

HAMLET

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a desire of satisfying their selfish interest. Then they must be checked, for in that case the cheerfulness of harmless joking gives way to premeditation and dissimulation.—

§ 102. An acquaintance with logical forms is to be recommended as a special educational help in the culture of intelligence. The study of Mathematics does not suffice, because it presupposes Logic. Mathematics is related to Logic in the same way as Grammar, the Physical Sciences, &c. The logical forms must be known explicitly in their pure independent forms, and not merely in their implicit state as immanent in objective forms.

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## H A M L E T.

By D. J. SNIDER.

*Hamlet* is the Sphinx of modern literature. The difference of opinion concerning its purport and character is quite as general as the study of the work. Persons of the same grade of culture and ability hold the most contradictory theories respecting its signification; even the same persons change their notions about it at different periods of life. To others, again, it remains an unsolved mystery. Yet, curious to say, everybody recurs to this play as if it possessed some strange fascination over the mind, as if it had some secret nourishment for the spirit of man which always drew him back to take repeated drafts. A work to which intelligence thus clings must be something more than an idle riddle; in fact, it must lay open some of the profoundest problems of life. Even to appreciate and comprehend such a problem when stated, requires no ordinary degree of culture and thought. Every individual brings his own intellectual capacity to the comprehension of the play, and it is no wonder that people differ so much since they have so many different mental measuring-rods. If one man has a deeper or shallower insight than another, there must be a corresponding difference of opinion. Also advancing years bring along great spiritual mutations; new views of life and broader experience must reveal deeper phases in *Hamlet*, if it be that absolute work which enlight-

ened mankind generally believe it to be. Hence we may account for the frequent occurrence of a change of opinion in the same person at the several periods of life. Indeed, a man ought perhaps to change his opinion concerning this drama once every decade during the first forty years of his existence; it would in most cases be a good sign of increased culture and maturer intellect. According to our own premises, therefore, we can hardly expect to satisfy all or even the majority, and to harmonize the many conflicting opinions. But we intend to grapple honestly with its difficulties, which are both many and great, and to attempt to state the thought which gives unity to its widely diversified parts.

At the very threshold of the subject stands the question of Hamlet's insanity. Was it real or feigned? If he is insane, and so intended by the poet, let us shut the book and say no more, for certainly there is nothing more to be said. But such is not the case. Art is the expression of Reason, and that too of the Reason of a nation, of an age, of an epoch; eliminate this principle, pray, what is left? Criticism, if it be true to its highest end, points out and unfolds the rational element in a drama or other work of Art; but here it could only say: this poem professedly depicts the Irrational, hence the Ugly. A piece which has as its theme the Ugly, cannot well possess much beauty. Moreover, what delight or instruction can there be in the portraiture of the Irrational? Think of the choicest spirits of this and former generations finding spiritual nourishment in the capricious oddities of a madman! In fact, this play would thus become repugnant alike to the intellectual and the moral nature of man: repugnant to his intellectual nature, for it would be stripped of all true intelligence in the dethronement of Reason; repugnant to his moral nature, for insanity destroys responsibility, and thus Hamlet could in nowise be held accountable for his acts. Here lies the greatest objection to the above-mentioned view: it takes away the notion of responsibility, and thereby blasts the very germ of the play. That the poet intends no such thing is very evident. Hamlet has the profoundest sense of duty, the most sensitive moral nature; moreover, the termination of his career at the end of the piece shows how Shakespeare would have us regard the matter. To destroy an insane man for

his deeds would be not merely an absurdity but a moral horror. The view that Hamlet is mad has lately been promulgated with much emphasis by several physicians who have had large experience in the treatment of the insane. Their method of procedure is curious, resting upon a wholly physical basis, though they are judging a work of Art; they carefully reckon up the symptoms and show the various stages, evidently regarding *Hamlet* as a treatise on insanity. One is at first inclined to think that these doctors ought to take the place of their patients, and be incarcerated for a while in an insane asylum. Yet we should not, perhaps, blame them; for does not everybody read into *Hamlet* his own life-experience and culture? Why not let these men read into it their own insanity in peace?

A modification of this opinion is that Hamlet is deranged in some of his faculties, though not in all; is mad at times, with lucid intervals, etc. These views are hardly worthy of a detailed examination; in them all definiteness fades away; their supporters are evidently on both sides, and on neither. But a true criterion may be laid down to guide our wandering steps in this trackless waste of uncertainty. *Hamlet is never so mad as not to be responsible.* Hence, with any ordinary definition of insanity, he is not mad at all. He has undoubtedly weaknesses, so has every mortal; he possesses finite sides to his character and intelligence, otherwise he could hardly perish as the hero of a tragedy. A definition of insanity which includes Hamlet would sweep at least three fourths of mankind into the madhouse. That he is lacking in the element of will, that he is melancholy in his feelings, that his reasoning is often unsound, and in fact so intended by Hamlet himself, is all very true, but does not make out a case of insanity. He assumes madness for a special purpose, and says so when he speaks of his antic disposition; nothing can be plainer than that purpose throughout the entire play. He took a mask to conceal his own designs, to discover the secrets of the King and to deceive the court, and particularly Polonius, the sharp-scented detective, who was sure to be placed upon his track. But why should he take this special form of insanity to hide his plans? This was determined by the character of Polonius, who was no fool, but very astute in his

particular calling, who had therefore to be caught in his own net. That trait of his character in which all others were resumed was cunning. Now Hamlet was known to the court as a man of profound candor and earnestness, and disinclined to all trickery and deceit; hence, to meet Polonius, he had to reverse his entire nature and reputation. But how would everybody regard this sudden transformation? Either in its true light as a disguise, in which case the whole design of it would fail, or that the man had lost his wits. Hence Hamlet, in order to conceal his plans and thoughts, had to counterfeited madness; such was the impression that he was compelled to make upon the world. Thus he had a veil beneath which he could be cunning too, and indulge in all sorts of vagaries without exciting suspicion, and could thwart Polonius and the other court-spies on all sides. Moreover, Hamlet was intimate with Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, and had been dismissed by the father's orders; here was just what was wanted, namely, a ground for the theory of Hamlet's madness—his affection for Ophelia. Hence the self-love of the old courtier assisted in leading him astray; besides, he did not and could not comprehend the profound ethical nature of Hamlet, who had a deep underlying motive for the disguise. Still Polonius sometimes half suspects the truth, for he cannot but observe that there is method in Hamlet's madness. Such are the reasons why Hamlet had to feign insanity. He was the self-chosen instrument of a mighty design, which however for a time required concealment; concealment demanded cunning; cunning was the reversal of his entire rational nature; still, to carry out his end, he had to submit to the circumstances, and hence to assume the garb of the Irrational. How perfectly our poet has succeeded in portraying this disguise is shown by the fact that quite a number of modern critics have been deceived as badly as Polonius. They maintain that Hamlet is mad; that his profound intelligence and his deep, conscious planning mean nothing; or, to cite the expression of one of them, that "madness is compatible with *some* of the ripest and richest manifestations of intellect," whereof Hamlet is an example. Just the thought of old Polonius. Hear him: "How pregnant *sometimes* his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which

reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." Hence we cannot but regard those persons who believe in the madness of Hamlet as in the condition of Polonius in the play: most completely befooled by Hamlet's disguise. If, too, the characters of the play are considered, but little will be found to justify the hypothesis of Hamlet's madness. Besides Polonius, only the two women, the Queen and Ophelia, neither of whom was strong enough to have an independent opinion, take Hamlet to be mad. The King knows better, and acts upon his conviction to the end; moreover, Horatio, the most intimate friend and chosen vindicator of Hamlet, does not seem to have the remotest notion of the insanity of Hamlet.

But, after taking away the question of insanity, there still remains a very great difference of opinion. In regard to the character of Hamlet, one man considers him to be courageous—another, cowardly; one, that he is moral in the highest degree—another, that he is wicked; one, that he possesses vast energy of will—another, that he has little or no power of action. The same diversity of judgment exists in regard to the play as a Whole. It has been condemned as the wild work of a barbarian; it has been praised as the highest product of modern Art. Between these two extremes almost every shade of opinion has had its representative. Even Goethe denies its unity; he declares that there are many things, such as the story of Fortinbras, the journey of Laertes to France, the sending of Hamlet to England, which have no justification in the thought of the piece. That is, if it be a true totality, we must find some higher solution and some more adequate and comprehensive statement than that of Goethe. In fact, most of these conflicting opinions may in this way be harmonized; they are not absolutely false, but only partial views which become erroneous by laying claim to universality. Hamlet is thus a sort of universal man; in him every individual sees on some side a picture of himself; each one bears away what he comprehends, and often thinks it is all. If Goethe, whose criticism of this play in *Wilhelm Meister* is undoubtedly the best that has yet been given, complained of the many external and unnecessary incidents, our difficulty, be it said with all respect to so great a genius, is

quite of the opposite kind; we are compelled to supply so much, the poet has left so many faint outlines and even wide gaps to be filled up by the thought and imagination, that we would find here if anywhere a blemish in the construction of the drama. He ought rather to have taken a whole volume for his work as Goethe himself did in his *Faust*. But the defence of Shakespeare is at hand. He wrote for representation, which is an essential side of the drama; hence the limits which it imposed upon his art must be respected. In the space of a few hours he develops what might be the theme of the grandest epic. Hence he has dropped much that would otherwise be necessary, and the missing links must be supplied if one wishes to grasp the connecting thought of the piece. It will be seen that for this reason we shall often have to go outside of the poem and bridge over the chasms, for which work however the poet always furnishes the hint. But let it not be understood that we are thus correcting the defects of the play, or even completing what was before imperfect; besides the presumptuousness of the attempt, such a proceeding is destructive of all true criticism, whose duty it cannot be to supply the deficiencies of a work of Art, or to see in it things which do not exist.

First of all, the collision which constitutes the basis of the action of the entire play is between Hamlet and the King. They form the most wonderful contrast, yet both exhibit sides of the same great thought. Hamlet has morality without action, the King has action without morality. Hamlet cannot do his deed at the behest of duty, nor can the King undo—that is, repent of—his deed at the command of conscience. Hamlet represents the undone which should be done, the King represents the done which should be undone. Neither reaches the goal which reason so clearly sets before them, and both perish by the inherent contradiction of their lives. Each one seeks the death of the other, and, by the most rigid poetic justice, they die by the retribution of their deeds.

Hamlet has the most powerful motives which can urge the human breast; his struggle is with one who has murdered his father, debauched his mother, and usurped his throne. These facts are not revealed to him of a sudden in all their fulness; it is the course of the poem to unfold them gradually before

his mind; but even at the beginning his prophetic soul surmised the whole truth. It is a curious fact of anthropology that sensitive natures often feel that of which they have no information; instinct and presentiment seem to supply the place of knowledge. Hence the melancholy of Hamlet at the very outset shows the morbid activity of feeling, though there is a partial motive in the conduct of his mother which is known to him. But when the guilt of the King is as clear as day, he does not act. Why? The answer to this question must give the solution of his character.

Let us make a comparison with the Greek view, for there is an excellent opportunity. In the legend of *Orestes* we see the same content: father murdered, mother debauched, throne usurped. But Orestes, true to the tragic instinct of Greece, is one with his end; he marches directly to it by the deepest necessity of his nature. He never stops to reflect on the character of his act; he never for a moment doubts what he is to do; nothing can possibly interpose itself between him and his deed. To be sure, if that deed was wrong, the dreadful Furies might pursue him with their terrors; but they were something external to him, with which he had nothing to do. In other words, he never asked, never could ask himself the question: Is this act right or wrong? There was his dead father, his only duty was revenge. He might thereby commit another crime equally great, but this reflection he did not make. Hence he did not possess what is now called a moral consciousness, nor was it possessed by the Grecian world, for it is the special product of modern spirit. Now, if we add this moral element to Orestes, we shall in all essential features have Hamlet. Its leading characteristic is to react against the end proposed, to call it into question, and to test the same by its own criteria. Hamlet is impelled by the strongest incentives to kill the King—such is one side; but the other side comes up before him with appalling strength: have I the right to kill him? And here it is important to inquire into the nature of this right which has such authority with Hamlet. It is not law, it is not custom, nor even public opinion; indeed it would defy all these, if it came into conflict with them; it is, therefore, nothing established, and possessing objective validity. Moreover, mankind would justify



him if he slew the King. Hence it is *himself*, his own subjectivity, which he sets up as the absolute umpire of his actions. He cannot satisfy *himself* that he should do the deed, however great the other considerations may be which impel him to it. Here we see the moral consciousness in its extreme expression; it is the assertion of the right of the individual to determine the nature of his act. That the modern world gives validity to this right need not be told to the reader. It is commonly called conscience in the wider and not strictly religious use of the word; by it the individual claims the privilege of determining his own action *through himself*, against all demands of objective institutions, as State, Law, or authority in general. In Hamlet these two sides are in the most fearful contradiction. He acknowledges both principles; he thinks it to be his sacred duty to avenge his father, at the same time he feels the unspeakable iniquity and misery of murder. The difficulty is, he cannot subordinate these two principles of action; at one moment the one is uppermost, but the next moment the other is stronger. Such is the terrible struggle which rends his heart asunder and destroys his peace of mind. It should be observed that in his language he dwells more upon his revenge, and he tries to goad himself onward to it, but there is always the moral scruple which stays his hand. The presupposition of the entire play is the moral nature of Hamlet, hence it is not brought into prominence directly, but is always implied as the element which he is trying to overcome; it is the old stock which he is attempting to inoculate with a new principle. Nor are his scruples without foundation. He is seeking revenge, which means that he is taking justice into his own hands, and hence he commits a new wrong, which in its turn begets another; the result of which conduct, as exhibited in history, is the feud which transmits itself from generation to generation. It is the annihilation of law for the individual to administer the law in his own case. There is, therefore, an institution of society, the court of justice, before which the criminal is to be cited to receive the penalty due to his crimes. But in the present instance the criminal happens to be the King himself, the very fountain of justice and authority. His trial would hence be a mockery, a contradiction in

terms. What remains? Only this: that if the King is to be punished at all, it must be by the individual Hamlet. Thus the deed is thrown back upon him singly and alone, with all its consequences and responsibilities. 'Here we see the internal conflict which always palsied the arm of Hamlet; it is a fearful struggle which may well excite our pity and terror; he would not, yet he could—he could not, yet he would. It is just at this point where we must seek for the tragic element in Hamlet's character. Tragedy is not merely stage-slaughter; in its true significance it exhibits a collision of duties, which duties have equal validity in the breast of the hero; hence he perishes beneath their strife, because he knows not how to subordinate them. Here also may be noticed an essential distinction between ancient and modern tragedy. In the former the character is the bearer of one end alone; each individual has his single object to accomplish, in the execution of which he lays his whole existence; hence the collision is external and between the different individuals who have different ends. But modern tragedy, while it has this element too, possesses in its most complete manifestations an additional principle; it makes the collision internal as well as external; the same individual has two different and contradictory ends, both of which demand realization; thus there is a double collision, with himself on the one hand, and with the external individual on the other.

But this does not yet complete the statement of the collision in Hamlet's mind. It involves in its sweep not merely the moral but also the entire intellectual nature of man. We shall revert for a moment to our former illustration taken from the Greeks. They lacked not only the moral consciousness above mentioned, but the whole realm of which it is only a part—the absolute mediation of spirit with itself; in other words, subjectivity in its highest form, or, to employ still another expression, the complete thought of Freedom. On the theoretical side, this is seen in their doctrine of Fate, which at last ruled the King of Gods and men, the mighty Jupiter. An external power thus controls even the Absolute—the highest, after all, has over itself a higher. But it is most plainly observed in the practical affairs of the Greeks; every important action was determined by omens, by oracles, by

prophetic utterances; the greatest generals never gave battle without consulting the sacrifices. This custom, so strange to our ways of thinking, was founded upon an essential limitation of the Grecian spirit. It demanded this external impulse, and no Greek could, as we say, make up his mind, that is, have his will determine out of its own activity, from its own infinite depths, what was to be done. This element, which will perhaps be better understood by the contrast with the Greeks, who did not have it, must be again added to Hamlet in order to embrace all the moments of his character.

Hence between Hamlet and his deed is interposed what we may call the entire world of subjectivity. It is, moreover, this world in its one-sidedness without the objectifying element or Will. We have dwelt upon one phase of this principle, the moral consciousness; but it has many phases, and indeed includes the whole sphere of Intelligence as distinguished from Will. The fact is, therefore, to be emphasized that Hamlet represents the entire range of subjective spirit. This has three leading forms, each of which we shall find in excessive development in Hamlet.

The first and lowest of these forms is the emotional principle of man's nature, which includes the feelings, presentiments, impulses,—all of which are important elements in Hamlet's character, and sometimes are found in morbid activity. It is the dark realm of the Unconscious, in which the guiding light of reason may be dimmed or quite extinguished. So it will be seen when Hamlet follows impulse, not only all rational action is destroyed, but he becomes a criminal. The excess of emotion and passion in which Hamlet is generally portrayed by the poet is highly characteristic of a subjective nature, which must always lack that calmness and steadiness which result from a conscious mastery over the objective world.

The second form is what may be termed the phenomenal principle of mind, in which the subject becomes conscious of itself on the one hand, and of an external world of reality on the other. Upon this world of reality the mind now imposes its own subjective forms, applies its own one-sided predicates to all the manifold phases of existence. Thus the whole objective world from the realm of nature upwards may be

completely transformed by being passed through a peculiar mental medium. Hence this world only appears to be—is phenomenal. Now Hamlet exhibits many characteristics of such a state of mind. He cannot see the rationality of the world; it is a dire, horrible phantasm which he would be glad to leave in a hurry.

“’Tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.”

Thus he did not look at the moral order of the universe in its true reality, but as transmuted in its passage through his own mind. Indeed sometimes even his sensations and perceptions of external objects seem to be affected in the same way, as Coleridge has observed. There is an expression of his own, which, though it probably has a different meaning in the connection where it is found, may nevertheless be applied here: there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. The predominance of this phenomenal principle gives to the play its unreal, ghostly element, a side which will be considered more fully in another place when we come to treat of the Ghost.

The third form of subjective spirit is the psychological, which is the most important of all in the consideration of Hamlet. In the first sphere, the emotional, mental operations were unconscious and instinctive; in the second, the phenomenal, we see the realm of consciousness begin, and the mind busied with the objective world; but now, in the third, it goes back to itself and grasps its own doings. The mind turns from the contemplation of external reality, which trait it showed in the last phase, the phenomenal, and looks at itself, feeds upon its own operations. This is the extreme of subjectivity, the intellect is pushed to the very limit of its own negation, and, unless it can make the logical transition to the Will, it must remain forever entangled in its own meshes. Consider its condition. The mind retires in upon itself and looks at its own operations; this process, however, is a mental process, and in its turn must be scanned; this step, too, being like the preceding, demands examination as well as they; the result is an infinite series in which the mind is hopelessly caught, and in which all action must perish.

Such is what we call Reflection, an interminable passing from one subjective notion to another which in its fundamental nature is mere repetition. Here is the the point where we must seize the character of Hamlet in its concentration; here we must place the limit beyond which he cannot stir. This finitude which he cannot overcome is the ultimate cause of his ruin. If we examine the above-mentioned principles with care, we think that from them can be deduced all the peculiarities of Hamlet's character, and its seeming contradictions understood. We can thus account for the tendency of his mind to play with itself, to seek out hidden relations in every direction. We can thus comprehend how he is so perfectly conscious of all his states, and even of his weaknesses; for Hamlet knows what is the matter with himself, and declares it in the bitterest language of self-denunciation. His fondness for quibbling which seeks the hidden relations of words, is one phase of this same element; his tendency to spin out a notion into all its relations is another; the one finding its material in language, the other in thought. His intellectual keenness in deceiving, in feigning madness, in discovering the plans of his enemies, in reading the thoughts and intentions of others who were sent to pump him or ensnare him, and in many other similar cases, shows him the master of every form of subjective intelligence; he could cast himself into these infinite Protean shapes, could even carry them out as individual acts; but the ultimate purpose of them all was a fruit which he could never reach. Finally, the moral consciousness before spoken of must be referred to this head; for it is only the subjective element claiming the right to determine the deed, demanding that it be satisfied, and in the case of Hamlet refusing to be satisfied.

Moreover, the vicious elements of Hamlet's character spring from the same source. Hence his procrastination, for his mind cannot free itself from the net of its own working so as to translate itself into objectivity. He resolves on the death of the King even with passion; he places his end before himself even with violence; but that end is subjective, and hence exposed to the endless twistings and curvetings of Reflection, and at last is buried beneath the confusion. His sporting with possibilities also finds its basis here; for the

mind is the world of possibilities; they only exist in it, and are hardly to be found in the world of actuality. Here, then, is a glorious field for the exercise of his peculiar faculty; what may be is ever before his mind, and has quite as much validity as what is; nay, sometimes more. Again, what perfect excuses can he frame for not acting, as in the case when he refuses to strike the fatal blow while the King is at prayer, lest the latter might go to heaven! Nobody knew better than Hamlet the absurdity of such a proposition, yet it is good enough for a pretext. But all these psychological peculiarities, of which the play is full, need not be stated, for they have the same logical basis.

Such is the most general form of the internal collision in Hamlet. He is the grand representative of the entire realm of subjectivity, and he exhibits its finitude and its negation in his own fate. For subjective spirit, mere intelligence without activity cannot save man. He must be able not merely to understand the world, but to create it anew in a certain degree; not merely to translate it into the forms of his own mind, but to impose his own forms upon it, to make it the bearer of his own ends. Thus only can man assert his universality. Hamlet knows of action in its highest sense, since he is master of the world of thought, yet he cannot attain to it, though perpetually striving. He is intellectual and but little more. He cannot realize his plan, he cannot make himself valid in the objective world but to a small degree, and, in so far as he falls short of this, he can hardly be called an actual being, since he—his mind, his thought—has no existence in the world of reality. How, then, can he continue to live? It must be found in the end that he has not strength of individuality sufficient to maintain life. He complains of the external world which is always intruding upon his privacy and disturbing his quiet intercourse with himself; he even meditates to end this "sea of troubles" by ending his own existence. It is a troublesome world indeed, which, if it be not controlled, must itself necessarily control.

But it is not our purpose to maintain that Hamlet is excluded from every species of action. On the contrary, there is only one kind of action from which he is wholly excluded, though his tendency to procrastination is always

apparent. Just here occurs, perhaps, the greatest difficulty in comprehending Hamlet's character. He is wonderfully ready to do certain things; other things he will not do, and cannot bring himself to do. In fine, he acts and does not act. Hence different critics have given exactly opposite opinions of him; one class say he possesses no power of action, another class declare that he possesses a vast energy of Will. How can this contradiction be reconciled? Only by distinguishing the different kinds of action of which men are capable. Undoubtedly Hamlet can do some things, but the great deed he cannot reach. We shall attempt a classification of the different forms of action, and point out what lies in the power of Hamlet.

1. Impulse has sway over Hamlet at times as over every human being. This is the first and lowest form of action, unconscious, unreflecting, and belongs to the emotional nature of man, in which, as we have before seen, Hamlet is not wanting. Under its influence people act upon the spur of the moment, without thinking of consequences. Hence Hamlet's drawback—reflection—is not now present, and there is nothing to restrain him from action. But the moment there is delay sufficient to let his thoughts get a start, then farewell deed; impulse possesses him no longer. This is most strikingly shown when he sees the King at prayer; his first impulse is to slay him; but a reflection steps between, and the accomplishment of his plan is again deferred. Moreover, impulse may lead to immoral action, even crime, since it acts regardless of content; it cannot inquire of itself, What is the nature of this deed which I am doing? but blindly carries itself into execution. Hamlet therefore, as a sentient being, is capable of this kind of action, and here is where we must seek the source of all his positive acts. He slays Polonius under the influence of a momentary impulse, and finally even in the catastrophe it requires the goading of a sudden passion to bring him to kill the King.

2. Hamlet possesses what may be called negative action, the power of frustrating the designs of his enemies. He exhibits an infinite acuteness in seeing through their plans; in fact, this seems an exercise of intellectual subtlety in which he takes especial delight; he also possesses the practical

strength to render futile all the attempts of the King against his person. He is prepared for everything; his confidence in himself in this direction is unlimited; he knows that he can "delve one yard below their mines and blow them at the moon." But here his power of action ends; it has only this negative result—the defeat of the schemes against him. It is undeniable that this requires speedy resolution and quick execution, and hence may appear contradictory to what has been before stated; still it is not inconsistent with the character of Hamlet. For this sort of action, though it is no doubt a deed, ends with negating some other deed, and not with any truly positive act. Moreover, it is a condition of the drama itself that Hamlet possesses so much action at least as to maintain himself for a while, otherwise he must fall a victim to the first conspiracy, and the play abruptly terminate. It is only the great substantial deed, which includes all other deeds in its end, that Hamlet cannot perform. This brings us to the next form of action.

3. It is what we term Rational Action from which Hamlet is excluded. Here the individual seizes a true and justifiable end, and carries it into execution. This end Intelligence knows as rational, for it alone can recognize the worth and validity of an end—and the Will brings it to realization. Thus we have the highest union of Intelligence and Will, which gives the most exalted form of action. This unity Hamlet cannot reach; he grasps the end and comprehends it in its fullest significance, but there it remains caught in its own toils. But what would true action demand? There may be doubts and difficulties in the way, but these are ultimately brushed aside; there may even be moral scruples which rear their front, and this is actually the case with Hamlet, but these too must finally be subordinated, the higher to the lower. Thus the rational man acts; having seized the highest end, he casts aside all doubts, reflections, also moral misgivings, for the true morality must be contained in his end, if it be really the highest. Now, what is this end? Hamlet is invoked to vindicate both the Family and State, together with his own individual rights; it is his father who is slain, his king who is murdered, himself who is deprived of a throne. The order of the world is thus turned upside down; he knows that he is born to set it right—that this is the highest



duty, to which every inferior duty must yield; he repeatedly makes his resolution in the strongest terms; yet after all he allows his purpose to be first clouded and then defeated by his moral feelings and interminable reflections. The objective world of Spirit—State, Family, Society, Right—which Hamlet, by station and culture, is called upon to maintain as the highest end which man can place before himself, since upon them depend his very existence as a rational being, is lost in the inextricable mazes of subjectivity.

By this distinction it would seem that the striking contradiction in the character of Hamlet, his action and his non-action, can be reconciled. We are to consider what he can perform and what he cannot. Certain kinds of action lie in his power, but the one great act is beyond his ability. In like manner the difference of opinion among critics upon this subject would meet with a satisfactory solution.

Moreover, this distinction will assist us in dispelling a confusion which very often haunts the reader of this drama. When it is said that Hamlet's reflection destroys his action, is it meant that we should never think before we act? Many have taken such to be the poet's meaning, and even accepted the doctrine that we must go back to impulse and cut loose from our intellect; in other words, they declare that instinctive is higher and truer than conscious activity. They do this because they think that nothing remains but to take the lower form of action, impulse. But we have seen above that there is another more exalted kind, Rational Action, which demands thought, for its content can only be seized by thought, and indeed that content itself is thought in its objective form. Thus Intelligence passes over into reality, becomes a moment of action; man now grasps a substantial end by mind, and then carries it into execution. That the poet does not regard impulse as the true basis of action, is shown by the fact that he gives it to Hamlet, who by this very means is first made a criminal, and then brought to destruction. Hence the lesson is that we are to reflect before acting, but not to stop there. Rational Action is the great object, and that always includes Intelligence. Having grasped a true end (of course through Intelligence), we should proceed to realize it without thinking on all possible relations and consequences. For subjective reflection looks at the deed

and summons up every imaginable possibility. As these are simply infinite, the action is infinitely deferred. Consider for a moment what *may* take place, if you merely go to your daily occupation—a team may run over you, a house may fall on you, a stray bullet may hit you—and it will be evident what possibilities lie in the most ordinary act, what excuses a lively fancy can rouse up to shirk the performance of any duty. Hamlet clearly recognizes this rational end, yet will not translate it into reality because of “thinking too precisely on the event,” to use his own expression.

With this somewhat lengthy introduction, in which it is attempted to give the elements of Hamlet's character in their logical relation, we may now turn to the drama itself and watch its development under the hands of the poet. The plan is quite simple. It is to bring a series of external influences to bear upon Hamlet which first supply him with the most powerful motives and then spur him on to action. Given a character of deep moral feeling and decided intellectual culture, and we have the grand presupposition of the play. Hamlet is introduced as a man about thirty years of age, who has spent a number of years at the University of Wittenberg. It is to be observed that this is a German university, and moreover the home of the Reformation: hints which the poet has given not without a profound purpose. For it is here indicated that the culture of Hamlet is German in contrast to the French culture of Laertes, and hence lays stress upon the internal and spiritual nature of man rather than the outward show and conventionalities of life. For the German mind is now and always has been speculative rather than practical, and hence to-day it is the teacher of the world in thought and philosophy. Also in Germany began that rebellion against the externality of the Catholic church in favor of subjectivity, which rebellion was nourished in this very Wittenberg. So by a happy stroke the poet has identified Hamlet with the great historical movement of modern times which sought to free the human mind from the domination of outward forms and to bring it to a profounder self-consciousness. Hamlet, therefore, is true to his education in the highest degree. But this part of our subject we must reserve for the next number.