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Double Sessions: Joyce's Performance of *Hamlet*

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In Chapter Nine of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus addresses an impromptu lecture on *Hamlet* to a group of members of the Irish literary revival casually assembled in the reading room of the National Library in Dublin's Kildare St. The subject is a natural one for Stephen, who, like Hamlet, writes poetry, grieves for the recent death of a parent, dresses in mourning, and bears a certain ill-will towards those around him. Stephen's melancholic character, however, does not prevent him from a dazzling display of intellect in his exposition of Shakespeare's greatest tragedy.

In his lecture, Stephen refutes the traditional notion that of all Shakespeare's characters, Hamlet is the one with whom Shakespeare himself most identifies. Instead, Stephen argues, Shakespeare has created his own image in the ghost of Hamlet's father, and the character of Hamlet really stands for Hamnet, Shakespeare's son, who died in 1596 at the age of 11. Drawing on newly available biographical material, Stephen goes on to draw a complete series of correspondences between the characters in the play and the members of Shakespeare's family. Thus Stephen's speculations on an adulterous liaison between Shakespeare's wife Ann and his brother Richard provide the model for Gertrude and Claudius, making the Ghost into a figure for Shakespeare's own resentment and estrangement from his origins. Shakespeare's twenty-year residence in London (1592-1613) – the period of his entire dramatic career – is thus interpreted as exile from the family in Stratford to whom he has become embittered. As Stephen says, "The note of banishment, banishment from the heart, banishment from home, sounds uninterruptedly" throughout Shakespeare's tragedy (*U* 9.1000).

As a biographical tour de force, Stephen's library lecture is as fanciful as it is sensational. For me, however, it has served as a point of departure for a reflection on the nature of performance as *mimesis*, i.e., as a mode of representing nature or the truth. Beginning with Joyce's text and then moving to related discussions of the subject in modern critical theory, I shall propose the idea that *Hamlet* marks the beginning of a historical process whereby the

traditional notion of performance as mimesis is gradually subverted by a radical questioning as to the nature of the supposed object of imitation. In so doing, I willingly take the risk of lending support to Oscar Wilde's admittedly outrageous claim that when Hamlet utters "that hackneyed aphorism" about the play holding the mirror up to nature (III.ii.16ff), he is deliberately attempting "to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters" (73). Wilde's larger aim, of course, is to subvert the tradition of mimesis which subordinates art to some ostensibly represented truth. Art, according to Wilde, is not to be judged by any external standards of resemblance, because "art never expresses anything but itself" (80) – this being the case not because art is removed from reality, but rather because the two are so intimate – our sense of reality being already a kind of art, in the sense of something made, a world constructed, as Joyce puts it so memorably, "upon the incertitude of a void" (17.1015).

In the library chapter of *Ulysses* Joyce approaches the subject of performance in a number of ways: there is the fact, for example, that the lecture is itself a self-conscious performance. Stephen, a young poet, has been excluded from the inner circle of the literary revival as tacit punishment for an ungenerous review he has written on the work of Lady Gregory. Here he seeks to avenge the slight by impressing his hearers with a brilliant performance. "But act," he tells himself, "Act speech. They mock to try you. Act. Be acted on" (9.978-9). The fact that Stephen finally admits, under questioning, that he disbelieves his own theory (9.1067) merely affirms its performative nature.

The performance most important to Stephen's theory, however, is the première of *Hamlet* at the Globe Theatre in June, 1602, in which Shakespeare himself played the role of the Ghost. Stephen recreates for his listeners the scene as Shakespeare enters the stage:

> . . . Shakespeare who has studied *Hamlet* all the years of his life which were not vanity in order to play the part of the spectre. He speaks the words to Burbage, the young player who stands before him beyond the rack of cerecloth, calling him by a name:
>
> *Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit,*
>
> bidding him list. To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live forever. (9.164-73)

In other words Shakespeare, himself a ghost by absence and estrangement from his family, plays the ghost of the dead king, and in addressing Burbage as Hamlet he is also speaking to the ghost of his dead son Hamnet, who, had he lived, would have been 17 in 1602, Hamlet's own age. The ghost of the father speaks to the ghost of the son in what one might call an overdetermination of spectrality.

Now, it is not new to remark that the scene of a ghostly father returning to haunt the son has a certain resonance with Freudian theory, and especially with Ernest Jones' essay on "Hamlet and the Oedipus Complex," a copy of which Joyce had acquired in Trieste (Ellmann 54). Thus Stephen is made to discourse eloquently on the pain brought by the son: "his growth is his father's decline, his youth his father's envy, his friend his father's enemy" (9.855-7). But it is perhaps less obvious to remark that Joyce also locates this rivalry in the subject himself, who in his divided condition is both father and son to himself. Stephen's theory concludes that Shakespeare is both ghost and prince, father and son in one, and thus marked internally by the same struggle that sets Hamlet and the ghost at cross purposes. As Shakespeare is treated by Joyce as a figure of human universality, the suggestion is that for Joyce he represents the divided condition of the subject *per se*, whether he be Shakespeare, Hamlet, or Stephen Dedalus. Speaking of the male subject in the temporal sense, one might say that the youth is father to the older man of his own later life, while the mature man stands in the position of father to his former youth in the sense that entails rivalry, regret, and resentment – in short, castration, which is the psychoanalytic word for ghostliness.

As Mulligan says of Stephen's theory, "He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father" (1.555-7). For all his mockery, Mulligan correctly identifies the fundamental points of Stephen's discourse: the filial relations binding Hamlet to Shakespeare, Stephen's unspoken identification with both of these figures, and his embittered relation with his own father, another ghost by absence whose ruined condition finds its emotional analogue in Stephen's own *aboulie*, or loss of feeling. Stephen acknowledges his own affiliation with Hamlet *père et fils* by his internal remark, "He is in my father. I am in his son" (9.390), where "he"is the ghost and Hamlet "his son." To say of Stephen that "he himself is the ghost of his own father" in one sense merely anticipates Stephen's point that the presence of the son marks the demise of the father. But the same formula applied to Hamlet means that he is the ghost of a ghost, a figure marked by an excess of absence whose being is the sign of non-being.

The vision of Hamlet as double in his ghostliness is essentially that of another poetic Stephen, Mallarmé, in a text to which Joyce alludes repeatedly. At an early point in Stephen Dedalus' lecture, the assistant librarian Richard Best recalls Mallarmé's description of Hamlet as "lisant au livre de lui-même," and of a performance of the play in a provincial French town, where it was advertised as *Hamlet, ou le Distrait: Pièce de Shakespeare.* This intervention, presented as a casual association in the speech of a minor character, in fact provides the basic elements of Joyce's preoccupation with Shakespeare's play. These include the presence of a "French" *Hamlet* along with the entire cult of *Hamletisme* represented here by Stephen, recently returned from Paris. The figure of Hamlet reading the book of himself" conforms to Mallarmé's definition of *Hamlet* as *the* play, as the prototype of the "théatre de notre esprit" (300) or the "drame avec Soi" – the drama of the subject which in Shakespeare's work superseded the older play of multiple action. It further identifies Hamlet in his act of self-reading as an "haut et vivant Signe" – Mallarmé here insisting on Hamlet's preeminently semiotic and hermeneutic functions, on the lofty and noble sign made by the act of deciphering the self. Finally, and in the immediate context of the exchange taking place in the reading room of the National Library, this series of allusions leads Stephen to recall Mallarmé's description of the play's ending as a "sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder" (9.129). Stephen is preoccupied, in other words, by the lugubrious rhythms of Mallarmé's language as well as by the notion of the play as a performance of excess, a ritual and hyperbolic repetition.

The lines cited by Joyce are from Mallarmé's note to his own more substantial piece on *Hamlet*, inspired by Mounet-Sully's performance in the title rôle at the Comédie Française in 1886. Where Stephen sees Shakespeare doubled as ghost and prince, Mallarmé sees Hamlet himself as a ghostly double, as both "le seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir," and "juvénile ombre de tous" – the noble lord of unfulfilled promise, and the young shade of us all. Hamlet, in other words, is twice ghostly, on one hand representing the ghost of the father, the king he will never become, and on the other hand the ghost of the son, the shade in all of us of squandered promise and lost occasions. This double nature of Hamlet, at once son and father, here and elsewhere, present and absent, leads Mallarmé to consider him as a character best played in a ghostly manner.

Mallarmé's Hamlet, the one he has seen performed so much to his liking by Mounet-Sully, has what the poet calls a nameless quality of subtle and faded effacement ("effacement subtil et fané"), "une imagerie de jadis"

which is the opposite of the work of certain masters "who like to make things plain, clear, and brand-new." For Mallarmé's taste, the customary style of the Théâtre français makes things overly vivid; it falsifies by throwing life too much into relief. This pernicious influence is purged from the stage by Mounet-Sully's Hamlet, a figure who appears as a stranger everywhere, and everywhere imposes that nameless, faded quality through "the disquieting and funereal invasion of his presence" (302).

With this evocation of Hamlet as a faded and fading presence, Mallarmé stands squarely within a modern critical tradition devoted to the "fading of the subject," and which later ranges from Jones and Freud through Lacan, Barthes, and Derrida. As Ned Lukacher writes in his account of this critical phenomenon, "'fading' describes the negativity inherent in the subject" (72). The Platonic idea of a subject made wholly present to himself and to others through voice and gesture – in short, through performance – has faded, and is gradually being replaced by the notion of voice or performance as, not the outward expression or the mask of a presence, but rather the concealment of something missing. What Barthes calls the "tonal instability" of narrative voice, or "Le fading des voix" in modern writing, testifies to this fading of the subject as well. For Mallarmé, then, the brilliance of Mounet-Sully's performance lies in his capacity to convey this sense of the faded subject on stage – to perform the character of Hamlet as a kind of phantom presence, "who struggles against the curse of having to appear" "qui se débat sous le mal d'apparaître." A good deal of the enigma of Hamlet, as well his attractiveness as a representative figure of the modern subject, has to do with the inherent negativity of his dramatic function, which may be variously characterized as the power of impotence, the act of inaction, and the performance of non-performance.

In order to explore the idea of Hamlet's ghostliness as having historical meaning, let me turn to a remark made by Walter Benjamin in his essay "On the Mimetic Faculty," which is in effect a theory of the history of performance. In this essay, Benjamin identifies the mimetic faculty as a "powerful compulsion" belonging to the earliest stages of human history – a compulsion "to become and behave like something else" (*Reflections* 333). In ancient times this faculty, as expressed in dance, for example, performed the function of affirming the resemblances or correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, or between the perceptible world and the world beyond human perception. The modern world, however, has witnessed "the increasing decay of the mimetic faculty" because "the observable world of

modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples" (334).

The origins of performance, according to this definition, would lie in the mimesis of unseen powers and presences re-enacted or represented in ritual dance and other forms of cultic practice. In Benjamin's version of the history of mimesis, the element of magic in ritual practice is dissolved when this practice is superseded by writing, which establishes its relations according to a semiotic system that is not inherently mimetic. This account of the fading of the mimetic power echoes that of Benjamin's better known essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he finds that the original value of art, conferred by its function in ritual and cultic practice, has suffered a decay in the modern age. For Benjamin, the turning point in this process of art's estrangement from its original mimetic object occurs in the Renaissance, when art is suddenly released from its ritual context in magic and religion (*Illuminations* 22).

Now, we have already witnessed Mallarmé's observation that Hamlet marks a transition in Shakespeare's own work between the drama of multiple action and the drama of the self. But the additional perspective provided by Benjamin offers a much greater historical scale on which to measure the play. Benjamin's theory enables one to locate *Hamlet* at a transitional stage between ritualistic and symbolic practice, or between the mimesis of the supernatural (here represented by the Ghost) and the mimesis of the self (represented by the character Hamlet). Shakespeare's play, in other words, registers the interiorisation of mimesis, in which the mysteries formerly accorded to unseen powers in heaven or, in any case, beyond the grave, are now reformulated as mysteries of human motivation and action. Only in *Hamlet*, this process of reformulation is not complete – the new human drama of self-representation has not wholly displaced the older drama of man's relation to the supernatural, so that the two take place side by side, vying for control of the stage in a play itself bound "to double business" (III.iii.41).

This state of affairs, where two rival modes of performance stand in suspension, would account for the infamous instability of the play remarked upon, for example, in T.S. Eliot's observation that *Hamlet* is "superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form" (46). Eliot here refers specifically to the textual problem of the play as an incomplete revision of an older, now lost play by Thomas Kyd. But his uneasiness is also occasioned by a feeling of bafflement in interpreting the ontological status of the ghostly apparition of Hamlet's father. Is the Ghost real, as it indeed seems to Hamlet when in Act I its presence is witnessed by himself and three

other persons? Is it unreal, as Hamlet suggests in Act II, attributing the apparition to "my own weakness and my melancholy" (II.ii.587)? Or is it perhaps something between the real and the unreal, as it seems in Act III when Hamlet discourses with the Ghost in the presence of his mother, who sees "nothing at all" of the Ghost, "yet all that is I see" (III.iv.133)? On the one hand, Hamlet's bafflement is a crisis of doubt as to whether the Ghost is external or internal to himself. On the other hand, Gertrude's confidence that "all that is I see" belongs to the wholly observable world of modern man which the play itself hesitates to enter. It hesitates because the modern world heralded by the Renaissance is only apparently observable – its mysteries are now buried within the human subject or within the nature of events themselves. Shakespeare's play appears to mark this shift in the locus of mystery even in the structure of its action, which moves from the older material of the revenge tragedy, with its obedience to the supernatural, to the new material of inner motivation. The precise moment of this shift in fact may occur with Hamlet's defiance of augury at V.ii.208ff., his resignation to an unknown fate reflecting a newfound alacrity and readiness for whatever may come. Hamlet himself thus represents the interiorisation of an unfathomable abyss whose outward and more ancient manifestation is the Ghost. This displacement of the ghostly function onto Hamlet himself – marking the subject with the negativity of "not being" invoked in Hamlet's famous soliloquy – is what makes it possible for the Ghost to be identified both with Hamlet, as in the case of Mallarmé, and with Shakespeare, as in the case of Joyce. In these respective discourses, both Hamlet and Shakespeare serve as names for the interiority of absence.

When the object of mimesis is internalized, performance becomes a mimesis of the self. But in this very process the duality of mimesis, which requires both an object and its imitation, is compromised. For how exactly do we imitate ourselves, except through a kind of performance that is indistinguishable from its object? This is essentially the question posed by Derrida concerning Mallarmé's account of another performance which took place in Paris contemporaneously with Mounet-Sully's Hamlet in October, 1886. This was a piece entitled *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* by the mime Paul Margueritte. Not much is known about the content of this pantomime, except that it belongs to a tradition of similar mime dramas in which Pierrot tickles Colombine to death. Indeed, if more were known about the content of this drama, this knowledge could be conveyed only with reference to what it represents or imitates. But what if this object of imitation itself were undecidable? Such is in fact the nature of the performance witnessed by Mal-

larmé, who, however, finds in the undecidable object of mimesis not a failure of signification, but rather a medium of pure fiction (in the sense of *fictio*, a making), that stands outside the logic of truth and its imitation, reality and its representation, etc: "Tel opère le mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace: il installe, ainsi, un milieu, pur, de fiction" (310). "That is how the mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction."

Derrida places Mallarmé's essay next to a passage from Plato's *Philebus* which establishes the traditional logic of mimesis as the imitation or representation of a decidable truth (*logos*). In illustrating this principle, Plato compares the soul to a book in which truth itself is more or less truthfully rendered. This is of course the same figure that Hamlet uses in his promise to "remember" the Ghost:

> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain.
> (I.v.102-3)

It is also Mallarmé's figure for Hamlet, "lisant au livre de lui-même." In any case, the juxtaposition of Plato's dialogue with Mallarmé's *Mimique* provides Derrida with the occasion for a "double session" on these two texts, between which lies an entire history of the relation between literature and truth or, if you will, between performance and its object. During the course of this history the mimetic function has not so much lost its power as that it has lost a certain ontological grounding insofar as the object of mimesis, no longer rooted in the Platonic *logos*, has been cast adrift. Derrida says of the pantomime evoked by Mallarmé that it "no longer belongs to the system of truth, does not manifest, produce, or unveil any presence; it does not constitute any conformity, resemblance, or adequation between a presence and a representation." Again, "The plays of facial expression and the gestural tracings are not present in themselves since they always refer, perpetually allude or represent. But they don't represent anything that has ever been or can ever become present" (183-4). The purely gestural nature of this performance calls to mind a remark made by Benjamin on Kafka. Benjamin observes that the central element of Kafka's work is the gesture – the exaggerated gesture without apparent motivation, and which does not signify anything but itself: "Each gesture is an event – one might even say, a drama – in itself" (121).

The haunting nature of this gestural excess is what Eliot observes in *Hamlet* when he says of the play and of himself that "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something that every person of sensibility has known" (49). And it is precisely this aspect of the play that haunts Stephen Dedalus when he recalls Mallarmé's description of *Hamlet* as a "sumptuous and stagnant exaggeration of murder" (*U* 9.129). The isolation of this citation in Joyce's text suggests that he as well as Mallarmé has reflected on the excessive morbidity of Shakespeare's play. Murder here lacks the economy of motivation that it has in, say, *Julius Caesar*: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, the Queen, the King, Hamlet himself – this surplus of corpses strewn about seems but the extension of Hamlet's own funereal presence from the moment that he firsts casts his shadow on the stage.

If for Mallarmé it is Hamlet who is the real ghost, Joyce carries this logic merely one step further in making Shakespeare himself the ghost, as, on the stage of the Globe, he addresses the ghost of his son Hamnet. Displaced, in Stephen's discourse, from the figure of Hamlet himself onto that of the absent father addressing the absent son, Shakespeare is seen as performing the condition of his own radical absence and, by extension, as enacting the nature of existence itself as a kind of haunting. In Joyce's logic, identification with the ghost has become a condition of authorship as well as of performance on the stage. In an aspect of Joyce's work that will be more fully explored in the work of Beckett, the performance itself arises out of the radical awareness that there is nothing behind it, that nothing is being performed, that what is being performed is precisely that nothingness. Whatever one might make of this situation in Beckett, one need not see it as a gesture of nihilism on Joyce's part; it is rather an affirmation of a performance which, like life – *as* life, no longer belongs to a logic of mimesis which insists on the duality of truth and its representation. Having been released by the Renaissance from its ritual context in magic and religion, the art of performance now secures its final and more terrible freedom – a release from the system of truth itself.

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