagination in his *Anthropology*, remarking that "If it is not already a form of mental illness (hypochondria), it leads to this and to the lunatic asylum."[48] Coleridge diagnosed the disease already in 1810, when H. C. Robinson wrote of him: "He made an elaborate distinction between fancy and imagination. The excess of fancy is delirium, of imagination mania."[49] That he did not dismiss this theory is proved by Chapter 4 of the *Biographia* where he presents fancy and imagination simultaneously with delirium and mania, although he does not include the analogy in the much more optimistic Schellingian definition of the imagination offered in Chapter 13. Hamlet's "half-false" madness undermines the belief that the creations of imagination (its system of symbols) partake of truth. Hamlet's diseased imagination can produce only false symbols that are not "conductors of truth," but his means of self-delusion. Such an insight into the threat of the imagination could even lead Coleridge to question its truthfulness in general. As critics like McGann claim, a crucial suspicion about the imagination can indeed be witnessed in his later works, most openly in the poem "Constancy to an Ideal Object" (1826).[50]

What is so strange about Coleridge's Hamlet is that he partly retains his admirable characteristics: he is both a prime representative of the superior human

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48 The beginning of the quotation reads: "To observe in ourselves the various acts of the representative power when we call them forth merits our reflection; it is necessary and useful for logic and metaphysics. – But to try to eavesdrop on ourselves when they occur in our mind *unbidden* and spontaneously (as happens through the play of the imagination when it inverts images unintentionally) is to overturn the natural order of the cognitive powers, because then the principles of thinking do not come first (as they should), but instead follow after." (Simpson, p. 10)

49 Seamus Perry, *S. T. Coleridge: Interviews and Recollections* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Publishers Ltd, 2000), p. 132.

50 Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 99.

intellect and a bad example, in whom certain faculties can be found in morbid excess. How can the mentally unbalanced, unhealthy Hamlet be identical with the representative of Shakespeare's divine intellect? Or does Coleridge mix up two distinct interpretations? As we have seen, these ambiguities are to some extent due to his own ambivalent response to Kant's philosophy, on which his interpretation is based. However, Hamlet's ambiguity is already present in his "conception" as Coleridge understood it: Shakespeare created his characters by conceiving "any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then placing himself, thus mutilated and diseased, under given circumstances" (*CCS* 72). This means that although Hamlet was created out of Shakespeare's own mental faculties (his reason and imagination), these are present in him in morbid excess and therefore he is "diseased." Moreover, he can represent merely a "mutilated" Shakespeare because only part of the authorial subjectivity was infused into him – this is why Coleridge claims that "he has a sense of imperfectness" and "something is wanted to make it complete" (*CCS* 70).

In other words, Hamlet shares the fate of the symbol that can represent only a *fragment* of the truth of which it partakes. His negative characteristics are only the other side of his divine conception. Coleridge's survey through the tragedy following his general characterisation of Hamlet reveals what he finds missing in him: he lacks the capacity that is needed for participation in the external world, or, in his words, he lacks the ability to act. Coleridge's interpretation explores how such a subject must become the main character in a tragic plot

THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE TRAGIC

In his notes and in both lectures, Coleridge complemented what he called his "Character of Hamlet" with a "cursory survey through the play" (*CCS* 73). Unfortunately, the lecture notes cannot be regarded a thorough rendering of what he really talked about; Badawi even supposes that his criticism of structure may be missing to a large extent because "it cannot be abridged" and is more difficult to note down and remember.[51] However, the material we have of the lectures seems to reveal a certain tendency in Coleridge's selection of scenes and passages which contradicts the intention of giving a full structural analysis. His grounds for choosing certain passages can be inferred from how he interprets them: most of

51 M. M. Badawi, *Coleridge: Critic of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), p. 83.

the time he brings up a text as evidence of his general interpretation of Hamlet's character, the central signifier of the play. This means that, in Schleiermacher's terms, he is still pursuing a psychological interpretation and his goal is "nothing other than a development of the beginning, that is, to consider the whole of the author's work in terms of its parts and in every part to consider the content as what moved the author and the form as his nature moved by the content."[52] Coleridge reads each selected part as a development of "the beginning": a manifestation of the meaning of the whole, which is, in this case, the conception of Hamlet. This is why he detects a similar meaning in most passages he selects for commentary.

Naturally, he has a preference for Hamlet's speeches and soliloquies since these, as we have seen, offer him an almost direct insight into his consciousness and thus, into the meaning of the play. In his own notes written for the 1813 lecture, after analysing the first scene he deals with Hamlet's first wordplay (I.ii.65), his reply to the queen (I.ii.75ff), his first soliloquy (I.ii.129ff), his meditation before the Ghost appears (I.iv.13ff), his "instant and over-violent resolve" when the Ghost's story is told (I.v.29ff), his following soliloquy and "ludicrous" sayings (I.v.92ff), and his soliloquy over the player king (II.ii.544ff). In all these passages he studies "how the character develops itself" (*CCS* 73) and connects each observation to his general understanding of him. Of the last passage, for instance, he claims that it is "Hamlet's character, as I have conceived, described by himself" (*CCS* 75). The 1813 report shows that Coleridge followed his notes quite closely in his lecture, and Collier's notes prove that he chose similar passages also in 1812: in addition to scenes mentioned already, he spoke of the soliloquy about the young Fortinbras (IV.iv.32ff), Hamlet's "moralizing on the skull in the churchyard" (V.i.74ff), his replies to Ophelia (III.i.90ff), his monologue in the prayer scene (III.iii.73ff), his voyage to England, and his meditation "after the scene with Osric" (V.ii.215ff). All in all, this is indeed a "cursory survey" rather than a careful analysis of the structure of the play. Moreover, with the exception of two passages (on the first scene and on the voyage to England) Coleridge deals exclusively with Hamlet's own words, and usually on himself. By doing so he repeats what Goethe's Wilhelm Meister did and even called attention to: he judges a whole play from one character.[53] Both

52 Mueller-Vollmer, p. 94.

53 "Ich habe den Fehler, ein Stück aus eine Rolle zu beurteilen, eine Rolle nur an sich und nicht im Zusammenhange mit dem Stück zu betrachten, an mir selbst in diesen Tagen so lebhaft bemerkt,

Wilhelm and Coleridge attempt to understand the drama through imaginative identification or *Einfühlung* – a method that Coleridge himself regarded inappropriate for the analysis of the play as a whole. At least in his interpretation of the character of Polonius (relegated to a lecture on a different topic) he claims that "Hamlet's words should not be taken as Shakespeare's conception of him" (*SC* II, 217). In the lectures on *Hamlet*, however, he sticks so much to Hamlet's words that he cannot present his concept of the 'real' Polonius – or the 'real' Ophelia, Gertrude, or Claudius. This contradiction still follows from his method of dealing with what is thought to be essential and ignoring all the accidentals. Since he believes that the essence of the play is to be found in Hamlet's psyche, he deals only with passages that can be regarded as manifesting this essence.

With such principles, the critic cannot be expected to say much about the tragic plot of the play. In spite of this, Coleridge seems to have a distinct sense of Hamlet's tragedy. Describing the first scene (the only one he chooses to mention in which Hamlet is not present), he speaks of "the armour, the cold, the dead silence, all placing the mind in the state congruous with tragedy" (*CCS* 73). Since he usually treated the first scenes as the germ from which the whole play develops, this remark is of special interest. It claims that *Hamlet* can be understood only by a receptive mind that has some affinity for tragedy – which also implies that tragedy in this case is something like a state of mind. (*Gedankentrauerspiel*, Schlegel's word for *Hamlet*, allows similar conjecture.) Coleridge repeats this view in his notes for the 1819 lecture where he investigates how in the first scene "all excellently accord with and prepare for the after gradual rise into Tragedy – but above all Tragedy the interest of which is eminently *ad et apud intra*" (*LL* II, 295). Such a subjectivist concept of tragedy accords with the general nature of Coleridge's interpretation dealing primarily with spiritual or psychological entities, picturing the tragic character himself little more than a state of mind "congruous with tragedy." The external events of the drama are important from this point of view only as the background which brings out the tragic quality inherent in Hamlet – as we have seen, Coleridge regards the story as the canvas only on which the portrait is painted. Since Hamlet is defined by the faculties he has on the one hand, and he lacks on the other, the "background" is to bring out both, and this is its sole *raison d'être*.

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dass ich euch das Beispiel erzählen will, wenn ihr mir ein geneigtes Gehör gönnen wollt" (J. W. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, ed. Erich Trunz [München: C. H. Beck, 1977], p. 216 [IV, 3]).

Hamlet's inability to act, of course, can be best shown in circumstances in which he must act (just as his overpowering faculty of thought can be best shown in a situation where he should not think). This need determines for Coleridge the dramatic situation. In 1812 he said about Hamlet: "Shakespeare places him in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in: he is the heir apparent of the throne; his father dies suspiciously; his mother excludes him from the throne by marrying his uncle. This was not enough but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the result? Endless reasoning and urging – perpetual solicitation of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action – ceaseless reproaches of himself for his sloth, while the whole energy of his resolution passes away in those reproaches" (*CCS* 67–8). As this passage makes clear, Coleridge, like virtually all 19th century interpreters of the play, was convinced that the Ghost's call for revenge must be obeyed – mainly because he accepted Hamlet's insistence that it must. The whole play, then, becomes for him a story of delayed action; the motive, the resolution and the means are given (Coleridge quotes Hamlet's "I have the cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't" – *CCS* 70) but "nothing happens."

As we have seen, according to Coleridge's diagnosis the overbalance of Hamlet's imagination creates an inner world for him which prevents all forms of action. Hamlet is unable to act "not from cowardice, for he is made one of the bravest of his time – not from want of forethought or quickness of apprehension, for he sees through the very souls of all who surround him; but merely from that aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world within themselves" (*CCS* 68). Later in the same lecture Coleridge rephrased the statement: "This admirable and consistent character, deeply acquainted with his own feelings, painting them with such wonderful power and accuracy, and just as strongly convinced of the fitness of executing his solemn charge committed to him, still yields to the same retiring from all reality which is the result of having what we express by the terms a world within himself" (*CCS* 70). These explanations imply that Hamlet is after all a victim of not what he lacks but what he has in excess: his imagination is so strong that it usurps the place of the outside world for him. The fact that Coleridge attributes to him a high degree of self-consciousness could even mean that he is himself aware of this "overbalance," which could lead him to question the status of reality as such. The possibility of interpreting Hamlet as a sceptic is given in Coleridge's interpretation although it is not fully realised.

Schlegel, however, was definitely on this opinion and Hazlitt, probably following his views, also called Hamlet sceptical.[54]

Since the Coleridgean Hamlet has practically lost touch with the everyday world and therefore cannot act, he may not be accused of anything he does – only of what he does not do. Consequently, Coleridge clears him of all charges of intentional wrongdoing that his former critics, most importantly Johnson, brought up against him. One of the charges concerns his heartless treatment of Ophelia; as Johnson wrote, "He plays the madman most when he treats Ophelia with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty."[55] Coleridge, probably because he considered the love-interest generally of secondary importance, deals only with the crucial dialogue in 3.1, and claims that "His madness is assumed when he discovers that witnesses have been placed behind the arras to listen to what passes, and when the heroine has been thrown in his way as a decoy" (*CCS* 70). With this explanation Coleridge claims that Hamlet's rudeness is in fact a defence, and consequently it is not his fault. Johnson's second and even more severe objection is against Hamlet's monologue when he sees his uncle praying (III.iii): "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered."[56] Coleridge, not surprisingly, sees in this scene another proof of his theory of Hamlet, even though for this he has to assume that Hamlet deludes himself: "The fact is that the determination to allow the King to escape at such a moment was only part of the same irresoluteness of character. Hamlet seizes hold of a pretext for not acting, when he might have acted so effectually" (*CCS* 71).

Coleridge's theory seems to make him blind to any guilty deed Hamlet may commit. G. F. Parker is right to observe that "Coleridge's subordination of what

54 Schlegel: "Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else: from expressions of religious confidence he passes over to sceptical doubts: he believes in the Ghost of his father as long as he sees it, but as soon as it disappears, it appears to him almost in the light of deception. He has even gone so far as to say, 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so;' with him the poet loses himself here in labyrinths of thought, in which neither end nor beginning is discoverable" (Bate, p. 309–310). Hazlitt: "when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical" (Bate, p. 325).

55 *Johnson on Shakespeare* 1–2, ed. Arthur Sherbo, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. VII–VIII (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1968), Vol. II, p. 1011. Henceforward: *JoS*.

56 *JoS* II, 990.

Hamlet does to what he feels constitutes a softening of the play."[57] However, this does not mean that he clears him of all charges. Of his "original sin" inherent in his conception as an insufficient symbol he is never relieved. From the moment he is alienated from the originating mind of Shakespeare and put into the circumstances of the drama, he is practically doomed. Coleridge regards his tragic end as a consequence of his "morbid sensibility" – the plot is on the whole against him, and the particular events only show evidence of this. His downfall is both accident and necessity; as Coleridge said to H. C. Robinson "S[hakespeare] wished to shew how even such a character is at last obliged to be the sport of chance" (*SC* II, 165–6). This is why he cannot commit suicide, which for Robinson would have been the most logical ending of the play. Coleridge's Hamlet is unable to determine what he does or what happens to himself so his death must come from the outside. In his 1812 lecture he repeated that it was consistent with the character of Hamlet "that after still resolving, and still refusing, still determining to execute, and still postponing the execution, he should finally give himself up to his destiny; and in the infirmity of his nature at last hopelessly place himself in the power and at the mercy of his enemies" (*CCS* 71). This Hamlet probably comes as close to Aristotle's tragic hero as a modern character can. He is superior to others but is also imperfect – commits the *hamartia* of insufficiency – and therefore he must die. His sin is nothing within his power but, like Oedipus, he must bear its consequences.

What kind of moral can such a tragic character convey? Does it say that the human spirit is wasted on earth, moreover, that it is blind to its own state until the very end? Schlegel, whose interpretation of the play runs close to Coleridge's, admits the possibility of a totally negative message: "A voice from another world, commissioned it would appear, by heaven, demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect; the criminals are at last punished, but, as it were, by an accidental blow, and not in the solemn way requisite to convey to the world a warning example of justice; irresolute foresight, cunning treachery, and impetuous rage, hurry on to a common destruction; the less guilty and the innocent are equally involved in the general ruin. The destiny of humanity is there exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of scepticism all who are unable to solve the dreadful enigmas."[58] This utterly pessimistic account is all the more remarkable because – as Parker

57 Parker, *Johnson's Shakespeare*, p. 185.
58 Bate, pp. 309–310.

observes – for Schlegel normally "what is desperate and terrible in the situation of the tragic protagonist serves to intimate that *there is a world elsewhere* (to recall Coriolanus's cry as he 'banishes' the populace of Rome), a world in which the spirit rises indomitable over all that can befall it in its phenomenal aspect."[59] It seems that *Hamlet* did not offer the same consolation – its scepticism proved to be powerful enough to ruin some of Schlegel's main presuppositions. Coleridge, however, draws an altogether different moral. He does not accept the total negativity of Shakespeare's message but does not see in the tragedy a promise of another world either. He identifies the much more down-to-earth message "that action is the great end of existence – that no faculties of intellect, however brilliant, can be considered valuable, or otherwise than as misfortunes; if they withdraw us from, or render us repugnant to action" (*CCS* 72).

Such a moral follows somewhat unexpectedly from Coleridge's interpretation, indicating that in the background he has modified his interpretative principles. He started out by regarding Hamlet the central sign which conveys the subjective meaning of Shakespeare but now it seems that the final meaning is not conveyed through the sign but through what it is not: Shakespeare's intention is to show something *contrary* to Hamlet. The notion that meaning (intention) is not to be sought in or through the sign but in what is absent from it is the characteristic strategy of what Rajan calls negative hermeneutics, a phenomenon of romantic criticism.[60] While positive hermeneutics (in the case of Schleiermacher, for instance) "synthesizes the text by arranging and expanding elements actually given in it," in the negative method "reading supplies something absent from and in contradiction to the textual surface."[61] Coleridge's interpretation starts out from a positive, and reverts to a negative hermeneutics – strangely enough in order to assure a positive Shakespearean meaning in spite of the tragic signifier Hamlet. This also means that for him Shakespeare's spirit after all proves to be transcendent rather than immanent: although it is present in Hamlet to some extent, its essence is missing from him.

59 Parker, p. 83.

60 Shelley in his *Hamlet* interpretation follows a similar strategy claiming that "there is but one demonstration of the excellence of health, and that is disease" (Bate, p. 342).

61 Rajan, p. 5.

THE PLOT AGAINST THE CRITIC

With his final interpretative move (finding the moral of the play) Coleridge attempts to reach out to Shakespeare's meaning in a way *disregarding* Hamlet, the ambivalent signifier. But the Hamlet-symbol is constructed too powerfully to be ignored, and even though it cannot be seen through (due to its ambivalence) and thus it cannot lead to a final meaning, it still produces meanings by reflecting – and refracting – the image of the critic. That Hamlet and the critic are figures of each other follows from Coleridge's hermeneutic principles. As we have seen, he identifies the meaning of Hamlet by looking into his own mind; he constructs the figure out of his own subjectivity and makes him the bearer of its "truths." He is lead by the assumption that Hamlet is a universal symbol, representing what is common to all humanity. The symbol, however, proves to be tragically ambivalent (an image of the superior human mind *and* of the diseased mind), and acts out this ambivalence – in fact the ambiguous positions of the critic – within the context of the play. The critic has by that time indeed "Interwove Himself into the Texture of his Lecture": by defining Hamlet he has also defined his own positions and from that moment he must follow his self-constructed symbol wherever it leads him.[62]

Several instances can be witnessed in the lectures where the critic imitates Hamlet's behaviour. Coleridge approaches the play consciously with certain preconceptions – abstractions about the human mind – and regards every element in the text as possibly a hieroglyphic conveying its truth. Therefore, for him too "the external world and all its incidents and objects" in the play are "comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves" and "began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind" (*CCS* 67). By finding the most important hieroglyphic in Hamlet as the image of the mind, he dismisses every element that has no relevance to this strand of interpretation. His Hamlet ignores external circumstances, and consequently the critic has to ignore the dramatic plot as such and concentrate on the soliloquies in which Hamlet speaks of himself. He dismisses, for instance, Ophelia, as Hamlet dismisses her, because she is not part of the main interest that he discovers in the whole play. G.F. Parker also observes the way "Hamlet's ceaseless conversion of things into

62 Edward Jerningham wrote in a 1808 letter of Coleridge: "He often Interwove Himself into the Texture of his Lecture." (Perry, p. 121)

thoughts" is "reflected in the manner of much of Coleridge's critical writing."[63] However, as we have seen, Hamlet's turning away from reality may be revealed as an attempt to escape from it. Does the critic also have to flee the text in order to avoid facing an unsettling insight about himself?

Nowhere is Coleridge's habit of imitating Hamlet so obvious as in the examination of the Ghost-scenes. These passages are naturally very important for his interpretation: the appearances of the Ghost are the absolutely sublime moments of the play in which Shakespeare's genius – and Coleridge's meaning – should be witnessed. Hamlet's seeing the Ghost is the episode in which the "overbalance" of his imagination could be best shown and Coleridge in his notes indeed remarks somewhat enigmatically that "The familiarity, comparative at least, of a brooding mind with shadows, is something" (*CCS* 74). In other writings he deals with this psychological phenomenon much more extensively; in *The Friend* he reconstructs how Luther's vision of the Devil evolved and even claims to wish "to devote an entire work to the subject of Dreams, Visions, Ghosts, Witchcraft, &c."[64] His proposed outline bears some relevance to Shakespeare: "I might then explain in a more satisfactory way the mode in which our thoughts in states of morbid slumber, become at times perfectly dramatic (for in certain sort of dreams the dullest Wight becomes a Shakespeare) and by what law the *Form* of the vision appears to talk to us in its own thoughts in a voice as audible as the shape is visible; and this oftentimes in connected trains... "[65] Hamlet could be a perfect example of this psychological case, which would make the whole play doubly a drama of the imagination. However, for some reason Coleridge chooses a different interpretation.

In fact he raises the possibility "that the vision is a figure in the highly wrought imagination" only to dismiss it (*CCS* 68). As he asserts in his 1812 lecture, "Hamlet's own fancy has not conjured up the Ghost of his father" – the evidence being that "it has been seen by others" (*CCS* 68). However, this seemingly unquestionable proof is a little shaken by the mode Coleridge insists on establishing it. For one thing, he ignores the passage that could provide a counter-

63 Parker, p. 89.

64 *The Friend*, no 8, 5 Oct 1809 (*The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke [Princeton: PUP, 1969], Vol. II, p. 120).

65 *Friend* I, 145. A casual anecdote about Coleridge's psychological approach to ghosts told by Sir James Mackintosh: "the best thing ever said of ghosts was by Coleridge, who, when asked by a lady if he believed in them, replied, 'No, Madam, I have seen too many to believe in them'" (Perry, p. 179–180).

argument: the bedroom-scene in which Hamlet sees the Ghost but his mother does not. Furthermore, he compares Hamlet's reflections before the Ghost enters to *Macbeth*: "The same thing occurs in *Macbeth*: in the dagger scene, the moment before he sees it, he has his mind drawn to some indifferent matters" (*CCS* 68). The comparison is somewhat odd, since in *Macbeth* all circumstances suggest that the dagger is indeed a delusion of a guilty mind – it cannot be grasped, and if it was sent by the witches, they themselves correspond to desires inherent in the hero, as Coleridge makes clear.[66] The analogy accordingly would suggest that Hamlet's moralising before the Ghost enters is a sign of his "desire to escape from the inward thoughts" but these thoughts suddenly take shape in the vision, just like in *Macbeth*. Since Coleridge wants to prove the opposite, in other passages he points out the contrast between the supernatural in the two plays: "The Ghost, a superstition connected with the [...] truths of revealed religion, and therefore, O! how contrasted from the withering and wild language of the *Macbeth*" (*CCS* 74). But does the fact that the Ghost is a *Christian* superstition give more credit to it? Coleridge's strange (and politically charged) insistence suggests that he wants to impress this thought upon the audience. In his notes he jots down: "Shakespeare's tenderness with regard to all innocent superstitions – no Tom Paine declarations and pompous philosophy" (*CCS* 73).[67] But he was evidently not settled in this explanation; his notes for his 1818 lecture on *Hamlet* deal exclusively with the first scene, comparing it with "all the best-attested stories of ghosts and visions" and analysing every little detail that creates dramatic faith. A report of his lecture in 1819 shows that the problem of the Ghost has become almost an obsession for him: "Many of his ideas were as just as they were beautiful; but we wish that he had given some portion of the time consumed by the almost unintelligibly ambiguous apologies for belief in ghosts and goblins, to the elucidation of the yet obscure traits of the character of Hamlet" (*SC* II, 259). Of course, Coleridge is not likely to have propagated belief in ghosts in general – his argumentation is meant to prove that readers should have *dramatic* faith in the vision. However, the Ghost's reliability is questioned by Hamlet himself and its ontological status is

66 "They were mysterious natures: fatherless, motherless, sexless: they come and disappear: they lead evil minds from evil to evil: and have the power of tempting those, who have been tempters of themselves" (*LL* I, 531).

67 Cf. also his notes for the *1818–19 Lectures on Shakespeare*: "Hume himself could not but have faith in *this* Ghost dramatically, let his anti-ghostism be as strong as Samson against Ghosts less powerfully raised" (*LL* II, 296).

ambiguous throughout the play. Due to this ambiguity Coleridge's insistence that the Ghost is "real" and "true" could not be anything but "ambiguous."

Why is it so important for him to prove the Ghost's trustworthiness? Obviously, if he wants to maintain that the play conveys the moral that "action is the great end of existence" and its plot is about Hamlet's inability to act, he has to make sure that the call for action is based on truth. It could be said, that in this modified, negative hermeneutic interpretation not Hamlet, but the Ghost conveys the Shakespearean meaning (the call for action), and his *logos* assures the coherence of the whole. In this way he is not only the figure of the dead father, but also that of the author and a voice from heaven, as Schlegel thinks. If it proved to be a delusion and thus unreliable, the whole dramaturgy and the positive moral would be undermined. This would also mean that Hamlet is irretrievably deluded, but Coleridge wants to maintain that his madness is not complete but "half-false." His drawing of that precarious distinction is as important as his diagnosis of the Hamletian "overbalance" of imagination.[68] For if Hamlet would be really mad, and the manifestation of the Shakespearean meaning (the Ghost) would be revealed as no more than a projection of his deluded psyche, where could any meaning be located? And if Hamlet, who shares the intellectual faculties of the critic, would *invent* figures of meaning instead of interpreting them, what could be said of the critic?

The unreliability of the Ghost and the possibility that Hamlet may read his own meaning into it would have unsettling consequences for the critic that Coleridge has to avoid. Namely, it would suggest that the way Hamlet projects himself into the Ghost, the critic would possibly project himself into Hamlet and thus, instead of finding the true meaning inherent in both of them, he would invent his own meaning. In this case – using Rajan's formula – the hermeneutic reading would be unmasked as an heuristic one, which "can no longer be conceived as the reconstruction of an original meaning but must be seen as the production of a new meaning."[69] Of course, this is in contradiction with Coleridge's belief that through introspection he can find the truth of the drama.

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68 Coleridge draws attention to the distinction in a note in the *Biographia* (Ch. 2). Here he quotes the same line from Dryden as in his lecture on *Hamlet*, "Great wit to madness sure is near allied" in order to illustrate the deception that works "by the telling the half of a fact, and omitting the other half, when it is from their mutual counteraction and neutralisation, that the whole truth arises, as a tertium aliquid different from either." (Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 28) With this intertextual reference he indirectly emphasises that Hamlet is not *really* mad.

69 Rajan, p. 33.

Therefore he sets out to seek absolute evidence for the reliability of the Ghost – and his insistence on completing the impossible task makes him imitate Hamlet who does the same at least through three acts. He is entrapped in the plot of his own hermeneutic reading in which he either has to acknowledge that his Hamlet is his own mirror-image or has to repeat the movements of Hamlet and become *his* mirror-image. A metaphor of the situation is provided by Coleridge himself. In his poem "Constancy to an Ideal Object" he rewrites the image he used earlier to express the universality of Shakespeare's genius. The mountain traveller who – like the reader of Shakespeare – in the mist "beholds his own figure, but the glory round the head distinguishes it from a mere vulgar copy" becomes a deluded "rustic": "Sees full before him, gliding without tread, / An image with a glory round its head; / The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues, / Nor knows he makes the shadow, he pursues!"

In the intricate pattern of Coleridge's *Hamlet* interpretation we can witness the employment of a fundamental problem of romantic hermeneutics. A possible formulation of it would be that romantic hermeneutics assumes the meaning of a text to be found intuitively through looking into one's own self (subjective identification) but it also wants to make sure that the meaning grasped in this way is absolute, i.e. identical with the authorial and transcendental one. Thus it grants the reader freedom of interpretation and takes it away at the same time. Rajan offers another formulation: "The history of romantic hermeneutics is of a movement complicated by its emergence within a chain of substitutions. When writing fails to represent adequately the thought or speech that precedes it, it is replaced by reading, which is thus open to a similar failure."[70] Coleridge's reading of Hamlet goes through the same stages: it attempts to move beyond writing to reach the Shakespearean meaning but he finds a set of different meanings instead, relevant mostly to himself.

Whenever "a man is attempting to describe another's character, he may be right or he may be wrong, but in one thing he will always succeed, in describing himself" –Coleridge wrote in his Notebook.[71] His lectures on *Hamlet* are a perfect illustration of that, as his first audience was already aware. The most well-known evidence of this can be found in the letter H. C. Robinson wrote in January 1812 about Coleridge's lecture: "Last night he concluded his fine development of the Prince of Denmark by an eloquent statement of the moral of the play: 'Action,'

70 Rajan, p. 69.

71 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York, 1957–73) Vol. I, p. 74.

he said, 'is the great end of all. No intellect, however grand, is valuable if it draw us from action and lead us to think and think till the time of action is passed by and we can do nothing.' Somebody said to me, 'This is a satire on himself.' – 'No,' said I, 'it is an elegy.' A great many of his remarks on Hamlet were capable of like application" (*SC* II, 181–2).

What is interesting about this anecdote is not only that Coleridge's first audience immediately recognised the self-reflexive subjectivism of his interpretation but that they attempted to find its proper "genre" as well – the mode in which it is to be understood. In this respect they went further that T. S. Eliot who believed that Coleridge simply wanted to present himself "in an attractive costume." The first remark quoted by Robinson ("satire") expresses something important about the lectures: their self-critical edge, expanded by critics like Ellis and Mills.[72] However, Robinson's reply ("elegy") goes deeper. It implies that Coleridge is in a sense mourning for himself along with the tragic hero. Indeed, he could be said to have buried some of his romantic hermeneutic ideals in the course of this interpretation. Perhaps this is why the main products of the next important phase of his *Hamlet* criticism (1818–19) are not reports or lecture notes but marginalia to the play, representing a kind of transitional stage between reading in the strict sense and interpretation. With his sharp observations never straying too far away from the text, he reverts to something like Johnson's method who famously claimed to "have confined [his] imagination to the margin."[73]

72 Speaking of the first paragraph of his 1813 notes they assert: "So that while Coleridge may well have identified with Hamlet, this paragraph brings home the obvious truth that self-identification need not inevitably lead to self-glorification. It can also operate, as it may be doing here, as self-criticism." (Ellis and Mills, p. 246)

73 *JoS* I, 108.