A Mirror for Mankind:
The Pose of Hamlet with the Skull of Yorick

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This essay proposes to discuss what I shall call the pose of Hamlet with the skull of Yorick as a motif of special significance in poetry and art.[1] My sense of "motif" here is similar to what George Steiner has called a "topology of culture." Drawing metaphorically on "the branch of mathematics which deals with those relations between points and those fundamental properties of a figure which remain invariant when that figure is bent out of shape," Steiner argues that there are also such "invariants and constants underlying the manifold shapes of expression in our culture."[2] This notion of cultural topologies grows out of Steiner's sense that culture is to a large degree "the translation and rewording of previous meaning"(415). The motif of the pose of Hamlet involves in its different manifestations all three of Roman Jakobson's categories of translation: intralingual, interlingual, and especially intersemiotic.[3]

A version of the vanitas or memento mori motif, the pose of Hamlet can be seen in three distinct though interrelated forms: a man or woman contemplating a skull, a man contemplating the head of a statue, and a woman gazing at a mirror. The skull and mirror function interchangeably as truth-tellers and reminders of time and death. The heads of statues, contrasted to the living heads of the observers, are essential skulls. A second division of the motif occurs along religious and secular lines. Saints are reminded of the death of the body by skulls from which they look away. Secular characters, on the other hand, contemplate the

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[2]George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975) 425.

[3]Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *On Translation,* ed. Reuben A. Brower (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966) 233.

objects of vanity directly. A third and possibly a fourth division have to do with traditional and modern instances of the motif and its use in tragedy or comedy. Like the modern use of certain traditional symbols, the modern use of the vanitas motif is characterized by a fluidity which abstraction from the original cultural matrix enables. Tragedy and comedy, of course, involve different ultimate aims, though they may use the same images or language.

I begin, not with *Hamlet*, but a scene in Dekker's *The Honest Whore* (Part I), written four years later, where Shakespeare's motif of a man contemplating a skull is reprised to comic effect.[4] The Duke of Milan has faked his daughter Infelice's death, rather in the manner of Friar Lawrence, with the intent of preventing her marriage to the melancholy Count Hippolito. Hippolito, having made a "wild" show at Infelice's funeral, remains distracted at the thought of his beloved's death. His friends, who trick him into visiting a brothel, cannot console him. Nor can the "honest whore", Bellafront, whom he berates at length, and who answers him by falling in love with him and immediately repenting her sinful ways. Sometime later, alone in a room of his house, or rather trying to be (he is continually interrupted), he contemplates suicide as a means of being reunited with his beloved.

The stage directions call for various props suggesting a still life of the memento mori or vanitas variety. On a table Hippolito's servant has placed a skull, a picture of Infelice, a book, and a taper. Hippolito first takes up the picture. Admiring the artist's skill, he turns quickly to a favorite stock subject of the Elizabethans, the "painting" of women:

> 'Las! now I see,
> The reason why fond women love to buy
> Adulterate complexion! Here, 't is read:
> False colours last after the true be dead. (4.1.45-48)

"Painting" is one of the vanities of man, sustaining as it does, the fiction that man may overcome or at least disguise his fate. As such, it suggests the opposite of the skull or the mirror, both of which tell man the inexorable truth about himself. It is interesting that Dekker links makeup here with the higher art of portraiture. We should remember that until the time of the renaissance, secular portraits were themselves considered a form of vanity. It is not long before Hippolito conjectures that the picture, "a painted board," is no substitute for the real thing, having "no lap for me to rest upon, / No lip worth tasting"(4.1.56-57). At this point, Hippolito

[4]Thomas Dekker, "The Honest Whore, Part I," *The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists,* ed. William Allan Neilson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1911).

takes up the skull and addresses it (just what the skull is doing there is never made clear):

> Perhaps this shrewd pate was mine enemy's:
> 'Las! say it were; I need not fear him now!
> For all his braves, his contumelious breath,
> His frowns, though dagger-pointed, all his plot,
> Though ne'er so mischievous, his Italian pills,
> His quarrels, and that common fence, his law,
> See, see, they're all eaten out! Here's not left one:
> How clean they're pickt away to the bare bone!
> How mad are mortals, then, to rear great names
> On tops of swelling houses! or to wear out
> Their fingers' ends in dirt, to scrape up gold!
> * * * *
> Yet, after all, their gayness looks thus foul.
> What fools are men to build a garish tomb,
> Only to save the carcase whilst it rots,
> To maintain't long in stinking, make good carrion,
> But leave no good deeds to preserve them sound!
> * * * *
> And must all come to this? fools, wise, all hither?
> Must all heads thus at last be laid together?
> Draw me my picture then, thou grave neat workman,
> After this fashion, not like this; these colours
> In time, kissing but air, will be kist off:
> But here's a fellow; that which he lays on
> Till doomsday alters not complexion.
> Death's the best painter then: they that draw shapes,
> And live by wicked faces, are but God's apes.
> They come but near the life, and there they stay;
> This fellow draws life too: his art is fuller,
> The pictures which he makes are without colour. (4.1.63-94)

Hippolito is now interrupted again by his servant, who introduces Bellafront, come once more to woo Hippolito, and the comedy moves on its way.

Taken in its rather gratuitous context, Dekker's scene reads like a hilarious parody of *Hamlet,* as well as other Shakespearean plays ("What fools these mortals

be..."). But parody, of course, is one indirection by which we may find direction out. Hippolito's rather overwrought soliloquy takes up and plays, for all a knowing audience knew they were worth, the basic themes of Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull. The motif of a man holding up and addressing a skull was irresistible material to Dekker. The theme of memento mori, here in a comically painless form, is perhaps most obvious: "And must all come to this?" All life, surely, is as brief as Hippolito's taper. But Dekker presents this theme, more pellucidly than Shakespeare, as being linked to the theme of art and its presumed conferment of a kind of provisional immortality. This is suggested in a number of ways: by the still life setting of the stage props, by the portrait of Infelice, by the introduction of the "painting" motif (an art through which we disguise our mortality a while), and finally by the consideration of death as an artist, "the best painter." The skull, then, is a supreme work of art, challenging with its permanence our own transient existence. Fools and wise, we read in it, as in a mirror, the truth about ourselves. And as a work of art, it overcomes our mortal weakness of being locked in the limited perspective of time. The skull, of course, represents the past, but Hippolito, a creature of the present, reads in it not merely the past, but the future as well: he, too, will come to this. The skull, therefore, involves past, present, and future in a continuum of experience (which may be predicated also of enduring works of art), testing the timeful limitations of the human imagination.

As I suggested above, the interwoven themes of mortality and art are present also in Shakespeare's use of the motif in *Hamlet*, and as we shall see in a number of diverse works in the European tradition that draw their strength from this motif as well. I have begun with Dekker rather than Shakespeare because the motif in Shakespeare is more thoroughly subjugated to his dramatic purpose, and therefore less obvious in itself. But it is audible even in his more subtle application.

The graveyard scene has long been recognized as one of the most significant in *Hamlet.* As Maynard Mack suggests, "here, in its ultimate symbol, [Hamlet] confronts, recognizes, and accepts the condition of being man."[5] The scene provides us with "the crucial evidence of Hamlet's new frame of mind"(Mack 62), which will enable him, finally, to engage in the "contest of mighty opposites"(Mack 63) awaiting him at court. Cast in a sober prose rather than the heated verse of the earlier soliloquies, the scene objectifies Hamlet's resignation to the human condition through the vanitas motif of a man holding a skull.[6] Hamlet and Horatio watch as

[5]Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet,* ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 62.

[6]William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* ed. Willard Farnham (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969).

the grave digger throws up one skull after another. At first Hamlet responds with wittily ingenuous questions:

> There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? (5.1.91-96)

The focus of these questions is the absence of wonted action and volition; life lost is suggested by the loss of the power to will and speak. "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once"(5.1.71-72). The meditation is generalized at first, but takes on a horrible particularity when Hamlet is informed that one of the skulls belonged to Yorick, a person of his acquaintance. He now takes up the skull:

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.172-83)

Like Hippolito's speech, Hamlet's turns also on painting (there is a rather chilling echo here of his earlier upbraiding of Ophelia, whose death occasions the scene), and thus on the futility of human art, indeed all human endeavor, before death. Death, for Hamlet too, is the greatest and most ironic painter. Wit, songs, and makeup, jester, queen, or world conqueror, all end alike in the silent verity of the skull. "To what base uses," Hamlet continues, "may we return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bunghole" (5.1.190-93).

In *The Third Voice*, Denis Donoghue makes a useful distinction between "the unit of poetic composition," which "is necessarily verbal," and the situational unit of theatrical composition, which

> is not encompassed within the verbal realm. If one isolates a moment from the thousands of contiguous moments in a play, one should regard as the unit of theatrical composition everything that is happening

> at that moment, simultaneously apprehended. Words are being spoken, gestures are being made, the plot is pressing forward, a visual image is being conveyed on the stage itself.[7]

To consider the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* in this light is to be aware most powerfully of the visual image of a man gazing at a skull he holds in his hand. Our method of interpretation, therefore, is not simply verbal or linguistic, but emblematic. Like Hippolito, Hamlet gazes at the skull as into a mirror, showing him at once past and future, and signifying at once verity and vanity, that he too must come to this favor. The motif Hamlet enacts functions, of course, as part of the plot which is pressing forward, but at the same time it establishes emblematic connections with other works of art that make use of this motif as part of the human way of knowing.

The contemplation of a skull is a common motif in paintings of the period. Often a saint is depicted with a skull, suggesting his awareness of the vanity of human endeavor. Cavarozzi's painting of St. Jerome, for instance, portrays the scholarly and ascetic Jerome at his writing table watched over by a crucifix and two angels.[8] On his table are several old books, religious beads, a sand-glass, and in the foreground a skull facing outward. These images suggest at once the bearded saint's holiness and his humanity. The crucifix, the angels, and the beads guide and guard him, or rather his immortal part. The books represent his characteristic erudition, the toil of human wisdom. The sand-glass and the skull, however, are symbols of human vanity, the glass reminding us of the time-bound human condition and the skull reminding us of death. That Jerome keeps these articles on his desk suggests also his own awareness of time and death. The skull, placed on a book and facing outward, echoes by its position in the painting the bald head of the saint. Positioned between the head of Jerome and the skull, the glass serves to conjoin the two; this head, given the passage of time, will become that skull. Even the light, lingering on the two foreheads, implies their identity. A significant difference between the image in Cavarozzi's painting and the image in *Hamlet* is that, unlike Hamlet, Jerome does not contemplate the skull directly. As a tragic hero, "crawling between earth and heaven," Hamlet is very much the ordinary mortal with little "relish of salvation" in him. For Hamlet, as I have noted, the skull is in effect a mirror of his humanity, into which he gazes with all possible scrutiny. Jerome, on the other hand, pursues his characteristic work, which

[7]Denis Donoghue, *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959) 7.

[8]Bartolomeo Cavarazzi, *St. Jerome* (before 1625), The Pitti Gallery, Florence.

involves primarily the contemplation of divinity (one of his open books contains what might be a *pieta).* He is aware of the impending death of his body, as the skull suggests, but this affects a part of his consciousness only and by implication. The painting, though it involves memento mori, does not dwell on this, but celebrates Jerome's human activity.

Similarly, Ribera's portrait of St. Francis depicts the saint holding a skull in his hands but gazing upward at the vision approaching him from heaven.[9] Already marked with stigmata (a hole in his garment and a mark on one hand reveal this), Francis seems ready at this moment to leave behind the travail of his body and to become one with Christ in mind and heart. The position of the skull in Francis's hands suggests, however, that in the moments before the heavenly vision he was contemplating the skull directly, directly contemplating the vanity of earthly life very much in the manner of Hamlet. Interestingly, the fissures in the skull, which form a sort of rough cross, echo the stitchings of the saint's rag garment. The skull and the garment of rags, taken together, suggest the earthly trappings of the soul, from which it would escape. The cross on the skull reminds us that even Jesus' human body could not avoid the experience of death. If the skull is a mirror of Saint Francis's human life, however, it is a mirror from which he looks away toward salvation. Vanitas is merely one constituent of the religious experience being presented.

Georges de La Tour, in his painting, *Magdalen with the Lamp,* also makes use of the skull as an image of vanitas.[10] The Magdalen sits at a table holding a skull on her knee. On the table is another still-life setting: a glass oil lamp (the painting's only light source), two books, a scourge, and a wooden cross. Her right hand rests on the forehead of the skull, while her left hand supports her chin in a gesture of melancholy meditation. Once again, the saint's meditation is not directly on the skull; she gazes away from it, as it were, through the lamp's tall flame into the darkness of the background. Her thoughts are on the salvation possible only in another world. The light, however, flows from her hand to the skull, joining them in effect, while the position of her left forearm connects the skull with her own head. The end of earthly life, as the skull, the scourge, and indeed the cross remind us, is death. As T. Bertin-Mourot has pointed out, "the theme of the Magdalen in meditation is a synthesis of ... Melancholy and Vanity.... La Tour's is the mystic feeling of this poignant dialogue between the penitent and God, in the contemplation of Death."[11] La Tour's mysticism, therefore, asks us

[9]José Ribera, *St. Francis* (1663), The Pitti Gallery, Florence.

[10]Georges de La Tour, Magdalen with the Lamp (between 1625 and 1633), Louvre, Paris.

[11]Quoted by Jacques Dupont and Francois Mathey, *The New Developments in Art from Car-*

to go beyond Hamlet's human meditation. Hamlet, contemplating death as the certain end of all human life, throws down his skull and turns to act out the life remaining him. The Magdalen, like the other saints discussed in this context, looks through her death towards a salvation made possible only by the human oblivion of the skull. The mystic, reminded of death, is essentially uninterested (certainly the scourge suggests this) in the life she is to leave behind.

In secular works, however, the implications of the vanitas motif are more chilling. As I have suggested above, the skull is effectively a mirror, revealing to the subject his future at the same time that it reveals the past. A literal mirror is also commonly used in exercising the motif. Titian uses both a skull and a mirror as images of vanitas. There are two similar versions of the Magdalen subject that depict the saint gazing upward toward heaven, while an open book lies before her on a skull. In both versions a black ribbon drapes the skull, suggestive of the human vanity she is leaving behind. Other Titian vanitas paintings make use of mirrors. A painting attributed to Titian and entitled simply *Vanitas* shows a woman at her toilette gazing into a mirror held aloft by Cupid.[12] This painting is quite similar in theme and composition to the famous *Toilette of Venus.*[13] Here two cupidons assist the goddess, one holding the mirror and the other a garland for her hair. Venus wears pearls in her hair, earrings, costly bracelets and rings, and (partially) a rich robe of fur and gold embroidery. Gazing at the mirror, however, she sees not her own youthful face and body, but those of an old woman. In *Vanitas* too, the image in the mirror, though here the difference is not so striking, appears to be that of an older woman. The suggestion of both paintings is that old age and of course death are the favors to which all human beauty must come. Interestingly, though his subject is a Venus, Titian ignores the traditional ascription to the goddess of eternal youth. This suggests of course a devaluation of the Greek myth in a Christian century; the goddess is depicted in effect as a secular figure, and her vanity proposes itself therefore as something essentially human. Whether we wrap ourselves in costly furs and jewels, or "rear great names / On tops of swelling houses," or indeed "paint an inch thick," this is the end of human beauty, love, and life. Like the skulls in *Hamlet* and *The Honest Whore,* Titian's mirrors suggest also the vanity of art and what E.R. Dodds once called "the offensive and incomprehensible bondage of time and space."[14] The images in the mirrors are *framed,* or delimited in space as if they were works of art. This implies, of course,

avaggio to Vermeer, trans. S.J.C. Harrison (New York: Skira, c.1951) 36.

[12]Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), *Vanitas,* S. Luca Gallery, Rome.

[13]Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), *Toilette of Venus* (around 1550), The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

[14]E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) 102.

the reasonable but limited confines of human activity. And the images in the mirrors, like the skulls, suggest an inescapable future time as well as the past (for do we not become in the future like those human Yoricks we once knew?). The vanitas motif, in its secular form, involves a human confrontation with the boundaries, in time and space, of human endeavor. The truth-telling skulls and mirrors, from which, mere mortals, we cannot take our gaze, remind us forcefully of these limits.

Before proceeding to some typical modern instances of the vanitas motif, I will consider one more version from the seventeenth century, Rembrandt's moving image of *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer.*[15] Dating from 1653, a time when Rembrandt's later style was beginning to be noticeable, the painting depicts a contemporary looking, bearded Aristotle gazing at a bearded sculpture of the fabled epic poet. Aristotle's left hand rests on his hip; his right hand is extended and rests on the head of the sculpture. The light passes from the sculpted head to Aristotle's face along the extended arm, which is clothed in a voluminous white sleeve. In effect this joins the two heads, as does the similarity of their beards. Rembrandt's image, while different from either the skull or the mirror images we have considered, combines in essence the elements of the vanitas motif present in both of them. Like the skull, the sculpted head suggests a lifeless image from the past. It is an essential skull, and in gazing at it, Aristotle confronts the vanity of even the most brilliant human endeavor. This head had a tongue in it once and could sing. It represents also Aristotle's future, for at some future time his physical being will be similarly silent; like his famous pupil, Alexander, Aristotle may find a new calling stopping a bung hole. And Rembrandt's painting suggests quite forcefully that the sculpted head is a kind of mirror. Both men are bearded and similarly featured. The sculpted head, however, speaks of death, and carries with it the burden of the past, which is, of course, the burden that the future must learn to bear. The anachronism of Aristotle's contemporary dress suggests that Rembrandt had in mind a more universal relation of living man to dead than simply the special subject of the two Greek thinkers. The future, the time of his own death, which Aristotle sees in an image of the past, is Rembrandt's time, and by extension our own. The anachronistic dress, along with the vanitas motif itself, scorns the artificial distinctions of time, which is actually a continuum imprisoning us all. That the sculpture is palpably a human work of art introduces more obviously than we have seen elsewhere the notion of art as a provisional confrontation with

[15]Rembrandt van Rijn, *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* (1653), The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

mortality which ultimately must confirm it. Like Hamlet, therefore, and unlike the saints, Aristotle confronts and—as his sober look suggests—accepts his own mortality.

The vanitas motif, as I have discussed it so far, might seem simply a phenomenon of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Indeed, all the works used here to round out the theme were produced between 1550 (the earliest ascribable date for Titian's *Toilette of Venus)* and 1653 (the date of Rembrandt's painting). Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* which was most probably written in 1600, appeared roughly in the middle of this period. The vanitas motif is an important and well-known ingredient of the *Zeitgeist* under which these artists worked. What I shall now try to demonstrate is that this motif is also important, though less formally worked out, in our own century. It is certainly visible among the fragments our artists have used to shore against their ruins, and if anything its grim message is grimmer still in a century when saints are mostly silent and religion is steadily on the wane.

One of Picasso's most fascinating paintings is the *Girl before a Mirror* of 1932, now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[16] Like many of Picasso's paintings of this period, it makes use of multiple images to suggest movement or the passing of time in a medium whose traditional convention was of temporal stillness. The girl stands before what might be a cheval-glass at once in profile and facing forward. The left profile of her face rests in an oval, full-face outline, in which the features of the right side are extended in a different color. A similar ambiguity attends the depiction of her legs and belly; there may be one or two legs, depending on how one views a line running down the middle of the figure, while a circular shape may suggest the frontal view of the belly or an interior image of the womb. From the stylized emphasis on her breasts and belly, it appears that she may be pregnant. Her arms are extended in the act of adjusting the glass, and one arm, therefore, interacts in terms of color and design, with the mirror image. As Alfred Barr notes, there is an "intricate metamorphosis of the girl's figure—'simultaneously clothed, nude and x-rayed'—and its image in the mirror."[17] This metamorphosis expresses itself in terms of oppositions of color and design which suggest the opposition of life and death. As in Titian's mirror paintings, the mirror image here both reflects the figure and comments on the figure through its variation. The most obvious variation is that of color. The stripes

[16]Pablo Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror* (March 14, 1932), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[17]Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946) 176.

suggesting the girl's clothing are differently located in the mirror; what is nude is clothed in the mirror. The colors in the mirror are generally much darker than those of the girl herself. Her hair, as well as part of her face, is yellow and is set in what seems to be a white radiance, shaped almost like a bridal veil or halo. The face in the mirror, on the other hand, is composed of a silvery gray marked with reds, purples, green, and black, which flows into a heavy outline; the hair is green, outlined, and surrounded by what seems to be a bluish veil. Where the girl's face and hair suggest the sun and daylight, the mirror's face suggests the moon and night. Its color, grayish and blemished as it were with purple, creates a skull-like image. This is reinforced by the fact that while an eye is drawn in the girl's profile face, the face in the mirror has only a dark shape suggesting an empty eye-socket. Even the long oval of the cheval-glass has about it, in Nabokov's phrase, "the encroaching air of a coffin." This deathly air is enhanced by the stylized shape of the girl's neck, which is drawn as an Egyptian pyramid. Thus the striped clothing of the girl in the mirror may suggest the wrappings of a mummy.

The major opposition of the painting, very much in the vanitas tradition, is of life and death. Picasso combines the vanitas images of the mirror and the skull and involves the related theme of art (the cheval-glass could also seem a portrait on an easel, a painting within a painting). But Picasso's use of the vanitas motif is modern in sensibility as well as style. The fact that the girl is seen both in profile and in full face suggests that she is at once contemplating the image in the mirror and looking away from it. Unlike a saint, however, she does not look away toward her own salvation, but turns toward us. Modern human kind, as Eliot reminds us, cannot bear very much reality. Her memento mori is thus ours also in a direct and uneasy way. Her seeming pregnancy, suggestive of the human life cycle and the human urge to continue the chain of life, is still involved in the imprisoning continuum of time. For the modern artist, Hamlet's mortal gaze is more familiar than St. Francis's or the Magdalen's.

Eliot himself includes a "Girl before a Mirror" scene in the "Game of Chess" section of *The Wasteland.*[18] This is, of course, the famous parody of Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge. The woman with bad nerves sits before her vanity combing her hair: "Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words, then would be savagely still"(lines 108-10). As Eliot's many allusions suggest, this woman may be taken as a modern and ironic composite of a number of death-marked women from history and myth:

[18]T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971).

Cleopatra, Dido, Eve, and Philomela. All of them are unlucky in love, and in this respect the woman with bad nerves certainly belongs in their company. The comparisons are ironic, however, because where Cleopatra and the others have *acted* greatly, as it were, have given all for love, the modern woman remains simply frustrated, another of the "uncommitted ones" who populate the "Limbo" of the modern world. Unwilling to risk "the awful daring of a moment's surrender," she glows into empty words that suggest merely the breakdown of communication with her lover:

> "What is that noise?"
> The wind under the door.
> "What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
> Nothing again nothing.
> "Do
> "You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
> "Nothing?"
>
> I remember
> Those are pearls that were his eyes.
> "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"(117-26)

What the lover remembers, via Ariel's song, is the drowned Phoenician Sailor, who, as we later learn, "was once handsome and tall as you"(321). This thought is literally, therefore, a memento mori. But as the woman's response implies, they are themselves already among the living dead, neither truly alive nor dead, and as the repeated "nothings" of the passage suggest, essentially empty. Her identity, of course, is blurred with those of the dead queens; her future may be read in their past. Indeed, hers is in effect Hamlet's quandary on confronting Yorick's skull. The setting of the scene reinforces my sense of it as a modern reworking of the vanitas motif:

> The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Glowed on the marble, where the glass
> Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
> From which a golden cupidon peeped out
> (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
> Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
> Reflecting light upon the table as
> The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
> From satin cases poured in rich profusion...(77-85)

What we have here, cupidons, jewels, and all, is the pose of Titian's *Toilette of Venus.* This mirror, however, tells the woman not merely of time and death, but of her own emptiness and living death (the mirror is described as reflecting the objects of the room, but interestingly not her image). The vanitas motif, as Eliot invokes it, echoes the central condition of *The Wasteland.*

Something more akin to Rembrandt's use of the motif occurs in the *Mythistorema* sequence of George Seferis.[19] As the title suggests, these poems are concerned with myth, history, and story, and attempt to express, as Seferis himself puts it, "circumstances that are as independent from myself as the characters in a novel"(261). One of the major concerns is clearly the burden of the past as represented by myth, history, and story. The third poem of the sequence expresses this burden through the image of a man holding the head of a statue in his hands:

> I woke with this marble head in my hands;
> it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down.
> It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream
> so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it
> to separate again.
>
> I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed
> I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak
> I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin
> I haven't got any more strength.
>
> My hands disappear and come toward me
> mutilated. (5)

The speaker here is very much in the pose of Hamlet: a living man confronting the image of the past and finding in it his own identity ("so our life became one"). The sculpted head, as in Rembrandt's painting, suggests an essential skull with eyes "neither open nor closed" and cheeks breaking through the skin. It "keeps trying to speak," but it is locked in the silence of the past. The speaker senses and would maintain a connection with this past, but the effort for the living man is exhausting, indeed, mutilating. The world of the dead, of history, is a presence which must be confronted and remembered. In part because of this, it threatens to overwhelm the living person. He does not know where to put the statue down and resume his

[19]George Seferis, *Collected Poems: 1925-1955,* trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967).

life; "it will be very difficult for it to separate again." Though it proposes itself as a waking experience, the poem is clearly nightmarish, an experience of life in the grip of time and death. It suggests no saintly escape from the condition of mortality, nor even Hamlet's return, after confronting death, to the work of living. The body's surreal dismemberment in the final lines argues rather that the self is bound to and lost in the past. Like the other moderns, Seferis's vanitas experience reverberates in a void of lost values.

I began with an example from comedy, and I return finally to a famous comedy of the twentieth century, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier.*[20] Near the end of the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier,* Hofmannsthal interrupts the opera's merriment with a scene replicating Titian's image from *Toilette of Venus.* Having set in motion a comic plot that will end in the loss of her youthful lover, Octavian, the Marschallin is left alone for some minutes in her boudoir. The thought of the buffoon, Baron Ochs, taking a young bride disturbs her by reminding her of her own youth and marriage. Taking up a hand mirror, she gazes into it and meditates:

> Wo ist die jetzt? Ja,
> such' dir den Schnee vom vergangenen Jahr!
> Das sag' ich so:
> Aber wie kann das wirklich sein,
> daß ich die kleine Resi war
> und daß ich auch einmal die alte Frau sein werd.
> Die alte Frau, die alte Marschallin!
> "Siegst es, da geht die alte Fürstin Resi!"
> Wie kann des das geschehen?
> Wie macht denn das der liebe Gott?
> Wo ich doch immer die gleiche bin.
> Und wenn er's schon so machen muß,
> warum laßt er mich zuschauen dabei
> mit gar so klarem Sinn? Warum versteckt er's nicht vor mir?
> Das alles ist geheim, so viel geheim.
> Und man ist dazu da, daß man's ertragt.
> Und in dem "Wie"
> da liegt der ganze Unterschied— (Page 42)

> (Where is she now? Yes, / seek out the snows of yesteryear! / That I can say: / But how can it really be / that I was little Resi / and that

[20]Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Rosenkavalier* (London: Fürstner Limited, 1911). English translations used here are my own.

> also one day I will become an old woman. / The old woman, the old wife of the Fieldmarshal! / "Look, there goes the old Princess Resi!" / How can that happen? / How can the dear Lord let it be? / Yet *I* am always the same. / And if He must do it like this, / why does He allow me to look on / with such clear senses? Why doesn't He hide it from me? / All this is mysterious, so very mysterious. / And one is here but to bear it all. / And in the "How" / there's the whole difference—)

Whereas in Titian's painting a young woman looks in a mirror and sees the image of an older woman, the Marschallin is actually an older woman and presumably sees a proper likeness of herself. On a psychological level, however, she does not feel like an older woman. Her sense of self is still that of the young Resi, and therefore the image in the mirror is strange and shocking to her. The "I", who is "immer die gleiche," sees a different, older self in the mirror, one clearly subject to the ravages of time. The mirror shows her a future that on a psychological level she did not know had already happened, and the passing of time, of course, threatens to continue. She feels herself slipping irrevocably into the past. Hofmannsthal's image—and it involves here words, gesture, the stage setting, and indeed the gorgeous music of Richard Strauß—presents the vanitas motif in the fullness of its lineaments. The reference to Villon's famous poem about the fading of earthly beauty merely deepens the aura of this tradition. What is more modern here, though it bears indeed a key relationship to the mood of Hamlet, is the questioning of the God who would subject human beings to such a painful consciousness of their fate. A secular character, the Marschallin does not look away in the manner of a saint toward mystical salvation, but concentrates like Hamlet on her own ageing and approaching death. But like Hamlet also, she turns stoically to the business of enduring life, the graceful "how" of things suffering the imprisonment of time, which, as she puts it, makes all the difference.

Comedy may remind us of death, and often forcefully, but its ultimate motive is the celebration of life as it is lived and passed on in the chain of time to the ever changing young. It recognizes the continuum of time as something neither to overcome nor to mourn, but to celebrate: a continuity in flux. This is the mystery that the Marschallin, like Hamlet in his own way, recognizes and accepts. When Octavian returns at the end of the first act, he notices but does not understand her sober mood, and she attempts to interpret it herself:

> Die Zeit, die ist ein sonderbar Ding.
> Wenn man so hinlebt, ist sie rein gar nichts.

> Aber dann auf einmal, da spürt man nichts als sie.
> Sie ist um uns herum, sie ist auch in uns drinnen.
> In den Gesichtern rieselt sie,
> im Spiegel da rieselt sie,
> in meinen Schläfen fließt sie.
> * * * * *
> Manchmal steh' ich auf mitten in der Nacht
> und laß die Uhren alle, alle stehn.
> Allein man muß sich auch vor ihr nicht fürchten.
> Auch sie ist ein Geschöpf des Vaters, der uns alle
> erschaffen hat. (46)
>
> (Time is an odd, curious thing. / When one just lives, it seems like nothing. / Then suddenly one senses nothing else. / It is around us and inside us too. / It trickles in faces, / it trickles in mirrors, / it flows in my temples. / ... / Sometimes in the middle of the night I rise / and make the clocks, yes all of them, stand still. / But also one must not fear time. / It, too, is a creation of the Father who created us all.)

Secular man may be, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, a "chafing prisoner of time," or he may be an accepting prisoner of time. With a rather touching naivete, the Marschallin makes her case for acceptance. For her, as for the Hamlet who came to see a "special providence in the fall of a sparrow," the vanitas experience ends in a kind of humility before death and life. The confrontation with time as it flows in mirrors, in statues, or indeed the temples of skulls is a spiritual preparation for the act of living one's limited days.

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Figure 1: Rembrandt, *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*



Figure 2: Ribera, *St. Francis*

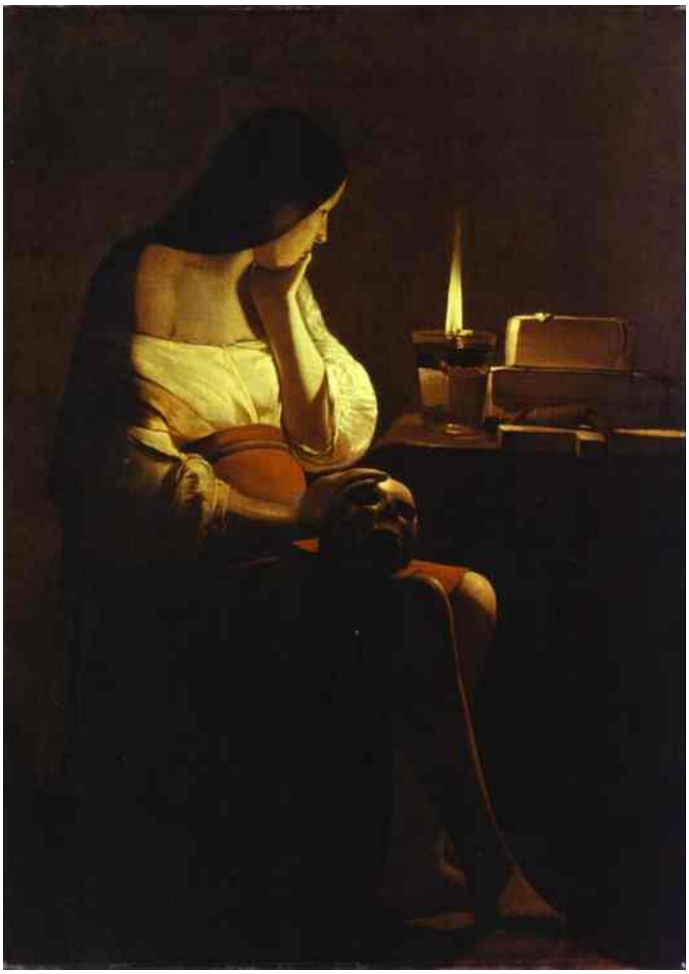


Figure 3: Georges de La Tour, *Magdalen with the Lamp*



Figure 4: Titian, *Toilette of Venus*



Figure 5: Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror*