



THE IRISH READER

ESSAYS FOR JOHN DEVITT

edited by Michael Hinds, Peter Denman & Margaret Kelleher

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HAMLET'S GHOSTS AND GODS

RICHARD KEARNEY

John Devitt was the first teacher to introduce me to Shakespeare. As a boarder in Glenstal Abbey I was initiated to the bard's plays and sonnets in John's extraordinary classes where time ticked away imperceptibly as we entered the worlds of Macbeth, Prospero and Hamlet. But I was also privileged to have John as a drama director in a number of Synge and Shakespeare productions on the creaking wooden stage of Glenstal in the early seventies. Of all the plays I read or performed under John's genial guidance, *Hamlet* is the one that remains most graphically engraved in my memory. I offer the following reflections in tribute to John, a man passionately preoccupied not only with Shakespeare but also with those ghosts and gods who haunted his dramatic imagination.

|
Hamlet is a play which opens with a spectre enjoining the protagonist to remember something that cannot be remembered. From the opening scene we find ourselves embroiled in a play about the terrible impossibility — yet inescapability — of memory. 'Remember me', says the ghost of King Hamlet to his son. Tell my tale and transmit my memory to future generations so that my role in history — abruptly cut off — can be restored. It is common in Shakespearean plays to find Kings bidding their children to inherit their secret story, blessing or birthright. And was not young Hamlet born for this? To tell his father's story to the people of the Union: the Union of two nations, Denmark and Norway, sealed with the pearl won by his father in the famous duel with Fortinbras the Elder. (A duel fought, as is later recalled by the gravedigger, the *same day* that young Prince Hamlet entered this world). Was not Prince Hamlet born, then, to respond to the summons of his father's spirit — namely, to carry on his father's history and avenge his murder?

But there's a rub. First, we cannot be sure *who* speaks when the spectre speaks. There is a profound ambivalence about the origin and character of the ghost. Hamlet's friend Horatio says 'tis but a fantasy'. Or worse 'a guilty thing'. At best a 'spirit', one moment there, one moment gone, there and not there, present and absent, the past-as-present. And when the sepulchral phantasm finally talks, after much equivocation, he claims he is a creature come, not back from heaven (as we would expect for such a noble father), but from *hell*: from 'sulphurous and tormenting flames'. He is indeed a 'questionable shape'. So, from the very outset of the play, it would appear that religious questions of guilt, sin, repentance, redemption and the afterlife deeply inform Hamlet's dilemma.

But there's another rub. If we can't be sure *who* the ghost is, neither can we be sure of *what* he is trying to say. He bids his son, 'remember!' Yes. *But what is he to remember?* His father's glories as illustrious monarch, faithful to his people, spouse and son? Or the exact hidden details of his untimely murder? No. The irony is that the first thing father tells son is *what he cannot tell him*. Recall the actual words spoken in Act I, scene V:

I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the days confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul....

In other words, the very secret that the father is bidding his son to *remember* is a 'tale' that the father is actually *forbidden* to tell! No wonder the young Prince is going to experience — like most other characters in the play — a crisis of narrative memory.

But there are further problems. King Hamlet's ghost proceeds to command his son to prevent the 'royal bed of Denmark' from being 'a couch...of damned incest'. Here again the Prince is thrown into disarray, for his father's spirit immediately adds: 'do not contrive against thy mother aught'. In other words, Hamlet is confronted with another contradictory injunction. First: Remember me/remember me not. Second: intervene/don't intervene. The paralysis of narrative memory is thus doubled as a paralysis of moral action.

In this light, the spectre's opening injunction — 'Remember me!' — can be reread as a double command: to commemorate the ghost's memory by honouring his summons to avenge; and to recall what 'foul crimes' the ghost-King actually committed in his own youth, if he could only recount them (which alas he is 'forbid'). This self-contradicting summons represents what we might best describe as a *tragedy of narrative memory*. Hamlet has a history to tell but cannot tell it. And he cannot tell it because he is not permitted to remember it.

Hamlet, then, is a story about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of stories. And without stories, there are no histories. For histories too are narrated memories. Ophelia cannot tell her story until she goes mad (when she tells everything but is no longer herself: 'Here's rosemary for remembrance'). Claudius cannot tell his story, even in the confessional, and so it has to be acted out for him by the play-within-the-play. Gertrude cannot tell her story because she is ignorant of it (she does not know that Claudius killed the King). Polonius and his fellow courtiers — Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Osric — cannot tell their stories either since they contrive only to serve others' versions of events. But most dramatically, of course, Prince Hamlet cannot tell *his* story for as long as conscience makes a coward of him. Not, that is, until dying of a fatal rapier wound he begs his friend Horatio: 'absent thee from felicity awhile to tell my story'. All of which means that this is a play where no one actually tells their story, and where no one truly remembers. Until Prince Fortinbras arrives too late on the scene, and

announces: 'I have some rights of *memory* in this kingdom/which now to claim my vantage doth invite me' (Act V, ii).

What exactly these rights of 'memory' are, Shakespeare never tells us. And if he could have told us the play would probably not have survived the First Act. In other words, the play is about a cover-up, the concealment of a crime which the hero is trying to uncover, and ultimately to recover from. And the way in which Hamlet seeks to do this is by having his story told, even if it is after his demise. Only thus, it seems, may the disjunction of time, signalled by the anachronistic return of the Ghost, be finally addressed.¹ The telling of the tale is an attempt to respond to the time being 'out of joint', to bring concordance back into discordance, to 'synthesise the heterogeneous'.² But the matter is not simple. The ghost is not about to yield his secret easily. Hamlet will have to pay a tragic price for the recovery of this deeply buried 'crime'.

In short, the task of remembrance, staged here by Shakespeare, is deeply paradoxical. Indeed, were it less so one wonders if Shakespeare would have succeeded in turning a standard revenge play into a spiritual masterpiece. It's true 'the play's the thing in which (we'll) catch the conscience of the king'. But *which* king are we speaking of? King Hamlet, King Claudius or King Fortinbras? Who is the *rightful* king in this whole sorry history of poison and betrayal? Who truly possesses the legitimate 'rights of memory'? And *who* speaks when the Ghost speaks? Indeed, is the real *crisis of memory* — with which the play opens and closes — not itself a *crisis of legitimacy* which in turn expresses itself as a *crisis of identity*: the famous 'to be or not to be'? It is because there's no quick solution to these interlocking puzzles that *Hamlet* the play survives to this day and Hamlet the prince is the most written about person in Western culture after Jesus and Napoleon.

II

I believe that Hamlet is in fact a deeply theological play — and that when Shakespeare talks about spirits, he sometimes means just that: '*spiritual* spirits'! In this second part of the paper, I wish to explore this hypothesis in some detail.

In his bold reading of Hamlet in *Shakespeare: Les Feux de l'Envie*, René Girard argues that *Hamlet* is nothing less than a profoundly religious rewriting of a revenge play (Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*), converting it into a drama of eschatological wisdom and peace. Everyone in the play, notes Girard, is 'to double business bound'.³ All are symptoms of an original forgetfulness that has blighted the kingdom. No character escapes the mimetic cycle of compulsive repetition and revenge, a cycle epitomised by the return of the ghostly phantom and covered over with a rhetoric of 'seems' and ceremony. Until, that is, reality is confronted at the end of the play and young Fortinbras enters the scene to reclaim his 'rights of memory' to the kingdom. Thus Girard's diagnosis of the play as a pathological tragedy of desire progresses gradually from a hermeneutic of suspicion to one of eschatological affirmation.

Girard begins with a critical reading of Hamlet's imprisonment in the doubling mechanism of mimetic desire. Following the lead of James Joyce in the National Library episode of *Ulysses*, the play is interpreted as a literary attempt to go beyond the stifling logic of rivalry, revenge and sexual betrayal — a logic attributed

to Shakespeare's 'originary traumatism' of the 'cuckold bawd' experience (Anne Hathaway's alleged betrayal with Shakespeare's brother). *Hamlet* is thus read as a parody of a classic revenge play. The earliest hint to this effect is the disclosure at the outset of the play that the murdered King Hamlet is no innocent victim but someone who is now purging his own 'foul crimes' in purgatory. In short, the fact that the assassinated victim (King Hamlet) was himself an assassin undermines the whole revenge-sacrifice mechanism. The exposure of this inner mechanism reveals Claudius's crime to be just one more loop in a chain of revenge-murders which the young Hamlet will simply continue if he kills Claudius in turn, as he is commanded to do by his father's Ghost.

Shakespeare's play dramatises the way in which the mimetic cycle of desire, imitation and revenge has led to a 'crisis of indifferentiation' where each character loses his identity and becomes the mirror-image of the other. This inability to distinguish one murderer from the next is powerfully expressed in the boudoir scene where Hamlet presents his mother with two portraits — one of his father, the other of Claudius — only to show, in spite of himself, that there is more of a symmetry between the two brothers than he wishes to admit. The alarming symmetry (non-difference) is further revealed by Gertrude's inability to distinguish between the two. It is not the Lady that doth protest too much, however, but the Prince himself who is becoming increasingly aware of how 'undifferentiated' his father and his uncle actually were. The interchangeability of those caught in the revenge cycle — the 'crisis of indifferentiation' — is also evident in the scene by the graveside where Hamlet and Laertes are presented as twin-images of each other.

For critics like René Girard and André Green, *Hamlet* is a play which re-enacts and subverts the sacrificial logic of mimetic violence at the heart not only of society but, at a more symbolic and originary level, of theatrical culture itself. It serves as a dramatisation of drama exposing the hidden structures of theatrical pretence and cover-up. Like the *Mousetrap* play-within-the-play, Hamlet too tries to 'catch the conscience of the king', and of the rest of us as well. In this respect, Girard suggests, *Hamlet* should be read as a quintessentially moral and Christian play which endeavours to expose the long repressed truth of the repetitive sacrificial logic upon which most human societies, and not just Denmark, are founded. The wisest way to answer the spirit of pathological doubling and return, signalled by the demonic Ghost, is by invoking a Holy Ghost which redeems us from mimetic revenge and emancipates us into pardon and letting-go — a spiritual 'divinity that shapes our ends'. This is finally the difference between the two Hamlets — one is a ghostly father caught in the reiterative cycles of the past; and the other an ultimately, if tragically, enlightened son who opens up a future of forgiveness.

For any theological reading of the play, the graveyard scene is of course pivotal. The moral recovery of the original cover-up is already prepared for in the graveyard scene where Hamlet, who was unable to properly mourn his own father, comes to mourn his surrogate father, Yorick. A skull is thrown up by the gravediggers — 'like Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder'. But of course, Yorick is a foster-father who has managed, through play-acting and humour, to escape the mark of Cain, which condemns most other characters in the play to a cycle of fratricide. And in so doing he, the King's jester, has proved capable of genuine paternity towards Hamlet — 'here hung those lips that I have kissed/I

know not how off'. Now he can be mourned as a father after the event (*nachtraglich*).

In the grave scene, Hamlet confronts the *real*. He comes to acknowledge death. This acceptance of separation and loss amounts, as noted above, to what Lacan and other psychoanalytic readers of the play call 'symbolic castration'.⁴ This exposure of the 'real' is symbolized not only in the exhuming of dead skulls — in particular that of Yorick — but in a whole metaphoric of vanity and ashes running through the exchanges between Hamlet and the gravediggers. These include jokes about how such mighty figures as Alexander and Caesar were finally 'turned to clay'; and, perhaps most pointedly, Hamlet's command to the skull that it go to the 'Lady's chamber and, tell her, let her paint an inch thick/to this favour she must come'. The grave episode teaches Hamlet that no matter how much we cover over our earthly origins we must all undergo the 'fine revolution' which returns us to the 'base uses' of a 'sexton's spade'. Ornamental pomp and make-up count for nought.

But arguably the most telling disclosure of the graveyard scene is that Hamlet was born on the very day his father fought the duel with King Fortinbras thirty years previously. This fact is recalled by the gravedigger since he, coincidentally, became a gravedigger that same day. So, the message seems to be that this gravedigger's uncovering of skulls reminds Hamlet of two forgotten facts of paternity: the crucial role played by his foster-father Yorick (who he now belatedly mourns); and the killing of King Fortinbras by his actual father on the day of his birth. So we may reasonably suppose, may we not, that the body the gravedigger committed to the ground on that first day of his employment, coinciding with Hamlet's birthday, was the corpse of King Fortinbras? And we may surmise, by extension, that it is to the recovery of his father's body that Fortinbras the younger refers in his closing allusion to his 'rights of memory in this kingdom'?

The 'primal secret' is what King Hamlet did to King Fortinbras, and what Claudius does to both Hamlets: namely, poison them to secure the rights of Kingship. The 'rights of memory' restored by young Fortinbras in the last Act would refer therefore to the final righting of the wrong committed against Fortinbras' own father by Hamlet's father. And the fact that King Hamlet's 'foul crime' occurred on Hamlet's birthday becomes central to the un-concealing plot: a crucial revelation confirming the Prince's opening invocation of the 'dram of evil' — that 'vicious mole of nature in (particular men),/as in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,/since nature cannot chose his origin...'(I.iv). Only by passing through the guts of a beggar can Hamlet come to his own self. By mourning his surrogate father (Yorick), and then embracing his own death in Act V, Hamlet ultimately undergoes — after the passage of much time — the spiritual mourning and letting-go of his ghostly father. A letting-go that sets him free. Hamlet gives up the ghost in every sense.

Such religious surrender itself coincides, finally, with the young Fortinbras' claim to realize his own right/rite of commemoration at his father's grave. Some four thousand lines after the ghost of King Hamlet bids his son to 'remember', we find another son remembering his deceased father with cathartic mourning. Young Fortinbras, Hamlet's princely double, completes the latter's insufficient mourning.

And by mourning Hamlet in turn — instead of gloating at his demise — Fortinbras brings an eschatological end to the bitter cycle of repetition and revenge.

We might also note here Harold Bloom's interesting take on the doubling mechanism of *Hamlet*, which though written from a more humanist angle than Girard's, still has much to contribute to a spiritual reading of the play. Bloom maintains that two Hamlets confront each other with almost nothing in common except their names. 'The Ghost expects Hamlet to be a version of himself, even as young Fortinbras is a reprint of old Fortinbras'.⁵ But Hamlet seeks to go beyond the temptation of mere repetition and revenge. He refuses to succumb to the recurring and paralyzing cycles of melancholia. The 'spiritual' reading is further developed by Bloom when he affirms that what is most universal about Hamlet is the 'quality and graciousness of his mourning'.⁶ Bloom claims that the deepest mysteries of Hamlet's character are involved 'in his universal mourning and in his self-cure'.⁷ And he sees the most crucial question of the play to be this: 'How ought we to characterize Hamlet's melancholia in the first four acts, and how do we explain his escape from it into a high place in Act V, a place at last entirely his own...?'⁸

Bloom doesn't answer this question. But he convincingly argues that the legendary fascination with Hamlet revolves around 'mourning as a mode of revisionism', and even upon 'revision itself as a kind of mourning for Shakespeare's own earlier self'.⁹ Now, this spiritual self-transformation of Shakespeare, who mourns not only his father and son but his own earlier self — he was thirty six when he wrote the play — is of course acted out in the drama itself in the personage of the player prince who 'revisioning the self replaces the project of revenge'. In other words, 'Hamlet is also Shakespeare's death, his dead son and his dead father...Hamlet is Shakespeare's own consciousness'.¹⁰ This very process of self-revision and self-overcoming is what makes Hamlet a deeply spiritual play of the 'fiercest inwardness ever achieved in a literary work'.¹¹ The danger of such a turn inward, however, is that Shakespeare/Hamlet might lapse into solipsistic melancholy. In that scenario, the lost and then idealised object (i.e. Hamlet's over-revered father) might be internalized to the point that he suffers a pathological neurosis. Or to cite the Freudian take on melancholy, it would be a refusal to let go of the lost object (such letting-go being the proper work of mourning). Thus combining the theological insights of a critic like Girard with the therapeutic insights of the psychoanalysts, Bloom can conclude that Hamlet's descent into radical interiority is epitomised by the seven soliloquies and especially the most famous of all — 'To be or not to be' — where he rehearses his own prospective suicide. This turn to subjective inwardness, in addition to Hamlet's inability to love Ophelia, to forgive his mother or to act against Claudius, would all suggest symptoms of melancholic paralysis. But the play charts the movement beyond the temptation of such self-absorption through a series of epiphanies: the play-within-the-play, the sea-change effected by Hamlet's visit to England, and most importantly the 'symbolic castration' of the graveyard exchange.

All these moments of spiritual insight lead to a final embrace of truth — the way things are, our mortality and finitude — expressed in the admission that the 'readiness is all'. And if Hamlet's final self-consciousness is still theatrical, it is another sort of theatre, 'eerily transcendental and sublime, one in which the

abyss between playing someone and being someone has been bridged'.¹² So exemplary, in fact, is this sublimatory act that it may be taken as a lesson for modernity as a whole. If our Western culture is to overcome its current self-hatred, suggests Bloom, it must become 'only more Hamlet-like'.

Bloom concludes accordingly that when Shakespeare broke free from the competitive lures of 'Marlovian cartooning' — and so became himself, William Shakespeare — 'he prepared the abyss of Hamlet for himself. Not less than everything in himself, Hamlet also knows himself to be nothing in himself. He can and does repair to that nothing at sea, and he returns disinterested...'.¹³ So doing the Prince transcended the revenge instinct. He traversed the void of loss and found the serenity of letting-go.

III

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare transforms a revenge tragedy into a play of cathartic remembering. He stages the *working through of the immemorial* until it yields peace. This transfiguring of melancholy — or what I call 'impossible memory' — into epiphanic mourning is powerfully expressed in Hamlet's final acceptance of the reality of mortality. So much so that one has good reason to suspect that if the Ghost were to return in the last Act he would be given short shrift by his son. Indeed, were this to happen, the mature and illusion-less Prince would, logically, neither hear nor see the specter. Why? Because his mourning would have been activated. Moreover, I would claim that it is Hamlet's final passage from melancholy to mourning which not only enables him to face death but to preserve life. And if not his own life (since he must literally lose it to regain it), then at least that of others after him. This is why Hamlet's parting words to Horatio are so crucial. He begs him to renounce suicide in order to heal his (Hamlet's) 'wounded name' by living on to serve as his memorialist. 'Absent thee from felicity awhile', pleads the dying Prince, 'to tell my story'.

Against the standard view that *Hamlet* marks the 'majesty of melancholy', I prefer to read it as a metamorphosis of melancholy into a miracle of mourning. Shakespeare moves beyond a play of compulsive rivalry and revenge to one of deep spiritual enlightenment by staging one of the finest dramas of narrative memory in Western literature.

¹ See Jacques Derrida's remarks on this 'out of joint' phenomenon in *Hamlet in Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. xx. Derrida speaks here of a 'spectral moment' that no longer belongs to time understood as a linear sequence of present moments — past, present, future. '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*)'. This spectral moment, which Derrida sees as intrinsic to the ontology of time itself, appears to us as a 'trace' which comes 'to disjoin or dis-adjust the identity to itself of the living present as well as of any effectivity. There is then some spirits. Spirits. And one must reckon with them'(p.xx). On the spectral return of repressed memories after the event (*nachträglich*), often resulting in compulsive acts of repetition, see Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955) and 'The Uncanny', *The Standard Edition*, Vol. 17. See also Paul Ricoeur on 'Impeded memory' (*la mémoire empêchée*) in *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (Paris: Ed du Seuil,

2000), pp.83-97; and his concise summary of this position in 'Memory and Forgetting' in *Questioning Ethics*, edited by R. Kearney and M. Dooley, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.5-12.

² Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, edited by David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), and *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984-87), Vols 1-3.

³ René Girard offers an illuminating reading of Hamlet's tragic imprisonment in the doubling mechanism of mimetic desire in *Shakespeare: Les Feux de l'Envie* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), especially the two essays 'La Vengeance Abâtardie d'Hamlet', pp.331-353 and 'Croyez-vous Vous-même à Votre Théorie?', which analyses Joyce's theory of *Hamlet* in *Ulysses*, pp.313-330.

⁴ See Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of desire in Hamlet' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp.11-52. For an elaboration of this psychoanalytic thesis, see also the entry on 'Hamlet' in *Dictionnaire de la Psychoanalyse*, edited by Roland Chemama (Paris: Larousse, 1993), pp.60-62; Nicholas Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology' in *Diacritics*, vol.18, 4, 1988. (see for example p.172: 'What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others ... the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object') and 'The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act' in *Diacritics*, 18, 4, 1988, p.188; J.P. Muller, 'Psychosis and Mourning in Lacan's Hamlet' in *New Literary History*, vol. XII, 1980; André Green, *Hamlet et Hamlet: Une Interprétation Psychoanalytique de la Représentation* (Paris: Balland, 1982); and also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p.49. What is original is her concentration on the role of the maternal as well as paternal implications of the phantom-signifier. She writes: 'Constructed on the one hand by the incestuous desire of (for) his mother and on the other by an overly brutal separation from her, the borderline patient (read here Hamlet), even though he may be a fortified castle, is nevertheless an empty castle. The absence, or the failure, of paternal function to establish a unitary bent between subject and object, produces this strange configuration: an encompassment that is stifling (the container compressing the ego) and, at the same time, draining (the want of an other, qua object, produces nullity in the place of the subject). The ego then plunges into a pursuit of identifications that could repair narcissism – identifications that the subject will experience as insignificant, "empty", "null", "devitalized", "puppet-like". An empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts – "powerless" outside, "impossible" inside' (p.18). All of these psychoanalytic readings take their cue, of course, from Freud's reading of Hamlet first published in 1900 in his seminal book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Pelican, 1983), pp.365-368, 575-6. For a more elaborate treatment of the psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet*, see my 'Specters of Hamlet' in *Spiritual Shakespeare*, edited by Ewan Fernie, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁵ Harold Bloom, 'Hamlet' in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p.387.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.413.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.430.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.400.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.400.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp.406-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.401.

¹² *Ibid.* p.411.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.431. Bloom appositely recalls Nietzsche's insistence that Hamlet possessed 'true knowledge' which recognizes 'the abyss between mundane reality and the Dionysian rapture of an endlessly on-going consciousness' (p.421).