

Vanishing Point: Looking for *Hamlet*

Graham Holderness

1

‘If the *Mona Lisa* is in the Louvre’, asked F.W. Bateson, ‘where is *Hamlet*?’ (74). The distinction is a common one in aesthetics, between the *autographic* and the *allographic* work (McLaverty 87). A painting (or sculpture) is unique, singular, atemporal, created directly by the artist, and can be forged as well as copied. A work of literature (or music) is plural, temporal, consists physically of things not made by the artist, is performed by others, and cannot be forged, only imitated, approximated, copied. ‘If the *Mona Lisa* is burnt, we say the work is lost, no matter how many copies remain ... but an author's manuscripts may come (that is, be rediscovered) and go without any necessary effect on the existence of the work of art’ (McLaverty 85). When it comes to works of literature, ‘We have no originals’, as Jonathan Goldberg said, ‘only copies’ (213).

But we have already given up looking for Shakespeare’s manuscript. Shakespeare now exists in an environment of textual multiplicity and authorial absenteeism. Each ‘play’ or ‘work’ is implicated in what Jerome McGann calls a ‘ceaseless process of textual development and mutation’ (9). The text is multiple, iterable, subject to an inevitable law of change, and to some degree independent of the author. ‘Today, many Shakespeareans’, says Barbara Mowat ‘see the plays as free from the process of filiation ... and read them “without the father’s signature”’ (132). Lady Viola has it right when in *Shakespeare in Love* she asks the writer ‘are you the author of the plays of William Shakespeare?’ The actual author is secondary to the text, which in turn subsumes or contains an author-function, ‘William Shakespeare’. Even if we do not abandon the author as the sole source of authority and meaning, we are likely, following McGann, to resituate him within a greater social framework, and to acknowledge the larger network of cultural agents whose combined activities collaborate in the process of making culture. This constituency includes especially readers: ‘Texts vary from themselves immediately’ in McGann’s words, ‘as soon as they engage with the readers they anticipate’ (9). All readers rewrite the texts they

read. Or as Derrida puts it, repetition entails change: ‘iteration alters’ (*Limited Inc.* 40).

So whether you think, as the New Bibliographers did, that the ‘original’ *Hamlet* could be reconstructed from the evidence of the printed texts; or if you agree with the bibliographical scholarship of today that there is no original, only copies; then the position remains the same: there is no literary equivalent of the unique original artefact, the *Mona Lisa*.

2

But the painting has also come a long way since it left Leonardo’s hands, and its history is also a history of change. It appears to have been cut down from a larger picture; it has sustained damage and been over-painted; the wooden panel on which it is painted is starting to disintegrate. And if ‘iteration alters’, then the painting in the Louvre is not even quite the painting executed by Leonardo, which was already altered by recontextualisation by the time it was exhibited to the first viewer’s recreating gaze.

Both *Hamlet* and the *Mona Lisa* of course exist not in one place, or as singular physical objects, since they are among the most replicated or self-replicating of all cultural productions (the *Mona Lisa* is described as ‘The most frequently reproduced work in the history of painting’ [Leader 4]). They both exist in the form of millions of copies – texts, performances, images, electronic records, postcards, placemats, t-shirts, mugs - distributed throughout the world. One could describe the *Mona Lisa* in the words John Berger used of Leonardo’s *The Madonna of the Rocks*: ‘a famous painting of which somewhere one has already seen a reproduction’ (21). If we agree with Stephen Orgel that ‘the history of realisations of the text’ is ‘the history of the text itself’ (14), then these multiple and universalised realisations are as much part of *Hamlet* and the *Mona Lisa* as the play’s lost manuscript or the original painting.

In the case of the *Mona Lisa* this assertion was tested when the painting was stolen from the Louvre’s Salon Carree in 1911. In a true *Thomas Crowne Affair* caper, the housepainter Vincenzo Perrugia hid in the Louvre overnight on the Sunday, and on

the Monday walked out with the painting under his coat. But it was a full 24 hours before the theft was noticed. People saw the painting absent, but somehow did not see it gone. One attendant thought it had been locked up somewhere. Another that it had been taken down to be photographed, that it was away on another exercise in self-replication. The man who realised it was missing was a painter, Louis Beroud, who arrived with the intention of copying the painting. His intention was satirical: accompanied by a model, he planned to paint a picture of her doing her hair in the reflection from the glass that had only ten months before been fitted (controversially) to the painting. He needed the 'real thing', but only to copy its image into an ironic pastiche. Initially, then, what people saw, and looked for, was not a Leonardo lost, but an absent presence: a missing reflection; a vanished apparition; a blank space on the wall.

But then that very emptiness became a bizarre substitute for the missing masterpiece. Thousands of people flocked to view the blank space on the wall where the painting had been. More people came to see it gone, than had been to see it there. People who had never been to see the picture, or even entered the Louvre, came to see the space. To use Walter Benjamin's influential term, the painting's 'aura' survived both its mechanical reproduction and its loss, suffusing the deserted wall with a rich nostalgia for vanished presence.

Many people have suggested that it is impossible to 'see' the *Mona Lisa* any longer, as a consequence of its familiarity and universality of imitation; or to withstand its gaze, the look of all those people who have gazed at it before us. How can we endure being 'looked at by something that does not see us?' (Leader 12). Only when estranged by the iconoclastic alterations of a Marcel Duchamp or an Andy Warhol can we be shocked into seeing it afresh. Freud also argued that what we 'see' in the *Mona Lisa* and in her ambiguous expression is literally something 'unseeable', incestuous desire for the mother. The *Mona Lisa* smile is 'The smile of bliss and rapture which had once played on Leonardo's mother's lips as she fondled him' (Freud 162), which Richard Halpern interprets as an intolerable contrast between 'the most devoted tenderness and a sensuality that is ruthlessly demanding' (64-5).

Perhaps then when people gazed at that blank space on the wall of the Louvre they saw more than a missing picture. On it, in it, was the very idea of the *Mona Lisa*, its essence as a 'work' beyond the corporeality of its workmanship. This blank space, this vanishing point, is both a place of bereavement, of loss; and a point of departure, where we immediately start to remake the lost object. It has been described as a sacred site, consecrated by the presence of what is now gone – an art-critic said people came to 'look at the nails from which she had hung' – and a space of infinite potentiality calling for restitution, restoration of the absented. It's the place where the missing was 'last seen'; yet it recalls irresistibly the emptiness that was there before she ever existed, the point of origin.

3

This essay begins with the aesthetic experience as an encounter with loss, and applies this principle to writing itself via the work of Blanchot and Derrida. Ultimately this analysis collapses Bateson's distinction between painting and play, since reading literature proves to be remarkably similar to gazing at a blank wall where the 'original' once stood, conscious of its absence, longing for its restoration. Writing also famously begins with a blank sheet, from which what you are about to write is by definition absent. The writer has to move through the blank wall of the *tabula rasa* to discover the work in the process of formation on the other side. But then as I take possession of it, as it comes to be, so I also lose it, and it becomes something other, something lost, something - like the Ghost in *Hamlet* – 'vanished from our sight' (1.2.219).

The 'vanishing point' that supplies the title of this essay is, to begin with, that disappearance of presence that makes the vanishing point itself visible, and constitutes the aesthetic experience as a form of bereavement. The term is used throughout the essay in a number of different but related ways, sometimes as metaphor, sometimes as concept. For Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida the 'vanishing point' is the point of origin where writing both begins and ends; for Stephen Greenblatt and Christopher Pye it is both the anchor of visual perspective in painting, and the Lacanian 'real', that element of the subject that cannot be known, yet constitutes the structure of the whole being.

In all these models reality is to be found at the point where presence and absence meet and part company. This approach is then applied to *Hamlet*, where the reality of the play is in my reading constituted by the unseen, by what vanishes. From this perspective *Hamlet* is a play about the afterlife, a fundamentally spiritual and religious meditation on death and on Judgement. The play's preoccupations are then linked with the religious wall-paintings in the Guild Chapel at Stratford, which Shakespeare would have partially known as a boy. I focus in particular on one he could not have seen, the great fresco of the Last Judgement which was defaced under the supervision of his father John Shakespeare. The whitewashed wall which under its 'dull façade' (Eliot, *Little Gidding* 2) housed a potent vision of the Last Days is compared with the blank space left by the stolen *Mona Lisa*. Both are prototypes of art as loss and return, absence and presence, death and resurrection. These illustrations are then finally linked with the 'Catholic Shakespeare' question that has recently been brought into much greater prominence by Richard Wilson, and latterly by Stephen Greenblatt. The work aspires to be a contribution to Catholic Shakespeare literature as well as to the 'New Aestheticism' promoted by critics such as John Joughin.

4

The blank space on the empty wall resembles the blank page that is the writer's nightmare, the symbol of writer's block.

He spread a fresh sheet of parchment ... he reached for his quill. He wrote:

LOVE'S LABOURS WON A Play in Five Acts by William Shakespere

So Shakespeare in *No Bed for Bacon* (35-6) beginning the play that never got itself written. The blank page simultaneously cries out to be filled, and repudiates addition. The blank page is both internal and external: a state of mind, *tabula rasa*, and a physical medium for writing on. It has also been called a virtual space, which is

neither in the mind nor outside it: a space of mediation in which whatever is written, however deep and private its source, is echoed back transformed.

Empty, the page is two-dimensional, a plane. Written on, it becomes thick, three-dimensional: writing confers substance, jumps out at you, requires like a lens to be seen through. The emptiness is already virtually and potentially full, since as Timothy Clark puts it, it is 'the place of intersection of the writer's intentionality with the multiple possibilities of reading' (29). The blank page is 'A chiasmatic structure in which the scene of composition is already a prolepsis of reception' (23).

How odd to imagine Shakespeare, as he is presented in *Shakespeare in Love*, as suffering from writer's block! He wrote with such facility that we received from him not a blot in his papers. Fancy's child, he warbled his native wood-notes wild and never blotted a line. But a wholly inspired writer is one who is not reading the writing as it emerges. In fact it is impossible to do this; in practice the writer simultaneously writes and reads. Hence the emergent text becomes a quotation from a possible work the writer is trying to realise, drawn from a future text that does not yet exist. In writing the self is transformed, not with flashing eyes and floating hair, but by the admission of otherness, as the writer reads what is written, and begins to share in the multiple possibilities of reading. Writing is future-oriented: it is full of promise, though it never quite exists. As in Lacan's mirror-stage, there is a simultaneous experience of empowerment and dispossession; a proleptic sense of what is possible, but a frustrating confrontation with what could have been, as the work reveals itself repeatedly in the role of just having vanished.

Some of the most helpful thinking on this ancient question is that of Maurice Blanchot, especially in *The Space of Literature* (1955). For Blanchot literature cannot be said to have a universal value that remains unchanged across time. Rather literature is 'radically ahistorical, as the bearer of a movement of transcendence that holds the text open as the question of its own nature' (Clark 241). In these terms literature is nothing less than the search for its own nature and origin. Blanchot uses the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to explore that moment in the work's coming-to-be that annuls the writer, allowing the work to realise itself for the first time as a singular and impersonal affirmation. By means of his art Orpheus draws Eurydice out of the

underworld. But he cannot resist that backward look to see exactly how she is coming along. At that moment he loses her, and she relapses into her own darkness. Even as he draws the work up from its dark origins, the writer has to read it; and as he reads it he loses both the work and his contact with its source.

But according to Blanchot the 'passion of the origin' has to do not just with this desire for the beginning, but also with the source of writing as the draw or pull of a point to which the writing is tending. The desire is contradictory, since it demands the writer's eclipse (Orpheus was literally torn to pieces by the Maenads).

The central point of the work is the work as origins, the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching (54).

The origin becomes an object of fascination at the moment when the work frees itself from intentionality and begins to come from itself, from its own impulse to be. The work emerges from a 'nowhere' which is 'yet the space the work projects in its unfolding; at the same time it becomes in this movement that quest for the point whence it is coming' (Clark 250). This is the virtual point, the 'vanishing point', which is simultaneously in the past and in the future. It is *fons et origo*, the source of all inspiration; and *terminus ad quem*, the point to which all inspiration aspires. It is the 'vanishing point', for Blanchot, where writing begins, 'the point where nothing reveals itself' (48); and the point of final realisation where the work completes itself and the author dies.

So both *Hamlet* and the *Mona Lisa* also exist for us as points of origin, as the invisible source of their own copies. Somewhere there is a heart of silence, a blank space that is uniquely the *Mona Lisa*, 'the original of a reproduction' (Berger 21); 'the final referent of innumerable copies and versions' (Leader 4); a blank page that is incommensurably *Hamlet*, 'Infinite enacted' as Emily Dickinson phrased it, 'In the Human Heart' (Gross 53). Paradoxically such a space is constitutive and defining, yet also in Foucault's words 'a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears' ('What?' 102); or a vanishing point such as that identified by Derrida as 'the very origin of the destabilising moment' (*Marx* 138). However many copies are

made, however many iterations occur, something endures, something alters yet remains itself.

The always altered, ever-changing 'copy' is certainly in a particular and local sense the 'text itself'. But what is it a copy of? The vanishing point must be some potentiality within the work, something that lies even beyond the 'original', somewhere in that dark fertile underworld of human creativity from which Orpheus drew Eurydice, from which both the artefact and its multiple potentialities of duplication derived.

For Derrida, speech is the illusion of presence; writing potentially a means of demonstrating absence. The sign is always a deferred presence. Language attempts to overcome this deferral of meaning, but in doing so only reinscribes it. As Graham Ward puts it:

Derrida suggests the openness of textuality to an indefinite future, a deferred eschaton – an openness that cannot be closed. We are always *in medias res* – moving between an origin which can never be recovered or single and a conclusion which can never be determined. We occupy a place, as such, in the shifting sands of semiotic systems, haunted by the possibility of presence and stable identity, but forever unable to produce it (15).

Writing is, in Derrida's terms, an elegy for lost presence, an act of mourning for that which lies already in the past. But the very signs employed to represent that lost presence announce the absence of the presence they signify. Presence is again postponed, pushed into the future, a 'deferred eschaton' (Ward, p. 16). If a text is 'no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself' (Derrida 'Living On' 256-7), then the text itself is also a 'gap'. A hole, an empty space, an *aporia* through which we can glimpse a place beyond borders: what Derrida calls 'the limits' (*Aporias* 65), or Helen Cixous 'an unlimited place' (1).

There *was* a point of origin for Shakespeare's plays and we will always be fascinated by it, mourn for its passing, long for its rediscovery. But as Blanchot shows, the point

of origin is in the future as well as in the past. The transcendent reality of the work is not to be recovered in the past by archaeological excavation, but rather extrapolated towards that final deferred 'eschaton' that lies at the other end of time. What we are doing when we remake Shakespeare's texts is more a matter of building towards an unrealisable future than recapturing an irrevocably vanished past. In that process our mourning for the lost past is projected forwards into mourning for the endlessly deferred future. As such it embraces bereavement, and with all the powers of the imagination invests in what Derrida calls 'the work of mourning'. And what we will find here is not, in John Berger's description, art stripped of aura, something 'ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless' (32); but rather what Henry James found in Shakespeare's Birthplace: 'a *presence* ... diffused, uncontested and undisturbed' (Gross 21).

5

Of all plays a play of bereavement, *Hamlet* begins with a command to 'unfold'. Whether we turn and 'unfold' the leaf of a book, or sit in a theatre and watch the scene 'unfold' before us, the word unfolds itself in multiple layers of divested meaning.

Stand and unfold yourself (1.1.2).

To 'unfold', to identify oneself to theatrical recognition: open your cloak, throw back your hood. Or to be revealed, to detach oneself from the circumambient darkness, to appear as a discrete body, visible. Or to open the self in a much more fundamental sense, to 'unfold' a narrative, answer a question, tell a story. 'I could a tale unfold ..' (1.5.15). The questions are all there in the imperative to unfold: name yourself, show yourself, tell me all about yourself ...

The obscurity against which Barnardo is asked to individuate himself is a darkness of the imagination, an 'artificial night' created by reader, spectator or director. I see night, although light floods the page before me. In the Jacobean playhouse I am called upon to supply my own darkness at noon. In the modern theatre the lighting technician can produce for me a blackness impenetrable, unpunctuated by moon or

star. In every case what I see is Barnardo unfolding himself from a represented night, darkness visible, a night that blinds the vision, yet gives me light enough to see with the mind's eye.

So I approach what Blanchot calls 'the first night', where 'language completes and fulfils itself in the silent profundity which vouches for its meaning' (163). But I know it only through the medium of the 'other' night, the darkness visible of representation:

When everything has disappeared in the night, 'everything has disappeared' appears. This is the *other* night. Night is the apparition: 'everything has disappeared'. It is what we see when dreams replace sleep, when the dead pass into the deep of night, when night's deep appears in those who have disappeared (163).

This is where *Hamlet* begins, unfolding from a primordial darkness the stage night can only gesture at.

Before the play opens there is a moment of nothing, that point of sudden attentiveness in the auditorium when reality withdraws and performance begins. Or as the book opens, a page turns to unfold the opening lines of *Hamlet*: a silent pivotal action that both joins and parts the parallel states of not-reading and reading. However familiar the words and the action, you cannot swim in the same stream twice: we have never seen or read this performance, this reading, before. So every new beginning originates. As we face the other, represented darkness, we can feel the true darkness at our backs, and with Barnardo ask the first question of being: 'Who's *there*?'. Not 'who am I?', which already presupposes the mirror of self-consciousness. But 'who else is there? Who or what is here with me?' (Pye 109).

The question we hear unfolding in vocal space is also the essential question of the séance: 'Who's there?'; or one of the questions to be asked of early modern ghosts by the formula prescribed in the *discretio spiritum* (Greenblatt *Purgatory* 210). The watchers in *Hamlet* are poised on a border: between self and world, invisible and visible, life and death, and at that point their words immediately begin to conjure the spectre. A sentry's white face glimpsed in a glimmer of torchlight is a tear in the

fabric of darkness, an *aporia* that opens to admit the invisible. 'Here the invisible is what one cannot cease to see; it is the incessant making itself seen' (Blanchot 163).

Although this night is fabricated only to produce the ghost, nobody especially wants to see it. 'Not a mouse stirring'. 'I have seen nothing'. 'But our fantasy'. 'Twill not appear'. The ghost is an apparition because it *appears*, but also because it only *appears* to be something: an 'image'; a 'figure like the king that's dead'; a 'thing' that walks 'together with' a 'form' that only 'sometimes' accompanied 'the majesty of buried Denmark' (1.1.10-50 *passim*). As Blanchot puts it, 'Those who think they see ghosts are those who do not want to see the night' (163). For Blanchot dreams, apparitions, even the walking dead, are all signs that belong to the 'other' night of representation. As such however they point us, beckoning, towards the true first night: sleep, silence, death. Simulacrum or not, the ghost trails with it the ambience of eternity. Night's deep only *appears* in the ghost, but it is deep enough to strike the observer with 'fear and wonder'.

The Ghost bodes 'some strange eruption': it has broken out from somewhere, but also irrupted, broken in. Elsinore is well fortified against external assault, as the vigilance of the sentries testifies. But the enemy is already, like the Greeks 'couched in the ominous horse' (2.2.454), within the gates. Similarly Horatio's ears purport to be 'fortified' against the story of haunting that assails them. But the play has begun, the poison is already in the ear; it is too late with Stephen Gosson to 'close our orifices' (44) against the irruption of the unheard, the unseen. Disproof, 'something more than fantasy', will soon present itself to his mind's eye, as the incessant makes itself seen.

Just as the ghost's 'apparition' is divided and unstable, so it responds with Protean reluctance to interrogation.

'Tis gone, and will not answer (1.1.50).

It is a 'questionable shape' (1.4.24) in that it seems to invite ('would be spoke to', 1.1.43) and yet eludes question. It is the 'question of these wars' (Holderness and Loughrey *Tragedy*, 1.1.124), yet the soldiers still find its apparition 'questionable'. It

is an 'illusion' which yet prompts a paradoxical request for it to 'stay'. It defines itself, yet evades definition (Holderness *Histories* 61-2; Barker *Violence* 83-5).

Mar. Is it not like the King?

Hor. As thou art to thyself (1.1.57-8).

Literally, 'so like that it must indeed be him'. But if the relationship between 'thou' and 'thyself', between what the subject is and what he thinks he is, can be understood as one of *resemblance*, then the 'self' is as divided, unstable, indeterminate here in Jacobean England as it has become in modern times. There is, as Greenblatt puts it, an incomprehensible 'difference between oneself and oneself' (*Purgatory* 211). Even the sceptic Horatio, who confronts the invisible with the solidity of reason, who 'will not let belief take hold of him' (1.1.22), fragments before our very eyes:

Bar. ... is Horatio there?

Hor. A piece of him (1.1.16-17).

The dismembered body, 'disjoint and out of frame' (1.2.20), is shown to play host to a disunited mind, as Horatio acknowledges the reality of haunting. 'I ... do in part believe it' (1.1.146). As Christopher Pye says of Hamlet, 'the more he seeks to constitute himself, the more he reiterates an originary split within himself' (111). 'Hamlet' Greenblatt writes, 'is a play of almost universal self-estrangement' (*Purgatory* 212).

We encounter Prince Hamlet with his gaze already fixed on what is not there (though we have already seen it).

Do not for ever with thy veiled lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust (1.2.70-1).

Hamlet's eyes, bent on vacancy, are 'veiled', lidded, downcast in grief. The 'nighted' or 'nightly colour' (1.2.68) noted by Gertrude is not just what he wears or displays, but what he sees: the vision of partially sealed eyelids, looking directly onto their own darkness, seeing beneath the fringe of the veil only the dust of the ground. Both

Gertrude and Claudius coax him to look up towards light, to acknowledge true priority in the Aristotelian chain of being: ‘look ... on Denmark’; ‘throw to earth/This unprevailing woe’ (1.2.106-7).

... all that lives must die
Passing through nature to eternity (1.2.72-3).

Bereavement is natural, mourning temporary; life is transient, eternity the point to which it is tending. Hamlet’s preoccupation with the dust is in this model regressive, self-annihilating, a wilful reversion to the dust from which man was made, rather than a reverence for the product of his making. ‘The system of signifiers’, in Lacan’s words, ‘is impeached by the least instance of mourning’ (38). As Claudius puts it, it is a ‘fault to heaven’ (1.2.101) to focus on the ‘quintessence of dust’ (2.2. 311) rather than on Creation’s miraculous ‘piece of work’ (2.2.305).

‘Vailed’ eyes are also eyes veiled, like the hooded eyes of the *Mona Lisa*, against the scrutiny of others: the veiled face cannot be read or deciphered. In his reply to Gertrude, Hamlet unintentionally confirms just how opaque this veil is.

‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother ...
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed ‘seem’,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show -
These but the trappings and the suits of woe (1.2.77, 82-6).

Hamlet’s claim to sincerity serves only to darken the veil. He is not, he affirms, simulating mourning, or playing a part; his grief is an authentic expression from ‘within’, something that no conventional ritual of mourning can truly signify. But this core experience ‘passeth show’, is far deeper than anything that can be represented. As such it is also therefore impenetrable, indecipherable, impossible for others to see or read. Hamlet’s gaze is focused on the true night, where the dead are. His relationship to that state can only however be realised through ‘the trappings and the suits of woe’, the visible language of the ‘other night’, ‘what we see when dreams

replace sleep, when the dead pass into the deep of night, when night's deep appears in those who have disappeared' (Blanchot 163). Just how strongly and deeply that depth appears in Hamlet is then conveyed by his great fantasy of self-annihilation:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew ... (1.2.129-30)

'Solid' or 'sullied' as the variant texts deliver the metaphor, intractable or contaminated, the movement is the same: to undo Creation, to de-compose, to reduce being back to its original constituent elements of moisture and dust. It is only by wishing the self could be entirely other – not conscious, not thinking, not suffering, not *there* – that Hamlet can approach the night where his father lies, and respond with the silence of the dead to the question 'Who's there?'

The place where the ghost is to be 'encountered' (1.2.199) is clearly defined as

The dead waste and middle of the night (1.2.198).

This is the true darkness, where in Blanchot's words 'one can die' and 'reach oblivion'. Hence the living beings who glimpse the darkness, the 'other night', are seized immediately with that same impulse of self-annihilation and decomposition, 'distill'd/Almost to jelly' (1.2.204-5).

But this other night is the death no one dies, the forgetfulness which gets forgotten (Blanchot, p. 163).

The Ghost is a forgetting of forgetfulness, an *anamnesis* precluding oblivion. Like a parent to a child, Hamlet coaxes the Ghost back to sleep: 'rest, rest, perturbed spirit' (see Greenblatt *Purgatory* 210). But as Blanchot observes, 'In the heart of oblivion is a memory without rest' (163). This is the memory of the future: being and not-being, this world and the next, are one. Or as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, 'the barriers between this world and the afterlife' are 'not fully closed' (*Purgatory* 18).

When the Ghost disappears, then, it disappears only relative to the vision of the observer, it is ‘vanished from our sight’ (1.2.219). No one doubts that it has gone somewhere else, that in whatever spiritual reality it came from, it continues to exist. The point where it ‘fades’, on the crowing of the cock, is another ‘literary equivalent’, in Christopher Pye’s words (115), of the ‘pictorial vanishing point’, the point of invisibility that makes seeing possible, ‘where everything converges on the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity’ (Berger 16). Just as a perspective painting is structured around the point where it disappears in an ‘impossible visibility’ that defies visual logic; so the self is ‘a formal subject structured around its own negation’ (Pye 65). Here the vanishing point coincides with what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘the sublime object of ideology’, or Lacan ‘the real’:

... a hard kernel resisting symbolisation and an entirely chimerical entity, impossible to grasp except by tracking its traumatic effects. The object most worthy of theoretical reflection, the object around which the subject is structured, is precisely the one that, while it continually invites the overwhelming desire to see, seize and digest it, cannot in fact be securely located, measured, inventoried or experienced in any of the ways that we normally associate with objects (Greenblatt ‘Remnants’ 338).

6

The Ghost’s appearances are of course among the many points where *Hamlet* confronts death and the dead. If the play opens with haunting, its closing movement begins, before the final accelerating denouement, in a landscape of death from which the very possibility of afterlife seems at first glance to have been erased, the graveyard scene of 5.1. The gravediggers debate the legalities of suicide and Christian burial, but they spare no thought for the fate or even the destination of Ophelia’s soul. Hamlet uses the skulls as props for an imaginative reconstruction of the life they formerly inhabited; but he displays no curiosity about the current status of their occupants. He speaks of a politician who might have attempted to ‘circumvent God’; but shows no curiosity as to the outcome of such *hubris*. When he asks ‘Might not that be the skull of a lawyer?’ (5.1.95), his focus is purely on the dissolution of

accumulated property into 'fine dirt', and he rhetorically inquires ('where be ...?') as to the whereabouts of everything but the lawyer's soul. He is still seeking meaning in the dust.

At the play's opening Hamlet was, as we have seen, seeking his noble father in the dust; at its centre he defines humanity as a 'quintessence of dust' (2.2.311); and towards its end dust is still his preoccupation.

To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination
trace the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bung-hole?
(5.1.197-200)

At this stage of the play Hamlet's preoccupation with physical decomposition seems to have replaced the Ghost's haunting spiritual presence; old Hamlet is by now, as Greenblatt observes, 'well and truly buried' (*Purgatory* 226). Yet the dead father is very much there in the margins of the scene. Hamlet refers to Cain, whose 'first murder' was that of his brother. The Clown alludes to Old Hamlet's victory over Fortinbras. The gravedigger's employment, and Hamlet's life, occupy the same thirty-year interval; but Hamlet's question: 'How long will a man lie i'the earth ere he rot?' (5.1.159) breaks the continuity of badinage and exhumes buried thoughts. His timescale is retrospective, since it alludes to the recently slain, such as his father and Polonius; but also prospective, since it includes the yet-to-be-assassinated Claudius, and of course himself, sitting as he is literally with one foot in the grave.

The graveyard, with its rotting corpses, dismembered bones and sour jesting, seems dissociated from that populous nocturnal Elsinore where ghosts nightly walk the battlements. The lack of spiritual concern and eschatological focus in such an environment is as inexplicable as the haunted Hamlet's earlier description of death as the 'undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns' (3.1.81-2). One might say that Hamlet is brooding on death, but no longer meditating on the dread of something after it.

It is a commonplace that Hamlet seems to be represented as a different person after his return from the abortive journey to England. He is no longer disabled by thought, melancholy and obsession, but appears to be a man of action patiently biding his time. Greenblatt describes him as a 'liberated spirit' (244), finally capable of providential vision, stoical acceptance and sacrificial revenge. Above all, he is no longer haunted: he has incorporated the Ghost's command and can present it as a clear and unproblematical programme of ethical and political duty:

... is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (5.2.67-70).

It is tempting to interpret this reconstructed Hamlet as the early modern Protestant, or even the modern liberal, hero who has finally freed himself from the inherited legacy of mediaeval pessimism, asceticism and unnerving fear, and can act decisively from his own free will. But in practice the lineaments of an older piety continue to underlie the surface of the play.

'Is't not to be damned?' Hamlet's imagination in the graveyard scene is a theological one, despite the often secular terms in which it is expressed. The ghost remains the absent presence, the negation that constitutes the play's world, whether he is there or not, visible or invisible. Hamlet is no longer absorbed by and fixated on the local conditions of his intractable predicament, the prison-house of 'Denmark'. His imagination 'searches past and future' (Eliot 'Dry Salvages' 212) and it is a future death that is the source of his deeper meditations: revenge fulfilled, the unjust justly served, himself immolated in what has implicitly become conceived of as an acceptable sacrifice. Hence his underlying concern with judgement, with how his own 'audit' (3.4.82) stands:

We defy augury. There's a 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. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all (5.2.165-9).

In the gospels of both Matthew and Luke the value of human beings relative to sparrows is associated with judgement and the potentiality of damnation:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered (Carroll and Prickett, Matthew, 10: 28-30).

And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows (Carroll and Pickett, Luke, 12: 4-7).

Hamlet is ready to face judgement. As an orthodox reformed Anglican reduced to only two sacraments, he has no need of the confession, communion and anointing the absence of which so pains his Catholic father in the flames of Purgatory. Nonetheless it is Doom that he faces. Graves are the strongest houses, affirms the Clown, as they 'lasts till doomsday' (5.1.59). Later the Priest will allude to 'the last trumpet' (5.1.224). In the full eloquence of his elegiac reflections on Alexander the Great, Hamlet devises a quip that by its liturgical echo captures him firmly within the theological framework of judgement:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust (5.1.204-5)

It is impossible not to hear in this parody the echo of those liturgical rhythms that have from the earliest days of the church prepared for the affirmation of judgement:

He suffred and was buried, and the thyrd day he arose agayn ... And he shall come agayne with glory, to iudge both the quicke and the dead: whose kyngedome shall have none ende (*Book of Common Prayer*, 'The Communion').

7

Between the Edward VI Grammar School and the site of New Place, Shakespeare's Stratford house, stands the Guild Chapel, originally home to the mediaeval Guild of the Holy Cross, Blessed Mary the Virgin, and St John the Baptist. The Chapel has also been known as the Chapel of the Trinity. The building dates from the 13th century, but was refurbished, with the nave rebuilt, at the turn of the 15th century under the terms of Stratford Mayor Hugh Clopton's will. Among the improvements made at that time was a series of wall paintings, including a magnificent 'Doom' or depiction of the Last Judgement, one of the largest surviving versions in Britain. The Doom, based on the so-called 'Little Apocalypse' of Matthew, 25, depicted Christ, seated on a rainbow, supervising the Last Judgement, with the patrons of the Guild, the Blessed Virgin and St John the Baptist on either hand in the posture of intercession. There were also paintings in the Chancel narrating the legend of the Cross (Stratford seems to have held the Cross in particular veneration, celebrating two annual feast days for the Invention and the Exaltation); and a Dance of Death, which culminated in the figure of a 'King eaten by worms' (Davidson 1-10).

The Guild was dissolved in 1547. In 1553 a Charter of Edward VI brought the Chapel under control of the corporation of Stratford. Following the royal injunctions of 1559 which demanded the removal of all signs of 'superstition' and 'idolatry' from places of worship - 'they shall take away, utterly extinct, and destroy all shrines, coverings of shrines, all tables, candlesticks, trindals, and rolls of wax, pictures, paintings, and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition, so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass windows, or elsewhere' (Duffy 568-9) - the wall paintings in the Guild Chapel were defaced, covered over with whitewash. The job was supervised by Shakespeare's father John, who was Chamberlain of Stratford 1563-4, being mentioned in his accounts. 'Item payd for defasyng ymages in y^e chappell ij^s' (Davidson 10). The Doom was whitewashed, and

not rediscovered until 1804 during restoration. At that time detailed drawings were made by Thomas Fisher and published as *A Series of Antient Allegorical, Historical, and Legendary Paintings Which Were Discovered in the Summer of 1804 on the Walls of the Chapel of the Trinity at Stratford upon Avon in Warwickshire*. The paintings were then recovered, and the Doom not disclosed again until 1928. It can be seen today.

The walls of the Guild Chapel from the 1560s did not however present a thoroughly sanitised and whitewashed Protestant interior. Although most of the paintings were whitewashed, not all were covered. The paintings in the chancel remained exposed until 1641. The Dance of Death on the north wall was noted by John Stowe, in a manuscript addition to his copy of Leland's *Itinerary*, in 1576 (Davidson 11), as similar to the one in St Paul's.

This was all there for the young William Shakespeare to see. He would have seen the Dance of Death and the King Eaten by Worms. He may have seen a painting on the west wall beneath the representation of Thomas a Becket's martyrdom, which contained the words of a version of the medieval poem 'Erth out of Erthe' based on the Ash Wednesday liturgy (Davidson 9). The image showed a grave with a shrouded corpse eaten by worms, two skulls, and three scattered bones; with two men, leaning into the grave and conversing.

Erthe oute of erth is wondrously wrought
Erth hath gotyn upon erth a dygnyte of nought

I am particularly interested however in the images of the Guild Chapel that were not visible to the bodily eye after 1564, particularly that of the Last Judgement. As Eamon Duffy observes, in the Middle Ages the image of the Doom, 'that daunting vision', appeared above every rood-screen and 'haunted the popular imagination' (309). Reformation measures sought not only to erase such images, but also to uproot their memory from that imagination: 'that there remain no memory of the same'.

The *Mona Lisa* was not extirpated from the memory when it disappeared, but remained visible to the mind's eye through the *aporia* of a vanishing point, an empty

space. Similarly the Last Judgement did not disappear from memory when John Shakespeare's workmen defaced it in the year of William Shakespeare's birth. The father himself, now thoroughly established by modern scholarship to have been an unreformed Catholic, would have seen clearly enough, every time he glanced up at that whitewashed wall, behind the thin veneer of paint hovering the dreadful or promised reality of what his son was later to call 'the great Doomes Image' (Hinman 746).

The dying Hamlet does not even consider those 'last things' that to his dying father had loomed so large, confession, communion, anointing, the 'shrift, housel, annealing' which in mediaeval piety prepared for judgement, compensating for the almost inevitably unprepared condition of the sinful soul. Like the pagan Danish prince of the play's sources, he thinks only of the reputation that will survive him: 'Report me and my cause aright ... tell my story' (5.3.291, 301). The Prince himself journeys into 'silence'; the silence of the true night; the real darkness of sleep and death. It is a Protestant silence, into which the audience is not invited; and Hamlet's vanishing is akin to Eamon Duffy's definition of the reformed funeral service, 'an act of oblivion, a casting out of the dead from the community of the living into a collective anonymity' (Duffy 494). But Horatio's valediction, with its visual reference and Catholic iconography, envisages Hamlet flown to his rest by 'flights of angels' (5.2.313), like the redeemed souls in representations of the Doom.

It was impossible to erase the memory of the Last Judgement from the early modern popular imagination, since it was a memory of the future. The Doom is presented graphically and centrally in the play of *Hamlet*, but like the wall-painting in the Guild Chapel it was for centuries covered over by a critical and scholarly whitewash.

To bee or not to bee, I there's the point ...
For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
And borne before an everlasting Judge,
From whence no passenger ever return'd,
The undiscovered country, at whose sight,
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.
(Holderness and Loughrey *Tragicall Historie* 60).

Hovering behind the polished refurbishment of the 'authorised' text, like a rough mediaeval wall painting, defaced by centuries of critical erasure, embarrassingly slap bang in the middle of the greatest Shakespearean speech of all time, lies, in the 1603 Quarto text, this vivid sketch of the Last Judgement, based on the 'Little Apocalypse' of Matthew 25. 'For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known' (Luke, 12: 2).

Centuries later in the Guild Chapel, a Protestant clergyman stood beneath the safely effaced Doom and spoke of the apocalypse in Calvinist terms of calling and election.

Nothing then can separate us from the love of Christ: we shall dwell with him now, and he with us, and when he shall appear for the manifestation of His sons, and the discomfiture of His enemies, we shall *wake up in His likeness and shall see Him as He is* (Medwin 80).

The Doom lay silently behind its whitewash as the reverend T. R Medwin, Minister of the Chapel and Head of the Grammar School, stood below it and fulminated against the very idea of 'Communion with the Papal Church in her apostasy' (xv). This was in the 1840s. A little later another priest spoke nearby of the Last Days, in terms which anonymise and individualise the prospect of judgement, distancing it yet further from the old communal mediaeval vision with its interceding saints and visible departed. Yet by an effort of imagination, an echo of Dante, and a quotation from *The Tempest*, the Reverend Richard Morris unconsciously called to witness the ghost of the old erased image.

Yet there will be a time for every one, when standing, as it were, on the brink of death, with one foot in time and the other in eternity, on that narrow path which separates the seen and unseen world, where all the appliances of wealth and rank cannot reach, and where affection's self must leave us; and there, alone, we shall individually and separately meet God face to face, and be personally in the presence of our Maker and Judge (Morris 100).

The sermon went on to provide a quotation from *The Tempest*, lines which in Stephen Greenblatt's words, link 'the evanescence of the spirit actors to the evanescence of "the great globe itself"' (*Purgatory* 260). Prospero's lines also connect the origins of creative vision, the building of dreams, with the final dissolution of the world, the eschaton. Created *ex nihilo* and doomed to vanish, 'theatrical, insubstantial, fading, and ultimately ghostlike' (260), here we have everything: creation and dissolution, apparition and vanishing, sleep and dreams; the beautiful fragility of art, and the poignant evanescence of mortality:

... like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep (4.1.151-8).

References

- Barker, Frances. *The Culture of Violence: essays on Tragedy and History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Bateson, F. W., D. Baxendale, *et alii*. 'Modern Bibliography and the Literary Artefact: The Large Scale Searching of Handwriting Samples'. *English Studies Today: Journal of the Forensic Science Society* 2 (1961): 67-77.
- Benjamin, Walter. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature* (1955). Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
- Book of Common Prayer, and administracion of the Sacramentes, and other Rites and Ceremonies in the Church of England*. London: in officina Richardi Iugge and Iohannis Cawood, 1559.

Brahms, Caryl and S.J. Simon. *No Bed for Bacon*. London: Michael Joseph, 1941.

Carroll, Robert and Stephen Prickett, eds. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Cixous, H el ene. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*. Ed. Deborah Jensen. Trans. Sarah Cornell *et alii*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Davidson, Clifford. *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon*. New York: AMS Press, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. 'Living On: Border Lines'. Trans. James Hulbert. *The Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Ed. Peggy Kamuf. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

Derrida, Jacques. *Limited, Inc.* Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992.

Eliot, T.S. 'The Dry Salvages'. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

Eliot, T.S. *Little Gidding*. London: Faber and Faber, 1942.

Foucault, Michel. 'What is an Author?'. *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Freud, Sigmund. *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910). Trans. Alan Tyson. London: Pelican, 1963.

Goldberg, Jonathan. 'Textual Properties'. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37:2 (1986): 213-17.

Gosson, Stephen. *The School of Abuse*. London: Shakespeare Society, 1841.

Greenblatt, Stephen. 'Remnants of the sacred in early modern England'. *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*. Ed. M. de Grazia, Margaret Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the Word: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004.
- Gross, John, ed. *After Shakespeare: an anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Halpern, Richard. *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud and Lacan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.
- Hinman, Charlton, ed. *The Norton Facsimile: the First Folio of Shakespeare*. London and New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1968.
- Holderness, Graham and Bryan Loughrey, eds. *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. London: Longman, 1990.
- Holderness, Graham and Bryan Loughrey, eds. *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.
- Holderness, Graham. *Shakespeare: the Histories*. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Joughin, John, ed. *The New Aestheticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Lacan, Jacques. 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*'. *Literature and Psychoanalysis: the Question of Reading, Otherwise*. Ed. Shoshona Feldman. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Leader, Darian. *Stealing the Mona Lisa*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- McGann, Jerome. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- McLaverty, James. 'The Mode of Existence of Literary Works of Art: the Case of the *Dunciad Variorum*', *Studies in Bibliography* 37 (1984): 82-105.
- Medwin, Rev. T.R. 'Affinity not reckoned of blood'. *Sermons Preached at the Chapel of the Guild of the Holy Cross, Stratford-upon-Avon*. London: G. Bell, Oxford: J.H. Parker, Stratford: F and E. Ward, 1851.
- Morris, Rev. Richard. 'A sermon Preached at the Tercentenary Meeting of the Grammar School of King Edward VI, Stratford-upon-Avon'. *Stratford-upon Avon Grammar School of King Edward VI, Tercentenary Volume*. Stratford: Edward Adams, 1853.

- Mowat, Barbara. 'The Problem of Shakespeare's Text(s)'. *Textual Formations and Reformations*. Ed. Laurie E. Maguire and Thomas L. Berger. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998. 131-48.
- Orgel, Stephen. 'The Authentic Shakespeare'. *Representations* 21 (1988): 1-25.
- Pye, Christopher. *The Vanishing: Shakespeare, the Subject and early Modern Culture*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- Ward, Graham. *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*. 2nd edition. London: Macmillan, 2000.
- Wells, Stanley and Gary Taylor, eds. *The Oxford Shakespeare: the Complete Works*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Wilson, Richard. *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Religion, Theatre and Resistance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.