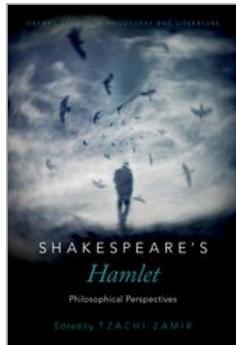


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## Shakespeare's Hamlet: Philosophical Perspectives

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## On (Not) Making Oneself Known

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter uses an exploration of the nature of selfhood in *Hamlet* to stage a discussion of the concept of literary knowledge. What does it mean to claim for our various practices of literary production that they can yield, collectively if not always individually, a “form of knowing”: that there exist distinctly literary ways of making sense of the world and thus of presenting it as an object of understanding? Making sense of this, this chapter argues, requires an account of the nature of narrative and the manner in which it bestows a distinct form of intelligibility upon the events it relates. *Hamlet* brings to view a striking feature of the nature of this intelligibility and its role in generating the forms of meaning that make *Hamlet*, and literary narrative more generally, elusive.

*Keywords:* akrasia, self-constitution, selfhood, Wittgenstein, narrative, interpretation, literary knowledge, cognitive value of literature, literature as acculturation, literary meaning

All a world can do is appear.

—Joseph Massey<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

If you were to ask a room of educated sorts what constitutes philosophical knowledge, you would expect serious disagreement about what the answer should be but little as to what the question itself was asking. Ask, however, what constitutes literary knowledge and considerable confusion as to what you *mean* is likely to arise. “Philosophical knowledge,” one assumes, indicates the form of insight into the world and human predicament philosophy attempts to produce. And while no two philosophers will offer the same account of the nature of this insight, most will hear the phrase as meaning, minimally, something like “philosophy’s presumed contributions to human understanding.”<sup>2</sup> The phrase “literary knowledge,” however, is likely to ring odd in many **(p.18)** ears. It is, at the very least, ambiguous. To the literal-minded, “literary knowledge” will not be taken to refer to a kind of insight at all, except for the kind literature trivially gives us: the knowledge *of* literature that comes from reading lots of poems, novels, and plays. To the more charitable-minded, however, the phrase might be taken to indicate the possibility that we can speak of literary knowledge in the same register as we speak of philosophical or, for that matter, psychological, historical, or geographical knowledge. That is, it might be taken to claim for our various practices of literary production that they can yield, collectively if not always individually, a “form of knowing”: that there exist distinctly literary ways of making sense of the world and thus of presenting it as an object of understanding.<sup>3</sup> It is this fuller and more cognitively ambitious sense of “literary knowledge” that I explore here.<sup>4</sup>

*Hamlet* is surely not the only literary work that obliges us to think seriously about the idea of literary knowledge, but it does provide a **(p.19)** site for doing so that approximates the ideal. This is not because, or just because, the history of *Hamlet* criticism has made of the work a veritable philosophical giving tree, finding in it everything from a critique of modern subjectivity to a proto-existentialist statement of the general blahness of being.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it because, or just because, the problems *Hamlet* presents to the critic embody nearly perfectly the great philosophical problem of literature itself, namely the problem of meaning: the sheer expanse of interpretive possibilities a complex literary work generates and the challenge of understanding how we can legitimately adjudicate among them. All these features of *Hamlet* and its reception matter, but they have come to matter

because at its core *Hamlet* seems possessed of a secret. And it is this secret, whatever it precisely may be, that calls on us to make meaningful a play that very well might be about, if not quite nothing, then nothingness. Philosophers and philosophically minded critics return to *Hamlet* with such frequency because unraveling this secret promises to make sense not only of the text but also, in some manner, of ourselves. We may be disappointed when we come to learn its secret—secrets, like promises, can be empty—but the work nonetheless seems to know something and to prompt in the reader or spectator an urge to share in its knowledge. Understanding why we find that Hamlet personifies so powerfully the oppressiveness of existence, the destructive powers of thought, the limits of agency, the allure of the slacker—deciding which, exactly, is where the problem lies—goes some way in understanding how literature of any sort can seem to possess philosophical secrets.

**(p.20)** On the reading I shall offer here, *Hamlet* engages the problem of literary knowledge on two fronts. In the most direct respect, *Hamlet* apparently produces content that is of philosophical significance: the drama of the play is in part a drama of ideas, and those ideas seem to speak directly to standing philosophical concerns regarding, by my reckoning, the nature of the self and self-knowledge. But the particular manner in which *Hamlet* reveals its content—its mode of presentation, as it were—raises questions about the nature of literary meaning itself, including the meaning of the very content that gives *Hamlet* a claim to philosophical significance. The questions it raises are not skeptical and they do not lead us to cynicism regarding all talk of literary meaning and the general idea that a work of fiction can be about something.<sup>6</sup> But they do require that we think very carefully about how the “words, words, words” (2.2.189) that constitute the work deliver meaning and so yield an object of understanding. If we take seriously *Hamlet*’s particular way with meaning, it will bring into relief a striking possibility for giving sense to the idea of literary knowledge.

### A Kind of Life

Before beginning I need to say a few brief and general words about methodology. If *Hamlet* is in part a drama of ideas, what should we expect these “ideas” to look like in their proper literary and dramatic context? What should we take ourselves to be looking for in *Hamlet*, or in any work of literature for that matter, if we hope to find something that can act as an object of “worldly” knowledge (leaving it **(p.21)** open, for the moment, as to what constitutes such a thing)? In a very general sense, how does something of cognitive significance *appear* in a fictional narrative?

The approach I favor regards literature as apt to produce a form of *narrative* understanding. To claim that literature at times generates a distinctly narrative variety of understanding is to assert that a literary narrative *alone* can suffice to produce a kind of insight, indeed that the narrative a literary work weaves *is* the object of understanding, when such there is. If this sounds entirely obvious, be assured that contemporary philosophers of literature have produced many arguments to the contrary. And they have done so by arguing that we need something *in addition* to a fictional narrative if literature is to lead the mind to genuine insight. The most common way of explaining what this additional thing might be is to invoke the image of something declarative and sentence-like, say a proposition, a claim, an assertion, or a kind of conclusion. The idea is that it is only once we have an entity such as a proposition that a work of fiction can be said to produce a proper object of cognitive attention: an item that embodies, or otherwise acts as the vehicle of, insight. We see such an approach, for example, when we attempt to model literature’s cognitive value on *thought experiments* (hypothetical employments of thought that lead readers to embrace or dismiss a claim) or *enthymemes* (incomplete arguments the missing links of which readers are obliged to fill in).<sup>7</sup> I will not argue against the idea that literature can do such things, but something always feels bad-mannered about such a philosophicalization of our sense of how literature traffics in ideas. When literature offers gifts cognitive and epistemic in nature, we should expect it to deliver them in distinctly literary packaging, and my interest in **(p.22)** defending a notion of narrative understanding is motivated in part by a desire to take this seriously. It may be the case that narrative understanding is expressible in propositional form,

or, more generally, that literary narratives can assert truth-valued claims about extrafictional reality, construct sound arguments, establish theses, perhaps even traffic in justified true belief itself. My claim is simply that a viable account of literary knowledge does not require any of this, and I trust that my discussion of *Hamlet* will make this clear.

Note that what we *explicitly* find presented in a literary narrative is a (linguistically mediated) picture of human comportment and relationship: of actions, events, happenings, sufferings, and sayings. These things are organized such that certain patterns of significance are made visible and hence critically salient. We find much more than this, needless to say; but the point I wish to make is that in the first instance we should attempt to find in this “weave of life,” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase, the raw material of literary knowledge and the primary form in which it is declared to the mind. When Wittgenstein speaks of the importance of coming to grasp “special patterns in the weave of our lives,” part of his point is that *cultural practices*, socially organized forms of human activity, are themselves often the proper object of philosophical understanding (rather than, say, abstract propositions or extracultural matters of fact). Understanding typically requires more than that we possess the relevant concepts and representational capacities and that we can deploy them competently. It demands more than, as it were, definitional understanding. It requires a grasp of the role words and concepts play in constituting a “form of life.”<sup>8</sup> Without this, in many cases understanding is merely conceptual and thus impoverished, incomplete. As such, it is a step short of that crucial grasp of the link **(p.23)** between words, concepts, and the various forms of experience and circumstance in which we can fully see their significance, indeed what they “mean” for creatures such as ourselves. In respect to a certain range of concepts, understanding is fully articulated only once it is contextualized, enlivened, and tethered to the rhythms and ticks of cultural life.<sup>9</sup> None of this is to imply that a literary work is bound to existence and the way the world currently is, which would obviously be an insult to its imaginative powers, powers that permit it a very healthy degree of transcendence. But if literary works have the power to speak beyond our culture and material conditions such as they currently are, the claim is that this power also often

functions to realign the heart and mind with the actual world.<sup>10</sup>

Works of narrative art should strike us as having an obvious role to play in this *acculturation* of understanding. It is, after all, in narrative form that we often represent actions and events, articulate the significance of experiences, and in general fashion a sense of how we hang together as persons, communities, and cultures. Add to this the claim that literary narratives provide us with many of our most complex and finely textured narratives, and the rudiments of an approach to the notion of literary knowledge becomes visible. I present these ideas in plainer philosophical terms below, but for the moment this will suffice to give a sense of my general orientation to the matter of how literary fictions can relate the mind to life.

A word to the skeptic. One might claim that everything I have said applies to the significance of *actual* weaves of life and not to the fictional ones works of imaginative literature place before us. Literature, as the young Nietzsche thought, necessarily falsifies life, precisely because it adds so much “art” to it.<sup>11</sup> For Nietzsche it does **(p.24)** so in a way that makes life bearable, now presented as meaningful, beautiful, and significant, whereas in reality it is none of these things. Yet for just these reasons fictions cannot quite be said to show us the unadorned truth. The general worry this raises is obvious: the ordering of life one finds in a fictional narrative, and literature’s manner of investing life with great expressiveness and meaning, can seem to raise a powerful question as to whether literature is suitable for representing *actual* life at all. I will return to this idea.

### Hamlet's Problem

Hamlet, we know, is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.84); he is "thought-sick" (3.4.49). This is Hamlet's problem: his predicament of thought and (in)action about which so much critical and philosophical hay has been made. Putting the problem this way makes it clear that I am concerned with the traditional question of why Hamlet hesitates; and while reducing his problem to one of "hesitation" is perhaps crude, we know perfectly well what is being highlighted. It is, especially, the force of Hamlet's self-questioning in his soliloquies as well as the text's various references to the oppressiveness of the "sun," "ears" as sites of penetration and potential contamination (by words, existence, other minds?), the expressions of disappointment with reason, language, and conscience, and, of course, sundry talk of skulls and suicide. "Hesitation" is a loose but serviceable way of referring to a series of problems and sites of potential significance in *Hamlet* that function as centers of interpretative gravity. I here elaborate one way of working through this familiar material so as to produce an example of how one might explain Hamlet's problem. The hope is that my reading will illustrate how we can draw from a literary work something that seems a candidate for the sort of thing literary knowledge might be knowledge *of*.

**(p.25)** Sarah Beckwith argues that Shakespeare's later "post-tragic" plays develop a "grammar of forgiveness," and her claim provides an apt point of departure for my discussion. Plays such as *Cymbeline* and *A Winter's Tale* conclude with, in her words, "a public spectacle, event, or ceremony in which private fantasy, isolation, grief, self-immolation, or despair is overcome, and the protagonists return to what is common and shared as the ground of their relations and as a place where their expression of themselves can have a local habitation and a name."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the terrible event that crushes the protagonist at the end of a tragedy is, in Shakespeare's post-tragic plays, presented as a premise rather than a conclusion, and dramatic tension is generated by exploring the link that extends from this event to, if not redemption, then a revitalization of the self and its community (the two things tragedy always threatens to destroy). A helpful way of thinking about *Hamlet* is that it is a sustained study of life at the other end of the process, in the days before the terrible act, as the self attempts to comprehend its significance and to give order

to the various desires, anxieties, and doubts it has in respect to committing it. What is dramatized is the challenge of self-organization in the face of such an event: of our ability to arrange the moving parts of our psychological interior into a coherent self when called on to establish who we are through our actions. If forgiveness is what might be required in the aftermath of the act, prior to it the implicit plea is for something more akin to *resolution*, whose “native hue” (3.1.83) Shakespeare depicts not as the simple matter of committing oneself to a course of action but as a deeper, moral-psychological issue of achieving determinacy as a thinking and feeling self.

It is this resolution that defies Hamlet. There is something about the way Hamlet *thinks* that makes it so, and it is the particular manner **(p.26)** in which his thinking appears to annihilate the possibility of both self-organization and action that presents the essential problem of understanding Hamlet. There are of course many literary characters whose motivational problems appear to raise, as Hamlet’s do, great existential and moral questions. It is hard not to think of Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* in this context. Like Hamlet, Bartleby refuses to act, though clearly on much different grounds. While Melville gives us virtually no access to the inner workings of his character’s mind, we at least know that Bartleby is possessed of a settled, and wholly negative, opinion on the value of action. We may not know *why* he thinks the world unworthy of his involvement; but his inaction reveals *that* he thinks this, since it is declared every time he says, “I’d prefer not to.” Thus Bartleby achieves the requisite resolution as an actor on the stage of life; it is just that he is convinced that the most suitable way of performing his role is by doing nothing. Hamlet, however, is among the most psychologically transparent characters literature has given us. He stands as a puzzle not because he fails to share his mind with the audience. Unlike Bartleby, Hamlet opens his mind to us entirely, and the problem is one of sorting through the mess inside. In this way *Hamlet* implies a rebuke to the old idea that what limits our knowledge of others is lack of access to their psychological interiors, as though if we could just look inside a person, our questions about who they *really* are and why they behave as they do would be fully answered. The play suggests that even if we could look in on Hamlet’s mind, what we would find there would be as vague and ambiguous as the self-image

he offers the public world. This is because there is something essentially inchoate about Hamlet's inner life, some crucial aspect that we expect to be defined yet that he insists on leaving unformed. Let me explain.

For Hamlet thought propels one in precisely the wrong direction: back into the self rather than forward into the world. Hamlet (p.27) does many things in the play, needless to say. But he does not do them as a coherent agent who is capable of self-legislated action: as one who wills himself to be thus and then steps out into the world according to plan. It is obviously a mistake to think that Hamlet retreats inward simply because he dislikes the options for action the world gives him, though he does dislike them: avenge his father and become a murderer, refuse the sin of murder and be a coward, or make himself a suicide, which God, he half-heartedly tells us, forbids (1.2.131). The murder of his father and remarriage of his mother to Claudius—all within the space of a month—surely brought on his intense “melancholy” (2.2.536; 3.1.164), but we cannot imagine him to have been a Laertes prior to all the bad news.<sup>13</sup> As Hamlet thinks through his possibilities, we see the gradual emergence of a *generalized* dissatisfaction, felt to reach out to much more than Hamlet's immediate predicament. Stating just what this generalized dissatisfaction is *with* is where the game becomes difficult. One has, in the broadest terms possible, two choices: (1) an externalist interpretation that sees Hamlet as articulating dissatisfaction with the world itself and the possibilities of experience it places before him; or (2) an internalist interpretation that makes features of the self—of what it means to be minded—the essential object of dissatisfaction. Strictly speaking, these two interpretations are not incompatible (logically, that is; they may well be dramatically incompatible—a specific performance may have to choose between the two—but that is another story). Nonetheless, each offers a very different way of articulating what *Hamlet* is, in a philosophical sense, *about*.

(p.28) I favor an internalist approach, certainly as a starting point, and it is in good part because of how I think a critic ought to unravel Hamlet's claim that “there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.”<sup>14</sup> In the hands of ill-informed readers this can be taken in a resolutely externalist sense, as, say, suggesting constructivism or relativism about the moral realm. But this fails to do justice to our best hypothesis about Shakespeare's intellectual inheritance and the way *Hamlet*

amends a central aspect of it. As A. D. Nuttall observes, the line looks not forward to edgy postmodernists but back to detached Stoics, whose ideas would have dotted the material of an Elizabethan classical education (Nuttall 2007, 193). In this case the lines take on a new meaning. It is not a sage invocation of antirealism but an attempt to make a despairing claim about the inescapability of the mind in experience.

Note that for the Stoics, as for many Greek and Roman philosophers, *passion* is the part of the self that causes the gravest problems in the economy of the mind (“soul”/ψυχή), though for the Stoics emotion cannot be neatly separated off from thought. Theirs was an essentially cognitive theory of emotion, according to which a passion is a complex psychological state with a *judgment* as its core. Passion, in effect, involves “thinking that makes it so,” thereby presenting items in the world as disgusting, beloved, pitiable, and so on. But these are Stoics, and so emotions, certainly when intense, are seen as typically embodying *false* judgments about the value and significance of what befalls us (death as “mattering” or “horrible,” though it is not in the grand scheme of things). This is what the Stoics offer as a route to addressing a more basic, and familiar, problem, that of *akrasia* (“weakness of the will” or “moral incontinence”): the phenomenon of acting against our best judgment.<sup>15</sup> In Plato’s foundational (p.29) image, reason, a charioteer, holds the reins of the unruly horses of passion and appetite, and in *akrasia* one of the beasts pulls free, usually commandeering reason and so directing thought in the process. The upshot of all this is that on the classical model of mind a coherent self is one in which the passions we act on and the desires we satisfy are those that logos consecrates, in effect, as *mine*: as expressive of *my* values, *my* beliefs, *my* goals. In akratic behavior a mere (e.g.) desire gets expressed (for that cigarette, for another hour at the bar) and not quite a person. The failure of self-organization in akratic action implies a failure of self-expression: my behavior does not speak for who I take myself to be. When suffering *akrasia*, how I believe I hang together as a person is defied by, rather than declared through, my actions.

What makes *Hamlet* so fascinating to a reader concerned with the self and moral psychology is that in his figure reason alone, not passion or desire, comes to seem the culprit in the fits and paroxysms of the akratic mind.<sup>16</sup> In *Hamlet* *logos* just produces logorrhea, expelling an endless stream of “words,

words, words.” If reason is not right with the world, it is not due to an epistemic failure or the deceptions of passion but to the endless addition of another word when trying to render judgment. Yet the intimacy of reason, thinking, and the self **(p.30)** yields a larger problem. As a phenomenologist might put it, the self is always in the “dative” position of experience, endowing it with an inescapable “for-me-ness.”<sup>17</sup> It is omnipresent in conscious thought, and this is what Hamlet cannot tolerate: consciousness takes the form of “a prison.”<sup>18</sup> He suffers the inevitable presence of the self as the rest of us experience white noise, a kind of buzzing of me-ness that makes him yearn for “quietus” (3.1.74). This quietus, death, strikes Hamlet as a viable avenue of self-escape, until thought, of course, keeps on going and asks, “what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (3.1.66). Thought effectively poisons Hamlet’s hope that there is at least one place where he can escape the chatter of “conscience.” If this is so, then when Hamlet says, “thus conscience does make cowards” (3.1.82), he laments not quite his failure of agency but the limitlessness of thought and its endless generation of—to borrow Gertrude’s line—“noise so rude” (3.4.39). The problem of Hamlet is not inaction but hyperactivity, just reinterpreted in psychological rather than behavioral terms.

The text’s various references to the ears now take on a distinct significance. As Tzachi Zamir notes, “for Shakespeare’s contemporaries . . . [w]hatever enters the ear is conceived as a powerful, and at times violent, entity, capable of transforming the hearer.”<sup>19</sup> In *Hamlet* this violence is given a very particular spin. The sense modality through which the thought of others is most commonly received is of course auditory, by way of spoken language (perhaps the Internet has rendered this false; it was certainly true in Hamlet’s world). This is what *logos* traffics in, semantically packaged “accounts”: descriptions, explanations, and theories. For Hamlet this openness to other minds compounds the problem **(p.31)** exponentially. The ears add to the noise inside the noise of others, turning what would be the solitary mumbling of one mind into a grating choir. Each of these voices adds one more statement of how the world and its affairs “seem” to it. In *Hamlet* there are some 166 mentions of “seems” and 182 of “appears.” The repetition reinforces the sense of the ears as assaulted from within and

from without by thought and the relentlessness of its manner of making things “appear” and “seem.” Or so Hamlet feels.

“Seeming” is also a mark of determinacy, of something achieving sufficient form to appear as *this* or *that*. Hamlet, as nearly every critic notes, is marked by a refusal of self-definition. He feels “too much in the sun” (1.2.67), and his wish is to “resolve into a kind a dew” (1.2.130), that is, a liquescent, unformed state.<sup>20</sup> When he tells Gertrude, “I know not seems” (1.2.76), we initially hear his refusal to put on appearances as a claim to authenticity, though as the play progresses we gradually come to realize that his use of “seems” has a subtler meaning. In the semantic and symbolic play of the language of *Hamlet*, “being” is associated with “the sun” and “seeming,” that is, with the illuminated world in which things appear as the things they presumably are. Hamlet is not, we know, quite at home in this world. He copes with it in part by dissociating his sense of self from those aspects of a person in which we habitually think self-identity resides. One way of stating this difficult idea is in terms of a fairly precise refusal of self-constitution. A central way in which we articulate a sense of self—an image of being a particular kind of person—is through an act of psychological identification. We all have perhaps an anarchy of different desires, emotions, beliefs, interests, and concerns that pass through us, if not in a single moment then certainly **(p.32)** over a span of time. As we saw hinted in the discussion of *akrasia*, the road to self-constitution is paved in part by *identifying* with certain of these desires (etc.), bestowing upon them the right to *stand* for us, that is, to be expressive of who we take ourselves to be.<sup>21</sup> Now I might be guilty of self-flattery or self-deception when I identify with my desire for a modest life or my love of animals, but in so identifying I begin to craft a self-image. I can now “appear” as a kind of person, to myself and, if I wish, to others. In fact, it now becomes possible to ask questions of *self-knowledge*: am I really as I take myself to be, and are those features of my mental life I tap as essentially expressive of *me* those which actually inform my agency? This is what Hamlet understands, and it is in effect this kind of self-identification against which he rebels. His problems of agency bear witness to an unwillingness to let various of our desires, wishes, beliefs to *speak* for us, indeed to give domicile to our identity. Of course throughout the play Hamlet desires various things, expresses values, endorses thoughts, and states

preference for actions. The point, however, is that Hamlet lets none of them declare his identity. None of them function to constitute a self.

To distill these reflections on Hamlet's problem into a philosophical point, I conclude with two related claims. The first, clearly, is that *Hamlet* inherits and amends in a novel manner the traditional picture of *akrasia*. Hamlet is perhaps the first *cognitive* akratic, that is, the text renders **(p.33)** intelligible an image of human moral psychology in which a cognitive state—*thought*, bluntly put—alone can make self-organization impossible in the face of action. In *Hamlet* logos does not hold the reins but itself is one of the beasts, and this raises a fascinating question about just what, and where, the self is for Hamlet and in *Hamlet*. Hamlet effectively dislodges his sense of self from any of the features of the mind traditionally imagined to be capable of housing it: not just desire and passion but even thought itself.<sup>22</sup> There would seem nowhere to go from here, no further feature of the psyche to make expressive of his self through a grand act of identification. But the play indicates a striking possibility.

To bring this possibility to view, we must first note that it is a mistake to think, as critics sometimes do, that *Hamlet* pushes the self deeper into the psychological interior, hiding it more thoroughly from the public world than classical models of mind could countenance. Hamlet's self is marked by radical *abstraction* and not *interiority* or *innerness*.<sup>23</sup> It is the image of a self, dim and merely implied, as what remains when I say, *I am not this*. As Hamlet wishes, it is formless, "dew-like," removed from "the sun," and thus a self largely without defining qualities. But herein lies the accomplishment: showing that one can generate, and identify with, a voice that functions **(p.34)** only to express alienation from all that would otherwise make self-constitution possible: desires, thoughts, actions—the whole lot of it. This is of course a profoundly estranged self-image, and that is the point. Nietzsche calls it the "pathos of distance," which is achieved through "out-looking and down-looking" on those we deem beneath us.<sup>24</sup> For Hamlet it just happens that the objects of this pathos are internalized, not other people but all those features of ourselves upon which we can hang a determinate self-concept. Whatever we may think of the desirability of this self, the text pulls off an impressive philosophical trick: it reveals that self-constitution can consist in acts of self-

alienation and refusals of self-expression (in the sense given here), and it shows that, despite appearances, there is nothing really contradictory about the idea. Hamlet is of course happy to accept the consequence of this: that it makes of the self an “airy nothing,”<sup>25</sup> a fiction not unlike the characters on the stage in his try at theater in act 3. But this fiction, this air of a self that is brought to view only obliquely, is, for all that, *an image of a self*: of one whose particular way of being consists in not being one way or another. There is nothing to know about this self; it has virtually no determinacy, except, of course, the determinacy of a refusal. Yet it has a voice—a **(p. 35)** decisively negative one—and it can be heard, indeed even enacted on the stage, and it is thus a proper object of dramatic and philosophical appreciation.

### The Matter of Meaning

We can now return to the question with which we began. We have a candidate insight, into selfhood, as my interpretation has it. And so we have something that seems a potential object of understanding, perhaps even an example of the sort of thing literary knowledge might be knowledge *of*. To make a first pass at this, assume for a moment the aptness of my interpretation, just to see what follows from it.

Note that what my interpretation has yielded is the very thing that a common line of thought tells us will not do if we wish to assert literature's philosophical and cognitive value. What I have drawn from *Hamlet* is just an image: a *vision*, fictional at that, of a person burdened with a peculiar sense of self. And a certain kind of philosopher will complain that images, pictures, visions, and the like merely represent a state of affairs; they do not establish its truth.<sup>26</sup> Something must be *done* with an image if it is to lead the mind to truth and knowledge, some surrounding apparatus of argumentation must be provided, some reason must be proffered for *believing* that it gets things right; hence the desire for propositions and proofs mentioned in section "A Kind of Life". The worry, with us since Plato, is **(p.36)** that literature's manner of "showing" is *mimetic* and not *epistemic*. Art presents a picture but *demonstrates* nothing about it; that is, it does not show the picture to be reasonable, right, accurate, revelatory of reality: *anything* that could give the image a claim to properly *cognitive* significance. And my interpretation of *Hamlet* appears to walk us directly into this thicket of worry. It is worth adding that the picture of the self *Hamlet* inherits and amends is, it turns out, likely false: modern sciences of the mind do not countenance the existence of tripartite psyches or a thing called "logos." So how could *Hamlet* lead the mind to something called insight, to something one might *know*?

The above line of reasoning is too quick and too manifestly philosophical in respect to the terms it offers us for addressing the issue. First things first, *Hamlet* in fact does demonstrate something. It even shows something to be the case; it *establishes* something. It may not be the truth of a proposition about what selves—all or most of them—in fact are. Nor is it quite a conclusion about the nature of self-experience. But for all that, something is still made very clear. *Hamlet* demonstrates the *intelligibility* rather than the truth of a certain view of the self. The play makes *comprehensible* a way

of thinking about mindedness and the inescapable presence of the self as a problem, as a “prison.” It turns into an object of *understanding* how anxieties, fears, and material circumstances may conspire to make such an abstracted self desirable, even appear a sanctuary. Truth is important, but so is what *Hamlet* gives us: a refinement of thought, and an enlargement of our sense of the possibilities and complexities of experience. When I assert this, it is important to see that I am not reporting on something that I simply *feel* has happened to me when reading *Hamlet*, describing, as it were, the private glow of personal illumination. There may be some of that, but what bears primary witness to this refinement of understanding is the refinement of terms, concepts, distinctions, and habits of thinking about selves displayed *in the work of criticism*: in the struggle, public in nature, to **(p. 37)** state what one finds of significance in *Hamlet*. If one does not think that this is in evidence in my interpretation, it will be if one begins to work through the history of *Hamlet* criticism and its brighter achievements.

This form of demonstration is narratological and perhaps not in any interesting sense epistemic. A narrative demonstration aims not at establishing the truth of some matter but rather at showing that a coherent story can be told of it. It demonstrates, for instance, that a view of the self as formless, estranged, and abstracted can be given sense in the context of a kind of life. The story makes this view of the self meaningful, not, of course, by tracing the boundaries of a concept and defining it in propositional terms, but by showing us what it amounts to as a kind of human experience, as a way, that is, one might be in the world. Thus while it is fair to say that *Hamlet* demonstrates the intelligibility of a certain conception of the self, it is not a merely conceptual mode of presentation. It presents the “idea” of this self as *embodied*, placed on the concrete stage of human action and relationship. The concept is given flesh, indeed Hamlet’s “too sallied flesh” (1.2.129), and so it becomes intelligible to us as a precisely shaped human situation. Literary works, because of their way with fictional narratives, can infuse understanding with a sense of what a certain slice of life looks like when configured in the light of the concepts and “ideas” upon which we habitually rely: despair, joy, alienation, or weakness of the will as *these* “patterns in the weave of our lives.” It is essentially our understanding of this that I am claiming literature refines,

expands, and enlivens. Fictions, for reasons entirely too obvious to be worth mentioning, give us infinitely more opportunities than the actual world does for providing these slices of life.

Noël Carroll argues that literary narratives are primarily concerned not with the discovery of new items of knowledge but with the clarification of our existing (moral) concepts and the demands **(p.38)** they place on us.<sup>27</sup> My claim is kindred, at least to the extent that it takes the achievement of a kind of clarity to be paramount. It is literature's ability, as exemplified by *Hamlet*, to link thought to context, concepts to visions of lived experience, "ideas" to cultural conditions, that explains its particular gift to the mind: its "cognitive significance." This acculturation of understanding is what I am claiming to be literature chief's contribution to understanding: its ability, on occasion at least, to bring the contents of our minds more perfectly in line with the "form of life," to misuse Wittgenstein's phrase just slightly. This is, I submit, a fair answer to the question of what literature knows and so of what literary knowledge might be knowledge of. It is in effect a form of know-how: knowledge of how to use fictions, and the narratives that deliver them to us, to bring thought more firmly in line with the material of life: with practices, experiences, relationships, desires, and everything else that bears the mark of the world we are inclined to call ours. True, *Hamlet* is not real, but only a terribly misguided metaphysical view would lead us to conclude that his world is therefore not the human one. Fictional characters and real people are not of a piece, but the practices in which they engage, the relationships they cultivate, and the anxieties that animate them provide the needed undercurrent of shared life, a common stage upon which our ontological differences become visible yet appear to be much less of a big deal. Not every literary work, of course, establishes this shared stage, and some get us wholly wrong. But the terms in which I explicated *Hamlet* provide an example of how we speak when we wish to affirm success.

It is in this way that we can see how to handle the skeptic when she protests, "Hamlet does not exist, and thus the play only **(p.39)** demonstrates that a certain view of the self applies to a fiction, not to us." If *Hamlet* does not establish the truth of a certain view, it by extension does not establish that it is true of any one of us. In other words, it does not attempt

to say that this is how we, or even how some of us, *are*. To this extent, Nietzsche is vindicated. But the achievement of *Hamlet* is more fundamental than can be captured in these terms, and it enjoys a certain priority to matters of truth. The point is simple. Before we can query the truth of various ways of taking ourselves and our world to be, we must first have the vision itself. That is, what renders talk of truth and falsity meaningful is a more basic cultural accomplishment: the production of these visions of life and the fleshing out of a sense of the world and the possibilities of experience it contains. What *Hamlet* gives us in respect to the self is more akin to a moment of genesis than the discovery of a fact: the establishment of an image, in the form of Hamlet himself, that holds in place a cluster of concerns about self-organization, thought, and action. This is one way of explaining why *Hamlet* provides the framework for so many philosophical, psychoanalytic, theological, and existential analyses of the person. *Hamlet* creates the terms for the debate and so a ground on which it can be carried out. By rendering intelligible such a view of the self, *Hamlet* offers a refinement of our capacity to think about what it means to be minded and the burden of self-experience this can place on us, at least on those of us whose “melancholy” makes such a self seem desirable. The compliment to be paid to this is not to call it “true” but “foundational”: it is the *establishment* of grounds for a manner of thinking about persons and their plights. That these grounds have proven productive and valuable is brought to relief not by, or just by, looking inside the work; we see it most asserted clearly in all the theories, arguments, and artworks built upon it in the four hundred years since its first performance. The general point one should take from this is it is often best to see literary narratives as intervening in the real by, as it were, **(p.40)** *making* sense: by creating a distinct sense of the nature of some feature of human action and predicament. This does not flag the dull point that fictional narratives are intelligible; it highlights the more interesting fact that they can, as *Hamlet* has, play a role in creating the conditions of intelligibility.

Before concluding I have to address a final item of business. What happens if we no longer assume the aptness of my interpretation? What happens, that is, if we look out across the vast expanse of skeptical, theological, psychoanalytic (and so on) interpretations? Does everything I have just argued for

suddenly become provisional, at least until I can refute all competing interpretations? Does the assertion of my interpretation commit me to the painfully conservative view that all other interpretations are illegitimate just to the extent they conflict with mine? I trust it does not, and while these questions open up all those great debates on the nature of interpretation—debates I clearly do not have the space to address here—I want to say why I think it would be an error to think that they vitiate the points I am putting on offer here.

The mistake, I think, is to think that conflicting interpretations necessarily assign conflicting *content* to a literary work. We can be inclined to think this when held captive by a bad picture of what content is in a literary context. The picture can be put a number of ways, though one way is to cast it in terms of a mistaken view of the relationship between text and meaning. It is to model our thinking of how literary works bear meaning on our model of how sentences do. As a sentence is a vehicle of a proposition, a text, on this picture, is a vehicle of a meaning. And as a proposition just *is* the content of a sentence, a meaning just *is* the content of a text. Thus my reading falsifies the very content of *Hamlet* if it turns out that the play is not really about selfhood—that it does not contain this meaning—or at any rate not about it in the manner I have claimed. But a literary work is very unlike a sentence. There are many reasons for this, but I trust **(p.41)** a few simple examples will suffice. Consider the difference, radical indeed, between the meaning of “meaning” in these cases:

1. What is the meaning of the Gullah sentence, “A ain shame eben one leetle bit ob de Good Nyews”?<sup>28</sup>
2. What do the recent attacks on Paris mean?

And, more colloquially,

3. Exactly what were you reporting when you confessed that you threatened a man with a severed limb?
4. What does the Trump presidency say about us?

In cases 1 and 3 we are asking about the semantic meaning of a linguistic vehicle, and our knowledge of communicative intentions gives us very good reason to assume that they each attempt to generate one and only one content (if not, then the sentences are ill-formed or not a genuine attempt to convey a content). In cases 2 and 4, however, we are talking about

*culture* and not *assertions*, events and not linguistic vehicles. We might find conflicting Marxist, libertarian, or Seventh-day Adventist interpretations of 2 and 4, but clearly here the conflict is between the values, concerns, and philosophical commitments different interpreters endorse. The “content” of these examples, like the content of a narrative, is a constellation of events, sayings, doings, and happenings, delivered to us through language but not themselves linguistic in nature (an attack on a city is *not* a sentence). In disagreeing in our interpretations, we call into question the terms we each deem appropriate for capturing the significance of these events, their “meaning” in a broadly “existential” sense. Still, each interpretation **(p.42)** takes itself to be attempting to specify the nature of these events: of what they are *about* and so of what they mean. If I call a certain act or practice violent, I take myself to be saying something about its nature, about it the way that *it is*. Only a profound act of dissociation, or self-doubt, would permit me to experience the violence I see in a blow as a mere projection, a reflection of my attitudes but not also of the quality of the event.

It is at this juncture that we do well to think of *Hamlet* in its natural state, as a play, and to recall that literary works in general, though offering us a texture of words, function to bring before us the texture of a world: an image of a weave of life. When we ask what bears meaning, it is in the primary instance the configuration of life we might find on the stage or page. The “content” of this just is the actions, sayings, sufferings, and predicaments enacted before us. My interpretation, and most others that are philosophical in nature, are attempts to put to words the significance of life so configured. It is the attempt to find terms appropriate for revealing why this weave of fictional life suggests to us something of consequence about, if not exactly ourselves, then certainly selves and their complexity. It is the intricacy of the “form of life” we find in it that underwrites the variety and openness of manners in which we can, with apparent legitimately, specify what it means. An externalist interpretation that casts Hamlet as suffering from a disappointment in the world surely is in disagreement with an internalist one that casts him as disappointed with the self. Assuming neither of us has simply misperceived or misheard what is happening on the stage, then the conflict is ultimately between how we are inclined to make sense of life, not merely

the “content” of *Hamlet*. We may of course disagree about the (semantic) meaning of various utterances in *Hamlet*, form varying hypothesis about the intentions of its author, discover that we mistook a historical reference, and much else besides. And this may lead us to a different sense of something rightly called the content of the play. These problems are perhaps **(p. 43)** inescapable in the interpretation of art, and I have no wish to deny this. My point, however, is that when the articulation of meaning is performed in the register outlined here, we are engaged in an activity different in nature than when we argue about whether Hamlet’s flesh is “sullied,” “sallied,” or “solid” (1.2.29) and its broader implications for the meanings we find *in* the play.

In this respect, understanding *Hamlet*’s particular way with meaning obliges us to begin the good work of liberating the notion of “literary meaning” from the concept of linguistic meaning, to which the linguistic turn—in both philosophy and literary theory—of the last century yoked it much too tightly. *Hamlet* seems to bear meanings in excess of even our best interpretations not quite because its signification is such a challenge to pin down but rather because its significance strikes us as so potentially vast, perhaps even “unlimited.” It is a work that seems to implicate us, in our very attempts to make sense of it, in the act of working through, and so making meaningful, basic and often elusive features of our ethical, familial, existential, and psychological condition. All these features of the basic stuff of “life” are, of course, constitutionally open to interpretation and reinterpretation, not because we do not know what they “mean” but rather because the sort of meaningfulness they bear is not the sort of thing that gets a final statement. We chip away at it, as philosophy and literature themselves do in respect to the issues and questions that animate them.

### Conclusion

All this leads us round to a simple point. It is hardly surprising, even a truism, though certain trends in philosophy and literary theory have done their part to make such a mundane observation worthy of statement. It is this: what *Hamlet* offers as an object of understanding is **(p.44)** *Hamlet*. This, and not some further thing, is what it makes available to the mind as an object of cognitive attention. It is what it possesses that is

worth knowing, at least if we wish to acquire knowledge of the complexity of our culture's concerns with the self and the varieties of ways it imagines it.

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Notes:

(1.) Joseph Massey, *Illocality* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2015), 4.

(2.) "Presumed" because one can be skeptical about philosophy's actual contribution.

(3.) Many readers will find it bewildering that one might sincerely ask whether literature can “make sense of the world” (of course it can, surely in some manner). But if it bewilders, in academic philosophy, even in academic philosophy of literature, it is still a live question. Given our common ways of understanding the fictionality of imaginative literature, the nature of literary language, and the aesthetic and artistic concerns of art, it turns out to be remarkably difficult to explain in a theoretically satisfying manner how art engages with life. For discussion of this issue from various philosophical and disciplinary vantage-points, see Gerald L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Gaskin, Richard. *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Andy Mousley, *Literature and the Human: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Peter Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); and Bernard Harrison, *What Is Fiction for? Literary Humanism Restored* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

(4.) Readers familiar with contemporary analytic aesthetics will hear in my description of literary knowledge the general problem of “aesthetic cognitivism,” that is, the debate on whether works of art bear distinct forms of cognitive value (and whether they derive their aesthetic value in part from the forms of understanding they presumably articulate). For a survey of contemporary work in this debate, see John Gibson, “Cognitivism and the Arts,” *Philosophy Compass* 3.4 (2008): 573–89.

(5.) Many of these critics were of course philosophers. A very incomplete list of philosophers who have had something to say about *Hamlet* includes Kant, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Arendt, Foucault, and Stanley Cavell. For discussion of the philosophical reception of *Hamlet*, see Simon Critchley and

Jameison Webster, *Stay, Illusion: The Hamlet Doctrine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013); and Andrew Cutrofello, *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

(6.) In setting up my discussion this way I make it clear that I approach *Hamlet* as a literary narrative, as a text, and not as a play, or even as a poem. It is by emphasizing the narrative dimension that I am best able to stage my general philosophical point.

(7.) See Jukka Mikkonen, *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) for an exhaustive survey of these and other such strategies, as well as for a sophisticated defense of the idea that literary narratives can function as enthymemes.

(8.) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 240. The German is *Muster auf dem Band des Lebens*.

(9.) I attempt to spell this out in proper philosophical terms in Gibson, *Fiction*.

(10.) I thank Tzachi Zamir for bringing this issue to my attention.

(11.) This is the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

(12.) Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 1.

(13.) For discussion of the nature of social organization in Hamlet's world and its relevance for understanding his afflictions, see Paul A. Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), chapter 2. In Kottman's reading, *Hamlet* is as much about our moral obligations to the dead and the confounding demands they place on us as it is about Hamlet's "self."

(14.) This line appears in the F but not in Q2 or in Q1. It appears in the Arden II edition (Harold Jenkins), which prefers but does not always privilege Q2, at 2.2.250.

(15.) The Stoics, unlike Plato and Aristotle before them, clearly cannot explain *akrasia* as simply conflict between thought and passion, since the latter so essentially enlists the former. Nonetheless, they can distinguish between different ways in which different judgments can conflict, one, for example, that is rationally sanctioned and the other, embodied in a powerful emotion, that is not (my unshakable thought that another drink would make the evening better, even though I know, and rationally identify, with the judgment that it is best to be sober around colleagues). For a study of (early) Stoic moral psychology, see Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For an excellent survey of the concept of *akrasia* in Greek philosophy, see A. W. Price, *Mental Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). For discussion of the Platonic roots of *akrasia* and the “tripartite soul,” see the essays collected in Christopher Bobonich and Pierre Destrée, eds., *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy: From Socrates to Plotinus* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

(16.) This is also what makes *Hamlet* seem so prescient in respect to various modern critiques of rationalist views of the human.

(17.) Zahavi 2011, 326–27.

(18.) This is the continuation of 2.2.250 in F, and while it refers to Denmark, the passage treats it as a synecdoche for a much wider landscape.

(19.) Zamir 2007, 168–69.

(20.) In the Hegelian tradition of interpretation, this craving for indeterminacy is linked both to a kind of angst (with existence and the pressures it places on us), and to a desire for the freedom of pure potentiality. On this, see Kristin Gjesdal’s “Reading Shakespeare—Reading Modernity,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9.3 (2004): 17–31.

(21.) This way of thinking about the self comes into the philosophical literature by way of Harry Frankfurt's still highly influential theory of identification, according to which selves have (second-order) volitions regarding which (first-order) desires constitute our self-concept as agents (our "will"). See Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). This line of thought can also be developed in terms of so-called narrative conceptions of the self, in which case the important act of identification will not, or not just, be with desires but, crucially, with the events and experiences that provide the content of the stories we tell of ourselves and the lives we lead. See Marya Schechtman, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for an excellent defense of this.

(22.) For elegance of argument, if it can be called that, I ignore a possibility. I have approached moral psychology with the classical picture of the tripartite self and claimed that *Hamlet* breaks its mold. But the tripartite picture of the self was effectively expanded by Augustine and later medieval moral psychology, and the amendment would have been very familiar to any Elizabethan who entered a church. It is the addition of a fourth element, the will (*voluntas*). There is perhaps an element of this in *Hamlet*, namely, that Hamlet effectively houses his identify in something will-like. In a sense, the will is just the voice of *agency*, the part of the person that makes pronouncements of identification with various desires, beliefs, and values. Nonetheless, *Hamlet* still can be said to revise the traditional view of even this picture, since the will is now conceived as generating an entirely negative voice, not as constituting agency through acts of psychological identification but in the refusal to do so.

(23.) On the idea of inwardness, interiority, innerness, and the like, see Anne Ferry, *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion's Triumph over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

(24.) Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1917), 197. Parts of the passage in which this phrase appears would seem to offer much more for making sense of Hamlet: “Without the *pathos of distance*, such as grows out of the incarnated difference of classes, out of the constant out-looking and down-looking of the ruling caste on subordinates and instruments, and out of their equally constant practice of obeying and commanding, of keeping down and keeping at a distance—that other more mysterious pathos could never have arisen, the longing for an ever new widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, further, more extended, more comprehensive states, in short, just the elevation of the type ‘man,’ the continued ‘self-surmounting of man,’ to use a moral formula in a supermoral sense.”

(25.) *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (4.1.16).

(26.) What I canvass here are often described as arguments for aesthetic anticognitivism, that is, the idea that art, literature included, derives none of its value from its contributions to human understanding and the growth of knowledge. See Stolnitz, Jerome. “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32.3 (1992): 191–200 and Terrence Diffey, Terrence. “What Can We Learn From Art?” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2 (1995): 204–11 for classic anticognitivist arguments.

(27.) See Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126–60. His position is aptly labeled “clarificationism.” I resist the temptation to refer to my position as “acculturationism,” on obvious aesthetic grounds.

(28.) It is a line from the Gullah New Testament and can be translated as, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.”

