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Contents: Introduction: Shakespeare,
spirituality, and contemporary criticism /
Ewan Fernie — 'Where hope is coldest':

All's well that ends well / Kiernan
Ryan — Harry's (in)human
face / David Ruiter — Waiting for
Gobbo / Lowell Gallagher — 'Salving
the mail': perjury, grace, and the
disorder of things in *Love's labour's lost*
/ Philippa Berry — The Shakespearean
fetish / Lisa Freinkel — Bottom's secret /
John J. Foughin — Spectres of
Hamlet / Richard Kearney — The last
act: presentism, spirituality, and the
politics of Hamlet / Ewan Fernie.

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Spectres of *Hamlet*

Richard Kearney

Before religious dread comes 'daemonic dread' with its queer perversion, a sort of abortive offshoot, the 'dread of ghosts'. It first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny', 'eerie', or 'weird'. It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting point for the entire religious development in history.

(Otto 1958: 14)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play about spirits. But how should this be read – theologically, aesthetically, psychoanalytically? This is a question that has preoccupied many thinkers from Kierkegaard and Lacan to Girard and Derrida. In what follows I propose to revisit some of the most significant philosophical interpretations of Hamlet's phantoms from a contemporary perspective. I will begin with a brief presentation of *Hamlet* as a play about a *crisis of narrative memory*, before then going on to review how several theorists have sought to interrogate its role as a drama of holy and unholy ghosts. I will look at four main readings: (1) the psychoanalytic paradigm of phantom-as-unconscious; (2) the existential paradigm of phantom-as-failure;

(3) the deconstructive paradigm of phantom-as-erasure; and (4) the theological paradigm of phantom-as-conscience.

Hamlet is a play that 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 (1.5.91). 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 our fantasy’ (1.1.21). Or worse ‘a guilty thing’ (1.2.129). At best a ‘spirit’ (1.2.135), 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 or Purgatory: from ‘sulphurous and tormenting flames’ (1.5.3). He is indeed a ‘questionable shape’ (1.4.24). 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 1, scene 5:

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 . . .

(1.5.9–16)

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’ (1.5.82–3). Here again the Prince is thrown into disarray, for his father’s spirit immediately adds: ‘nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught’ (1.5.85–6). 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: (1) to commemorate the ghost’s memory by honouring his summons to avenge; and (2) 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 express, and to vindicate in action, but cannot express it; and he cannot express it because he is not permitted to remember it.

Hamlet, then, is a play (an enacted 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: ‘There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance’ (4.5.173)). 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: '[a]bsent thee from felicity awhile . . . [t]o tell my story' (5.2.289–91). All of which means that this is a play where no one actually tells their story, 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' (5.2.333–4; my emphasis).

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 (but which? whose? King Hamlet's or Claudius's?) that the hero is trying to uncover – and ultimately 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. For the telling of the tale is an attempt to respond to the time being 'out of joint' (2.1.189), to bring concordance back, to synthesise the heterogeneous. 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/Wherein [we'll] catch the conscience of the king' (2.2.581–2). 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* that in turn expresses itself as a *crisis of identity*: the famous '[t]o be, or not to be' (3.1.58)? 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.

Psychoanalytic reading

Freud, as we know from his famous comment on the play in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, reads these paradoxes as symptomatic betrayals of Hamlet's Oedipus Complex. Memory is playing tricks, he argues, because of Hamlet's repressed desire to destroy his father and possess his mother (Freud 1983: 365–8, 575–6). Certain followers of Freud go much further and deeper than their mentor, however, in describing Hamlet's double injunctions as deep symptoms of loss and melancholy. But all agree that the ghosts of *Hamlet* have less to do with a theology of spirit than with a psychology of trauma.

Jacques Lacan, for example, declares that *Hamlet* is, from first to last, a play about *mourning*.¹ And he relates this in turn to the fact that the play should be read, at an ontological level, as a 'tragedy of desire' – expressing the protagonist's excessive sense of his 'lack of being' (*manque-à-être*). Although Lacan does not focus explicitly on the crisis of narrative provoked by the breakdown of the father–son relation, with its attendant crises of identity and legitimation, he does offer some fascinating observations on the play's obsession with doubles, ghosts and the un-mourning dead.

Lacan writes, 'I know of no commentator who has ever taken the trouble to make this remark, however hard it is to overlook once it has been formulated: from one end of *Hamlet* to the other, all anyone talks about is mourning' (Lacan 1982: 38–9). He cites as prime evidence (1) Hamlet's return to find his father already buried without proper funeral rites; and (2) Gertrude's remark that the cause of Hamlet's 'distemper' is '[h]is father's death and our o'erhasty marriage' (2.2.55, 7). The entire play, on this reading, revolves around the 'relationship of the drama of desire to mourning'. The recurrence of the Ghost is attributed to the insufficiency of mourning (played out again in Hamlet's hiding of Polonius' dead body

in the castle thereby preventing a proper funeral rite). And this explains, furthermore, the intimate link between 'the lack, skipping or refusal of something in the satisfaction of the dead' and 'the appearance of ghosts and spectres in the gap left by the omission of the significant rite' (Lacan 1982: 39). This insufficiency of mourning is exacerbated by the fact that for Hamlet, as for Oedipus – the two dramatic heroes who captivate the imagination of psychoanalysis – there is an uncanny secret behind the crisis of mourning.

Lacan, and several of his followers, interpret the play accordingly as a process of successive detachments from fetish-objects of lure and illusion: what Lacan calls the 'little a objects' (*objets petit a*) that stand in for the missing phallus. This process eventually leads to the moment of truth when Hamlet confronts the 'real' by meeting his own death – the ultimate act of detachment – and so finally succeeds in mourning. It is only with the decline of the Oedipus Complex, argues Lacan, that the phallus (as stand-in for the original lost object) can be mourned. In other words, it is only when 'Hamlet's hour' finally comes at the moment of death, that he can act and accept the 'hole in being' – the uncanny abyss of the Real anticipated by the empty grave of Act 4. Until then, Hamlet is unable to act, a paralysis most evident in his incapacity to avenge his father by striking at the phallic substitute, Claudius. 'It's a question of the phallus', says Lacan, 'and that's why he (Hamlet) will never be able to strike it, until the moment when he has made the complete sacrifice . . . of all narcissistic attachments, i.e., when he is mortally wounded and knows it' (ibid.: 51). In this light, Lacan construes the entire drama as a critique of the power of the phallus – and its passage towards 'symbolic castration' via a progressive disillusionment with the various *objets petit a* supplements. In other words, the play interrogates the phallic compulsion to draw agents into imaginary identifications with the phallic to the point of psychotic splitting and doubling – a point epitomised by the upsurge of spectral visitations and voices.

Prince Hamlet's arduous journey through the 'guts of a beggar' (4.3.31) is interpreted thus as a progressive disenchantment with the claims of the illusory fetish-phallus: (1) the Ghost's appeal to a fallacious paternal authority and vengeance; (2) Claudius' link to a 'divinity [that] doth hedge a king' (4.5.100)

(reinforced by the erotic desire of Gertrude); (3) Ophelia's incarnation of phallic substitution; (4) Laertes' rival phallic passion that represents the 'desire of the other' and sets the phallic signifier in motion.

Only when Hamlet finally undergoes symbolic castration in the hour of death, liberated at last from the desire of the other and its endless fetishistic signifiers, can Hamlet become his own subject and accept the 'real': namely, the truth that the phallus is 'nothing' and that the 'readiness [to accept this] is all' (5.2.100). Hamlet may well be a melancholic neurotic for most of the play; but when he dies, he dies 'cured'. It is then he realises that the phallus does not exist – or, in Hamlet's own words, that 'the King is a thing – . . . of nothing' (4.3.26–8). In short, it is only when Hamlet faces the true strangeness of death, and sees through the paralysing estrangement of the Ghost (his father's returned double), that he is freed from illusory attachments to the phallus, qua spectral phantom, and from the mimetic cycles that hold him in thrall. But, sadly, Hamlet only comes into his own desire posthumously, when it is too late. His desire dawns in the moment of dying, which is why his desire is tragic.

In an essay entitled the 'The Phantom of Hamlet', Nicolas Abraham takes this psychoanalytic line of argument in a somewhat different direction when he claims that what haunts Hamlet is an 'unspeakable' event that has been buried and entombed. Abraham reads the whole crisis of narrative memory as a symptom of the *gap* left in Hamlet by the untold secrets of those who came before him. What the 'phantom' objectifies is the cavity carved within the unconscious 'by the concealment of some part of a love object's life' (Abraham 1988a: 171). Abraham advances the following bold hypothesis:

The appearance of the Father's ghost at the start of the play objectifies the son's awareness-unawareness. Awareness-unawareness of what? Of his own uneasiness due to a circumstance not to be doubted: the late King must have taken a secret with him to the grave. Does the ghost appear in order to lift the state of unawareness? If that were the case, the ghost's objectification would have no more object than Hamlet's own dubious 'madness of doubt'. A ghost returns

to haunt with the intent of lying: its would-be 'revelations' are false by nature.

(Abraham 1988b: 188)

Abraham concludes that what audiences and critics have generally ignored for over four centuries is that the so-called 'secret' revealed by the ghost – that he has been murdered and so must be avenged – is itself but a subterfuge for another *more secret* secret: 'this one genuine and truthful, but resulting from an infamy which the father, unbenown to his son, has on his conscience' (ibid.: 189). Read in this manner, Hamlet provokes the *phantom effect* of a repressed generational secret encrypted in the 'spirit' of Hamlet's father. The Ghost is a symptom of blocked memory. A phantasmatic past repeating itself as present through its absence. In sum, a phantom.

Abraham argues that the aim of Shakespeare's play 'is to cancel the secret buried in the unconscious and to display it in its initial openness' (ibid.: 189). But how can such a secret be exposed given that the shame and guilt attached to it persist? Their exorcism, suggests Abraham, leads not to the punishment, real or imagined, of the other, but rather to a 'higher wisdom about oneself and the world of humans at large' (ibid.). But to exorcise the phantom, to lay the ghost, is to 'reduce the sin attached to someone else's secret and state it in acceptable terms so as to defy, circumvent, or domesticate the phantom's (and our) resistances, its (and our) refusals, gaining acceptance for a higher degree of "truth"' (ibid.).

Abraham proceeds, accordingly and rather brazenly, to write a fictional sixth act to the play in which Hamlet and Fortinbras become reconciled. In this supplementary act, the two enemy sons acknowledge their respective fathers' secrets and 'restore to Poland the kingdom which their fathers had stolen from it ... even returning the usurped Pole, Polonius, to his native Poland for proper burial!' (ibid.).

A related psychoanalytic perspective on spectral representation in *Hamlet* is offered by André Green in his pioneering book, *Hamlet et Hamlet* (1982), where he claims that the whole play is a theatrical uncovering of the buried, covered-up memory of murder. For Green, it is precisely the play as form (rather than content) that functions as disclosure. *Theatrical representation itself* becomes, in Shakespeare's ingenious experiment

with dramatic fantasy, an operation of proto-psychoanalytic 'showing' of the unshowable primal scene. And this, in turn, serves a therapeutic-cathartic role for audiences. This of course gives extra weight to Hamlet's throwaway line after his staging of the play-within-the-play – 'The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'. In sum, Green's basic hypothesis is that Shakespeare's drama actually succeeds in staging the unconscious and enables us to show/say what cannot otherwise be shown/said at a purely conscious, and therefore censored, level.²

What Lacan's reading fails to sufficiently appreciate, it seems, is that Hamlet's tragedy also comprises narrative catharsis. If the phantom has the first word, it does not have the last. The spirit as haunting spectre is finally overcome by another kind of spirit, the spirit of surrender to a 'divinity that shapes our ends/Rough-hew them how we will' (5.2.10–11). In the terminal scene, after all, Denmark is saved from its 'rotteness', and the memory of Hamlet's successful (if tragic) overcoming of phantoms lives on, thanks to the testimony of Horatio who absents himself from felicity to tell his story. And thanks also, we should not forget, to Hamlet's supposed rival, Fortinbras-the-son, who, himself ultimately liberated from the cycle of mimetic desire and revenge, ensures that Hamlet-the-son has the proper mourning and burial that Hamlet the father never received.

It appears that Shakespeare is aware of a healing power that escapes Lacan and his apocalyptic apostles of 'nothing': namely, the power of narrative memory and imagination. *Hamlet*, I would argue, can teach contemporary culture – crippled as it is with phantasmatic crises of desire, identification and legitimation – that spirits can be holy or unholy, allies or adversaries, and that some sons *can* truthfully acknowledge the secrets of their fathers. In sum, that certain stories heal. When one considers the vast number of contemporary tales – literary, cybernetic and cinematic – dealing with the collapse of the father-son relation (*Ulysses*, *Magnolia*, *American Beauty*, *Star Wars* etc.), one appreciates that if the *Hamlet* narrative is indeed perennial it is especially pertinent to our postmodern predicament of paralysis, simulation and psychosis. Wherever the logic of doubling rules, phantoms proliferate; and where phantoms proliferate, the story of Hamlet needs to be re-told and re-enacted, again and again.

Existential reading: Kierkegaard

While psychoanalytic readings construe the paradoxical injunctions of the 'spirit/spectre' in terms of repressed memory or blocked desire, Søren Kierkegaard signals a more existential and dialectical interpretation. In an appendix to *Stages on Life's Way*, entitled 'A Side-Glance at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*', Kierkegaard raises the question of *Hamlet* as a religious play. The pseudonymous narrator, Father Taciturnus, confesses that he is 'engrossed' by the claim that '*Hamlet* is a Christian drama' (Kierkegaard 1988: 453).³ This claim is attributed to a certain Borne 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, such thinkers can often offer us a unique insight into the religious. 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 be grateful that we have at least 'a few really clever people who are offended (by religion)' (ibid.: 452).

After this mischievous preparatory remark, the author comes to his main statement on the matter: 'Borne 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' (ibid.). Once unpacked, this dense formulation seems to be saying that *Hamlet* should be really 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* (Eliot 1951). 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.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym spells out his evaluation of *Hamlet* as a failed religious play as follows. If Shakespeare deprives

Prince 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 paralysed with genuinely religious visions and moral-spiritual 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 the play fails to be the great religious drama it 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. But since one does not see Hamlet sink religiously under his revenge plan, his conscience stricken by 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' reckoning, 'comes too early'. As a result, Hamlet comes across as simply 'morbidly reflective'. In short, for Kierkegaard, Hamlet is not a genuinely religious drama because the genuine act of 'repentance' is lacking.

Returning to the guiding idea of a Revenge Plan that Hamlet sets himself but fails to realise, 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.

(Kierkegaard 1988: 453)

In short, without the presence of the religious, Hamlet simply degenerates into (1) a revenge hero who cannot live up to his

purpose; or (2) a reflective melancholic with no real purpose at all who analyses himself to death in the name of some empty (i.e. areligious, amoral) imago. Taciturnus then goes on to repeat his argument, for a second time, that Hamlet is *neither properly aesthetic nor properly religious*. (Anticipations of Derrida's concepts of 'aporia' and 'undecidability' 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.

(ibid.)

On the other hand, says the author, 'if he is religiously oriented, his misgivings are extremely interesting, because they give assurance that he is a religious hero'. 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' (ibid.: 454). In sum, trying to make a good drama out of the religious struggles of subjective inwardness is like trying to make a silk purse from a sow's ear. It simply cannot be done. If it could be done, Kierkegaard seems to be saying (via his pseudonym) that he, SK, 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 inwards toward subjective solitude and away from external action. Father Taciturnus contrasts this to Medieval Catholicism where a zealous believer could become a tragic hero for the sake of the Church. In other words, for pre-modern Roman Catholics the idea of being a militant actor on behalf of a religious messianic politics – i.e. a saintly agitator, crusader, missionary or martyr – was still a possibility. Were Shakespeare a religious author in the Medieval Catholic Church, attuned to Aristotelian poetics and missionary militancy, he might indeed have written

a genuinely religious-aesthetic drama. But he was not; and, for Kierkegaard, those days are gone.

Yet Taciturnus has not totally given up. In the same 'Side-Glance' appendix, he tries 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 aesthetic model – and then, having murdered Claudius (and perhaps Gertrude too), realised his sin and collapsed back into an attitude of genuine religious repentance after the event? First the evil action, then the good reaction. First the aesthetic (imitation of an action), then the religious (pardon and peace). It could thus be argued that Hamlet exposes the folly of mimetic desire and sacrificial revenge in favour of a true Christian revelation: No to revenge, yes to providence! 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.

(ibid.: 454)

Thus this third scenario is also impossible, for no matter how subtly and dialectically one might try to manage such a move, it would ultimately make for a moralising-sermonising tract where the aesthetic action of revenge is used merely to make a religious point. In that instance, the drama would be no more than a means towards an end, a pretext 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. And this prospect is unpalatable for Kierkegaard.

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

In the piece immediately following the 'Side-Glance', 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 laboured point. So let's take one last spin of the dialectical wheel. The tragic-aesthetic hero is, we are now told, great by suffering in such a way that he conquers in the external – which is what 'uplifts the spectator while he weeps for the dying one' (ibid.: 455). 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 (ibid.: 454, 636). 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' (ibid.: 455). 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' (4.4.9.45), or to realise '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). 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' (Kierkegaard 1967: journal entry 1561).

Since (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 1844–5 about his own vocation as a religious individual. Indeed, his view of himself is probably not much different from that of Hamlet: namely, that he is (1) too interior, subjective, shut-up and inactive to be properly tragic, provoking sympathy and fear in his readers; and (2) 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 aesthetic category of Climacus but not religious enough to meet the religious category of Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard 1967: journal entries 6431, 6433).

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' (quoted in Kierkegaard 1959: 209). 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 misbehaviour with his maid; and of Hamlet's father's 'foul deed done in his days of nature' and his mother's incestuous relations with Claudius.) Indeed, Kierkegaard must have been fascinated by the way in which Hamlet is caught in the paralysing bind of his father's double injunction: remember me/I cannot tell you what to remember.

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 aesthetic and pseudonymous ploys of 'indirect communication' once again. Reflecting upon the event afterwards, 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 Kierkegaard's *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, made their language, and their lives, a process of inevitable and ineluctable vacillation.

Third, and finally, it is almost certain that Kierkegaard saw in Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia a mirror-image of his own relationship to Regina 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 behaviour. The analogy between Kierkegaard–Regina and Hamlet–Ophelia is not explicitly mentioned in *Stages on Life's Way* but it surfaces in the following entry to 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.

(Kierkegaard 1967: journal entry 1562 entitled 'Hamlet')

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*' (Kierkegaard 1988: 635), Kierkegaard himself feels compelled to conclude 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 unrivalled, despite the progress the world will make, that one can always learn from him, and the more one reads him, the more one learns.

(*ibid.*: 454)

That this final admission is ostensibly inconsistent with all the criticisms of *Hamlet* that precede it, is typical of a point of view so deeply contradictory that it begins to look like a deconstructive aporia.

Deconstructive reading

No analysis of philosophical readings of Hamlet's ghosts should ignore Derrida's allusions to this theme in *Spectres of Marx*. For Hamlet, the spectre in question was his own father. For Derrida, it is the less personal surrogate father figure of Marx (as well as 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' (Derrida 1994: xix). One is prompted, in the light of our 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 his comments about 'ventriloquism' 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 reflection on *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 modalised 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 spectre 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*)' (Derrida 1994: xx).

Derrida's first chapter, entitled 'Injunctions of Marx', opens with an explicit citation from Act I, scene V 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 lips, I pray' (2.1.188), he goes on immediately to 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' (2.1.189–91). Derrida then proceeds to invoke the opening reference to another ghost, this time in Marx's *Communist Manifesto* – 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre 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 spectre. 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

reapparition, but a reapparition of the specter as apparition for the first time in the play.

(Derrida 1994: 4)

Derrida does not hesitate to suggest that 'in the shadow of a filial memory, Shakespeare will have often inspired Marxian theatricalization' (ibid.: 5). A strange use of the future anterior tense here! Or as he puts it, invoking Valéry's famous text on the 'European Hamlet', 'Shakespeare qui genuit Marx . . . (and a few others)' (ibid.). (We are inclined to include Kierkegaard and Derrida himself, of course, among these other few, but more of that anon.) What the spectre represents for Hamlet, as later for Marx and others, is a 'Thing that is not a thing'. Or as Derrida says: 'One does not know what it is' (ibid.: 6). 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 de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony' (ibid.: 6–7). 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' (ibid.). Derrida claims that this definition of the visor effect will be presupposed by everything he, Derrida, has to say on the subject of the spectre 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. This is the very religious structure of existence as what Derrida calls 'religion without religion', which, broadly speaking, is the form of religion without any predetermined, dogmatic content: an openness to whatever is beyond.

Now replace the spectres 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 (1) what Kierkegaard has to say about Hamlet not being sufficiently 'religious' in his doubts, with (2) 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' 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' (ibid.). More specifically, we might consider the relevance of this analysis for the notion of messianic commitment or summons – the very thing which, 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 . . .

(ibid.: 8–9)

In short, how can we ever be sure which kind of ghost, holy or unholy, is here before us? Especially if, as Derrida often says: 'every other is every (bit) 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*. Here we find curious echoes of the psychoanalytic reading. 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' (Derrida 1994: 9). Or as the prayer for those finally buried goes: *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. (1.5.12 ff.)). It is, of course, natural 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 returned too late from Wittenburg), but he can't even be sure that the paternal spectre 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 he 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 Taciturnus's view 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!' (Rom. 12:19)).

In short, Kierkegaard's Hamlet is deprived of both an earthly father and a divine one. And the same might – who knows? – have been true of Kierkegaard himself in certain 'non-religious' moments of vacillation, inaction or faithlessness – moments almost too disturbing to be acknowledged. For remember, not only did Kierkegaard have a most troubled relation with his own father (who cursed God and crushed his own son), he also experienced moments of deep hesitation and confusion, especially prior to his Easter conversion. (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 event-ness 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' (1994: 74–5). As promise, insists Derrida, and 'not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design' (ibid.). 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 difference)'. And this in turn signals the impossibility of the present ever being fully contemporaneous or identical with itself (ibid.). Deconstruction maintains the indestructibility of 'emancipatory desire', which is, Derrida concludes, the very condition of 're-politicisation', or perhaps even of 'another concept of the political' (ibid.). In light of this rather 'up-beat' deconstructive reading of Hamlet's undecidability, we can, I submit, reinterpret Kierkegaard's verdict on *Hamlet* in a variety of ways. Let me outline 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 score, would be that he hadn't read Derrida. Or to put it more plainly, he wasn't deconstructive enough – that is, sufficiently to realise 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 aesthetic 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. While, contrariwise, one might note that there is not one of Derrida's

references to *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx* that is not political. Had Kierkegaard espoused such a new concept of the political he might have been able to escape the paralysing either/or of aesthetic versus religious options to which he condemns Hamlet.

Third hypothesis: Kierkegaard is prefiguring, 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 John Caputo, Kierkegaard may be construed as a 'radical hermeneut' whose deconstructive reading of Hamlet as neither aesthetic 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.⁴ By this account, *Works of Love* and other signed works, may be seen as anticipating the possibility of just such a new politics.

Such a deconstructive 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 technocapitalist 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 (the 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 judgement and condemnation in favour of more refined deliberation; (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' needs to be honoured, so that the repetitive cycles of mimetic desire and revenge may be overcome; (7) an acknowledgement, finally, that the best kind of politics is one open to both 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 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 spectres and spirits, as Derrida reminds us, 'there is more than one of them and they are heterogenous' (Derrida 1994: 75). 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 indifferentiation. 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.

Theological reading

While Kierkegaard and Derrida argue that *Hamlet* is neither aesthetic nor religious but something undecidable between the two, there are other thinkers who claim that *Hamlet* is in fact a deeply theological play – and that when Shakespeare talks about spirits, he sometimes means just that: 'spiritual spirits'! In his bold reading in *A Theater of Envy* (1991), 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.⁵ The ambiguities and ambivalences of the psychoanalytic, existential and deconstructive readings here give way to a theological solution.

Everyone in the play, notes Girard, is 'to double business bound' (3.3.41). All are symptoms of an original forgetfulness that has blighted the kingdom. No character escapes the mimetic cycle of compulsive repetition and revenge, 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 while Girard's diagnosis of the play as a pathological tragedy of desire confirms in some measure the psychoanalytic perspective, his conclusion is radically different: he moves 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. He interprets the play as a literary attempt to go beyond the stifling logic of rivalry and sexual betrayal – a logic that he attributes to Shakespeare's 'originary traumatism' of the 'cuckold bawd' experience (Ann Hathaway's betrayal with Shakespeare's brother alleged by Joyce). *Hamlet* is a parody of a revenge play, says Girard, pointing to the disclosure at the play's outset that the one to be avenged – 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, argues Girard, 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 Girard, *Hamlet* is a play that 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, concludes Girard, *Hamlet* should be read as a quintessentially moral and Christian play that endeavours to expose the long repressed truth of the repetitive sacrificial logic upon which most human societies, and not just Denmark, are founded. The only way to answer the spirit of pathological doubling and return, signalled by the demonic Ghost, is by invoking a Holy Ghost that 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: (1) a ghostly father caught in the reiterative cycles of the past; and (2) 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 – 'as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder' (5.1.71–2; my emphasis). 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 oft' (5.1.174–5). Now he can be mourned as a father after the event (*nachträglich*).

In the grave scene, Hamlet confronts the *real*. He comes to acknowledge death. This acceptance of separation and loss amounts, as noted earlier, to what Lacan and other psycho-analytic readers of the play call 'symbolic castration'. This exposure of the 'real' is symbolised not only in the exhuming of dead skulls – in particular that of Yorick – but also 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' (5.1.196); 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' (5.2.178–9). The grave episode teaches

Hamlet that no matter how much we cover over our earthly origins we must all undergo the 'fine revolution' that returns us to the 'base uses' of a 'sexton's spade' (5.1.82–3, 187). 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: (1) the crucial role played by his foster-father Yorick (whom he now belatedly mourns); and (2) the dispatching 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' (or 'sin' in Girard's reading) 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 . . .' (1.4.18.8–10). 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 realise 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.

Conclusion

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 spectre. Why? Because his mourning would have been activated. Moreover, I would claim that it is Hamlet's final passage from melancholy to mourning that 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, '[t]o tell my story' (5.2.286, 289–91).

Against the standard view that *Hamlet* marks the 'majesty of melancholy', I prefer to read the play accordingly 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.

Notes

For an earlier formulation of the opening section of this chapter, see R. Kearney 2002.

- 1 See Lacan 1982. For an elaboration of this psychoanalytic thesis see the entry on 'Hamlet' in *Dictionnaire de la Psychanalyse* (Chemama 1993: 60–2).
- 2 See Green 1982.
- 3 For a more extensive treatment of this subject see Kearney 2003.
- 4 See Caputo 1987.
- 5 See Girard 1991: 271–89.