

# 17 Hamlet and the Time of Action

*Henry Somers-Hall*

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter I want to explore a comment made by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze that presents a connection between two figures: Kant and Hamlet.<sup>1</sup> In his most important early work, *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes, “the Northern Prince says ‘time is out of joint’. Can it be that the Northern philosopher says the same thing?” (Deleuze 2004, 111). In this chapter, I want to look at the question of drama and see how different conceptions of drama allow us to understand action, or more precisely inaction, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I want to show how these different conceptions of dramatic action tell us something about the nature of temporality. I will begin by reversing Hamlet’s claim, and discussing what time “in joint” would look like, tracing it back to Aristotle’s conception of drama, before moving on to Plato’s characterization of temporality.

## 2. Aristotle’s Conception of Drama

Aristotle claims that tragedy is

the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

(Aristotle 1995, 1449b25–29)

For our purposes, what is important to note is that in Greek tragedy, what is central is action (“they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action” [Aristotle 1995, 1450a20–21]). Tragedy cannot occur simply through a misfortune on the part of good characters, as this is “not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us” (Aristotle 1995, 1452b36). Likewise, it cannot involve evil characters suffering misfortune, as “pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune”

(Aristotle 1995, 1453a4). In this sense, the plot of tragedy involves “a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune is, however, brought about not by vice and depravity but by some fault” (Aristotle 1995, 1453a6–10). As Michael Davis points out, “the *Poetics* is about two things: *poiêsis* understood as poetry, or imitation of action, and *poiêsis* understood as action, which is also imitation of action” (Davis 1999, 9).

If we look at a play such as *Antigone*, we can see that the drama arises from the actions of its characters, and traces their consequences. The conflict at the center of the drama emerges through King Creon’s prohibition on the burial within the city of Antigone’s brother, the traitor Polyneices, and Antigone’s transgression of this prohibition. Here the conflict occurs between the laws “of the gods, that are unwritten and unfailing” (Sophocles 2003, 501), the right to bury the dead, and the laws of the state, exemplified by Creon’s prohibition. Each character chooses to act solely according to one determining principle, and does not recognize the rights of the other. The one-sidedness of their opposed actions means that a resolution can only be achieved by the tragic death of Antigone, and Creon’s loss of his wife and son. In order to explore how drama represents action, I want to bring in here the analysis of the art critic, Harold Rosenberg. In what Rosenberg calls “old drama,” the basis of tragedy must involve some kind of transgression for which the agent is responsible:

[T]he concepts of morality or social law, applying exclusively to human beings and ignoring possible analogies with other living creatures, tend to define the individual not as an entity enduring in time but by what he has done in particular instances. A given sequence of acts provokes a judgement, and this judgement is an inseparable part of the recognition of the individual.

(Rosenberg 1994, 136)

When we look at the legal conception of the person, it isn’t the case that the unity of the individual can be given in terms of their acts themselves. Rather, when someone comes before a judge, what the judge relates to is not a unity governed by personality, but rather a series of acts that are unified by the last act’s relationship to the law. As Rosenberg notes, the acts of a murderer are in large part no different from the acts of anyone else, and are only made criminal by the fact that they precede the murder itself: “entering an automobile, stepping on the gas, obeying the traffic lights” (Rosenberg 1994, 138). These actions are all perfectly innocent, but gain their criminal character by the fact that they make possible the transgression of the law. When we look at a criminal act, it is the law that provides a framework for the analysis of action, and which imposes a structure of artifice that unifies the conduct of the perpetrator. This is not merely the case in the sense that it is the transgression of the law that defines the act as criminal, but also that the law provides a way of synthesizing certain other acts that, without reference to the crime, would be indifferent in relation to the law. We can

see that there is an artificiality to such an analysis as becomes clear if it is suddenly discovered that the alleged perpetrator did not commit the crime. The entire identity of series of actions before the law then disintegrates. The actions of “stepping on the gas” and “obeying the traffic lights” now take on an entirely innocent aspect. Law is therefore what draws together a series of acts that in themselves are indifferent to one another.

Now, obviously in the case of the law, the problem is determining whether the structures of the law apply to the actions or not (whether the person is guilty or innocent). In the case of “old drama,” we do not have the difficulty of determining whether acts properly accord with the structure of the law. Rather, characters in “old drama” are constituted to be in accordance with their fate from the outset:

The dramatist’s definition of the character was not an arbitrary superimposition that exchanged the emotional, intellectual, and mechanical characteristics of a biological and social organism for some one deed that concerned the court; it constituted instead the entire reality of a character, avoiding the ruinous abstraction of the law by determining in advance that his emotions, his thoughts and his gestures should correspond with and earn in every respect the fate prepared for him.

(Rosenberg 1994, 139)

In “old drama,” therefore, character is seen simply as a manifestation of the underlying unity provided by the actions’ relations to the law. Once character has been subordinated to the structure of the law through action, the possibility of an exploration of the change or development of character is ruled out. Thus, while Creon’s relations to those around him—Haemon, for instance—may change during the course of the play, this is simply as a result of the expression of the same moral identity. This is explicit, for instance, in Hegel’s reading of tragedy, where “the truly inviolable law is the unity of the action” (Hegel 1975, 1166). Hegel’s understanding of tragedy sees it emerging through each character’s adoption of a partial aspect of the ethical as their guiding principle. Thus Antigone is justified in appealing to the rights of the family in seeking to bury Polyneices, just as Creon is justified in upholding the laws of the state. They are both also culpable in that their action fails to take into account the complete structure of the ethical. The resolution of tragedy is the restoration of balance to the ethical, but as “the *individuals* have more or less put their whole will and being into the undertaking they are pursuing” (Hegel 1975, 1166), the resolution of the tragedy can only occur with the dissolution of these partial views, and with them the characters who embody them. Thus by focusing on action, we rule out an account of character, or at least of a change of character. Similarly, the singularly human nature of action as relation to ethical structure reflects that what is being played out is something primarily atemporal. Here, the phenomenal manifestations of characters in classical drama are

merely manifestations of an underlying law, or an underlying judgment: the fate of the character. Hence, “psychology can establish the plausibility of Macbeth’s or Lear’s behavior, but for the sufficiency of his motivation, we must not refer to a possible Macbeth or Lear ‘in real life’ but to the laws of the Shakespearean universe” (Rosenberg 1994, 140).

### 3. Plato’s Metaphysics of Time

I want to now introduce Deleuze’s insights on this point by bringing in a distinction he draws between time in joint and time out of joint. In *Difference and Repetition*, he writes:

The joint, *cardo*, is what ensures the subordination of time to those properly cardinal points through which pass the periodic movements which it measures (time, number of the movement, for the soul as much as for the world). By contrast, time out of joint means demented time or time outside the curve which gave it a god, liberated from its overly simple circular figure, freed from the events which made up its content, its relation to movement overturned; in short, time presenting itself as an empty and pure form. (Deleuze 2004, 111)

In order to develop an understanding of what Deleuze means by time out of joint, I want to begin by looking at what “jointed” time might look like. The key to this is the notion of the joint itself, which Deleuze presents in more detail in his 1978 lecture, “Synthesis and Time”:

Cardinal comes from *cardo*; *cardo* is precisely the hinge, the hinge around which the sphere of celestial bodies turns, and which makes them pass time and again through the so-called cardinal points, and we note their return: ah, there’s the star again, it’s time to move my sheep! (Deleuze 1978)

Deleuze is here referring to Plato’s conception of time, presented in the *Timaeus*, which gives a mythical account of the creation of the world by a demiurge, who seeks to create the universe by imposing form on chaotic matter. The demiurge “took over all that was visible—not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion—and brought it from a state of disorder to a state of order, because he believed that order was in every way better than disorder” (Plato 1997, 30a). As the creator himself is perfect, he desires to create the universe as far as possible as an image of himself. Given the world is already in motion, he can only create the world as a likeness to eternity:

Now it was the Living Thing’s nature to be eternal, but it isn’t possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity, at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving

according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call “time.”

(Plato 1997, 37d–e)

Now, at this point, we can already note the first important point in this myth. Time is here seen as a structure of the realm of appearance. While the world itself is a copy of the creator, the creator himself is eternal, and hence has no relationship to time. So how does time come about? Before the universe is organized according to time, it is still in motion, although this motion is “disorderly.” Thus, for *Timaeus*, motion is not dependent on time, as motion is prior to the imposition of time. Time is not that which allows movement to take place, but that which allows movement to become rational. In fact, *Timaeus* believes that time is grounded in the elements that are most perfect in the universe, the celestial bodies:

In this way and for these reasons night-and-day, the period of a single circling, the wisest one, came to be. A month has passed when the Moon has completed its own cycle and overtaken the Sun; a year when the Sun has completed its own cycle. As for the periods of the other bodies, all but a scattered few have failed to take any note of them. Nobody has given them names or investigated their numerical measurements relative to each other. And so people are all but ignorant of the fact that time really is the wanderings of these bodies, bewilderingly numerous as they are and astonishingly variegated.

(Plato 1997, 39c–d)

On the Platonic model, time is simply an imperfect way in which the eternal patterns of the world present themselves. It is always an ancillary time premised on a logically prior movement. In this regard, we can see the *Timaeus* as, with some reservations,<sup>2</sup> providing an account of how an essentially rational structure becomes exemplified in the world as a whole.<sup>3</sup> We can see that the subordination of time to an eternal, intelligible, and also, representational, model of time is central not just to Plato’s conception, but also to a more general trend in pre-Kantian philosophy. Leibniz, for instance, argues that the notions of space and time are simply ways in which we perceive what are essentially a series of intelligible relations between things:

As for my own opinion, I have said more than once that I hold space to be something purely relative, as time is—that I hold it to be an order of coexistences, as time is an order of successions. For space denotes, in terms of possibility, an order of things that exist at the same time, considered as existing together, without entering into their particular manners of existing. And when many things are seen together, one consciously perceives this order of things among themselves.

(Leibniz 2000, 15)

Space and time are simply “well-founded phenomena” by which we inadequately perceive the true “conceptual” order of things. As such, time is really a mode in which the essential structure of succession appears to us. In this case too, therefore, time is secondary to a rational, conceptual, and representational way of ordering things. Time is predicated on a prior rational structure. Number is expressed in the celestial movement of the heavens. To be “in joint” is therefore to be hinged, tied to cardinal numbers, and tied to a prior rational order. We can further note that Aristotle’s model of drama mirrors this notion of a metaphysics of time. Rather than seeing the character as an entity who develops in time, we have a drama where the time of the play is an expression of the movement of the action. Just as in Plato and Leibniz’s metaphysics, time is the mode of expression of a prior rational structure in the world of appearances, so for Aristotle, the time of a tragedy is that by which an action is expressed in the world. How do these two notions of jointed time relate to *Hamlet*?

#### 4. Hamlet

The focus of Deleuze’s philosophical interest in *Hamlet* is on Hamlet’s hesitation. In *Hamlet*’s opening scene, Marcellus sets up the opposition to the Platonic scheme by noting that war has severed the connection between action and the celestial bodies in the Kingdom of Denmark:

Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task  
Does not divide the Sunday from the week.  
What might be toward, that this sweaty haste  
Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day?  
(Shakespeare 2003, I.i.75–78)

As Spencer notes (Spencer 1943, 11), the view of the celestial spheres as a rational realm mirroring the rational faculty of man was widespread at the time that Shakespeare was writing, and views such as that of the humanist G.-B. Gelli—that “man is made of two natures, one corporeal and terrestrial, the other divine and celestial; in the one he resembles beasts, in the other those immaterial substances which turn the heavens”—were the standard fare of renaissance cosmology. Hamlet relates his own inability to act to something like the Platonic cosmology:

And indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appeareth no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.  
(Shakespeare 2003, II.ii.280–286)

In this sense, Hamlet's concerns are not simply psychological, but are also related to a feeling of incongruence with the kind of rational cosmology put forward by the *Timaeus*. Hamlet sees Hamlet himself not as an identity in the legal sense, or in the dramatic senses that we find in Aristotle. He is not defined by action as, for instance Sophocles's own model of the vengeful son Orestes is, who claims that "talk is expensive," and is instead concerned with "practical details": "where we should hide, where we can leap out and push that enemy laughter right back down their throats!" (Sophocles 2001, 1720–1725). We do not need to turn to Greek tragedy for the figure of an identity, however, as Hamlet's character is paralleled by Laertes's need for revenge, which plays out in the traditional manner. The drama prior to Hamlet's return from England precisely concerns this inability to act:

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

(Shakespeare 2003, IV.iv.43–46)

Now, as this quote makes clear, Hamlet is very much aware of what he should do, but he is simply not able to do it. To this extent, we have an odd dramatic structure, since, if characters are understood in terms of the relations of acts to the judgment of the law, then Hamlet's various speeches, and use of speech in the first half of the play, are simply irrelevant to the structure of his role. On this basis, Deleuze writes that "Hamlet is the first hero who truly needed time in order to act, whereas earlier heroes were subject to time as the consequence of an original movement (Aeschylus) or aberrant action (Sophocles)" (Deleuze 1998, 28). Rather than action determining the time of the drama, Hamlet experiences time itself as being the ground of action. In this sense, he operates within a time out of joint where his relation to the world, and to himself,<sup>4</sup> is governed by a fundamental passivity. His actions unfold in a time that is not his own. Rosenberg's interpretation is precisely this, that Hamlet's character cannot be understood as purely derived from the structure of the action he is to undertake, unlike in the case of the kind of identity central to Aristotle's theory, and hence he exists outside of the role that the play assigns him. The task of taking on the role of avenging his father is simply too big for him. The sea voyage is therefore necessary to the structure of *Hamlet*, as it represents the break in the structure of the play whereby Hamlet becomes equal to the task allotted to him. In this sense, we can note that the first half of *Hamlet* can only be characterized negatively by an Aristotelian account of drama, as it is precisely governed by the absence of action. In Aristotle's terms, *Hamlet* is a dramatic failure. If we accept that Hamlet's hesitation is more than simply a negative moment or a failure on Shakespeare's part, then we also have to recognize that the time of Hamlet's action is not simply an expression of that action itself. The Aristotelian

model of drama functioned analogously to the Platonic conception of time, and so if *Hamlet* breaks with Aristotle's conception of drama, we might expect it to also require a new metaphysics of time. In order to see what this new metaphysics might look like, I now want to introduce Kant's critique of the Leibnizian model of time.

## 5. Kant's Characterization of Time

For both Leibniz and Plato, what is given to thought is a confused image of the true nature of things; that is, a copy that differs in degree from it. For Plato, what is presented is an image of eternity in time, but time is simply a manifestation of the rational movement of the celestial bodies. Similarly, for Leibniz, space and time are simply confused perceptions of a properly conceptual reality. Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is essentially that rather than regarding perception as merely a confused form of conceptual thought (what Kant calls in relation to Leibniz "intellectualised appearances" [Kant 1929, A271/B327]), there is a difference in kind between perception and concepts. In his article, "Concerning the Ultimate Foundation for the Differentiation of Regions in Space" (1968), Kant presents this difference explicitly as the grounds for a refutation of Leibniz. If we take Leibniz's position as being that space and time are simply confused presentations of conceptual relations, then we would expect all of the properties of spatial and temporal entities to be ultimately explicable in conceptual terms. If we consider a hypothetical universe containing simply one glove, however, then even if we were to completely specify the conceptual relations between the parts of a glove, we will not be able to tell whether the glove is left- or right-handed, as the mirror image of the glove will have exactly the same relations between the parts that compose it:

However, since there is no difference in the relations of the parts to each other, whether right hand or left, the hand would be completely indeterminate with respect to such a quality, that is, it would fit on either side of the human body. But this is impossible.

(Kant 1968, 42–43)

Given that the glove must be left- or right-handed, it therefore possesses a determination (its "handedness") that is not reducible to conceptual relations. If this is the case, then spatial entities cannot be seen merely as expressions of a non-spatial rational nature (we might think of this claim that space is also out of joint as a parallel thesis to the one we are considering), but also contain something in excess of the rational. The argument from incongruent counterparts shows that space cannot be seen as a mode of presentation of conceptual relations in the way that Leibniz proposed, and Kant makes similar arguments in the *Critique of Pure Reason* for the difference between time and succession. Kant's distinction of concepts and



intuition therefore has the consequence that time cannot be seen as the moving image of eternity, as it is no longer the expression of an underlying representational structure, whether the “number of movement” or the true “order of things.” That is, that rather than time being a mode of succession, succession is rather a mode in which time appears to us. In fact, succession is simply a way in which *we* organize time for Kant. Deleuze puts this point forward as follows:

Time cannot be defined by succession because succession is only a mode of time, coexistence is itself another mode of time. You can see that he arranged things to make the simple distribution: space-coexistence, and time-succession. Time, he tells us, has three modes: duration or permanence, coexistence and succession. But time cannot be defined by any of the three because you cannot define a thing through its modes.

(Deleuze 1978)

Once we recognize a difference in kind between concepts and intuitions (or between time and measure), then our understanding of time is no longer “joined” to, and dependent upon, an understanding of rational movement.

Does this mean that Deleuze’s “time out of joint” is an essentially Kantian form of temporality? In fact, Kant’s understanding of time is limited by his commitments to an essentially epistemic and subjectival project. That is, Kant is concerned with the conditions under which a subject can attain *a priori* knowledge of a world of objects. On this basis, he claims that whereas

hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects, . . . we must . . . make trial whether we may have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose objects must conform to our knowledge.

(Kant 1929, Bxvi)

In working out the implications of this assumption, Kant takes time and space to be faculties of the subject. That is, they are ways in which that which is to be thought by the subject is given to the subject. As space and time are faculties through which the subject apprehends objects, then those formal properties of the object that derive from its spatio-temporal nature can be known *a priori*. Given that we are interested in knowledge, which involves concepts, and Kant has posited a radical split between concepts and intuitions, the major project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to show how the faculty of the understanding can be related to the faculty of intuition. In Deleuze’s words, “does he not once again come up with the idea of harmony, simply transposed to the level of faculties of the subject which differ in nature?” (Deleuze 2003, 19). Kant himself recognizes that this is the central problem of the *Critique*, and it is the role of the transcendental deduction to show that it is impossible that “appearances might very well be

so constituted that the understanding should not find them to be in accordance with the conditions of its unity” (Kant 1929, A90/B123).

This is not the place to give a full account of Kant’s account of how intuition and the understanding are related, but Kant’s essential claim is that the understanding relates to intuition through the notion of synthesis. Kant defines synthesis as “the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one act of knowledge” (Kant 1929, A77/B109). In this sense, it functions like Rosenberg’s law, which draws together a series of acts that in themselves are indifferent to one another. Now conscious empirical synthesis takes the form of making judgments. Deleuze’s claim is that Kant has essentially taken a psychological account of how we synthesize judgments and reiterated it at a transcendental level. “The same function that gives unity to the different representations in a judgment also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations in an intuition, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of the understanding” (Kant 1929, A79/B104). By using this model, Kant ties the notion of synthesis to the notion of consciousness, and hence debars any form of synthesis that is not ultimately governed by judgment. This leads to a further sharp dichotomy between passivity and spontaneity. If the activity of synthesis is tied to the subject, then there is no possibility of a form of synthesis that does not involve a subject—intuition becomes a passive material to be taken up and organized by the conceptual understanding. Time remains a faculty of a subject rather than something capable of imposing itself upon the subject. If we do not see synthesis as tied to the subject in this way, we open up the possibility of seeing time as capable of exhibiting organization in its own right. It is in this sense that time can be seen as escaping from the subject. We might say that as well as the order of action, Hamlet must also operate according to an order of time. In this sense, Bergson’s example of waiting for sugar to dissolve is instructive:

For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*.

(Bergson 2002, 176)

The question is not how this time of duration can be overcome, but of how it can be related to the time of action. We can therefore see “old drama” as dramatizing an ontology of movement, whereas Hamlet dramatizes an ontology of time as out of joint or freed from movement. Hamlet’s question is how he is able to reconcile his personality with the identity of action. For Deleuze, it is only against the future that these two moments can be related. It is only the future that allows the self of the past to be brought into a

“secret coherence” with the present, as action precisely is this relation of past and present towards a future. There are thus three moments to Hamlet. The first is that of passivity, where he is incapable of acting. The second is the *caesura*, the voyage to England, which Deleuze represents as the present, and the final moment, the future, the horizon against which the action takes place. What Bergson brings to the fore is that the difficulty in understanding Hamlet’s inability to act can be related to the question of the metaphysical account of time as the expression of rational structure. Hamlet’s task in the play is to reconcile his acts with a temporality that is of a different order. That is, to bring his actions into accord with the temporality in which he is operating. In this sense, for Deleuze, Hamlet mirrors the central problem of Kant’s transcendental philosophy: how can two orders, which are different in kind, be brought into alignment with one another? For Kant, this problem is posed in terms of the incongruence of intuition and the understanding. For Rosenberg and Deleuze, the problem is posed in terms of the incongruence of personality as “an organic coherence intuitively based on the real world of sensation” (Rosenberg 1994, 135), and legal identity as the basis for action. To properly understand what it is to act therefore involves a proper understanding of the nature of time, and a deduction of how the structure of the act can be incorporated into the order of time. *Hamlet* can be seen as an attempt to provide such an understanding, offering an enquiry into the difference in kind between thinking and temporality.

## Notes

1. This chapter includes some material previously published in Somers-Hall (2011). I am grateful to Edinburgh University Press for granting permission to reprint this material here.
2. As Francis Cornford notes, the forms have no generative power, and so cannot replace the role of the demiurge in *creating* a moving image of eternity (Cornford 1997, 28).
3. Cornford gives the following account of the relationship of myth to the rational structure of the world:

It is to be taken, not literally, but as a poetical figure. The whole subsequent account of the world is cast in a mould which this figure dictates. What is really an analysis of the elements of rational order in the visible universe and of those other elements on which order is imposed, is presented in mythical form as the story of a creation in time. (Cornford 1997, 27)

4. Deleuze cites Kant’s paralogisms as providing a model for Hamlet’s hesitation, where Kant argues that even the self is given under the form of time.

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