Beyond the Thule of possibility: The Task of Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio*

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At the bloody end of *Hamlet*, the prince of Denmark with his last breath enjoins faithful Horatio not to follow him in death, but instead to fulfill the role of *witness* to the events leading to such a tragic end. As Hamlet puts it:

> O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story. (5.2.286-291)[1]

I have always found this command of Hamlet's cruelly wry. After all, the very plot of Shakespeare's play revolves around the ultimate unknowability of Hamlet's story. We are captivated by Hamlet because we can't be certain, ultimately, whether he's mad or, as he claims to his mother, "mad in craft" (3.4.210), whether he's sent by a devil or by delusion or by the limboed ghost of his murdered father. Indeed, the only thing resembling a consistent philosophy that Hamlet exhibits throughout the play is the advice on acting that he offers *to the professional acting troupe* passing through Elsinore. He says,

> …suit the action to the word, the word to the action;…o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature…. (3.2.16-20)

Holding the mirror up to nature—in other words, embodying the trappings of selfhood so thoroughly as to counterfeit selfhood. How, then, is Horatio to proceed—having been given the

[1] All quotations from *Hamlet* are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt et al. (Norton: New York and London, 1997).

burden of telling Hamlet's story, a story whose truth-value is everywhere compromised by Hamlet's own commitment to disguise and performance?

It is not surprising to me that Hyam Plutzik's late masterwork gives voice to Hamlet's over-chargèd companion. *Horatio* expresses thematically and insistently a concern that persists throughout Plutzik's work, from his earliest poems onward: the disorienting, even harrowing, tension between (on the one hand) the necessity of the *performance* of selfhood and (on the other) the intractable unutterability of the self. Plutzik's poems register with some pity, some compassion, and some bitterness the lesson that Hamlet's parting instructions teach: that the ephemeral, mortal self recede into a lonely and unreachable silence, leaving artificial, and therefore necessarily imperfect, versions of the self to endure.

It is a poet's realization, and Plutzik acknowledges as much in an early poem that's short enough for me to quote here in its entirety:

> "The Poetic Process"
>
> The poetic process is lonely but theatrical,
> Improvisation before an empty house
> With the dread that prompter and stagehands will stay away.
>
> The problem is always one of self-projection.
> Burbage must die while he wears Hamlet's beard;
> But also, strangely, when the tragedy is his own.
>
> To be, then, passionately impersonal
> Yet nourish the self, is the poetic dilemma.[2]

Here, Plutzik argues, the "poetic dilemma" is what he calls "self-projection"—or, in other words, how to be "theatrical" when the condition of being is essentially "lonely." The crisis that Plutzik's poems seem to return to again and again, and that the collection *Horatio* takes as its primary subject, is that it may not in fact *be* possible to maintain both states of affairs simultaneously. His verse aligns selfhood with mysterious silence even as it renders poetic speech as a form of theatricality behind which the self is obscured.

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[2] All quotations of Plutzik's poetry are from Hyam Plutzik, *The Collected Poems* (BOA Editions: Brockport NY, 1987).

Indeed, just as the unknowable and hermeneutically unstable figure of Hamlet haunts Plutzik's *Horatio*, his first collection, *Aspects of Proteus*, is informed by another shapeshifter. The spirit of Proteus suffuses Plutzik's early work, manifesting most notably in the shifting perspectives of that first volume. A poem spoken by "John Offut" gives way to another, by "Mr. Pollington," and another, by "Abner Bellow." These voices congregate, not supplanting but supplementing one another, as if to indicate that identity is best understood as a constellation of viewpoints—that is, as *Aspects of Proteus*. Plutzik makes this point directly in the poem called "Identity," in which he argues that the "person hidden in this room" (1) is the one "Who stands—in fact—before us" (2). The hiddenness, for Plutzik, of the person standing before us is best represented not by language but by silence. Plutzik imagines the self-presentational aspect of poetry as "Seeking always the word nearest to silence" (I take the phrase from the first line of his poem of that title), and acknowledges that speech debilitates the self's integrity, like "a fever" (2). Still, he must admit that pure silence does not make possible a pure rendering of the self, but rather offers its own brand of violence. I'll read the opening lines of the poem:

> Seeking always the word nearest to silence—
> For speech is a fever, as life an ague of nature—
> One nears the undifferentiated nothing… (1-3)

The effect of silence is the undifferentiation of the self, the maintenance of the principle of unknowability, "the person hidden in this room."

The puzzle of Hamlet with which Horatio is left to grapple lies in the seeming contradictions of his self-representation and self-obscuring. Hamlet's garrulous construction of his own narrative throughout the course of the play renders him paradoxically ever more "the person hidden in this room." Hamlet's antic performance of the role of *Hamlet* denies the capacity of language to render comprehensible one's selfhood— "that within which passeth show" (1.2.85)— and calls into question the principle of representation. And it is with this awareness that Plutzik's *Horatio* begins.

In the prologue to Plutzik's long poem, Bernardo addresses the mystery of Hamlet directly. Horatio imagines the ghost of young Hamlet stalking the castle, searching, ripping back the curtain to find….and here Bernardo breaks in to exclaim, "Himself!...dead at the arras/ Pierced with his own sword" ("Prologue" 24-25). Bernardo's figure puts Hamlet in the place of

Polonius, and suggesting that Hamlet's determined self-concealment eventuated in his death, no less than Polonius's physical self-concealment resulted in his. Bernardo goes on to suggest, by way of explanation, that in death, "the first question answered is—self" (32).

But Bernardo's notion that *self* is a question is immediately countered by Horatio's misreading. "If self is the answer…" (41) Horatio muses, transposing *self* from the position of unknowability that Bernardo is willing to grant it, to certainty. The problem traced by Plutzik's *Horatio* lies precisely in its hero's resistance to the idea that Hamlet might, in fact, be fundamentally unknowable; the volume's narrative conflict develops out of this *hermeneutic* conflict, between Horatio's effort to hew faithfully to the "real" Hamlet and the constant cultural indicators that the "real" Hamlet is constituted performatively, through acts of linguistic representation.

Horatio's commitment to the idea of Hamlet's ontological integrity is challenged repeatedly in the first two sections of Plutzik's poem. His travels put him in conversation first with an Ostler—who's received a bastardized version of events, as if the tale of Hamlet had been passed through a line of children playing telephone—and then in succession with Faustus, a French Count and Countess, and finally the Prime Minister of Denmark. Each of these figures presents a different Hamlet, and a different opportunity for Horatio to assert the authority of *his* version of Hamlet, *against* competing authorities. And it's worth acknowledging that at least two of those competing authorities are *authors*: the gentleman-scribbler who, upon hearing that Horatio knew Hamlet, regards Horatio with a "stony stare" and asks "Have you read my book…You ought to do so" ("The Salon on the Rue Galantière" 128-9), and the Shepherd whose narrative occupies the long central section of the book. Moreover, as Plutzik elaborates on each of these competing versions of Hamlet's story, the tales at hand begin to displace the source text, which is present *behind* but not *in* Plutzik's fantasia, both for the reader *and for Horatio*, who becomes less certain about his authority regarding the truth of Hamlet as the book progresses.

What becomes clear, as Horatio moves through his encounters with alternate versions of Hamlet, is that what's at stake is not merely the stability of Hamlet's identity, but also the stability of Horatio's own identity. Over and again, Horatio asserts the primacy of his own version of Hamlet's story as a contingency of his participation in it. When the Ostler doubts Horatio's telling, Horatio considers walking away from the conversation, but

> …a vow made at the sanctified hour of death
> Is a stubborn metal—and I said quietly,
> "Listen to me, I am Horatio…." ("The Ostler" 84-86)

Revealingly, recalling his vow to tell the story leads Horatio not into a declaration of Hamlet's story, but to a declaration of his own identity. *Listen to me: I am Horatio*. Horatio's vow to witness implicates him as a character in Hamlet's story, and makes him as subject as any other character to interpretation. Horatio's resistance to alternate versions of Hamlet is necessarily also a defense of his own lonely and incommunicable selfhood position.

Horatio's discussion with Carlus, the Danish Prime Minister, articulates the argument that Plutzik's book implies. Horatio protests that he defends only the truth, to which Carlus replies,

> …You persist in talking of 'truth.'
> Your devotion's for truth's sake. What, pray, is truth?
> What is this truth you would exhume from the grave? ("Carlus" 139-141)

Carlus calls the story Horatio wishes to tell "your drama" (145), and suggesting that the "truth" that Horatio wishes to attach to lived experience is no less readily applicable to a performance. And in this argument Carlus echoes Hamlet himself, and shows himself to be an apter figure to render Hamlet's story than steadfast Horatio can be.

In the book's final section, Horatio must acknowledge that he has failed in his task, and also that his task was not something at which he could have hoped to succeed. He muses about Hamlet's final command…

> Surely, with all his keenness,
> Knowing the straight and crooked ways of the heart
> And those too of the wagging, galloping tongue,
> The greater or lesser capacities of men,
> And knowing you, Horatio, and likewise
> Himself, in his own but half-explored vastness,
> Could he, hoping for a slippery justice
> From man and circumstance, have sent you forth
> To catch a foxfire moving always further
> Beyond the Thule of possibility…? ("The Return" 61-70)

In these lines, Horatio understands that Hamlet's order "to tell my story" was an impossible burden. He reflects later that Hamlet was

> …a histrion—
> Or worse, a damnable melodramatist—
> Who loved players, would rather act than do…
> Himself preferring a role that gave him room
> For sawing the air, or shouting cryptic words—
> That part of a madman, say. ("The Pit of Carlus" 15-17, 23-25)

After having been forced to yield the increasingly uncertain truth of Hamlet's selfhood to the realm of the fictive, the speculative, the representational, Horatio concludes, "I have made my peace / With old illusion, and with those who spoke it" ("The Philosophy of Earth" 1-2).

The "old illusion" to which Horatio refers here returns us to Hamlet's original injunction "to tell my story." As Plutzik's Horatio comes to understand, there is no one story to tell, no event that remains unchanged to all perspectives, no self that may be rendered without violence. If he is to tell Hamlet's story, if he is to follow Hamlet's orders, he must do violence in some way to the unutterable and unknowable in Hamlet, to Hamlet's own claims to have "that within which passeth show." To honor Hamlet's story, Horatio must break Hamlet's order to tell it. At the end, Horatio capitulates to the logic of Hamlet, which requires him to disobey his friend's final command. In so doing, Plutzik's Horatio reconciles himself to the hermeneutic inaccessibility of selves, and embraces—with the Ostler, Carlus, and the shepherd—the immortality of artifice. That is, the immortality of poetry. For Horatio's crisis is, as Plutzik's earlier work acknowledges, the poetic crisis. In the person of Horatio, we find Plutzik confronting the poetic dilemma, and ultimately yielding selfhood over to the endurance, however flawed, of poetic representation.