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Derrida's Hamlet

Christopher Prendergast

Beyond all the sound and fury (which continues even now beyond the grave, in the crasser forms of obituary-speak), there are, at a very general level of reflection, three emphases in Derrida's work that have mattered to me, and which I still carry with me. The first has to do with the rebarbative notion of *différance*, the notion that being is never present to us, which I take to be first and foremost a reflection on the irreducible temporality not only of being, but also of our categories for thinking about being. The second turns on the view that everything human is problematic for the rest of human time. The third concerns the paradox of the notorious "undecidability" hypothesis, which, whatever it may be taken to mean, *never* meant exemption from the requirements of decision-making. These emphases have been glossed in numerous ways, none ever far from controversy. In this brief notice I would like to run them through a particular source, in which, in their own terms, they are all to be found: *Hamlet*, and the reading of Shakespeare's play that occupies the first part of *Spectres of Marx*. What is Hamlet doing in a book about Marx and ghosts—both Marx's ghosts (the famous spectre mentioned at the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*) and the ghosts of Marx (broadly, what Derrida means by the "legacy" of Marx, as the constant returns of a kind of spectre in the midst of the contemporary neoliberal victory)? How is it that Derrida, citing an essay by Blanchot, in which Blanchot uses the expression "since Marx," can add that Blanchot's "since Marx" could easily have been "since Shakespeare"?

Broadly speaking, the answers have to do with two interconnected, deep-structural and persistently recurring preoccupations of deconstruction: ontology (the philosophy of Being) and justice (the sphere of the politico-ethical); both these preoccupations assembled, or rather disassembled, in an overarching category that Derrida calls spectrality, the spectral nature of all our constructions (including the Marxist construction) of being and justice. Nietzsche claimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the essential point about Hamlet is not—as in the standard view—that he thinks too much, but that he thinks too well; he is unable to act not because of a contingent psychological infirmity, but because the sheer lucidity of his thinking corrodes the ground of all possible action in a

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world dominated by an instrumental logic of ends and means. Hamlet, according to Nietzsche, sees into the nature of things, beyond local manifestations of injustice, some particular crime (Claudius's) or form of corruption ("something is rotten in the state of Denmark"), to something askew in the world itself, something radically and incorrigibly out of joint.

How then might we carry this over to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*? What, from the point of view of deconstruction, would it mean to think too well? What is it about *Hamlet* that lends itself to a Derridean model of lucidity? This is certainly not the point of view of philosophy as classically conceived, or, in the terms of the play itself (a point Derrida makes much of), the point of view of the "scholar" ("Horatio, thou art a scholar. Speak to it"), that is, the regime of conceptual enclosure or grasping (in the dual sense of German *Begriff*, meaning both concept and grasp, active in, for example, Hegel and Heidegger). We can get a handle on what this means, on why *Hamlet* is exemplary for Derrida, by way of two aspects, or two motifs of the play. They are, first, the "figure" of the Ghost, and second, the notion of Disjointure, the image of a world out of joint: "The time is out of joint, O cursed spite that ever I was set to put it right."

Both these motifs converge on the ontological and the ethico-political, the metaphysical realm of being and the historical realm of justice. The figure of the Ghost is the principal focus of the first of these two categories. The Ghost in *Hamlet* is distinctly Shakespearean. There is no ghost in the Ur-Hamlet: Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*, and although there appears to have been a ghost in an Elizabethan version of *Hamlet* written before Shakespeare's (probably Kyd's), and which Shakespeare may well have seen performed; the text has not survived. What Derrida in turn makes of Shakespeare's ghost is equally distinctive. For Derrida, the significance of the ghost resides in its radical indeterminacy. This, however, is not to be understood in terms of the normal theological reading particular to the Catholic/Protestant disputes of the Reformation, where the ghost is indeterminate, in the sense of ambiguous as to its provenance (Purgatory or Hell, the ghost of Hamlet's father or an emissary from the Devil). In *Spectres of Marx* it is indeterminate in the more strictly ontological register of occupying a place/non-place between presence and absence, appearance and disappearance. The spectre is a "Thing" (Shakespeare's term) and yet not a thing, not a substance. It hovers uncertainly between material embodiment and disembodiment. It inhabits a space of pure virtuality, and what in that space is swallowed up is the ontological ground of Being itself. In a characteristic play of

words, the spectral is the sign of the displacement of ontology by what Derrida calls “hauntology.”

Harnessing Shakespeare’s ghost to Derrida’s hauntology might of course look a trifle strained. However, this apparently opportunistic use of *Hamlet* is but the first step in the argument. The next and decisive step is the move from the metaphysical to the historical, and, from there, to the ethico-political—that is, the question of Justice. Derrida’s re-reading of Marx rests, fundamentally, on a critique of entrenched versions of Marxism that locate Justice historically in some material embodiment or other (the Party, the International, the Proletariat, etc.). The figure of the spectre is designed in part to remove and dissolve those metaphysical groundings. Translating this back into the Marxist corpus (though corpus now seems scarcely the right term), we might say that this implies a view of historical materialism that could be captured by means of a generalized extension of Marx’s famous description of capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto*: “all that is solid melts into air”—an extension that would include also the so-called “legacy” of Marxism as it congeals into the dogmatism of the ontological.

But the figure of the ghost is also joined, if in this context I can properly use this term, to another figure in the text of *Hamlet*: “the time is out of joint.” And it is this link between the spectral and the disjointed that furnishes the crux of Derrida’s argument; it is this paradoxical hinge, introduced at the very moment of speaking of the unhinged, that explains why it is that *Hamlet* is so special to him. In this crux, time, history, and world come together, all drawing towards a fateful question—the relation of action and justice, not just in particular historical worlds (Shakespeare’s state of Denmark, Marx’s Old Europe), but in the world as such. Justice and time go together by virtue of the former’s determination by reference to a past and a future: on the one hand, an original wrong, evoking an historical-causal chain leading back to a primary transgression, and, on the other hand, a final rectification of that wrong, a final solution in which the historical, the political and the ontological will come together in a final moment of pure presence, realized in some form of material embodiment. This is the conception of justice that Derridean deconstruction tirelessly exposes to critique. One of the grand running themes of *Spectres of Marx* (as of other later Derrida texts) is that the effort to establish justice by reference to an originary fault or crime merely triggers and endlessly reproduces the cycle of retaliatory violence (history as an endless revenge-tragedy), since the conflicting parties will always lay claim to the definition and location of the original fault.

Relatedly, seeking to establish justice by reference to a final solution merely installs the reign of tyranny. At both ends of the temporal chain, the political intervenes to impose a form of self-legitimizing closure, called the Just, whereas Derrida wants to break that chain in the name of time as permanently and incorrigibly out of joint, disjointed, disadjusted, off its hinges, or if you prefer, spectralized, offering no site for the embodied manifestation of the Just.

On this view, then, Hamlet's tragedy is that he is arbitrarily chosen (by the fact of birth) to remedy the irremediable. Hamlet does not just curse the corruption of the world, but also the mission to redeem it. He is thus punished by virtue of being appointed as the punisher, the avenger, inserted into the impossible chain of violent reprisals against actual, alleged or perceived wrongs, the chain that has no beginning and no end, and so in turn he is no different—apart from his consciousness of the dilemma—from anyone else caught up in the cycle of violence. Revenge in the Elizabethan context was described by Francis Bacon as “wild justice.” Though Derrida doesn't mention Bacon, he takes this thought just about as far as one can go with it, into the further reaches of deconstructive speculation on the ethico-political. In the final, murderous scene of the play, vengeance and justice are finally enacted, but where has the “justification” of the Just gone (reprisal for the murder of his father)? Whatever it is in Hamlet's mind as he attacks and kills Claudius, it does not seem to be his father, of whom he says nothing and whose ghost has long since disappeared from the frame of the action. In a world of counterfactuals, we could try to imagine what the dying Hamlet might have said in connection with this question. Hamlet indeed seems about to speak, perhaps to explain his actions as legitimate retribution, but of course he does not—the rest, famously, being silence.

“Tragedy” is Derrida's term, indeed what he also calls “the essence of the tragic” glossed as “the birth wound from which he [Hamlet] suffers, a bottomless wound, an irreparable tragedy, the indefinite malediction that marks the history of the law or history as law.” It is the thought that takes us all the way from *Spectres of Marx* to another “legacy”—Derrida's reflections on the violence of the “rogue state,” now speaking to us, at the very moment the true rogue state and its fictions of the “rule of law” bestride the world like a colossus, as if in a spectral voice *d'outre-tombe*.

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