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KIERKEGAARD

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KIERKEGAARD ON HAMLET:
BETWEEN ART AND RELIGION

Richard Kearney

Part One

KIERKEGAARD'S REFLECTIONS ON HAMLET are not as frequent as one might expect given their common destiny as introspective melancholy Danes. But the reflections that do exist are tantalizing, if characteristically oblique. Over half of these are to be found in an appendix to the fourth and final part of *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), already a multi-layered work composed by multiple pseudonyms (William Afham, A Married Man, Frater Taciturnus) and published by yet another pseudonymous character called "Hilarius Book-binder." More exactly, the appendix on *Hamlet* is part of a supplementary text to the main concluding part, "'Guilty?'/Not Guilty?': A Story of Suffering—An Imaginary Psychological Construction," by Frater Taciturnus. The supplement is called a "Letter to the Reader," and the appendix on *Hamlet* therefore is really more of an appendix to an appendix. Its exact title reads "A Side-glance at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*." The text in question thus lies coiled like the inner seam of a multi-layered Danish pastry.

My hypothesis in what follows is that if every text, as the hermeneutic model suggests, involves someone talking about something to someone, then this one is, when closely decrypted, nothing more nor less than Kierkegaard talking about Kierkegaard to himself.

To make matters even more intriguing, the "side-glance" a *Hamlet* is itself prefaced by two brief allusions to *Hamlet* within the "'Guilty?'/Not Guilty'" text itself. The first of these hints that "if it so happens that an individual who was great by virtue of his inclosing reserve offers himself as a subject for poetic treatment . . . we sneak up to admire."¹ Though Kierkegaard does not mention Hamlet by name here, a note by the editors and translators, Hong and Hong, leaves us in little doubt that it is Hamlet who is being referred to. Later in the text, but still before we get to the appendix proper, Kierkegaard makes his first explicit, albeit still indirect, pronouncement on Hamlet: "The esthetic hero must have his opposition outside himself, not in himself. That this is not the case in Hamlet is perhaps precisely

the anomaly—more on that later.”² And Kierkegaard will remain true to his promise. The appendix when it does come later, in however cursory and lapidary a form, will indeed make much of the fact that Hamlet fails as an esthetic hero precisely because the opposition is *within*, rather than *outside of*, himself. But before proceeding to a detailed textual analysis of what Kierkegaard actually *does* offer in his “side-glance” at *Hamlet*, let me first take a look at one or two other brief references that Kierkegaard makes to his Danish predecessor in some of his other works, in particular *The Concept of Dread* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, both also written in the mid-1840s.

* * *

In the *Concept of Dread* (1844), where we might expect to find the most elaborate references to Hamlet—given his famously melancholic disposition—we must content ourselves with a single allusion. It comes in the context of Kierkegaard’s own quasi-autobiographical discussion (via the pseudonym of Vigilius Haufniensis) of the relationship between what he calls “shut-up” characters and “revelation.” In “poetic existences”—such as his own and Hamlet’s—we are told that the “most subtle contradiction” of “shut-upness” manifests itself as a will to revelation which goes incognito. On the surface, shut-upness operates demonically to transform “revelation” into a “mystification”—even as it may continue surreptitiously to will it. But this leads to a second contradiction in that the very form of expression that one uses to expose the inner secrets and subterfuges of the shut-up poetic existence is that of “monologue” or “soliloquy”—someone talking to him/herself. To break the silence of shut-upness is to make these inaudible self-to-self speeches audible. “For its talk,” says Kierkegaard, “is precisely monologue, and hence when we would characterize a shut-up we say that he talks to himself. But here I essay only to give everything ‘an understanding but no tongue,’ as said the shut-up Hamlet warningly to his two friends.”³ And yet the irony is unavoidable, is it not? Both Kierkegaard and Hamlet were shut-up soliloquizers whose respective published soliloquies are considered among the most celebrated of modern letters!

For Kierkegaard the dilemma is the following: *either* to respond demoniacally to revelation (by remaining shut-up); *or* to respond authentically (by “assuming the responsibility for it in freedom”).⁴ In the case of the former—that is, the demoniacal—the revelation will out in any case, generally through an involuntary glance, lapsus, or gesture: what Kierkegaard calls the “sudden.” Indeed, Kierkegaard—or at least his pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis—comes very close here to anticipating Freud’s description of unconscious parapaxis. He describes the “sudden” as a symptom of “psychic unfreedom.”⁵ And ironically the more the *will to shut-upness* (or what he also calls “close reserve”) wins out over the *will to revelation*, the more certain it is,

we are told, that this demoniacal repression will result in an outburst of unwilling "ventriloquism": an uncontrolled lapse of self-exposure at the least expected moment. The demoniacal thus expresses itself as the "sudden" exposure of the inner secret, the degree of suddenness being proportional to the prior degree of suppression. The opposite of such shut-upness and suddenness is "communication" and "continuity," which the author insists are the idioms of "salvation." The demoniacal—like the sudden, terrible, almost insane outbursts that express it—is, we are told, "dread of the good."⁶

So the question one can hardly resist here is this: Is Hamlet an authentic character in whom the will to salvation wins out over shut-up "close reserve" and "entrenchment in the ego"? Or is he a demoniacal character condemned to psychic unfreedom and dread?

* * *

In Kierkegaard's two subsequent texts that refer to Hamlet—*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846, by Johannes Climacus) and, more importantly, in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845, published by the Hilarius Bookbinder)—we find some hints of a solution. In the former work, the author first assumes what seems like an odd position in associating Hamlet with comic rather than tragic contradiction. He defines the difference between the two as follows: "the tragic is *suffering* contradiction, and the comic is *painless* contradiction."⁷ And he then goes on to cite Hamlet "swearing by the fire tongs" as an example of the comic insofar as there is a contradiction between the solemnity of the oath and the reference—that is, to the inane fire tongs—that annuls the oath.

But Kierkegaard reverts to a more tragic understanding of Hamlet's attitude to contradiction when he comments on his famous existential question, "to be or not to be." The analysis here is dense and difficult, but very telling. It goes like this. Whereas from an *objective* or purely scientific point of view the question of existence is "indifferent" and "leads away from the subjective individual," Hamlet shows us that "existence and non-existence have only subjective existence."⁸ Which prompts the following surmise:

At its maximum, this way will lead to a contradiction, and to the extent that the subject does not become totally indifferent to himself, this is merely an indication that his objective striving is not objective enough. At its maximum, it will lead to the contradiction that only objectivity has come about, whereas subjectivity has gone out, that is, the existing subjectivity that has made an attempt to become what in the abstract sense is called subjectivity, the abstract form of an abstract objectivity. And yet, viewed subjectively, the objectivity that has come about is at its maximum either a hypothesis or an approximation, because all eternal decision is rooted specifically in subjectivity.⁹

Kierkegaard goes on to claim that the objective way of mathematics and science lays claim to a "security" that is totally incompatible with the

question of "what it means to exist."¹¹ And because of this the objective way thinks it has staved off "madness" that lies in constant wait for the subjective way," since the latter is incapable of distinguishing between lunacy and truth as expressions of "inwardness."¹²

This does not, of course, stop Kierkegaard from rejoicing that the determination of our "objective age" to get rid of inwardness and existence may itself involve its own kind of "lunacy." One may state something that is objectively true and still be a lunatic, Kierkegaard brazenly reminds us!¹³

But perhaps Kierkegaard's most telling comment on Hamlet in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* comes when the author claims that "to pray is just as difficult as to play the role of Hamlet."¹⁴ An intriguing statement! Just as the greatest of actors can spend their entire lives trying to get this role right, so too learning to become subjective, that is, learning to exist and to know what it means to die, are tasks that demand, not an instant, not a week, month, or year, but a lifetime. "To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all."¹⁵ Which is why the true greatness of a tragic hero is that he/she does not die until the final act when death has had time to gain "infinite reality in pathos."¹⁶ The greatest hero is the one who can wait, keep vigil, procrastinate. And though Kierkegaard does not explicitly mention Hamlet here, it is impossible not to suppose that he is still teasing out the analogy made two pages earlier between (a) praying, (b) existing, and (c) playing the role of Hamlet! In all three cases, the readiness is all. But the matter is not, as we shall see, quite as simple as it seems.

* * *

It is, no doubt, in *Stages on Life's Way* that Kierkegaard comes clean—or at least as clean as he ever comes—on his attitude to Hamlet. This work, as the McKinnon Concordance shows, contains over half of all Kierkegaard's references to Hamlet (ten out of twenty, to be precise). In the "Side-glance" appendix mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard's narrator, Frater Taciturnus, confesses that he is "engrossed" by the claim that "*Hamlet* is a Christian drama."¹⁷ This claim is attributed to a certain Börne who shares the determination, in common with two of his contemporaries, Heine and Feuerbach, to have nothing to do with the "religious." But precisely because of this, says Taciturnus, these thinkers offer a unique insight into the religious. The author plays with a curious analogy here: just as a jealous lover can know as much about the erotic as a happy one, so those offended by the religious can be just as insightful about it as believers. And in an age where great believers are few and far between, we should, says the author, be grateful that we have at least "a few really clever people who are offended (by religion)."¹⁸

After this mischievous preparatory remark, Kierkegaard's pseudonym comes to his main statement on the matter: "Börne says of *Hamlet*: 'It is a Christian drama.' To my mind this is a most excellent comment. I substitute

only the word a 'religious' drama, and then declare its fault to be not that it is that but that it did not *become* that or, rather, that it *ought not* to be drama at all."¹⁹ Once unpacked, this dense formulation seems to be saying that *Hamlet* should be considered a *failed religious drama*. Or to be more precise, *Hamlet* is a work that should have been properly *religious*, and therefore not an *aesthetic* drama at all. Or else, it should have been properly *aesthetic* and therefore not a *religious* work at all. The fact is, however, that it is neither. It falls between the religious and aesthetic stools and so, as T. S. Eliot would famously pronounce a half century later, *Hamlet is a dramatic failure*. This is not, of course, to deny that it is the most fascinating drama ever written. *Hamlet*, as both Kierkegaard and Eliot were aware, is the literary character who most fascinates modern minds. And neither, I suspect, would have been surprised by the statistic that Hamlet is the most written about person in Western civilization after Jesus and Napoleon.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym spells out his evaluation of *Hamlet* as a failed religious drama as follows. If Shakespeare deprives Hamlet of religious presuppositions and doubts that conspire against him and prevent him from acting, then he is merely a "vacillator" in a comedy. In other words, if Hamlet is not paralyzed with genuinely religious visions and misgivings, there is no good reason for him not to proceed with the summons to avenge his father's murder and restore Denmark to its former state. But Kierkegaard does not think that Shakespeare *does* make Hamlet religious in this manner, and so the play fails to be the great religious drama it ought to have been and could have been.

So how *should* Shakespeare have written this play according to the author of the "Side-glance"? Well, first, Hamlet's grandiose plan to become the avenger to whom vengeance belongs should have been confronted from the start with the religious prohibition on revenge killing. A reference to Romans 12.19 is cited in a note: "Never try to get revenge: leave that to Retribution. As Scripture says: 'Vengeance is mine—I will pay them back. . . . If your enemy is thirsty give him something to drink. . . . Do not be mastered by evil, but master evil with good.'" But since one does not see Hamlet "sink religiously under (his revenge) plan," his conscience stricken by such biblical prohibitions, one expects quick action as in a normal revenge tragedy where one deals only with "external" obstacles. Alas, however, in the case of *Hamlet* there seem to be neither internal subjective religious doubts nor external objective obstacles to action—yet Hamlet fails to act. And as a result, the whole vacillating, procrastinating drama becomes one huge introspective psychodrama where Hamlet's misgivings take on a purely psychological form of "dialectical repentance"—a non-religious and ultimately unfounded repentance that, in Taciturnus's reckoning, "comes too early." As a result, Hamlet comes across as simply "morbidly reflective."

Returning to the guiding idea of a Revenge Plan that Hamlet sets himself

but fails to realize, Taciturnus argues as follows: "If the plan remains fixed, then Hamlet is a kind of loiterer who does not know how to act; if the plan does not remain fixed, he is a kind of self-torturer who torments himself for and with wanting to be something great. Neither of these involves the tragic."²⁰ In short, without the presence of the religious, *Hamlet* simply degenerates into (a) a revenge hero who cannot live up to his purpose, or (b) a reflective melancholic with no real purpose at all who analyzes himself to death in the name of some empty (i.e., a-religious, a-moral) imago.

Taciturnus then goes on to repeat his arguments on the basis of the *either* esthetic *or* religious model, concluding once again, for a second time, that *Hamlet* is *neither* properly esthetic *nor* properly religious. (Anticipations of Derridean aporetics perhaps?)

If Hamlet is kept in purely *esthetic* categories, then what one wants to see is that he has the demonic power to carry out such a resolution. His misgivings have no interest whatsoever; his procrastination and temporizing, his postponing and his self-deluding enjoyment in the renewed intention at the same time as there is no outside hindrance merely diminish him, so that he does not become an esthetic hero, and then he becomes a nonentity.²¹

On the other hand, "if he is *religiously* oriented, his misgivings are extremely interesting, because they give assurance that he is a religious hero."²² But this, were it the case, would not lead to good drama either because it would belong to the order of the "interior being" where alone such religious misgivings could have their "essential significance." In short, trying to make a good drama out of the religious struggles of subjective inwardness is like trying to make a silk purse from a pig's ear. It simply cannot be done.

If it could be done, Kierkegaard seems to be saying (via his pseudonym) that he, S. K., might well have tried his hand at religious drama himself! But religious drama is, according to the above logic, a contradiction in terms—at least for our modern age of Reformed Christianity where the religious gravitates inward toward subjective solitude and away from external action. (Fraternal Taciturnus contrasts this to medieval Catholicism where a zealous believer *could* become "a tragic hero for the sake of the Church just as the Roman did for his country," that is, still observing the "esthetic" categories of Aristotelian drama as the "imitation of an action." In other words, for pre-modern Roman Catholics the idea of being a militant actor on behalf of a religious messianic politics—that is, a saintly agitator, crusader, missionary, or martyr—was still a possibility. But for modernity this is no longer a realistic option.)

In sum, either Hamlet's dilemma is religious, and therefore inappropriate for dramatic action, or it is esthetic, and therefore appropriate for dramatic action. It cannot be both at once. That Shakespeare tried to achieve the impossible—by seeking to compose a religious drama—is to his credit. But it does not and cannot take from the inevitable failure of the enterprise.

* * *

Yet Taciturnus has not totally given up. In the same "Side-glance" appendix, he resolves on a third tack. What, he asks, if Shakespeare had allowed Hamlet to *carry out* his plan of action—in keeping with the dramatic demands of the esthetic model—and then, having murdered Claudius (and perhaps Gertrude too), realized his sin and collapsed back into an attitude of genuine religious repentance *after the event*? In sum, first the evil action, then the good introspection and revelation. First the esthetic (imitation of an action), then the religious (pardon and peace).

But *this* third scenario is also impossible, for no matter how subtly dialectical one tries to manage such a move, it would ultimately make for a moralizing-sermonizing tract where the esthetic action of revenge is used merely to make a religious point. In that instance, the drama would be no more than a means toward an end, a pre-text for a pre-established doctrine, the moral of the story having been set from the start—rendering the action of the drama entirely redundant. In short, the only way such a scenario could work would be as religious propaganda—a prospect almost as unpalatable for Kierkegaard, it seems, as political propaganda. (Incidentally, it is just such a religious reading that René Girard proposes in *Shakespeare: Les Feux de l'enfer*.)²³ It could thus be argued that *Hamlet* exposes the folly of mimetic desire and sacrificial revenge in favor of a true Christian revelation: No to revenge, yes to providence and peace!

This is how Kierkegaard has his pseudonym, Taciturnus, tease out his final, yet still self-defeating attempt to save Hamlet as religious drama:

If Hamlet is to be interpreted religiously, one *must* either allow him to have conceived the plan, and then the religious doubts divest him of it, or do what to my mind better illuminates the religious (for in the first case there could possibly be some doubt as to whether he was capable of carrying out his plan)—and give him the demonic power resolutely and masterfully to carry out his plan and *then* let him collapse into himself and into the religious until he finds peace there. A drama, of course, can never come from this; a poet cannot use this subject, which should begin with the last and let the first shine out through it.²⁴

So it would seem that, for Kierkegaard, Hamlet is neither a religious hero nor an esthetic (tragic) hero but something in between. Neither fish nor fowl. A hybrid creature. In short an esthetic-religious mess. Perhaps not unlike Kierkegaard himself.

* * *

In the piece immediately following the "Side-glance at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," Taciturnus makes a supplementary and useful distinction between the two kinds of hero. By way of trying to get a final fix (if that were

possible) on what Kierkegaard is really getting at, I think it might be worthwhile bearing with Taciturnus on this ostensibly labored point. So let's take one last spin of the dialectical wheel.

The *tragic-esthetic hero* is, we are now told, great by suffering in such a way that he conquers in the external—what “uplifts the spectator while he weeps for the dying one.”²⁵ As such the suffering of the tragic hero “must arouse fear and cleanse the passions,” provoking the spectator's sympathies, which differ within the various views of the world.²⁶ No surprises here—standard Aristotelian poetics.

Now, by contrast, the *religious hero* is great by suffering *without conquering in the external*, and therefore without inviting the spectator to be purified (as Aristotle put it) through pity and fear. The religious hero, in other words, is someone “emancipated from externals” and from the tragic world of actions and passions. But precisely *because* of this, he is uniquely capable of that “qualitative qualification that is reserved for the religious, where a farthing is worth just as much as kingdoms and countries.”²⁷ One thinks here not only of the Gospel allusions to the widow and her farthing or the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed, but also of the passages in *Hamlet* itself where the hero observes how important it is “to find quarrel in a straw” (4.4.55), or to realize “when our deep plots do pall (fail)” that “there's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.9–11).²⁸ But, Kierkegaard insists, Hamlet does not ultimately pass muster when it comes to the religious category. Why? Because as we learn from a Journal entry of 1844 (deleted from the “Side-glance” appendix to *Stages on Life's Way*): “The mistake in Shakespeare is precisely that Hamlet does not have religious doubts. If he does not have them, then it is sheer nonsense and indecision if he does not settle the matter straight away.”²⁹

* * *

Because (according to Kierkegaard) Hamlet does not have religious doubts, he does not qualify as a religious hero; and because he does not settle the matter straight away in a dramatic act, he does not qualify as a tragic hero. So what, we might ask at this point, is Hamlet to Kierkegaard that he should weep for him? Apart from the fact that both are morbidly reflective Danes—enough perhaps in itself to justify the connection—there would seem to be other, less avowed, reasons.

First, it would seem obvious that Kierkegaard himself had keen concerns during the writing of *Stages on Life's Way* in 1844–45 about his own vocation as a religious individual. Indeed his view of himself is probably not much different than that of Hamlet: namely, that he is (a) too interior, subjective, shut-up, and inactive to be properly tragic, provoking sympathy and fear in his readers; and (b) too full of morbid reflection ever to be able to make a proper leap of faith! In short, Kierkegaard sees in his compatriot Hamlet a

symptomatic embodiment of the in-between condition he once confessed to—namely, being too religious to fit into the esthetic category of Climacus but not religious enough to meet the religious category of Anti-Climacus.

Second, Kierkegaard appears to identify with Goethe's remark about Hamlet that in "relation to his body his soul was an acorn planted in a flower pot which at last breaks the container."³⁰ The Dane of Copenhagen seems to have shared with the Dane of Elsinore a deep sense not only of being ill fitted for his task in life, incapable of heroic action or passionate love, but also of being shackled with a summons to amend a wrong that cannot be atoned for. (I am thinking here of Kierkegaard's father's cursing of God and misbehavior with his maid; and of Hamlet's father's "foul deed done in his days of nature" and his mother's incestuous relation with Claudius.) Indeed, Kierkegaard must have been fascinated by the way in which Hamlet is caught in the paralyzing bind of his father's double injunction: remember me/I cannot tell you what to remember. And he must have been equally intrigued by the second double injunction of the ghost-father, namely: (a) prevent the bed of Denmark from becoming a foul place of incest; but (b) "contrive against thy mother naught." In short, you must act, but you can't act!

Indeed it could be said that this is not entirely dissimilar to Kierkegaard's own personal sense of paralysis and paradox following his famous Easter conversion experience of 1848: he initially believed he had received a direct summons from God to "speak out"—only to revert subsequently to the esthetic and pseudonymous ploys of "indirect communication." Reflecting upon the event afterward, Kierkegaard was horrified by his own demonic hubris at supposing himself to be a chosen martyr of God—like the medieval hero-martyrs he considers so anachronistic in "Side-glance." This critical reflection was later to be corroborated by his disapproval of the self-proclamation of Pastor Adler as chosen advocate of divine mission, recorded at length in the pages of *Authority and Revelation* (1848). Kierkegaard's ultimate sentiment seems to have been that of the spectator of tragic aberration: "there but for the grace of God go I . . ."

The fact, moreover, that for both Kierkegaard and Hamlet the legacies of their heavenly father and their ghostly father were at times so diabolically intermixed (Derrida might say "contaminated") made their language, and their lives, a process of inevitable and ineluctable deconstruction.

Third and finally, it is almost certain that Kierkegaard saw in Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia a mirror image of his own relationship to Regine Olsen. The vehemence of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hamlet in this regard—as failing to live up to his "secret" religious mission by distracting himself with Ophelia and loving her almost by default—surely betrays a veiled criticism of his own behavior. The analogy between Kierkegaard-Regine and Hamlet-Ophelia is not explicitly mentioned in *Stages on Life's Way*, but it

surfaces in the following entry in his Journal. Let us read the passage deliberately in light of our above hypothesis:

Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet cannot be regarded as really being in love with Ophelia. It must not be interpreted in this way, even though psychologically it is quite true that a person who is going about hatching a great plan is the very one who needs momentary relaxation and therefore can well use a love affair. Yet I do not believe that Hamlet is to be interpreted this way. No, what is indefensible in Hamlet is that, intriguing in grand style as he is, he uses a relationship to Ophelia to take the attention away from what he actually is keeping hidden. He *misuses* Ophelia. This is how it should be interpreted, and one can also add that precisely because he is so overstrained he almost goes so far that momentarily he actually is in love.³¹

* * *

And yet in spite of all, and especially in spite of Kierkegaard's complaint about how "incredible" he finds it that "Goethe has taken such great pains to uphold *Hamlet*,"³² Kierkegaard himself feels compelled to conclude his own published "Side-glance" with this admission: "On a specific point, one may have a doubt . . . and yet agree on the one opinion that has been the opinion of one and two and three centuries—that Shakespeare stands unrivaled, despite the progress the world will make, that one can always learn from him, and the more one reads him, the more one learns."³³ That this final admission is ostensibly inconsistent with all the criticisms of *Hamlet* that precede it is typical of Kierkegaard's own deeply contradictory, not to say aporetic, approach to this play of plays.

Part Two: Some Notes on a Deconstructive Reading

Since this volume is specifically concerned with continental and deconstructive readings of Kierkegaard, let me conclude with some remarks on Derrida's allusions to *Hamlet* in *Spectres of Marx*—and see what relevance, if any, they might have for our above analysis.

I use the term "allusions" advisedly. Derrida at no point offers a consistent argument about Hamlet. Yet his *Spectres of Marx* opens with several direct quotations from the play, makes passing references throughout, bears a mention of the "work of mourning" in its subtitle, and actually carries (in its English edition) a front-cover representation of Hamlet confronting his ghost-father. And of course, both *Hamlet* and *Spectres of Marx* are concerned with "spectres," that is, the influence of the returned dead (*les revenants*) on the living. For Hamlet, the specter in question was his own father. For Derrida, it is the less personal surrogate father-figure of Marx (and by historical extension, Shakespeare himself).

In spite of this obvious difference, the logic of posthumous influence is, Derrida suggests, similar in both cases. It is, as he says in the "Exordium," the "*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*."¹⁴ One is prompted, in the light of our above analysis of Kierkegaard's "side-glance," to think here of what the latter had to say about the out-of-kilter temporality of Shakespeare's failed attempt at a religious drama (where the end informs the beginning); or again, of Kierkegaard's intriguing references to "ventriloquism" and the "sudden" as the eruption of non-continuous time.

But before teasing out such matters, let's see what Derrida himself has to say about this spectral temporality—or what he calls "spectropoetics." The context is that of trying to do justice to those who are no longer—or not yet—part of the "living present"; and the passage in question culminates, tellingly for our purposes, with a citation from *Hamlet*:

To be just: beyond the living present in general—and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past, present, actual present: "now," future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (*Hamlet*).¹⁵

Derrida's first chapter, entitled "Injunctions of Marx," then opens with an explicit citation from act 1, scene 5 of *Hamlet*. The passage in question concerns the episode where Hamlet and his companions are sworn to silence by the ghost; yet we know, since it is the opening act of the play, that the matter will not rest there. Though Hamlet does indeed admonish his guards, "And still your fingers on your lippes, I pray," he goes on to immediately state his deep unease at the fact that while he is not responsible for what has occurred he is obliged nonetheless to "set it right." The voice from the past is summoning him to his future. "The time is out of joint: Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right."

Derrida then proceeds to invoke the opening reference to another ghost, this time in Marx's *Communist Manifesto*—"A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism." He suggests the following analogy between the two kinds of ghost:

As in *Hamlet*, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing ("this thing") will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come. It won't be long. But how long it is taking. Still more precisely, everything begins in the imminence of a *re*-apparition, but a reapparition of the specter as apparition for the first time in the play.¹⁶

Derrida does not hesitate to suggest that “in the shadow of a filial memory, Shakespeare will have often inspired Marxian theatricalization.”³⁷ A strange use of the future anterior tense here! Or as he puts it, invoking Valery’s famous text on the “‘European Hamlet,’ *Shakespeare qui genuit Marx* . . . (and a few others).”³⁸ (We are inclined to include Kierkegaard and Derrida himself, of course, among these other few, but more of that anon.) What the specter represents for Hamlet, as later for Marx and others, is a “Thing that is not a thing.”³⁹ Or as Derrida says: “One does not know what it is.” One does not know if it corresponds to a name or an essence or any specific identity; and yet this invisible thing looks at us even though we cannot look at it. “The Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It desynchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony.”⁴⁰

Derrida calls this the “visor effect,” namely, the impression that “we do not see who looks at us.” Or more specifically in the case of Hamlet’s father, “Even though in his ghost the King looks like himself (‘As thou art to thy selfe,’ says Horatio), that does not prevent him from looking without being seen: his apparition makes him appear still invisible beneath his armor.”⁴¹ Derrida claims that this definition of the *visor effect* will be presupposed by everything he, Derrida, has to say on the subject of the specter in general. And as will become more obvious later in the book, what is at issue is not just Marx and Marxism but the whole “spectropoetics” of messianicity in general, that is, the very religious structure of existence as “religion without religion.”

Now replace the specters of Hamlet or Marx with the Holy Ghost of messianic Christianity, and we are no longer a million miles away from Kierkegaard. Indeed, if we compare (a) what Kierkegaard has to say about Hamlet not being sufficiently “religious” in his doubts, with (b) Kierkegaard’s contrasting analysis of his true religious hero, Abraham, in *Fear and Trembling*, we can read the entire analysis of spectral logic in a more evidently Kierkegaardian light. The following description by Derrida of Hamlet’s response to his ghostly father could, I submit, as easily have been written about Abraham’s response to the voice of the angel in *Fear and Trembling* (or, for that matter, about Levinas’s religious response to the summons of the infinite Other): “This spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority . . . and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion.”⁴² More specifically, we might consider the relevance of this analysis for the notion of messianic commitment or summons—the very thing that, according to Kierkegaard, Hamlet would have had to be more struck by if he were to be a properly religious character:

Here anachrony makes the law. To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the *visor effect* on the basis of which we inherited from the law. Since we do not see the one who sees us, and who makes the law, who delivers the injunction (which is, moreover, a contradictory injunction), since we do not see the one who orders "swear," we cannot identify it in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice. The one who says "I am thy Father's Spirit" can only be taken at his word. An essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction. It will condition all the others. It may always be a case of still someone else. Another can always lie, he can disguise himself as a ghost, another ghost may also be passing himself off for this one.⁴³

In short, how can we ever be sure which kind of ghost, holy or unholy, is here before us if, as Derrida says elsewhere, "every other is every other" (*tout autre est tout autre*)? And the simple answer is: we *can't* be sure.

Moreover, this question of the undecidability of the spectral injunction is in turn related, for Derrida, to the dilemma of mourning. Nothing is worse for the work of mourning, notes Derrida, than confusion about the identity of the one dead and gone. "One *has to know* who is buried where—and *it is necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*. Let him stay there and move no more."⁴⁴ Or as the colloquial expression goes when someone is finally buried: *requiescat in pace*. May they rest in peace! Now Hamlet, as we know, is notorious as someone who *cannot* properly mourn his dead father precisely because he cannot properly identify his father's nature or his past (e.g., "those foul deeds committed in [his] days of nature whose very tale would harrow up [his, Hamlet's] soul" etc.). It is, of course, true for anyone who has lost a loved one at sea or in some natural disaster to want to "recover and identify" the body so that the work of mourning can take place. But this is experienced as an even deeper anxiety by Hamlet, for not only has he missed his father's burial (he was "too late" returned from Wittenberg), but he can't even be sure that the paternal specter who is summoning him to murder his uncle is really his father at all—or at least the father he thought he knew!

Hamlet, like the ghost who confronts him, is riven with undecidability—and so is unable to mourn (his father), to love (his mother), to desire (Ophelia), or to act (by taking revenge on Claudius). But, in Kierkegaard's reading, this undecidability is even more accentuated. For we recall, by Taciturnus's account, that Hamlet is not only confused by the undecidable vision of an invisible ghost—a thing that is nothing; he is doubly confused in that he has no real religious experience of a God who forbids revenge (e.g., "Vengeance is mine says the Lord!"). In short, Kierkegaard's Hamlet is deprived of both an earthly father and a divine one. And the same might—who knows?—have even been true of Kierkegaard himself in certain "non-religious" moments of vacillation, inaction, or fathlessness—moments almost too

disturbing to be admitted or acknowledged. For remember, not only did Kierkegaard have a most troubled relation with his own father (who cursed God and crushed his own son), but he himself experienced moments of deep hesitation and confusion—especially prior to his famous Easter conversion of 1848. (An experience during which he felt summoned by God to speak out and write directly in his own name and voice. And why, one might legitimately ask, was it a “conversion” if he was already converted?)

* * *

But there is, I think, another key point at which the Kierkegaardian and Derridean readings of *Hamlet* overlap. Derrida concludes the second chapter of his Marx book by stating that the “deconstructive procedure” he practices attempts to put into question our inherited “onto-theological” notions of historical time by way of thinking another kind of temporality or “historicity.” This, says Derrida, would allow us to think “another opening of eventness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise.”⁴⁵ As *promise*, insists Derrida, and “not as onto-theological or teo-eschatological program or design.”⁴⁶ Derrida’s deconstructive thinking seeks to preserve this very promise by inscribing the “possibility of the reference to the other, and thus of radical alterity and heterogeneity” (i.e., of *différance*); and this in turn signals the impossibility of the present ever being fully contemporaneous or identical with itself.⁴⁷ So doing, deconstruction maintains the indestructibility of “emancipatory desire,” which is, Derrida concludes, the very condition of “re-politicization,” or perhaps even of “another concept of the political.”⁴⁸

In light of this rather “upbeat” deconstructive reading of Hamlet’s undecidability, we can, I submit, reinterpret Kierkegaard’s verdict on *Hamlet* in a variety of ways. Let me outline, by way of conclusion, at least three.

First hypothesis: Kierkegaard was incapable of moving from a traditional Christian understanding of the religious to a deconstructive understanding of religion-without-religion as “messianicity”—and so he was unable to appreciate the positive implications of Hamlet’s *failure* as a “religious hero” (in the traditional sense). In other words, the problem with Kierkegaard, on this account, would be that he hadn’t read Derrida. Or to put it more plainly, he wasn’t deconstructive enough—that is, sufficiently to realize that Hamlet’s undecidable reflectiveness is actually a very good and profoundly religious thing, once one accepts the notion of “religion without religion.”

Second hypothesis: Kierkegaard failed to move beyond the old alternatives of the esthetic versus the religious to embrace a new category of the *political*. There is not one mention of the political in all of Kierkegaard’s references to Hamlet. Contrariwise, one might note that there is not one of Derrida’s references to Hamlet in *Spectres of Marx* that is *not political*. Had

Kierkegaard espoused such a new concept of the political, he might have been able to escape the paralyzing either/or of esthetic versus religious options to which he condemns Hamlet.

Third hypothesis: Kierkegaard is also anticipating, in his "Side-glance" at *Hamlet* and other texts, Derrida's rethinking of the religious and the political. Read in this manner, in tune with commentators like Caputo and Dooley, Kierkegaard may be construed as a "radical hermeneut" whose deconstructive reading of Hamlet as *neither esthetic nor religious in strictu sensu* is already opening up a new sense of that very "event-ness as historicity" that Derrida sees as the precondition of emancipatory desire.⁴⁹ By this account, *Works of Love* and other signed works may be seen as prefiguring the possibility of just such a new politics.

Such a new politics might, I suggest, signal the following six features:

1. a commitment to action in fear and trembling—that is, in tolerance and vigilance;
2. a way of acting and suffering in the world so that the inwardly subjective and reflective is never sacrificed to the dictates of the purely "objective" and impersonal imperatives of the global techno-capitalist network;
3. a way of reflecting and acting "religiously"—that is, "messianically" in Derrida's terms, or "in light of the Kingdom" in Kierkegaard's terms—so that the impossible tasks of justice, pardon, and hospitality (these three great works of love) become more and more possible in each instant of decision and commitment;
4. a deconstructive-existential hermeneutic that tempers our instinctive rush to judgment and condemnation in favor of more refined and discerning judgments;
5. a new political practice based on Hamlet's insight that "memory" is indispensable and that amnesty can never be founded upon amnesia: for the "story" of the father needs to be told, the adversary's "rights of memory" need to be honored, so that the repetitive cycles of mimetic desire and revenge may be overcome; and
6. an acknowledgment, finally, that the best kind of politics is one open to endless responsibility and the surprise of the unexpected—the possibility of the impossible.

Read in this proto-deconstructive way, Kierkegaard may be conceived as a kind of Derrida *avant la lettre*. Maybe. It's possible. But I'm not absolutely certain. The ghost of Hamlet that migrated into Kierkegaard's reading of *Hamlet* is not, I think, identical to the one that migrated into Derrida's—however similar on questions of non-synchronous time, undecidability, and the logic of the spectral. For when it comes to specters and spirits, as Derrida reminds us, "there is *more than one of them* and they are heterogeneous."⁵⁰

This irreducible heterogeneity of ghosts is perhaps itself a guarantee of the heterogeneity of Kierkegaardian and Derridean readings.

That question remains open. But one thing is sure: new concepts of the “religious” and the “political” urgently need to be opened up and thought through in our postmodern age of growing indifference and indifferenciation. And if either Kierkegaard (as read through Derrida) or Derrida (as read through Kierkegaard) can help us in this task, which I suspect they can, we must be grateful.

Notes

1. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 230.
2. *Ibid.*, 407.
3. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), 114. Henceforth CDI.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 116.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 115.
8. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Scientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), 514 (my italics). Henceforth CUPI.
9. *Ibid.*, 193.
10. *Ibid.*, 194.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. This is also relevant, of course, to the basic hermeneutic distinction—so important to Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer—between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, and more generally, between *Geistwissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*.
14. CUPI, 163.
15. *Ibid.*, 164.
16. *Ibid.*, 165.
17. SLW, 453.
18. *Ibid.*, 452.
19. *Ibid.* (my emphasis).
20. *Ibid.*, 453.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 454.
23. René Girard, *Shakespeare: Les Feux de l'envie* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 331ff.
24. SLW, 454 (my emphasis).
25. *Ibid.*, 455.
26. *Ibid.*, 454, 636.
27. *Ibid.*, 455.
28. Quotations come from *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1963).

29. JP 1561, n.d., 1844. Kierkegaard is here referring to Röttscher, a Hegelian “systematician” who in Kierkegaard’s view interpreted Hamlet “rightly” as being “morbidly reflective,” and was ultimately obliged in his analysis of the “psychical development of esthetic characters” to use “existential categories such as the leap” (SLW, 635–36; from the draft to the “Side-glance” passage). In the same Journal entry, JP 1561, entitled “Röttscher,” Kierkegaard again cites Börne’s “en passant” remark that Hamlet is a “Christian Tragedy.” In the section on “The Romantic Arts” in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. J. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), with which Kierkegaard would have certainly been familiar, Hegel discusses *Hamlet* in his contrast between Greek and modern tragedy. He points out that Hamlet’s character is rooted in a collision similar to that treated by two Greek tragedians—Aeschylus in the *Choephoroi* and Sophocles in *Electra*—namely, the father is murdered and the mother has married the murderer. But the big difference is that while the Greek dramas portray the tragic actions as “ethical,” Shakespeare’s drama does not. In the case of *Hamlet*, the plot is purely *personal*. It is a play not about social or ethical action but about arbitrary internal conflict—indeed, the inability to take action.

Whereas in the Greek poets the King’s death does have an ethical justification, in Shakespeare it is simply and solely an atrocious crime and Hamlet’s mother is guiltless of it. Consequently the son has to wreak his revenge only on the fratricide King in whom he sees nothing really worthy of respect. Therefore the collision turns strictly here not on the son’s pursuing an ethically justified revenge and being forced in the process to violate the ethical order, but on Hamlet’s *personal character*. His noble soul is not made for this kind of energetic activity; and full of disgust with the world and life, what with decision, proof, arrangements for carrying out his resolve, and being bandied from pillar to post, he eventually perishes owing to his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances. (*Aesthetics*, 1225–26)

In short, if we were to use Kierkegaard’s categories here, we would say that for Hegel there is no real ethical basis to Hamlet’s predicament, nor a religious basis for that matter, but a purely subjective one.

The concern of *Hamlet*, as of many other modern tragedies, is that of “characters” and their inner “conflicts.” The greatness of classical Greek tragedy, for Hegel, is that its heroes were confronted by circumstances in which, having solidly identified themselves “with the one ethical ‘pathos’ that alone corresponds to their own already established nature, they necessarily come into conflict with the opposite but equally justified ethical power” (*Aesthetics*, 1226). By contrast, modern romantic characters like Hamlet are placed from the outset in a vast “field of more or less accidental circumstances and conditions within which it is possible to act in this way or in that” (that is, in an arbitrary rather than necessary fashion). As a result, says Hegel, “the conflict, for which the external circumstances do of course provide the occasion, lies essentially in the character to which the individuals adhere in their passion, not because of any substantial justification but because they are what they are once and for all” (*ibid.*). Modern heroes like

Hamlet do not act out of an "inherently ethical pathos" but rather from "chance"; and they make their decisions according to their own wishes and needs. And since the aims and motivations of the "inner subjective life" are all *particular*—rather than *universal* as in Greek drama—ethical considerations are not an "essential" or "objective" part of the drama. But when it comes to the portrayal of "directly present life and inner greatness of soul," claims Hegel, Shakespeare's characters are incomparable. Even Goethe and Schiller, he insists, cannot achieve anything like the "inner force and height of passion" of Shakespeare's heroes.

The lever of modern romantic tragedy, Hegel goes on to surmise, is what he calls the "personal tragedy of inner discord" (*Aesthetics*, 1229). "Indecision," "vacillation," "weakness of irresolution," "perplexity about the reasons that are to guide decision," "the swithering of reflection," and so on. These are all characteristics of the modern romantic hero left to his own devices and deprived of the external necessity of action (*Sittlichkeit*). In modern as opposed to classical tragedy, Hegel explains, "such dithering figures generally appear by being themselves in the grip of a twofold passion which drives them from one decision or one deed to another simultaneously." And to put this vacillation and discord into the same character must always involve, deems Hegel, "much awkwardness" (*ibid.*). Why? Because, in Hegel's considered view, "mental distraction into opposed interests has its source partly in a vagueness and stupidity of mind, partly in weakness and immaturity" (*ibid.*). But worst of all, says Hegel, is when the modern dramatist portrays such indecision of the whole character "as a sort of perverse and sophistical dialectic and then . . . makes it the main theme of the entire drama, so that truth is supposed to consist precisely in showing that no character is inwardly firm and self-assured" (*Aesthetics*, 1229). Now while Hegel goes on to invoke Shakespeare as a modern dramatist who *avoids* such portrayals of "vacillating characters inwardly divided against themselves" (*ibid.*), it is almost impossible not to see Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a perfect example of such a portrayal.

Hegel goes on to try and retrieve Shakespeare's main tragic characters, including Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, as somehow reflecting some "necessary correspondence" between inner conflicts and outer circumstances. But his explanation is, to my mind, less than convincing. Here is how he contrasts normal modern tragedy (which he holds in low esteem) with the Shakespearean exception to the rule: In modern tragedy, he writes,

the tragic denouement is displayed as purely the effect of unfortunate circumstances and external accidents which might have turned out otherwise and produced a happy ending. In this case the sole spectacle offered to us is that the modern individual with the non-universal nature of his character, his circumstances, and the complications in which he is involved, is necessarily surrendered to the fragility of all that is mundane and must endure the fate of finitude. But this mere affliction is empty, and, in particular, we are confronted by purely horrible external necessity when we see fine minds, noble in themselves, perishing in such a battle

against the misfortune of entirely external circumstances. Such a history may touch us acutely, and yet it seems only dreadful and we feel a pressing demand for a necessary correspondence between the external circumstances and what the inner nature of those fine characters really is. It is only from this point of view that we can feel ourselves reconciled in e.g., the fate of Hamlet or Juliet. Looked at from the outside, Hamlet's death seems to be brought about accidentally owing to the fight with Laertes and the exchange of rapiers. But death lay from the beginning in the background of Hamlet's mind. The sands of time do not content him. In his melancholy and weakness, his worry, his disgust at all the affairs of life, we sense from the start that in all his terrible surroundings he is a lost man, almost consumed already by an inner disgust before death comes to him from outside. (*Aesthetics*, 1231–32)

But even if we credit Hegel's positive reading of *Hamlet*, we are still left with his conclusion that even this modern tragedy leaves us feeling a woe that is only "a grievous reconciliation, an unhappy bliss in misfortune" (*ibid.*). In short, the typical emotion of the lost, beautiful, unhappy soul.

The main difference, we may conclude, between Kierkegaard's and Hegel's reading of *Hamlet* is that the former considers it both a religious and esthetic failure (without any explicit mention of its ethical function), whereas Hegel praises it as an esthetic success, albeit far removed from the ethical catharsis and necessity of Greek tragedy and not yet able to offer insight into the non-grievous reconciliation of Christian providence and peace.

30. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 209.

31. JP, 2:1562, n.d., 1854. Moreover, in light of this Journal entry we might reread a curious passage from the sketch to the section on the religious and tragic heroes cited above from *Stages on Life's Way*, a passage not included in the published text but entitled, tellingly, "What is it to be a hero?" It is hard not to read this unpublished passage without thinking of (a) Kierkegaard's imaginary male character (who fails to be a properly religious hero) as a version of himself and (b) of his imaginary female character (who fails to be a properly esthetic heroine) as a version of Regine (SLW, 637). Of his imaginary failed hero, the author writes: "If he, my character, had been a hero in the ordinary sense, he would have had to become that demonically by saying: I see that my idea of existence requires that she must go, ergo, and that this road over her leads me to my great goal. On the other hand, he must not say conversely that for him the main point was that he should suffer more than she. That is a religious hero. He is the greatest hero who wins the most.—He is the greatest hero who suffers the most. (Feuerbach in *Wesen des Christentum* is scandalized at Pascal's life, that it is a story of suffering . . .)." Of his imaginary failed heroine, Kierkegaard writes: "She also could have become a heroine, but only esthetically. I have not wished to keep her that way, for a new light should fall upon his sympathy; how it pains him that she breaks with the idea." To which the author adds this seemingly confessional aside: "If she had become a heroine, I would have bowed before

her (although the esthetic interests me less) for there is nothing I would rather do than bow; would to God that there were someone to bow before; most people, however, believe that there is a great deal to stoop for in the world." Then we stumble upon this self-disparaging and somewhat mock-heroic observation: "I am *poetice et eleganter* (in a poetic and refined way) a street inspector; I think of the two chamberlains who opened the door for Napoleon and said: The Emperor. Anyone could be made a hero if he will confide in me. I shall bring him into mortal danger; then it will turn out all right. Baggesen's lines fit most people (the majority):

Our Lord took a piece of sausage meat
and said: Become a man
Become sausage-witted and sausage-happy."

(SLW, "Selected Entries from Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Pertaining to *Stages on Life's Way*," 636–37).

32. See "Selected Entries" in SLW, 635.

33. SLW, "Side-glance," 454.

34. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

35. "Exordium," in *ibid.*, xx.

36. *Ibid.*, 4.

37. *Ibid.*, 5.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 6.

40. *Ibid.*, 7.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

44. *Ibid.*, 9.

45. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. See John Caputo, "Repetition and *Kinesis*: Kierkegaard on the Foundering of Metaphysics," in *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 11–35. See also Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

50. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 75.