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Hamlet and the Passion of Knowledge*

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From the dawn of its theatrical history, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's most inexhaustible tragedy, has resurfaced time and again with wilful perseverance. It has done so by alternatively questioning or eliciting its own modes of repetition; but also by encouraging revisitation and transformation via its own undifferentiated matrix of meaning. Extraordinary reserves of potential have enabled this tragedy to scatter out into a fine dust of enduring lines later used up and reinvested by the media or to settle into monument-like shapes that the canon has invariably entrenched. First and foremost, such reserves have to do with the staging of Renaissance epistemophilia, i.e. a drive towards knowledge which – in *Hamlet* – desire itself endows with the predicate of passion, opening it up to an ever-wider range of questions. Onto the framework of a conventional *revenge tragedy* – a king father enjoining his son to revenge the crime of which he was a victim – a question – Hamlet's crucial trope – is engrafted, which undermines the times and the ways of living and of dying. From its borderline outpost, the prince's gaze reaches out to penetrate such experiences, suspended as it is between a nostalgia for ancient, well-established knowledge and its ravenous proclivity to plumb modernity's new paradigms in their incipient stages. The threshold *Hamlet* looks out from marks the precarious epistemic balance of early modern England, where the sciences, be they old or new, along with the crafts and the arts are given a new lease of life in a shared cognitive venture. The

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blending of various strains of knowledge within the time frame that precedes their neat demarcation into disciplines and sciences takes place in the wake of a proper 'aesthetics of knowledge'. And in its enterprising effort to reshape existing relations between individuals and the new world – thereby altering the whole system of distances and perspectives – such new aesthetics reaches far. It is in fact in an unprecedented show of ambition that it sets out to shape the very subject, or rather the multiple subjectivities of knowledge[1].

In the first place, Hamlet's question addresses what lies beneath and beyond the body: that inner space which had then been turned into a passionate ground for anatomical observation. For anatomy had by then seeped into the collective imagination from the field of medical research, via the popularity of anatomical theatres. Ultimately, the desire to know what "lies inside", or, in the famous epigram of the Danish Prince "that within which passes show" (I.ii.85[2]), taps and strains the flow lines of scientific, philosophical and rhetorical knowledge in an effort to see whether these, apart from anatomical science, may in fact provide answers to the underlying question. And answers may come by sifting and testing the success of such disciplines in anatomizing their objects of study: along with the depths of the body, the density of a language which strives to voice them, and the density of time which marks their various beats[3].

In *Hamlet*, such conjuring of different areas of knowledge is all the more effective because it is powerfully enhanced by the poignant biblical echoes in scene v, Act I. In a dark, solitary place on the brink of a precipice, the ghost of the father, belched out of its tomb, trickles its poisonous story into the ears of his son and seals it with a double injunction to be revenged and to be remembered[4]. Critics have not failed

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1 See Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

2 All quotations from *Hamlet* are from the following edition: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980.

3 On this topic see: Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, London-New York, Routledge, 1995; Andrew Cunningham, *The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of the Anatomical Projects of the Ancients*, Aldershot, Scholar Press, 1997.

4 See I.v.1-111. Injunctions to vengeance occur at lines 9-10: "Hamlet: Speak. I am bound to hear. / Ghost: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear"; and at line 25: "Ghost: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder". The injunction to remember marks instead the conclusion of the story at line 93: "Ghost: Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me".

to notice that the ekphrastic *tableaux* called forth by the Ghost's narration harks back to the book of Genesis by way of numerous suggestions. In particular, it looks back to the primeval sin committed in the Garden of Eden, superimposed with the scene of that first fratricide which was the fateful outcome and echo of that sin. The association between the Ghost's story and the biblical account must have been virtually instantaneous at the time, given the immense popularity of the Fall theme. Not only was the scene of the Fall played out in abundant detail in contemporary iconography: like Holy Scripture itself, that scene was also made the object of a relentless and quite momentous work of translation and reinterpretation on the part of Reformed Protestant theologians[5] in whose reading salvation and redemption were overshadowed, if not yet altogether suppressed, by new emphasis on the trauma of guilt. In the exegetical practice of preachers and theologians such a difficult revisitation of Genesis was never quite taken as final, yet it was made explicit in the daily work of interrogating texts, a work in progress which spans at least fifty years, the long period of planning for what was to become the authorized version of the Bible published under the aegis of James I in 1611. The Holy Book, its reformed reinterpretations and the exegetical method that sets them apart: these all set up a scene which, in Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father and in the account of regicide, is flooded with a starkly tragic and dramatically topical light. Ambiguities, gaps and contradictions in the account of the royal Ghost – who peeps through the mist of his Purgatorial penance in the "flower of sins"[6] only for the short time to him allotted – once again conjure up the horrifying imperfection of salvation, the trauma of loss and of Fall, the reiteration of sin. It is the guilty whisper of the Ghost, its unsettling shape, similar yet not identical with King Hamlet's, that ultimately poisons his commanding warrant for vengeance and remembrance and opens up the dizzying chasm of sense to the questioning eye of his interlocutor. Thus Hamlet's request for knowledge finds its sense and its urgency in the revelation of a biblical Fall which, albeit deprived of salvation and oppressed with guilt, is paradoxically imposed upon as the foundational scene of action.

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[5] Extensive documentation on the iconographic currency of both these biblical scenes is provided in Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

[6] "Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand / Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd, / Cut off even in the blossom of my sin" (I.v.74-76).

As it retells the modes and the shapes of Hamlet's question, the play makes an extraordinarily trenchant contribution to the cultural venture – at once political and religious – of interrogating the Scriptures, particularly the primeval sin recorded in the book of Genesis. In that revisitation, which puts back on stage the trauma of Protestant modernity, *Hamlet* shows, as no biblical exegete could ever have done, the scope of desire. It is desire which – together with unworkable mourning for the loss of Eden – feeds his epistemophilia[7]. Addressed as they are to the body and to its interiority – or rather its viscerality; to Time; to the gauging of time; to the Arts; to memory techniques and their encroachment upon oblivion – the queries and the doubts Hamlet raises derive from his questioning of the Fall and ultimately converge onto one single interrogation of knowledge. The remarks that follow are meant to explore the forms of Hamlet's interrogation and the ways in which such forms are made to converge.

Lancets and clocks

On account of its uncommon length and its jumbled pace, often winding into blind spots or straying into digressive subplots, *Hamlet* is well known to defy the time of performance (unabridged theatrical versions are quite rare). It is also well known that Shakespeare took an unusually long time (no less than three years) to draw up even a provisionally acceptable script after many rough drafts. To us, such false starts come across as the equivalent, possibly fortuitous but certainly quite unique, of the disjointed time that the play immediately foregrounds and that Hamlet recalls to conclude Act I. There he bemoans the exacting charge issued by the ghost of his father to rectify such disjunction: "The time is out of joint, O cursèd spite, / That I was born to set it right!" (I.v.188-89).

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[7] As David Hillman has recently shown, the epistemophiliac drive, which in Freudian psychoanalysis and in later Kleinian developments designates the child's curiosity for the mother's body and for the inner workings of his own body, provides a very adequate description of the nuances that the anatomical and bodily imagination of early modernity takes on in *Hamlet*. (David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 81-116.) It is no wonder that, despite anachronisms, twentieth century psychoanalysis should have found in this first tragedy of interiority compelling echoes of the inner dynamics of the unconscious.

The disjointedness of Time – which in the words of the Danish prince takes on a broad sense ("time" at line 188 is both the time marked by the hourglasses and the whole episteme itself) imbues the whole play, caught in the vice-like grip of a 'diseased' time fluctuating between anticipation and delay[8]. Undependable because abruptly turned over to individual perception against proper gauging or adherence to the cycles of nature, Time stutters on in continual jolts. In the indecent hastiness of the royal wedding between his mother and his uncle, Hamlet witnesses its obscene acceleration; in the continual deferral of his vengeful 'deed' he decrees its maddening slowing down. On the other hand, to the Elsinore court prince Hamlet's protracted time of mourning is unbearable: it is provocatively displayed in the black colour of his garment, as an eclipse of the Royal sun. Yet even beyond such divergent ways of seeing, which weave the fabric of the whole tragedy, it is the articulation of clandestine scheming that calls for hastiness and speed. The concealment of Polonius's body, the plots hatched to get rid of Hamlet: such events bespeak the unreliability of the Danish world and by extension of the English world it adumbrates. Slowness and delays are disciplined by the threat of exposure or possibly even death. Studded with the diction of urgency and delay, the rhetorical warp of the tragedy in turn dithers between the leisurely and the lively, between the winding volutes of Ciceronian style and a pressing readiness to fragmentation. Think for instance of the abrupt occlusions in Hamlet's first soliloquy, where an elegiac stream of fantasized dissolution is broken up by the elliptical segments of an unbearably pressing scene (I.ii.129-58[9]). Or think of the pendular rhythm of "to be or not to be", modernity's most celebrated soliloquy, where a perfectly balanced initial sequence breaks down into a list and finally jerks into a sudden acceleration (III.i.56-89[10]).

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[8] The centrality of the Time theme in *Hamlet* and its implications in the play are discussed in Wylie Sypher, *The Ethic of Time: Structures of Experience in Shakespeare*, New York, Seabury Press, 1976. Significant remarks on this subject are also found in Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, and Eric P. Levy, *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man*, Cranbury, Farleigh Dickinson, 2008, pp. 150-67.

[9] Fragmentation in this soliloquy is addressed in Davide Del Bello and Alessandra Marzola, *Shakespeare and the Power of Difference*, Bergamo, Sestante, 2011, pp. 131-48.

[10] For an analysis of the soliloquy's muddled rhythm see: Douglas Bruster, *To Be or Not To Be*, London, Continuum, 2007, pp. 43-64. I have followed here Bruster's

The disease of Time, a time which eludes the grasp of knowledge and the check of reckoning, ultimately infuses the shape and the sense of this tragedy; it is in fact its very symptom. To Shakespeare's England, suspended between a nostalgia for cyclical iteration and a linear, forward thrust impressed by incipient commercialism, the question of Time is unsettled. It is the crucial issue that, with tragic reverberations, the play amplifies.

It is in fact not coincidental that clocks should have become a key addition to household furnishings and private outfits in sixteenth century England. Technological refinement, combined with increasing popularity, turned clocks into a staple domestic feature, so much so that even the Queen could sport a miniature one shaped as a ring on her finger. Yet all that apparently failed to appease the deep-seated anxieties of the social imagination[11]. Quite the contrary. The wide availability of clocks arguably encouraged a personalized use of time and marked a shift towards internalization. Time was thus handed over to the unpredictable twists of individual experiences and fed into the chain of collective fantasies and anxieties. Anxiety of Time and about Time, heightened by the reform of the Catholic calendar and the subsequent abolition of liturgical holidays, touches after all one of the raw nerves in the social body. It acts as the catalyst for epistemic bewilderment, which the play detects and records from its start, pinpointing its main symptoms in the dismayed and pressing questions of one of the sentries:

> Marcellus
> Good now, sit down, and tell me he that knows
> Why this same strict and most observant watch

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definition of "soliloquies" as the speeches Hamlet delivers "*in what he believes*" to be solitude (the added emphasis is mine). For a discussion of this point see Bruster, p. 44.

11 The centrality of the notion of Time in Renaissance culture and the progressive release of tools meant to measure it are discussed in Gerhard Dohrn Van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clock and Modern Temporal Orders*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996. See also D. H. Wood, *Time, Narrative and Emotion in Early Modern England*, London, Ashgate, 2009. The transformation of the clock into a privately owned object in Shakespeare's time is discussed in Adam Max Cohen, *Shakespeare and Technology: Dramatizing Early Modern Technological Revolutions*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 127-49.

So nightly toils the subjects of the land,
And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
And foreign mart for implements of war,
Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
Does not divide the Sunday from the week.
What might toward that this sweaty haste
Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day?
Who is'it that can inform me? (I.i.70-78)

Marcellus's questions, only partly answered by Horatio's updates on the risks of an impending war with Norway (I.i.79-106) cast a powerful light on the multiple, pervasive occurrences which disrupt time by accelerating it. And Time, thus disrupted, in turn gives such occurrences unwarranted and tragic prominence. The heightening of exacting night watches, the unceasing production of weapons, the relentless work of carpenters enlisted abroad: all these turn Denmark's war preparations into a construction site changed beyond recognition by the "sweaty haste" which engulfs it. It is the uncanny effect of this alteration in Time which underlies the account of the ghost in the fifth scene of the first act, turning it into a patchy and questionable narrative. In the ghost's recollection of regicide, what is compelling is not only the lingering on the disfiguring effects of poisoning, but also the emphasis on the suddenness of their visible manifestation: poison penetrates quickly as mercury, stops the blood flow with arresting violence, while a fouling bark instantly mars the polished surface of the body[12]. The hebona Claudius treacherously spills into the ear of the king acts as a reactant to a guilt which surges up abruptly in defiling signs, very similar to those Luther assigned to the visible forms of the original sin[13] and quite similar to those which defaced the bodies of plague victims, a notorious sight to Elizabethan audiences. This dramatic re-enactment of the biblical sources taps and moulds

[12] "Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole / With juice of cursed hebona in a vial, / And in the porches of my ear did pour / The leprous distilment, whose effect / Holds such an enmity with blood of man / That *swift* as quicksilver it courses through / The natural gates and alleys of the body, / And with a *sudden* vigour it does posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk, / The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine, / And a *most instant* tetter bark'd about, / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust, /All my smooth body" (I.v.61-73, my emphasis).

[13] Martin Luther, "Lectures On Genesis", in *Luther's Works*, eds Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann *et al.*, Engl. transl. by George V. Schick, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986, 55 vols, vol. I, pp. 3-73.

social anxieties about the unwieldiness of contagion and mass annihilation[14] by engrafting them onto a reformed reading of Genesis. What ensues is the obliteration of 'becoming', i.e. the time of metamorphosis: the king's body suddenly appears like coarse bark, while innocence and virtue precipitate into visible marks of guilt which take away the time for penance and redemption. The very image of the Fall turns into the vision of ruinous collapse, forever ripping and severing the ties with Grace, laying the stain of unexpiated guilt onto the table of reckoning:

> Ghost
> Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand
> Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched;
> *Cut off* even in the blossom of my sin,
> Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
> No reckoning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head – (I.v.74-79, my emphasis)

The traumatic collapse of Time and Kingship is refracted in the catastrophic fall of Gertrude from the hyperbolic majesty of the king to the deathbed of wretched Claudius, a "falling off" which adds to the sense of absolute deprivation:

> Ghost
> O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!
> From me, whose love was of that dignity
> That it went hand in hand even with the vow
> I made to her in marriage; and to decline
> Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of mine! (I.v. 47-52)

In this crucial scene, horror for the compression of Time into simultaneity is magnified by the sudden imprisonment of the body inside a bark. Such cortex defaces the body's smooth surface: it sets up in its place the outrageous image of rotting flesh which confines the king's

[14] For an analysis of the effects of the plague on the social imagination and of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre politics see Frank Percy Wilson, *The Plague in Shakespeare's London*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963; Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Stuart Year*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991; Rebecca Totaro and Ernest B. Gilman, eds, *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England*, London, Routledge, 2011.

effigy within an unreachable space and obstructs his opening onto the world. In that rigid shape, cut off from its natural closeness to the outside, the tragedy foreshadows the *corpus clausus* of the modern subject, imprisoned within the narrow scope of himself, forever prevented from identifying with others. As it exhibits symptoms that closely recall those attached to the disease of 'melancholy' in contemporary medical tracts, the body also becomes the repository of a sceptic imagination inflamed by the abrupt unknowability of what is denied to the gaze of experience[15]. In that pivotal account, the disturbing permutation of the time sequence into simultaneity and the sense of confinement within a body that has become inaccessible create an anamorphic effect that eventually contaminates the whole system of signs and differences on which the paradigm of knowledge is based. Anamorphism casts its puzzling shadow on all relationships, erasing differences (between life and death, guilt and innocence, royalty and abjection), disrupting the horizon of perception in a sort of earthshattering deflagration.

The substance of *Hamlet* consists in a reverberation of and a response to that disjointed account. Its plot is the staging of the symptomatic repercussions of that trauma. Starting with the opening night fraught with mysteries, Time and Space seem suddenly torn from familiar perception, curled up in an opaque membrane which needs to be opened up and unfurled, "unfolded"[16]. Bodies usually confined within the defensive armour of a flat and insensitive effigy are suddenly exposed in the unbearable materiality of solid and sordid flesh[17]; sudden deaths set in as unforeseen side effects of life itself.

The tragedy's anatomical way of knowing takes after the 'solidity' of such disfigured integument. What ensues is a raving, impelling need to force and penetrate all the outer layerings that impede knowledge of the spaces, the forms and the words once familiar but

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[15] See Hillman, pp. 43-64.

[16] The second line of the initial dialogue is in fact an injunction to 'manifest' or 'unfold' oneself ("Stand and unfold yourself!", I.i.2), which Francisco addresses to his fellow guard Bernard, as if his form were curled up in a deceptive coil.

[17] I am thinking here of the opening lines of Hamlet's first soliloquy: "O That this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon against self-slaughter" (I.ii.128-31). Controversy over the variants of the adjective attached to "flesh" (either the "sullied" of the edition I cite or the "solid" of other versions) does not prevent us from accepting, as is now established practice, both readings within the horizon of meaning that the text opens up.

now seemingly lost to the dark depths of an unknown interiority. Hamlet, himself confined within a too solid flesh, locked up in the nutshell of existence[18], rips and tears tapestries, bodies and words with the same urgency that drives him to 'twist' Gertrude's heart[19]. Rather than aiming for truth, Hamlet sets out to expose his own claim by showing that it is not what it seems, that there is more to it than what is seen. Mania and frenzy arise from his anxiety that not knowing may become explosive, that the shell containing his lack of knowledge may burst, spilling out the disjointed splinters of the self. "Let me not burst in ignorance!" (I.iv.46), Hamlet pleads addressing the Ghost. It is as though the eruption of his father's shape from the tomb that contained it and the sudden burst of shrouds that shakes the earth were also confining him, his son, within the tomb of an ignorance likely to burst the nutshell of his own self:

> Hamlet
> […] but tell why thy canonized bones, hearsèd in death,
> Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre
> Wherein we saw you quietly interred
> Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws
> To cast thee up again. (I.iv.46-51)

'Knowing why' has ultimately become a matter of life or death. It is as though the suddenness of the Fall had turned incarceration in the body into an implosion of 'not knowing' that threatens to erupt. Both animated and sickened by the dread of imploding and exploding, Hamlet's desire to know is expressed in a double movement that alternates between the forcing of membranes and barriers and a sort of defensive tightening inside enclosures and armour. The pendulum between questions and litotes marks the oscillation between the two epistemic modes of a sceptical and melancholic modernity, observed in its incipient neurotic implications.

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[18] "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.i.253-55).

[19] In the *closet scene*, as the intimate space of the new royal couple is flung open by his intrusion, Hamlet's anatomical frenzy finds its crucial expression, as seen in the words that he first addresses to Gertrude: "Peace, sit you down, / And let me *wring* your heart. For so I shall, / If it be made of penetrable stuff, / If damnèd custom have not brassed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense" (III.iv.36-40, my emphasis).

Memory, trauma and repetition

It comes as no surprise that the Ghost's injunction to remember in the final line of his account ("Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder", I.v.24) should trump his first bidding to revenge, thereby shifting emphasis from *res publica* to private concerns. In the form of matter exploded from the grave that contained it and locked up in its defacing husk, the ghost of the king father cannot but ask his son to re-join his fragments even though it entails that the son abdicate his own place in the chain of being. Knowledge is thus burdened with the mortgage of a memory that cannot possibly be handled by the very arts meant to teach its practice, the arts that extol it as a divine gift and a source of immortality[20]. How to remember what is like him and what is unlike him, but never him? How to recall what challenges integration in the "tables of [his] memory" that are supposed to record the traces of a life meant to imitate a broken divine order? In the theatre of memory that the scene is supposed to make present, the story and the ghost to be remembered and avenged with exemplary swiftness represent a tumultuous and ungovernable excess of signs. In order to commit them to the table of his mind, Hamlet will have to erase what is already there and leave the way open to the compelling injunction of his father:

> Hamlet
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmixed with baser matters. Yes, by heaven! (I.v. 98-104)

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[20] A crucial analysis of the rediscovery of the role of the mnemonic arts in the Renaissance is given by Frances Yates, especially in her trailblazing book: Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* [1966], London, Ark, 1984. Bibliography on all aspects of this issue is vast. For the purposes of this contribution I will mention: William E. Engel, *Mapping Mortality: The Persistence of Memory and Melancholy in Early Modern England*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995; Garrett A. Sullivan, *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Peter Holland, ed., *Shakespeare, Memory and Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

The wax of the table appealed to by Hamlet ("My tables – meet it is I set it down", I.v.107) – and then by him impressed with writing along explicit stage directions – materializes the malleability of memory as a virtual prosthesis of his mind. It is a substance apt not only to embrace memory's imprints but also to allow their immediate erasure. For the 'matter' bidding remembrance imposes itself with such destructive and devastating force that in order to remember one must of necessity forget[21]. Long before the Ghost compels him to remember, Hamlet is in fact overwhelmed by the violence of a memory he cannot possibly handle, a scene that bursts open against the resistance of thought. To no avail, Hamlet's horrifying question – "Must I remember?" (I.ii.143) – endeavours to resist the image that sets before his eyes Gertrude's ravenous sexual greed: "Why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" (I.ii.43-44). And thought falls back, faced with the unworkable task of recording the short lapse of time between Gertrude's tears of sorrow for the death of the King and her wedding to a new husband. It is a time that eludes computation, since it seems to get shorter as words are forced to recall it[22].

As in the Ghost's account, here the inevitability of remembrance and its impossible integration mark the sudden upsurge of traumatic knowledge. And because of its unworkable horror, such knowledge is to be repeated without end. In the very same terms – those of reiterated trauma induced by the guilt of our progenitors – the Reformed theologians interpreted the biblical episode of Cain's fratricide, which *Hamlet* reverberates in the assassination of King Claudius. The Lutheran epiphany of guilt witnessed in Hamlet's initial soliloquy and unfolded in the Ghost's story dramatizes the traumatic revelation of original sin and its repercussions for later theological interpretations[23].

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[21] For an insightful reading of *Hamlet* vis-à-vis the crisis of the memory paradigm on the threshold between memory and oblivion see Greta Perletti's study: Greta Perletti, "'I find thee apt': Hamlet and the Transformation of the Art of Memory", in *The Difference of Shakespeare*, ed. Alessandra Marzola, Bergamo, Sestante Edizioni, 2005, pp. 91-112.

[22] The marks that punctuate the soliloquy keep revising the measure of elapsed time, progressively reducing its span: "But two months dead, nay not so much, not two!" (I.ii.138); "And yet within a month – / Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman. / A little month, or e'er those shoes were old" (I.ii.145- 47); "Within a month" (I.ii.153).

[23] For a more detailed discussion of reformed exegesis and their topicality in *Hamlet* see: Heather Herschfeld, "Hamlet's 'first corse': Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Theology", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54:4 (2003), pp. 424-48.

Although it cannot be made part of memory – itself a mere organic aggregate of mind impressions mimicking providential cosmogony – the scene of guilt can never possibly slip into the kind of oblivion praised by Michel de Montaigne as a new beneficial way of relating to time[24].

In the epistemic interlude between remembrance and oblivion repetition comes forth as the symptom of a Protestantism endlessly traumatized by the Fall. Repetition is also what marks the style required by a memory equally traumatized by a paternal story that cannot be coped with. Throughout the play, the various echoes of the Ghost's story are but replicas of his initial questioning. Hamlet repeats the forms of the Ghost's narrative: he enjoins and forbids, spreading the poison of his pestilential word. He puts it back in the limelight, showing how the smooth surface of the world has become thick, coarse and inaccessible. And eventually he forces its closure. Regardless of what it may actually reveal, the play's anatomical gaze is shaped by the mode of reiteration and by the urgency of its inevitability.

Hamlet's traces and the form of desire

The stammer of the Ghost's memory in the syndrome of repetition comes to a turning point when Hamlet refuses to remember his father or to reconstitute his father's character, which is now foreclosed and hidden inside interiority. He will make room instead for his own ambitions and advance his own claims, previously inhibited by his father's imperious injunction which bound him, his son, to 'morph' into the father's shape[25]. Like wax on the table of memory, the scene seems to have become malleable, susceptible to abrasions, substitutions, and multiplication of imprints. Since his father's royal seal rescued him from Claudius's ambush and helped him return to Denmark incognito, Hamlet has become indifferent to the question of what is inside, and has grown instead hypersensitive to the ways in which signs and words may serve the uses of the world: the strategies of survival

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[24] See especially Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond", in *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, Engl. transl. by Donald M. Frame, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1958, Book II, pp. 318-458.

[25] On the topic of Hamlet's 'cloning' as induced by the questioning of a narcissistic ghost see: Linda Charnes, *Hamlet's Heirs: Shakespeare and the Politics of a New Millennium*, New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 53-73.

and the stratagems of politics. Being 'I' is an act of language which produces multiple identities, shapes which morph according to circumstances. Before Ophelia's grave Hamlet high-handedly claims the coincidence between oneself and one's name ("This is I, / Hamlet the Dane", V.ii.253-54), but in front of Laertes, and the Elsinore court, he does not hesitate to deny it. Instead, he narrates himself in the third person, as a victim of the madness that usurped his name, taking it away from himself:

> Hamlet
> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. (V. ii. 227-31)

Taking his distance from what is inside, Hamlet writes about himself as a novelist *avant la lettre*, either sparingly or in great detail, according to his interlocutors. He writes letters that offer different versions of his fortuitous escape from Claudius's ambush. Yet it's not only Hamlet who scatters different traces of *Hamlet* about the scene. For Hamlet's name and Hamlet's story, in the last portion of the tragedy, seem to take on a new malleability and to encourage amplifications and reductions which vary according to the context[26]. At the cemetery, to the grave-digger who is unaware of the identity of his interlocutor, Hamlet is simply someone sent to England because he was mad; someone born when he had just started his grave-digging job. To Fortinbras, who takes over at the end of a scene, Hamlet is the one who, had he been put to the test, would have proved a true king. So to him ought to be paid the respects usually paid to a soldier[27].

The proliferation of Hamlet's profiles, both positive and negative, paves the way to the dissemination of his traces in the endless future of the character's reception. It is as though the fiction of interiority

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[26] See the detailed account of the events addressed to Horatio in letter form (IV.vi.13-30) and the laconic announcement of his "sudden and strange return" addressed to Claudius (IV.vii.43-46).

[27] "Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage. / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal. And for his passage / The soldiers' music and the rites of war / Speak loudly for him" (V.ii.389-94).

that had driven the play's anatomical probing had finally dissolved. The cemetery is the place where such disappearance is forcefully played up in a stage revival of the 'danse macabre'. Unlike Hamlet's Ghost, the bones of the dead have nothing to say. Not even the skull of Yorick, the beloved court jester, can escape erasure from the table of the mind. The memory that is left of him is the tale of what has been lost irretrievably. The space between the inside and the outside turns out to be as inconsistent as the dust of Alexander's body, earth and lime which could serve only to plug a barrel of beer. The desecrating mockery of the uses Hamlet envisages for that substance obliterates his eagerness to know what is inside: it resets both the race of time and Hamlet's endless dithering; it sheds an emphatic light on the "nutshell" of his name. The present and the future become one and the same: interchangeable as the king and the king's brother, as the time of life and the time of death, whose unpredictable fortuitousness becomes a sign of providence:

> Hamlet
> We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. It be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.213-18)

In this interval between the past and the future, the one Hamlet in fact claims to himself, what is highlighted is the unconditional superiority of the "readiness"; the willingness to let one's traces be shaped by chance, by future, by history. Such meek pliability to changing forms, especially the willingness to deny oneself, does not in fact mark a break with the story of the paternal ghost. Rather, it picks up and develops the heavy accumulation of prohibitions that conclude the narration by adding up quite incongruously to previous injunctions:

> Ghost
> If thou hast nature in thee *bear it not*,
> *Let not* the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury and damned incest.
> But howsomever thou pursuest this act,
> Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught. (I.v.81-86 , my emphasis)

Hamlet frames his endless dithering through the litotic mode of understatement. For understatement confirms the privilege assigned to the folds of names and its possible redefinitions in the negative, so that even 'non-doing', 'non-being', or abstention may change "the stamp of nature" by sheer iteration[28].

Litotes is the figure of speech which foreshadows the repression that is essential to action in the stories and in the history to come. Yet emphasis on litotes, combined with the leaving behind of one's traces to future appropriations, does not stifle desire. Rather, it rekindles it and turns it into an eagerness of telling and of being told. It is the eagerness which, at the end of the play, revives and rephrases the Ghost's urgency, inhibited only by a supernatural ban from telling the secrets of his sulphureous prison: "Were I not forbid I could a tale unfold" the Ghost had whispered at the very beginning of his account, foretelling interdictions while also leaking the terrifying suggestions of the secret he could not possibly reveal:

Ghost
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, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes likes stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (I.v.13-20)

"Had I but time", Hamlet adds in the theatrically long time of his death, "I could tell you":

Hamlet
Had I but time, as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you –
But let it be. Horatio I am dead. (V.ii.330-32)

[28] I am thinking here of the exhortations to abstinence and to the reiterated prohibitions Hamlet directs to Gertrude in the *closet scene*, at the end of his talk (III. iv.141-71; 183).

Eagerness to speak, inscribed in the many partial, broken or unuttered stories of the play[29], rises up again at the end. Impending death cuts the story short, thereby generating a desire *to let* audiences hear the elusive voice that is now asking leave to speak. Against the limited time of life there rises a struggle not at all weakened by bleak surrender to the twists of fate. The father's injunction to revenge and remember what lies outside the accepted models of remembrance is also an injunction to attempt new forms of knowing one's interiority.

A faulty ring in the chain of being, Hamlet nevertheless delivers *what remains* of the story of the father to Fortinbras's action and Horatio's words. Hamlet in fact forbids Horatio the consolation of stoic suicide, requiring him to live to tell his story, drawing his breath in pain: "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (V.ii.342-43). Despite the commanding tone of his testamentary act, Hamlet is lost in his legacy. Nothing except tenuous traces remains in the sketchy drafts of the stories his heirs will tell of him in the epilogue of the play. In a bombastic, orthodox catalogue of carnage and bloodshed, Horace promises to dispense violence to a world unaware of the events that occurred (V.ii.365-79). And that certainly does not do Hamlet justice; nor in fact does the curt injunction of Fortinbras, who issues the order to fire, thereby letting war violence erupt into the very last exchange of the play. And yet it is perhaps Hamlet's tenuousness, his demise into unrecognizable, different words, that makes it possible for us to discern the extraordinary potential of finding a *Hamlet* without Hamlet[30]: a Hamlet who bequeaths only the vacuum left in his 'I' by the speech of his father[31], an interruption that, preserving the nostalgia for lost plenitude, nour-

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[29] See Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 216-42.

[30] On the issue of the absence of Hamlet, understood as character or identity in the sense later widely celebrated by Western critics see Margareta de Grazia, Hamlet *without Hamlet,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. See also: Alessandra Marzola, "Shakespeare without 'Characters': The Difference of *Hamlet*", in Marzola, "Shakespeare without 'Characters': The Difference of *Hamlet*", in Marzola, ed., pp. 67-90.

[31] The reference here is to the famous sixth seminar of Jacques Lacan in the following English edition: Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*" (1958-1959), in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise*, ed. Soshana Felman, Baltimore-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp. 11-52.

ishes the endless desire to win it back.

Hamlet's Interim naturally echoes the tragic implications of a given historical imagination: the one found in England between the end of one century and the onset of another. Undoubtedly, the wound in Hamlet's name evokes the demise of the Tudor name handed over to the dynasty of the Stuart, as Elizabeth I appointed James VI of Scotland as her heir in 1603. And the threshold between two worlds that the tragedy puts on stage embodies the apprehensions and nightmares of a society challenged by the instability of its monarchy, undermined by internal rebellions and conspiracies, as well as mounting outbursts of republicanism. In the future of the country that *Hamlet* prefigures in Fortinbras's order, one can already envision the Puritan and revolutionary zeal of Cromwell and the provisional erasure of signs of monarchy in the brief republican experience.

A tragedy shaped by its time, steeped in first-hand experience, *Hamlet* however turns the story from which it takes shape in a sort of springboard for stories to come. That it does by exposing the origin of a trauma one cannot but keep questioning and exploring. The unflagging cognitive drive that animates the Reformed exegesis of the Book of Genesis greatly enhances the convergence of old and new sets of knowledge at the time, paving the way to a future exploration of the substance of interiority: from anatomy to variable patterns of psychoanalysis – from Freud to Lacan, up to neuroscience. But Hamlet's empty outline, suspended between the cyclical time of redemption and the vertical time of productivity and new wars, is also a malleable trace. Its wax-like pliability is there for future interpreters and story tellers to use. Because of its ability to stir up a passion for knowledge and make us embrace its transmutations, *Hamlet* functions as a matrix of desire making us repeat to no end the famous line of its hero: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I.v.165-67).