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Andrzej Wierciński & Andrej Božič (*Eds.*)

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Hamlet and the Philosophical Interpretation of Literature

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Abstract

The huge tradition of philosophical readings of *Hamlet* is focused here on the theme of *unknowing* as crucial to Shakespeare's epistemology. In contrast with the rising paradigm of experimental science, which Hamlet and fellow student Horatio bring into the play and which informs even the *method* employed for proving the guilt of the king, *Hamlet* dramatizes the advent of a new model of unknowing knowing by faith in "providence." This constitutes a transformation of an older paradigm of prophetic

knowledge by revelation, which comes to Hamlet in the form of the ghost of his father, a figure arousing doubt rather than certainty, and hesitation rather than action. With Hamlet's blind trust in what he calls "providence," the metaphysical order is no longer an object of knowledge, and yet it can ground belief and can still guide a kind of action that proves finally to be efficacious, even if tragic. Philosophical readings by Cutrofello, Critchley, Pascucci, Lukacher, and others are shown to line up with this non-objective kind of knowing, or more exactly unknowing, which nevertheless renews a kind of prophetic dimension of revelation in poetic language.

Keywords: prophecy, apophasis, modern thought, negative poetics.

Hamlet in filozofska interpretacija literature

Povzetek

Znotraj obsežne tradicije filozofskih branj *Hamleta* se pričujoči članek osredotoči na tému *nevédenja* kot bistveno za Shakespearovo epistemologijo. V nasprotju z razraščajočo se paradigmo eksperimentalne znanosti, kakršno v igro pritegneta Hamlet in njegov študentski prijatelj Horacij in kakršna navdihuje celo *metodo*, uporabljeno za dokaz kraljeve krivde, *Hamlet* dramatizira nastop novega modela nevedočega védenja s pomočjo vere v »previdnost«. To konstituira transformacijo starejše paradigme preroškega védenja s pomočjo razodetja, kakršno se Hamletu prikazuje v obliki duha njegovega očeta, osebe, ki namesto gotovosti spodbuja dvom in namesto delovanja obotavljanje. S Hamletovim slepim zaupanjem v tisto, kar sam imenuje »previdnost«, metafizični red ni več objekt védenja, a vseeno lahko utemeljuje verovanje in vodi nekakšno delovanje, ki se nazadnje izkaže za učinkovito, četudi tragično. Prispevek ponazarja, da se filozofska branja Cutrofella, Critchleyja, Pascuccija, Lukacherja in drugih ujemajo s takšno ne-objektivno vrsto védenja oziroma, natančneje, z nevédenjem, ki kljub vsemu obnavlja preroško razsežnost razodetja v pesniški govorici.

Ključne besede: prerokba, apofaza, moderna misel, negativna poetika.

Any volume on philosophy and literature is well advised to take account of the range and depth of the vast assortment of philosophical interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an orienting paradigm. This work has stimulated philosophical reflection and like hardly any other has been a crux for philosophers and for critics raising crucial, overarching questions concerning the nature and limits of the philosophical interpretation of literature. Shakespeare's play has proved endlessly provocative throughout the centuries for philosophers, as well as for thinkers in all sorts of related fields of reflection. I have elsewhere touched on this synergism and have proposed my own philosophical interpretation of Hamlet.[1] I have also in another, related essay treated particularly Stanley Cavell's interpretations of Shakespeare as exemplary of what philosophical interpretation of literature is capable of accomplishing.[2]

Here, I wish to broaden my consideration to other thinkers and critics who have developed certain philosophical aspects of Shakespeare interpretation specifically in relation to *Hamlet*. Even more restrictively, I choose those approaches that agree with mine in emphasizing *unknowing* as key to the Shakespearean epistemology that can be discovered so revealingly in its first emergence in *Hamlet*. Starting from Cavell's focus on skepticism in Shakespeare, we can trace the exquisite ways, in which skeptical, early modern philosophy issues in a transformation of traditional, ancient, and medieval knowledge by revelation into a prophetic *un*knowing. Even this delimitation still designates a field within Shakespeare criticism that is so vast as to be susceptible of no more than highly selective treatment of a few outstanding and suggestive cases that happen to have come to my attention—and only in their most general lineaments.

Unknowing in Shakespeare comprises a sprawling and almost unfathomable continent of criticism. This shadowy theme of unknowing can be found almost anywhere in Shakespearean criticism. However, it has been most densely concentrated in and around *Hamlet* as its commonly admitted matrix and emblematic standard bearer. The discussion of *Hamlet* alone on this topic is staggering. My previously published essay "Prophecy Eclipsed: *Hamlet* as a

1 Franke 2000; expanded and revised: Franke 2016.
2 Franke 2015a.

Tragedy of Knowledge" (in *Secular Scriptures*, Chapter 3) gives the gist of my reading of the play as a tragedy of knowledge. The tragedy is that access to the other world through prophetic vision by the "prophetic soul" based on unquestionable faith in Christian revelation is largely lost for Hamlet from the play's outset. This sublime heritage of immediate revelation through faith belongs to the father and his idealized world that comes back to haunt Hamlet only in the guise of his father's ghost. This traditional knowing by revelation has been challenged by the rising scientific paradigm of knowing that Hamlet and Horatio are assimilating as students at Wittenberg. Yet, there is also a perennial kind of *un*knowing that Hamlet discovers and that turns him toward faith in divine providence ("there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow," etc.). This new-found type of blind faith in providence issues in active striving and unreserved giving of oneself and one's all.

The previous, just mentioned essay outlines the eclipse of prophetic revelation in *Hamlet* and the emergence of a new, modern, action-oriented episteme. However, ancient and modern epistemological models alike are axised on the pivot point of *unknowing* as sheltering the secret source of true wisdom. This, in fact, has been the key to philosophical interpretations of Hamlet across the last four, and especially the last two, centuries—since Goethe. The last two centuries of criticism have focused on the introverted psychology of the character of Hamlet and have accentuated and interiorized the concentration on a void at the play's center.[3] Prophecy itself, given its at least apparent dependence on a transcendent principle beyond human knowing, can be understood as a particularly potent form of unknowing: the experience of radical unknowing serves as a grounding for belief, and prophecy is a form of belief requiring personal investment through a commitment of faith.[4]

The vast tradition of philosophical readings of Shakespeare, centering especially on *Hamlet*, demonstrates over and over again how the gesture of negation is the key to the peculiar insight that Shakespeare's plays convey and disseminate. Stanley Stewart surveys the engagement of modern philosophers

3 Cf. Margreta de Grazia 2007.

4 I expound this notion of prophecy in Franke 2015b.

with Shakespeare in this vein.[5] A similar conclusion is borne out by the diverse considerations of a host of philosophical interpreters such as Colin McGinn and Leon Harold Craig.[6]

Striking is that the innumerable philosophically profound readings of *Hamlet* all in one way or another turn on the dynamic power of *un*knowing that he embodies in the play. Cutrofello's *All for Nothing: Hamlet and Negativity* sums up this tendency already in its title and builds on a battery of predecessors. For Cutrofello, Hamlet represents, before all else, the power of negativity (2014, 2): he "personifies negation" (2014, 9). Cutrofello finds his cues especially in Walter Benjamin (Cutrofello 2014, 97–98), for whom this negativity turns revolutionary and even messianic.

For Benjamin, *Hamlet* alone redeems the allegorical time of the German tragic drama, which is otherwise oppressively boring. *Hamlet* manages this feat by tarrying with this negativity and by striking "Christian sparks" of redemption from it:

> In the tragedy, Hamlet alone is a spectator of God's grace; yet not what is represented to him but only his own destiny can satisfy him. His life, as exemplary object of his borrowed mourning, points, before being extinguished, to Christian providence, in whose bosom his mournful images are converted into blessed existence. Only a life such as this princely one redeems melancholy, which confronts itself. The rest is silence. (Benjamin 1974, 335.)[7]

Cutrofello's encyclopedic and yet pithy survey demonstrates the astonishing extent, to which *Hamlet* has accompanied and even guided modern

5 Stewart 2010.

6 McGinn 2007 and Craig 2001.

7 The German original reads: "Hamlet allein ist für das Trauerspiel Zuschauer von Gottes Gnaden; aber nicht was sie ihm spielen, sondern einzig und allein sein eigenes Schicksal kann ihm genügen. Sein Leben, als vorbildlich seiner Trauer dargeliehener Gegenstand, weist vor dem Erlöschen auf die christliche Vorsehung, in deren Schoß seine traurigen Bilder sich in seliges Dasein verkehren. Nur in einem Leben von der Art dieses fürstlichen löst Melancholie, indem sie sich begegnet, sich ein. Der Rest ist Schweigen."

philosophical theorizing of negativity. The play has been a constant reference for modern philosophy since Descartes, as is witnessed, for example, by Jaakko Hintikaa's influential "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?"[8] This unforgettable play has even retrospectively insinuated itself into our understanding of ancient negation and tragedy from Sophocles to Socrates.

Philosopher Simon Critchley and psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster likewise read Hamlet in terms of negation and particularly of desire as a kind of negation as analyzed psychoanalytically.[9] Psychoanalysis since Freud quite generally has been obsessed with Hamlet as an emblematic figure for the Oedipus complex. Lacan offers the perfect means for turning this psychoanalytic approach into a psychology of unknowing based on the linguistic negativity of the signifier.[10] In the context of this essay, it is especially telling that Critchley's philosophy more generally pivots on a systemic negativity of knowing that issues in a strange kind of "faith."[11]

The goal of Critchley and Webster in leveraging philosophical readings by Lacan, as well as by Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Benjamin, Freud, and the like, is to open "a compelling engagement with the play itself," one not without a certain rashness—and praised be rashness for it—based on the wisdom of "knowing nothing." Ophelia, of course, says more than once that she knows nothing (II.ii.105). "The point might be that if there is any providence at work, then we know nothing of it." (Critchley and Webster 2013, 23.) The word "nothing" is inventoried by Critchley and Webster as the linchpin for their reading of the play. This is spelled out especially in their internal chapter (2013, 26–38) borrowing for its title the Player Queen's phrase "It Nothing Must" (III.ii.150). For them, *Hamlet*, in a deep sense, is a "play about nothing," in other words, "a nihilist drama" (2013, 26).

"Nothing" is the key word in Hamlet in all sorts of apparently incidental ways—for example, in the talk about the ghost from the first act (I.i.22) and again when it reappears to Hamlet in the scene where he berates his mother

8 Hintikaa 1962.
9 Critchley and Webster 2013.
10 Cf. Lacan 2013, especially chapter "Sept leçons sur Hamlet." An integrative overview is offered by Hoornaert 2021.
11 Critchley 2012.

who sees "nothing" at all, although she sees "all that is." She also hears "nothing but ourselves" (III.iv.135–137). For Hamlet, Claudius, the king, is a thing "of nothing" (IV.iii.28–30). Again, in conversation with Ophelia, very serious play is made with the "nothing" that Ophelia allegedly thinks and that Hamlet says is a fair thought to lie between maids' legs (III.ii.106–109). Laertes later says of Ophelia's mad, yet piercingly revealing singing that "This nothing's more than matter" (IV.v.171). The word actually infiltrates every part and aspect of the play, as critics have been very keen to point out.[12]

For all their concentration on this word "nothing," these philosophical readings of *Hamlet* in terms of negation finally draw the play away from any focus on language and revelation in the word and relate *Hamlet* to what remains wholly Other and unrepresentable, beyond the reach of language. This "apophatic" nothing, too, teaches us to read for what is *not* being said and perhaps cannot be said. It can be heard aright only when ordinary hearing and communication stop. Ned Lukacher, in the name of Deleuzean immanence, arrives at what I call "apophasis" by an opposite route, stressing not the crisis of prophetic revelation as a loss of transcendence, but rather immanent transcendence.[13] Transcendence and immanence indicate diverging ways, which in the end converge upon the apophatic inability to articulate either condition taken in its absoluteness.[14]

Truly prophetic revelation of the other world reveals that it is unrevealable. This has already been intimated in the ghost's disclosures. Despite some very detailed, graphic descriptions of the other world, the ghost is forbidden to divulge its actual contents (I.v.14–23). In truth, this order of reality is beyond the pale of representation. Such is the drift of Lukacher's quest for the primal scene, from which the play erupts: it, too, above all, proves to be refractory to representation. The other world is revealed only through the subjective reactions it effects. Pouring poison in the ear, which the ghost does describe, is as close as we come. This turns out, Lukacher emphasizes, to be a very apt image for deranging the channels of sensory reception and representation so that a

12 Prominent among them are: Calderwood 1983 and Jaanus Kurrik 1979.
13 Lukacher 1986, 178–205.
14 For this topic in another context, see Brown and Franke 2016.

prophetic word can no longer be directly conveyed.[15] Hamlet is summoned, above all, to *hear* the word of the ghost ("List, list, O, list," I.v.24; "Now, Hamlet, hear," I.v.34). But precisely hearing is interfered with, indeed poisoned, by the king's crime.

For Lukacher, the play's primal scene lies in words not as *representing* some external, extralinguistic event, but rather as *themselves* poisoning and wounding. The act of pouring poison in the ear of the sleeping king substitutes for the primal scene of his murder, which is unrepresentable. The image purveyed by this scene is a kind of cypher signifying a destruction of representation itself symbolized by its channels or modes—particularly hearing and language.

Hamlet thus breaks through to a post-representational, post-metaphysical statute of language. In Lukacher's reading, the poisoning through the ear, as revealed visually by the ghost's description to Hamlet in Act I, scene v, is echoed by "The Murder of Gonzago" both in the opening dumbshow and in the ensuing dramatic recital, as well as in its effects on its audience. Using, but also relinquishing, language art as their instrument, these are the means by which self-reflection can be realized completely and absolutely by the subject—making it an internal possession, as in Hegelian *Er-innerung*. This type of poisoning, according to Lukacher, does not leave a trace behind.[16]

The original scene of the crime cannot be properly represented, but it can be reconstructed, or rather invented, artificially and theatrically. The silent language of the dumbshow, with which "The Murder of Gonzago" begins, is an archaic stylistic device (Lukacher 1986, 229) that does this concretely, since it is undecidable whether Claudius's crime is itself modeled on the play, which he might have seen beforehand, or the other way around. For Lukacher, "Through 'The Murder of Gonzago' and its dumb show, Shakespeare has poisoned the notion of representation." (1986, 232.) In the play within the play representing playacting, as the Player King says, "our devices still are overthrown" (III. ii.196). Citing Hamlet's baptism of the play within the play as "'The Mouse-trap.' Marry, how? Tropically" (III.ii.220), Lukacher concludes: "Shakespeare's

15 Lukacher extends this reflection in chapter 3 of *Daemonic Figures: Shakespeare and the Question of Conscience* (cf. 1994, 126–161).

16 This last paragraph makes reference to chapter 6 of *Primal Scenes* entitled "Shakespeare in the Ear of Hegel" (cf. 1986, 226–228).

archaic paratactic style burrows beneath the ground of representation, turning the trope into a trap." (1986, 233.)

In the final scene, Hamlet has a keen presentiment of ill ("how ill all's here about my heart," V.ii.193), a heartfelt misgiving in accepting Laertes's challenge. Yet, he is no longer ruled by his own self-affection or even by his own reflections. He has a higher standard and guide from outside the circuit of self-reflection, to which he submits and commends himself. This higher calling emancipates him from prophecy in the most superficial and debased sense of prediction of the future. He says: "we defy augury." He embraces and submits to a more natural and universal kind of divine purpose revealed in and through whatever actually happens, which he calls "providence" and which he encounters in an accepting spirit by vigorously and trustingly engaging with the challenges thrown in his way by life and circumstance, including the threat of death. This newfound sense of providence enables him to respond nimbly, as occasion offers, "for the interim is mine" (V.ii.73), that is, the moment between the times that we cannot change, whether behind or before us—the past or our future death.

> There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is it to leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.199–203.)

This is a minimalist version of prophetic revelation as *not* revelation, and yet it engenders the same effects of self-abandon and trust in one's own life and destiny. Hamlet has come to recognize that authentic prophecy delivers not a provable truth but rather a kind of unknowing in which one acts in confidence and without any rational assurances. Such trust is inculcated in the *Bible*, for instance, in Jesus's reassurances in the "Sermon on the Mount" counseling confidence in the future based on God's providential care for his creatures:

> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. But even the hairs of your head are numbered. Are you not worth more than a sparrow? Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Mt 10: 29–31.)

This word of the *Gospels* counsels humans to free themselves from time, with its incumbent privations and hardships, and above all its crippling uncertainties, by living with confidence that beyond the limits of any present moment they will be compensated in the wholeness of time with abundant life. Our part as human beings is not to know when we must leave or what we must leave behind, but simply to be ready to leave "betimes," that is, in a timely fashion as determined by events themselves taken as providential, no matter what they bring or how they may seem to us, whether prosperous or ominous. Hamlet finds that in all things "was heaven ordinant" (V.ii.48), such as his happening to have his father's seal when it is most necessary for him to forge the letters changing his death for that of his betrayers. On the basis of his experience of escape even when betrayed and held prisoner by his friends and facing death, Hamlet believes now that:

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will— (V.ii.10–11.)

Hamlet transmits this edifying discourse urging a life of faith in "a special kind of providence" that cannot be clearly or completely known from within the press of events, but that inexorably takes shape in our lives as a whole—at least if we are able simply to trust in it. Not to be overlooked here is that this insight is expressed by Hamlet in a collective voice and perspective: "*We* defy augury." He has suddenly transcended the limits of the isolated individual who previously spoke in his searingly solitary soliloquys: he now speaks from another height or depth and in a dimension of unlimited relationality to humans and fellow creatures under heaven.

I speak of prophecy still as a relevant category all through the play, even though this mode has turned from prophetic knowing into an unknowing. For prophecy, deeply understood, was always a kind of unknowing: it was based on an acknowledging of a higher power beyond human comprehension. Hamlet finds just such a faith in his orientation to providence in unknowing, which replaces or transforms the prophetic knowledge that is shown to be lost to the modern world from the beginning of the play. Hamlet's last words say it all—"the rest is silence" (V.ii.343). They open the play's perspective to this

unfathomable dimension of the apophatic, from which all within the play and within life is revealed. The play turns our knowing in this direction—toward a disclosure of the great unknowing to which we remain always beholden. In a related key, another of Hamlet's eminently quotable utterances—"Let be" (V.ii.203)—has been read by Cutrofello as echoing powerfully in Heidegger's teaching of *Gelassenheit* (letting be) in response to the Nietzschean will to power. This reference, too, helps to align the play's implicit and incipient philosophy with modern philosophical wisdom of unknowing or apophasis.

The only way to approach this mysterious dimension is through a negative experience of the abyss—in variegated concrete ways, of course, such as death and madness. These are the foyers of revelatory experience in Hamlet. Their uncanniness is signaled also by a certain hysterical levity associated with both. This is patent in the grave-digging scene, as well as in Hamlet's wild wit in feigning madness, or again in Ophelia's mad song. The latter "speaks things in doubt / That carry but half sense" (IV.v.5–7), but by doing so the song rivets attention more than any reasonable discourse possibly could, as the Gentleman reporting to the Queen attests:

> Her speech is nothing
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV.v.7–13.)

Balancing this tragic instance of speech turned revelatory by its very absurdity and incoherence, in the grave-digging scene, the clowns treat death farcically with the hilariously mock pedantic, hair-splitting discussion of Ophelia's death by drowning and her right to be buried in Christian ground. As one clown wittily (and uproariously) insists, to qualify for this right, she must have drowned herself in self-defense. This underling is sardonically suggesting that her social standing has protected her from a rigorous application of the law.

The satirical treatment of subjects as grave as death, but also as serious as class privilege in a rigidly aristocratic society, reminds us of Hamlet's hysterical

levity in addressing the ghost as "truepenny" and "old mole" in the oath-swearing scene. He is frozen with awe before his father as revenant and yet uses irreverent, insulting terms that cast into doubt whether this can all be taken seriously as "true" value. Hamlet ironizes his own awe and respect. This parodic register of the character's own self-reflection mines below representation and subverts its symbolic order. I take this as opening a space for the prophetic in a negative theological sense. Undermining pretended knowledge is the only way to expose its residual, oblique truth. Prophecy in this sense subverts representation in the sense of holding up the mirror to nature and is rather constructivist in producing deeply felt figures for what cannot as such be represented.

A constitutive element of artifice has been essential to this prophetic type of revelation ever since the opening scene with the ghost (not to mention at its sources in the *Bible*), which ends in Hamlet's calling attention to its theatricality, with his mention of the "fellow in the cellarage" (I.v.150). The ghost marks a threshold to the other world, and inspires all the fear and awe that are appropriate reactions to the borne towards the unknown country, from which no man returns, yet the artifice that is necessary in order to represent the unrepresentable is always taken up self-reflexively into the play by its metaliterary awareness of itself as art. An interpretive dimension is the unelidable mediation of this revelation of immediacy, which is to say of divinity.

Hamlet exposes its own represented other world as artifice, notably at this juncture where the ghost cries "swear" and is referred to by Hamlet as "this fellow in the cellarage." This meta-literary self-reference refers to the theatre as theatre, and breaks the illusion of the reality of what is being played by pointing to its artificial frame. Yet, the implication is not necessarily reductive, as if this were simply deception. Art is also a way of gaining access to a higher world beyond the empirical world of natural things or given objects. This self-reference of artifice can be a critical method interpreting the higher world of prophetic revelation in terms of the human process of poetic making. The undermining of representation is tantamount to an acknowledgement of the indispensability of *un*knowing to any form of knowing, not to mention of revelation. That, I suggest, is what Dante does programmatically in his *Vita*

nuova, whose self-questioning protagonist projects the destiny of the modern self-fashioning—but also self-subverting—subject that Shakespeare in *Hamlet* pursues so relentlessly in all of its ramifications.[17]

One crucial turn of this apophatic negativity of modern prophecy as it comes down to *Hamlet* is that it comes about through knowledge being made material. It is the corporeality of Hamlet's ideas, for example, of the spirit of his father materialized as a ghost seen prowling the night, that makes them capable of turning a powerful edge of negation against the corrupt powers of *Realpolitik* in the world. In a confirmedly modern perspective, Margherita Pascucci writes of "the first element of a material knowledge, which Hamlet calls prophecy, but which we know to be simply the truth" (Pascucci 2012, 32).[18] Above all, Shakespeare's creation is through the negative force of "self-causality" that breaks with the seamless system of things as they are given. Pascucci brings into view the "invisible architecture" of Shakespeare's prose as "an absence that torments" and that creates "unprecedented thought" (2012, 3). She apprehends Shakespeare as "generator of continuous new thought, as a star whose light is born and still burning while it seems already gone, gives us the intensity and productivity of an experience where our own self will, at a certain point, be no longer ours […]" (2012, 4). Thus, her reading, in the wake of Walter Benjamin's reflection on allegory, underlines "the combustion of representation" (2012, 1–28) as the pivotal issue of Shakespeare's writing.

This self-dissolution of representation is the result of the self's abiding with the negativity of all that is as what induces its continual self-metamorphosis into what it is not. Pascucci's contention is that in the baroque, as realized most originally by Shakespeare and as illuminated by Benjamin and Deleuze, knowledge becomes a system of "self-combustion of the image." A new system of "pierced images and disjointed time" arises that gives birth to new knowledge based on the self's feeding or "somersaulting" self-reflexively, or "self-affectively," on itself rather than reading the world around it. These modalities of self-reflexivity are most profoundly understood as revolutionary

17 I develop this interpretation further in *Dante's* Vita Nuova *and the New Testament: Hermeneutics and the Poetics of Revelation* (cf. Franke 2021b).

18 The quotation is taken from Chapter 2 entitled "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (cf. Pascucci 2012, 29–50).

transformations and novel modalities of prophetic knowing rather than simply as alternatives to it.[19]

Shakespeare has been an uncommonly and uncannily fecund catalyst of this type of prophetic realization reduced to the terms that remain intelligible in the secularized modern era. In language that similarly resonates with mine, Agnes Heller concludes her book on Shakespeare as a philosopher of history entitled *The Time is Out of Joint* with a theory of "revelatory truth" in Shakespeare.[20] This truth is more of the nature of a religious rite than of a fact that can be checked and confirmed; it belongs to the order of poetic, rather than of historical, truth.

In a more analytic vein, and yet working in an apophatic or at least an aporetic spirit, Graham Priest emphasizes the "dialethic" in *Hamlet* as consisting in things that are both true and not true.[21] Hence, in the words of Hamlet's verses for Ophelia, in the poem which Polonius has confiscated and reads out loud to the court: "Doubt truth to be a liar" (II.ii.117). This equivocal type of revelation runs directly contrary to the Parmenidean dualism of Hamlet's philosophical signature: "To be or not to be" (cf. Cutrofello 2014, 17). It is incarnate, instead, in his response to the ghost: "Speak, I am bound to hear" (I.v.6), which expresses openness and adherence to the prophetic word of revelation as rightly commanding his existence.

Hamlet's opening words in the play deliver his categorical rejection of seeming: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems" (I.ii.75). Nevertheless, the whole revelatory action of the play is directed paradoxically toward ferreting out the truth that depends on "the actions that a man might play" (I.ii.84). Hamlet's inaugural dichotomy breaks down as pretending itself becomes intrinsic to revealing in the sense of the highest type of truth, prophetic truth.

It is crucial from my point of view that this negative aspect of knowledge open the path to a higher kind of knowledge that is figured within the play as "prophetic." It encompasses "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls"

19 My broader treatment of this topic, if I may be indulged in self-reference (in keeping with the theme), is found in *Dante's* Paradiso *and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (cf. Franke 2021a, especially 189–193).

20 Heller 2002, 370.

21 Priest 2008.

(I.iv.56). This kind of knowledge poses a challenge to philosophy of the modern sort rooted in self-reflective Cartesian doubt and requires the latter to learn a certain capability of self-negation. The core of self-reflexive certainty that Descartes's exercise in reflective doubt is designed to produce must learn to place its own self-certainty again recursively into doubt.

In responding to current events concerning the theatre, as he learns of them from Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, and citing whims of the people regarding royalty and its iconic images (the king's "picture in little"), Hamlet imagines a philosophy that could reach beyond merely natural knowledge: "'Sblood, there's something in this more than natural if philosophy could find it out." (II.ii.346–347.) This, again, opens a supra-natural perspective that I call "prophetic," but in a negative register defined as something "more than natural," and thus as *undefined* except in relation to the natural knowledge that it exceeds. Hamlet finds something exceedingly strange in ordinary human behavior itself—as mediated by popular images or idols and theatrical playacting.

This uncanniness has been interpreted by critics in a Hegelian spirit on the basis of Hegel's allusions at the end of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* to the "old mole" breaking through to the sunlight.[22] Marx picked up eagerly on the low vulgar register and materialism of this reference. For Benjamin, following Marx, it is messianic, and Cutrofello follows them both in designating Hamlet as "a model of revolutionary agency" (2014, 99) that knows how to tarry with the negative. This sort of insight into a prophetic shattering of conventional knowledge and a revolution from below realized in poetic language will be picked up again and carried forward by modern poets in Hamlet's wake, notably by Stéphane Mallarmé.[23]

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22 Stallybrass 2001.

23 I pursue this further in "Mallarmé and the Negativity of Prophetic Revelation in Modern Literature" (Franke 2022).

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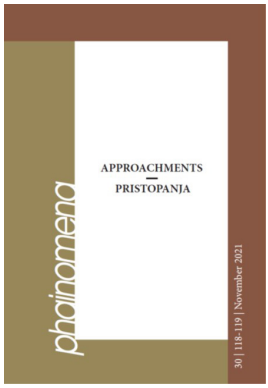

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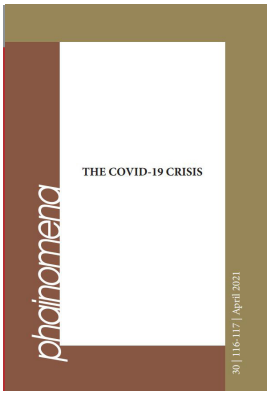

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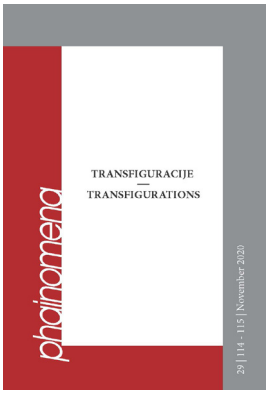

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