

This essay puts the modern philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of foundationalism into dialogue with the early modern playwright William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Doing so reveals a new candidate for Hamlet's traditionally hard-to-define *hamartia*—his “tragic mistake”—while providing an opportunity to theorize the notion of *tragic foundationalism*.

Tragic Foundationalism

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This essay reads Alain Badiou's theory of foundationalism in conversation with William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Doing so reveals a new candidate for Hamlet's traditionally hard-to-define *hamartia*—his “tragic mistake”—while suggesting that foundationalism is *hamartia*. So Badiou clarifies *Hamlet*, while Hamlet's *hamartia*, and the genre of tragedy invoked, helps further develop Badiou's theory. Badiou addresses the origin and operation of foundationalism—how and why we affirm one single belief as an unshakeable truth grounding other questions like *What is real?* and *What should I do?*—but *Hamlet* suggests an ethical turn. Foundationalism is perilous in the play, prompting the concept of *tragic foundationalism*: the decision to affirm one single idea as the basis of all knowledge and experience involves ignorance and confusion and can lead to catastrophe.

My goal is not just to re-read a famous literary text, and not just to re-think a prominent philosopher; it is to re-theorize a philosophical concept through a Shakespearean intervention. Beyond the specifics of my argument about tragic foundationalism, I hope

to uphold a kind of criticism where literature is not merely the recipient of philosophical ideas in the service of exegesis. Instead, the creative risks of literature provide exemplars to be theorized outward to help us understand on-going issues in life today. Beyond an occasion for the demonstration of existing theory, literature is a source for the creation of new theory.

What is Hamlet's *hamartia*? One of the most meaningful elements of tragedy as understood by the ancient Greeks, *hamartia* refers to the "error" or "mistake" a protagonist makes which, of necessity, brings catastrophe (Aristotle, 1453a; Frede). The term is often mistranslated as "fatal flaw," a twisting of Aristotle inflicted by Saint Paul's use of *hamartia* to mean "sin that dwelleth in me" (Rom. 7.20; Cox). A "flaw" is an attribute of someone's personality. Hamlet's "indecisiveness" is often mentioned: Goethe's Wilhelm Meister thinks Hamlet is "devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero" (518); A.W. Schlegel cites "the resolutions which [Hamlet] so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted" (40); Hegel gives "Hamlet's personal character [...] his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances" (2.1226); Coleridge looks to "the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind" (32); Shelley offers "the errors to which a contemplative and ideal mind is liable" (qtd. in *Byron* 54-55); Olivier's influential *Hamlet* (1948) begins, "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind"; and Badiou himself calls Hamlet "the master of the undecidable act" (*Theory* 94).

But why seek Hamlet's *hamartia* when Shakespeare never read Aristotle's *Poetics*? As Stephen Greenblatt glosses their approaches to tragedy, "The playwright's great achievement as a whole does not altogether comfortably fit the philosopher's influential descriptive account" ("Shakespearean," par. 6). Shakespeare certainly knew stories from the tradition of tragedy that Aristotle commented on and influenced. Shakespeare also had access to Aristotelian ideas second- or third-hand, mediated by Latin and English translations of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, English writers like Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson, and Italians such as Cinthio and Guarini (Dewar-Watson). And critics have found the *Poetics* useful for interpreting Shakespearean tragedy, especially *Hamlet*. The view of *hamartia*-as-flaw is most fully theorized in A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, which addresses the tragic hero's "weakness or defect" (29), a "tragic trait, which [...] is fatal to him" (21), a "marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction" (20), a "marked imperfection or defect,— irresolution, precipitancy, pride, credulousness, excessive simplicity, excessive susceptibility to sexual emotion and the like" (34-35). These "trait[s]" are character *flaws* but, going back to Aristotle, a *mistake* refers not to who someone is, but to what someone does

(Bremer). What is the one thing Hamlet does—an event rather than a quality of character—that brings it all crashing down?

One candidate is Hamlet's decision not to kill Claudius when he has the chance because Claudius is at prayer, would have a clean soul upon death, and would—according to Hamlet's Christian worldview—go to heaven instead of hell. Another candidate comes moments later when Hamlet kills Polonius behind the arras thinking he's Claudius. Both events exhibit the crucial feature of ignorance in *hamartia*: not knowing what the truth really is, a mistake of fact (Sherman). The one example Aristotle gives of *hamartia* is Oedipus killing Laius and marrying Jocasta, not knowing they are really his father and mother. The revelation of truth leads directly to Jocasta hanging herself and Oedipus blinding himself. There's no way Oedipus should have known his true parents. Similarly, there's no way Hamlet should have known Claudius's prayer was insincere: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below," says Claudius once Hamlet leaves (3.3.97), meaning, if Hamlet had killed Claudius, Claudius would have died with a tainted soul and gone to hell, as Hamlet wanted. And there's no way Hamlet should have known it was Polonius behind the arras: the most logical conclusion when you hear a man's voice behind a curtain in the queen's bed-chamber, during a time when you know the king is monitoring your behaviour, is that it's the king. In both cases—not killing Claudius and killing Polonius—*hamartia* is an event rather than an attribute, a mistake Hamlet makes, not a flaw in his personality, and taken together these events cause the catastrophe. In response to Polonius's death, Ophelia goes mad and commits suicide, and Laertes seeks bloody revenge by colluding with Claudius, who wouldn't be around anymore if Hamlet had killed him when he had the chance: they all die (along with Gertrude, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern) at the end of the play. But if the not-killing of Claudius and the killing of Polonius bear a necessary connection to the catastrophe at the end, they're also connected to the start: these actions are functions of Hamlet's foundationalism.

As theorized in modern philosophy, foundationalism is the act of asserting some universal, unassailable truth (usually proclaimed with a capital letter) as the basis for all other thought and action. For Saint Paul, it is God: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3.11). For Descartes, it is Mind: *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am" (19). Others have said Nature or Language, but in the twentieth century Western philosophers stopped arguing for a better foundation and started questioning the attempt to establish one in the first place, as Jacques Derrida argues in his famous essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science" (1966). The Western tradition can be seen, he says,

as “a series of substitutions of center for center” (249), but more recent philosophy—he is thinking of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger—has abandoned its quest for “the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game” (265). In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Richard Rorty cites Heidegger, Dewey, and Wittgenstein—“for all three, the notions of ‘foundations of knowledge’ [...] are set aside” (6)—but it was Stanley Fish who coined the term *anti-foundationalism*: “Antifoundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law, or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all of these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape” (“Anti-Foundationalism” 344). While a card-carrying anti-foundationalist, Fish thinks the theory has no practical—ethical or political—payoff. The idea has “truth but no consequences,” he is fond of saying, as when juxtaposing opponents and proponents:

Anti-foundationalist fear and anti-foundationalist hope turn out to differ only in emphasis. Those who express the one are concerned lest we kick ourselves loose from constraints; those who profess the other look forward to finally being able to do so. Both make the mistake of thinking than [sic] anti-foundationalism, by demonstrating the contextual source of conviction, cuts the ground out from under conviction—it is just that, for one party, this is the good news and, for the other, it is the news that chaos has come again. But, in fact, anti-foundationalism says nothing about what we can now do or not do; it is an account of what we have always been doing and cannot help but do (no matter what our views on epistemology)—act in accordance with the standards and norms that are the content of our beliefs and, therefore, the very structure of our consciousnesses. The fact that we now have a new explanation of how we got our beliefs—the fact, in short, that we now have a new belief—does not free us from our other beliefs or cause us to doubt them. (“Consequences” 323-24)

To Fish, softy leftist liberals seek to promote the virtue of anti-foundationalism as a more skeptical, considered, humble form of thought, but he merely wants to analyze—to describe—how foundationalism works: “The foundationalist strategy is first to identify that ground and then so order our activities that they become anchored to it and are thereby rendered objective and principled” (“Anti-Foundationalism” 342). To this day, the scope and significance of foundationalism is most evident in religious fundamentalism, zealotry, and terrorism (Harris), and in political partisanship, where compromise and practical problem-solving have been replaced by follow-the-leader ideology (Lenz).

Analysis rather than ethics is also the goal of Thomas Kuhn, whose book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), influenced by Wittgenstein, is one of the first

fully fledged analyses of how truth works from an anti-foundationalist perspective. And the same concern—analysis over ethics—informs Badiou, the French philosopher whose book *Being and Event* (1988) is our most extensive anti-foundationalist analysis of truth. Badiou wants to understand the ontology of the “truth process,” rather than truth per se, leading him to focus on “the knowledge/truth dialectic” in which each constitutes the other (331). Using the formal language and logic of mathematical set theory, which I won’t try to reproduce here, he begins with the *situation*, defined as a set comprised of what is known or thought to be true: what are acknowledged to be the elements of existence and the relationships between them? *Knowledge* is simply enough the discernment, classification, and naming of what’s at hand in the situation, an encyclopedia of the situation, as it were, defining what exists, describing the properties of things, and explaining how they relate. This situation is static—inert, a state of being, the status quo—until something new and unexpected occurs (akin to the “anomaly” in Kuhn’s system): a rupture, break, disruption involving an occurrence thought to be outside the bounds of the situation—what Badiou calls an *event*. Disturbing established and circulating knowledge, the event punches a hole in the situation and requires the formulation of a new truth identifying how the terms of the situation relate to the event. Pointing to that realm of reality not included in the situation as previously defined—Badiou calls that realm the *void*—the event creates a new way of being and conditions how we think about everything (what Kuhn calls a “revolution”). The event becomes a *foundation* of knowledge, something singular that, because of its singularity, forces us to re-organize previous knowledge to include it in our set of things that are real. Thus, the event is both the most particular thing that can be—a concrete happening in history—and the most universal. The truth of this event—its inclusion in the realm of the real—is affirmed through enthusiastic, even militant *fidelity* to it rather than other, ordinary, previous knowledge. This is how Badiou defines *subjectivity*, which involves not human interiority but remaining faithful to the event, bearing witness to it, deduction down from the truth of the event, and normalization of the new truth created by it. A new situation emerges constructed bit by bit through fidelity to the event, forging new knowledges and new languages. In theory, this new situation has its own void—its own blindness to certain elements of existence—which might someday break into the situation in another event, meaning the “truth process” is never-ending.

Badiou’s key example is *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997), which calls Paul “a poet-thinker of the event, as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure” (2). Paul, born Saul, a Roman and a Jew persecuting Christians, was struck by a divine revelation on the road to

Damascus at about age thirty. He converted to Christianity and became a missionary, or, in Badiou's terms, acknowledged an event had happened—the resurrection of Christ. Note the particularity of Christ's resurrection: truth is a historical occurrence, not an abstract idea. For Paul, nothing supported the reality of this event—no evidence was marshaled to demonstrate it—other than his own declaration of it. Thus he became a subject of the event: his subjectivity was determined by his fidelity to it. He named the event, came up with the language to describe it, became a new man. He forgot his old life. The Christian event was not to be squared with the Jewish law preceding it. Event superseded law, canceled it. Paul did not use the totality of nature and history to explain the resurrection of Christ; he did just the opposite. When the fantastic becomes real, as in the resurrection, the real becomes make-believe. Badiou points, for example, to Paul's statement, against the evident sense of things, that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek" (Rom. 10.12, qtd. in *Saint*). Badiou's gloss identifies the truth bearer as radically set apart from tradition, referred to as "the division of the subject": "To declare the nondifference between Jew and Greek establishes Christianity's potential universality; to found the subject as division, rather than as perpetuation of a tradition, renders the subjective element adequate to this universality by terminating the predicative particularity of cultural subjects" (*Saint* 57). What was real before the event—evidence, reason, philosophy—becomes illusory afterwards. The particular becomes the universal, the resurrection a universal singularity. Paul registered the universality of this truth by proclaiming its applicability to everyone, which Badiou calls "the theorem of the militant": "What grants power to a truth, and determines subjective fidelity, is the universal address of the relation to self instituted by the event, and not this relation itself" (90). The intensity with which one feels something to be true is registered in the intensity with which one speaks that truth and insists upon its applicability to others.

You'll be forgiven for wondering why Badiou merely analyzes and never criticizes Paul's truth process, especially because Badiou is an atheist seeing Christ's resurrection as a fiction. Does it matter that Paul is wrong? Are false foundations of knowledge dangerous? What are the consequences of militant foundationalism? These are the questions Badiou asks in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (1998). In keeping with his anti-foundationalism, he argues that "there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic of singular truths, and thus an ethic relative to a particular situation" (lvi). This sets up *Ethics* to be an analysis showing, à la Fish or Kuhn, the structure of the situated development of notions of right and wrong, without passing judgment on the propriety of those beliefs. But Badiou does an about-face to say there actually *is* a universal virtue. It is, he claims, the perpetuation of the truth process: "The Good

is, strictly speaking, the internal norm of a prolonged disorganization of life” (60). He repeatedly claims, “the ‘ethic of a truth’ is the principle that enables the continuation of a truth-process” (44); “‘Do not give up’ is the maxim of consistency—and thus of the ethic of a truth” (47); “‘Do not give up’ means, in the end, do not give up on your own seizure by a truth-process” (47); “Consistency [...] is the content of the ethical maxim ‘Keep going!’” (52). Badiou recognizes, though I think doesn’t fully appreciate, that every truth is a disruption to the truth process: “The ethic of truths—as the principle of consistency of a fidelity to a fidelity, or the maxim ‘Keep going!’—is what tries to ward off the Evil that every singular truth makes possible” (67). The “Keep going!” of the truth process (keeping it in motion) is antithetical to the “Keep going!” of a universal truth (which stops searching for truth because it has been found in a substantive universal). Thus, Badiou’s terms collapse in upon themselves as he specifies virtue and vice according to the “ethic of a truth.” One of his situational evils—*betrayal*, the abandoning of fidelity to an event, “stopping”—is precisely what is needed to achieve what he sees as the universal good of perpetuating the truth process (“Keep going!”). He doesn’t appreciate people can “keep going” in a circle (a universal good because it perpetuates the truth process) or “keep going” in a straight line (a situational good because it perpetuates a truth): what truth presents as evil (infidelity), the truth process presents as good, and what the process presents as evil (rigidity), truth presents as good. If the continuation of an anti-foundational truth process is ipso facto “good,” then fidelity to a foundational truth is “evil,” bringing us back to *Hamlet*.

With Badiou in mind, I want to argue that Hamlet’s *hamartia* is his foundationalism, specifically his decision to devote himself entirely to revenge, to use that devotion as the basis for all other considerations, and to forget everything else. But that claim is problematic given the misreading of *hamartia* as “tragic flaw”: Hamlet’s devotion to revenge is an attribute of his character, not an action he performs. Thus, I’ll insist it is the specific moment Hamlet becomes a foundationalist—which Shakespeare dramatizes and draws our attention to—that is his *hamartia*. This moment is an *event* in Aristotle’s sense of an action, rather than an attribute, and in Badiou’s sense of a concrete happening in history, not an abstract idea.

The event comes in the fifth scene of the play, during Hamlet’s second soliloquy. A bit earlier in the scene, after the Ghost appears and reveals that his father was murdered, Hamlet’s dedication to revenge is immediate and unambiguous: “Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.29-31). Curiously, in the first quarto and folio editions, these lines lack the subject of the sentence, “I”: “Haste me to know it, / That with wings as swift

as meditation, / Or the thought of it, may sweep to my revenge” (qtd. in *Norton* 5.23-25). Greenblatt’s remarkable gloss could have been written by Badiou: “It is as if the desire for haste is so intense that it erases the very person who does the desiring: the subject of the wish has literally vanished from the sentence” (*Hamlet* 207-08). Hamlet is undergoing a de- and re-subjectification.

Note the structure of religious revelation: in a mystical moment, a supernatural father figure appears to a confused boy to reveal some elemental truth from the beyond, and then it is written down—like God chiseling the Ten Commandments on two stone tables for Moses, or Jesus appearing to Paul who then pens the epistles collected in the New Testament. Shakespeare may have been invoking Moses by having Hamlet call the Ghost’s charge a “commandment” he will write on his “tables” (see Garber 147-53). But I want to focus on Shakespeare’s imagery of writing, tablets, and printing, which are used to have Hamlet say he will remember the Ghost’s commandment *and forget everything else*—the youthful dalliances of love (“all trivial fond records”), his scholarly education (“all saws of books”), any previous ideas used to make sense of the world (“all forms”), and any wisdom gained from experience (“all pressures past”). This evisceration of his previous life and mind is Hamlet’s overzealous response in his second soliloquy to the Ghost’s final words, “Adieu, Adieu, Adieu, Remember me”:

Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter. (1.5.97-104)

The ghost does not say, *Remember me, and forget everything else*. It asks Hamlet, at the start of its narrative, to “revenge his foul and unnatural murder” (1.5.25) then, at the end, to “remember [him]” (1.5.91). Hamlet chooses to “remember” through “revenge,” an ethically dubious decision, but the way Hamlet registers his vow—promising to remember *only* the Ghost and its commandment—is his moment of foundationalism and, I believe, his *hamartia*.

Foundationalism is tragic in *Hamlet* because it produces that key element in *hamartia*: ignorance. Hamlet’s *hamartia* does not flow from ignorance, as Aristotle would have it. Hamlet has just learned the secret truth of his father’s murder. Hamlet’s

hamartia flows from truth. But, just as Badiou argues that an event creates a subject, the revelation of the truth about his father's murder creates ignorance in Hamlet. "Tables are above all an erasable technology" (416), observes Peter Stallybrass and co-authors when looking at "the 'Table of [Hamlet's] Memory'" (415). By wiping his table of prior experience and belief clean, Hamlet's foundationalism creates a strategic ignorance to empirical, rational, philosophical, historical, and even emotional knowledge because the truth process has purportedly reached its goal and no longer needs to operate. In place of the small, portable, erasable, temporary device of the "table," Hamlet plans to write the Ghost's commandment in something larger, permanent, and enduring—a "book." It would be remarkably short. What it lacked in coverage, it would make up for in clarity. Imagine your entire library wiped out of existence and replaced with one book with one word: "Revenge." It is, in Garrett Sullivan, Jr.'s excellent gloss, "a fantasy of the annihilation and reformation of the self through forgetting and the subsequent inscription of a memory trace" (13). Having set his foundation, Hamlet just needs to "keep going" in a straight line.

Revenge was unambiguously immoral in Shakespeare's day. "The issue was settled," Eleanor Prosser says in *Hamlet and Revenge*: "Revenge was a sin against God, a defiance of the State, a cancer that could destroy mind, body, and soul—and that was that" (72). At the same time, the flurry of Elizabethan revenge tragedies suggests a thirst for revenge (Bowers; Rist; Dunne). *Hamlet* is the most famous, but it is not Hamlet's dedication to *revenge* that leads to tragedy. It is his *dedication* to revenge: the form and not the content of his foundationalism. As L.C. Knights characterizes Hamlet's foundationalist moment, "Something in the manner of the concentration is itself corrupting" (185). Foundationalism short-circuits Hamlet's truth process.

In Badiou's terms, the situation at the start of *Hamlet*—King Hamlet's death and Queen Gertrude's remarriage—has an unacknowledged void in its representation of reality. The appearance of King Hamlet's ghost is an event filling that void. It also fills an emotional void in the depressed Prince Hamlet: the revelation of his father's murder provides him with purpose and hope, neutralizing his unhappiness, suffering, and despondency. Note that the event Hamlet remains faithful to is not his father's murder but its revelation. Similarly, I question whether the Pauline event was really the resurrection of Christ, or instead the revelation on the road to Damascus. The void filled by an event is not necessarily a void in matter of fact; it is principally a void according to a person's situated perspective. Badiou—at least in his early work—doesn't grasp that an event becomes foundational not because it fills a void in reality, but because it fills a void in the emotional life of a person or culture. Militant foundationalism occurs when a supposed truth points to a happiness absent from the emotional lexicon of a

situation. If so, then subjectivity must exist prior to the event—arguably a Hamlet-like, melancholic subjectivity—for an event to be named as event. As Simon Critchley puts it, “The eventhood of the event is the consequence of a decision” (226). This realization sparked the main innovation in Badiou’s sequel to *Being and Event*, his book *Logics of Worlds* (2006), which draws attention to the “event-site” and dubs the “double role” of the site—the mutual constitution of subject and event—“transcendental indexing” (360).

Because of the emotional satisfaction it promises, the Ghost’s revelation becomes a foundation for Prince Hamlet, cancelling all previous knowledge. This is Hamlet’s *hamartia*, a mistake he makes—a concrete historical happening—but that mistake becomes a character flaw via the mechanism of fidelity: *hamartia*-as-event creates *hamartia*-as-attribute because the event generates subjectivity. Henceforth, in Hamlet’s mind, fidelity to the event is virtue, infidelity sin. Though everyone in Elizabethan England saw revenge as immoral, Hamlet conceives of all action other than revenge as wrong: infidelity to a foundation is evil.

When Badiou writes that “it is only in drama, as in *Hamlet*, that specters cast a semblance of efficacy” (*Briefings* 24), his point is not that ghosts only exist in fiction. His point is that the Ghost totally alters Hamlet’s future. Foundationalism is remarkably performative because the subject of the event repeatedly performs the foundation. The various candidates for Hamlet’s *hamartia*—not killing Claudius, killing Polonius, delay, indecision, etc.—are really the performance of the subjectivity engendered through Hamlet’s fidelity to the event he takes as foundational. What Hamlet sees as his greatest good—fidelity to foundation—we in the audience recognize as the habituation of his *hamartia*. He doesn’t kill Claudius because he (mistakenly) believes it won’t be satisfying revenge; he kills Polonius because he (mistakenly) thinks it will. Both are acts of fidelity to the foundation of revenge. His devotion even survives the incident with the pirates, which many see as a “serious artistic flaw” in *Hamlet* (Wentersdorf 434) because randomness and chance reset the tragic necessity of the play, disconnecting earlier events from later consequences. But this episode shows why the transformation of *hamartia* from mistaken action to character flaw is important. When an event becomes an attribute, the persistence of the character fashioned, even after randomness cancels any necessary connection between error and catastrophe, re-establishes that connection. The culminating catastrophe is necessarily connected, via fidelity, to the event: the end of *Hamlet* is the outcome of Hamlet’s continued fidelity to vengeance mixed with the consequences of earlier infidelities. Foundationalism, like tragedy, is about the fall of a great person making a slight miscalculation with disproportionately severe consequences.

“To forget everything else and become pure Avenger would be an enormous, brutal reduction,” writes Joshua Landy, and Hamlet has no such singularity: “He is a mourner, an avenger, a lover, a son, a scholar, a poet. And no single one of these facets *defines* him” (176). Or, in Andrew Barnaby’s powerful observation, “The ‘I’ in ‘This is I, Hamlet the Dane’ is, at best, fluid” (234). But Landy and Barnaby skirt something crucial: Hamlet plays his many parts in the context of his total commitment to revenge. Reading *Hamlet* with Badiou shows that Hamlet’s “many, many selves” (Landy 176) are not free-floating. They are predicated on a foundation that says they shouldn’t exist at all, creating stress and tension for the foundationalist. Thus, he repeatedly chides himself for his delay: “I am pigeon-livered and lack gall” (2.2.516); “I do not know / Why yet I live to say ‘This thing’s to do,’ / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do’t” (4.4.43-46).

Even in the immediate aftermath of the event, Hamlet forsakes his new foundation three times. First, he turns from thoughts of revenge to his “most pernicious” mother (1.5.105). Then the “table of my memory” metaphor calls to mind his actual tablet, which he produces to record a distracted aphorism (“One may smile, and smile, and be a villain” [1.5.108]). Based on Hamlet’s earlier pledge, “It is not his tables he should reach for but his sword,” as Peter Mercer observes (170). Hamlet has again forgotten the foundation just set, which he realizes: “Now to my word: / It is ‘Adieu, adieu, remember me.’ / I have sworn’t” (1.5.110-12). Bradley reads this moment as a mentally unstable Hamlet taking precautions, given his fragile condition, to account for his “fear of forgetting” (411), but the paradox still gives Stanley Cavell pause: we don’t need to write down the stuff we remember. We write something down when worried we’ll forget. For a third time, Hamlet has drifted from his foundation in the very moment of its affirmation. That’s why Rhodri Lewis perceptively concludes that Hamlet simply doesn’t feel the intensity of revenge he thinks he should.

“Hamlet emphatically does not sweep to his revenge,” in Greenblatt’s words (*Will* 304). He acts mad, investigates his uncle, philosophizes to his friends, wrestles with uncertainty, rants maniacally against his lover, and concocts an elaborate and improbable mechanism, *The Mousetrap*, for settling the affair. It’s hardly the behaviour of someone who has forgotten everything but revenge. He seems to be unmoored from any fixed foundation, which is why the Ghost returns “to whet [his] almost blunted purpose” (3.4.111). T.S. Eliot senses “a motive which is more important than that of revenge, and which explicitly ‘blunts’ [it]” (89), though Eliot doesn’t say what it might be. Freud thinks Hamlet loves his mother and admires Claudius for killing King Hamlet to be with Gertrude, rendering revenge against Claudius to be suicide of Hamlet’s symbolic self, leading to ambivalence and delay (224-25). Wherever they

come from, Hamlet's famous expressions of uncertainty suggest a lingering commitment to the truth-process he claims to abandon in his second soliloquy, running counter to an absolute dedication to revenge. But Hamlet's doubt and his devoutness need to be measured in relation to each other. His uncertainty is anguishing because it comes in the wake of his fierce statement of resolve. His foundationalism is significant because it creates the conditions of his torment. Doubt and delay are only acute moral failings when immediate action has been stipulated as the greatest good. So instead of saying that Hamlet doesn't really mean it when he dedicates himself to revenge, or he's not really as devoted as he claims, or we can just ignore the contradiction, it's most reasonable to conclude Hamlet both is devoted to revenge in his thoughts and words and isn't in his actions. And moreover—this is the real crux—his undevout actions are only a problem due to the intensity of his devotion.

If we think of Hamlet at the start of the play as lost and forlorn and thus suicidal, and the Ghost's commandment as an event giving him purpose and direction, the problem of his delay is less confusing. Completing his revenge would end the only task giving his life meaning. By pledging himself to the Ghost's commandment, eliminating all other concerns in his life, Hamlet creates a situation in which the fulfillment of that command would be initially satisfying but then bring ennui. Having disavowed love, education, experience, and wisdom, Hamlet has no remaining grounds of being to fall back upon if his quest for revenge is completed. He would lose his foundation, could revert to his earlier malaise. So he perseveres in his quest for revenge—keeps it alive—delays—any way he can.

In other words, Hamlet's moment of foundationalism in his second soliloquy is his uber-*hamartia* which prompts and explains all other sub-*hamartia*. Our initial quest to identify Hamlet's one true *hamartia* is complicated by the emergence (in Shakespeare's play and the tradition of tragedy at large) of different kinds of *hamartia*—some mistakes (acts performed), some flaws (personality traits). But Hamlet's foundationalism is the point of reference for his *hamartia* whether viewed from his own perspective (delay and indecision are betrayals to the foundation of revenge) or ours in the audience (not killing Claudius and killing Polonius are consequences of fidelity to that foundation). In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, all *hamartia* relate to the subjectivity formed through fidelity to the original sin of foundationalism.

I don't want to be mistaken. I'm fully convinced that, if we could interview Shakespeare, he would say Hamlet had a double *hamartia*—not killing Claudius when he had the chance, and killing Polonius thinking it was Claudius—which both involve Hamlet, like Oedipus, making a mistake in ignorance of truth. But looking back at *Hamlet* from this side of Hegel's theory of tragedy—which draws upon both Aristotle

and Shakespeare—we see *hamartia* differently. Like Bradley after him, Hegel thinks the tragic protagonist's *hamartia* is always a “one-sidedness,” a devotion to a certain abstract principle, whatever it is, blinding the protagonist to the virtue of other characters operating on other principles. Foundationalism is not only Hamlet's *hamartia*; it is the *hamartia* of all tragic protagonists from a Hegelian perspective. Consider the dissemination of *hamartia* into Laertes's moment of tragic foundationalism in Act 4, which (echoing Hamlet's) wipes away all prior belief and knowledge to assert a universal singularity. The passage hangs on the word “only”:

I'll not be juggled with.
 To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,
 Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
 I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
 That both the worlds I give to negligence,
 Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged. (4.5.130-35)

Later, Laertes wants to forgive Hamlet, but can't, because he must be faithful to his foundation. “I am satisfied in nature,” he says, “But in my terms of honor / I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation” (5.2.222-25). Foundationalism is a mistake—a tragic mistake—not only because it demands and engenders a willful ignorance to knowledge drawn from experience and thought, but also because it conceives of ideas derived from any source other than the foundation itself as, ipso facto, incomplete, wrong, or evil. Foundationalism establishes an artificial standard by which we evaluate and respond to ideas and actions—our own and others'—often to the end of intense self-loathing (as with Hamlet) or extreme violence (again like Hamlet). That's why Robert Watson's deeply personal reading of *Hamlet* argues that “we need to give up the ghost” (199): we must learn to forsake foundations because, like King Hamlet's ghost, they cause further *hamartia*.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou maintains that “the mode of appearing of truths is singular” (8), “the ontology of truths” (46) displays an “invariance” (9), and truth procedures “exhibit a type of universality” (33). These are bold claims, but *Hamlet* shows that Badiou lacks a crucial distinction between his sense of universal virtue, what he calls the *ethic of a truth* (where the indefinite article *a* indicates one-among-many), and his effort to theorize situational virtue, what we could call the *ethic of the truth* (where the definite article *the* indicates substance, specificity, and singularity). The ethic of *a* truth is anti-foundationalist, what Oliver Marchart terms *post-foundationalist*, “a constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation—such as totality, universality,

essence, and ground” (2). This posture shows fidelity to the truth process (“fidelity to fidelity,” as Badiou puts it), producing a subjectivity oriented towards particularity and open to change; an event introducing new knowledge might modify earlier knowledge, but does not invalidate the earlier situation (in *Logics of Worlds*, “modification” is Badiou’s keyword for “the transcendental absorption of change” [359]). The greatest good is the continued search for truth and, in the ethic of a truth, virtue comes in *courage* (to continue searching for truth), *discernment* (to understand truth accurately), and *reserve* (not to confuse my truth for everyone else’s), while vice is *betrayal* (giving up the search for truth), *delusion* (misinterpreting my situational truth for a universal truth), and *terror* (forcing my truth upon another). “Keep going in a circle” is the ethical imperative of a truth. In contrast, the ethic of *the* truth is foundationalist. It involves fidelity to a substantive event and a subjectivity oriented towards universality and absolutism; the event annuls and erases any knowledge from an earlier situation. The greatest good is not the search for truth, since it has been found, but the promotion and defense of the truth now known. In the ethic of the truth, *loyalty* (fidelity to the truth), *faith* (belief in the truth even without evidence), and *evangelism* (propagation of the truth) are virtuous, while *timidity* (fear of speaking the truth), *skepticism* (doubting the truth), and *moderation* (hedging one’s convictions) are failings. “Keep going in a straight line” is the ethical imperative of the truth.

Shakespeare’s contribution is to reveal that the ethic of the truth can be tragic because, through the subjectivity produced via fidelity, foundationalism transforms a mistake which was an event in time into a flaw which is an attribute of one’s character. Extrapolating outward from the example of *Hamlet*, tragic foundationalism is the notion that fidelity to a single and substantive truth at the expense of an openness to fact, reason, and change is an acute mistake leading—because that mistake becomes more deeply written into one’s personality every time fidelity to it is performed, and because that personality is engineered to be ignorant of everyday reality and everyday morality—to miscalculations of fact and virtue creating conflict and ending in catastrophic destruction and the downfall of otherwise strong and noble people. That is, foundationalism creates a person prone to errors of thought and action with disproportionately large consequences, extending to the mutual destruction of oneself and others.

This consideration of the genre of foundationalism has revealed something Badiou’s analysis misses: there is a structural difference between the acquisition of *a* truth and the acquisition of *the* truth. A philosopher or scientist interacts with truth differently than an evangelist or terrorist. Thus, this study has also revealed something Fish is loath to admit: foundationalism and anti-foundationalism have consequences. Specifically, foundationalism can have tragic consequences because it transforms the situation-specific

ignorance of *hamartia*-as-mistake into the strategic and universal ignorance of *hamartia*-as-flaw. An individual or cultural disposition cultivated to ignore everyday reality is only one step away from ignoring everyday morality, and this pervasive and manifold ignorance can lead people and nations of great strength and nobility to make miscalculations of fact and virtue, ending up in catastrophic destruction.

Let's conclude with a quirk: the title of the introduction to Badiou's *Saint Paul*, "Paul Our Contemporary," echoes the title of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, the 1964 book that knocked Shakespeare studies off its axis by showing the applicability of Shakespeare's plays to modern life. I don't know if this is a deliberate allusion—I doubt it—but if Paul and Shakespeare are both our contemporaries, they are at odds with one another (as the theologian and the artist often are). If, as Badiou argues, Paul is the original model of foundationalism, Shakespeare represents anti-foundationalism. Where Paul's polemical ethic of the truth inveighs us to keep going in a straight line, Shakespeare's dramatic ethic of a truth keeps us going in circles.

For this reason, I cannot bring myself to worship at the altar of "Paul Shakespeare," the figure Julia Lupton invents—in the final, Badiou-inflected chapter of *Thinking with Shakespeare*—as a model for living through times of cultural transition (because Paul marked the shift from Jewish to Christian, and Shakespeare from medieval to modern). I also see things differently than James Kuzner, who argues that *The Winter's Tale* represents an event that, instead of generating a new subjectivity, à la Badiou, "explodes the notion of individual integrity" (275). Similarly, Ken Jackson's reading of *Richard III*, a play invoking Saint Paul by name five times, uses Pauline subjectivity via Badiou to tell the tragedy of a character diametrically opposed to Hamlet: Richard believes in nothing, cares nothing for the truth, is faithful to nothing, and thus—because subjectivity is predicated on fidelity—ends up with a divided self in his final soliloquy. It would not be accurate to say *Richard III* presents a tragic anti-foundationalism. In Jackson's reading, Richard is a nihilist. Subjectivity does not disintegrate in anti-foundationalism. There's just no substantive, historical event to which one is faithful. One is faithful to faithfulness to reality. Anti-foundationalist fidelity is to an abstract idea, foundationalist to a historical event. Fidelity to fidelity is the foundation of anti-foundationalism which, yes, is its own form of foundationalism (as I think Fish would say), albeit one with a different internal structure (as I hope Badiou would concede), and a different outcome (as I suspect Shakespeare would insist).¹

NOTES

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