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Hamlet and the revenge of memory

Il saggio analizza il contributo offerto dall'Amleto shakespeariano al processo di risignificazione della morte, del ricordo e della vendetta nel contesto della *revenge tragedy* elisabettiana e giacomiana e in relazione ai discorsi dell'immaginario culturale inglese. Essi connettono la ingestibilità culturale dei significati della morte alle oscure e complesse vicende della successione monarchica degli Stuart sintomaticamente e spaventosamente intrecciate con la quotidiana esposizione alla brutalità e imprevedibilità del morire nelle epidemie di peste bubbonica. Una lettura orientata in senso decostruzionista consente di riconoscere in alcuni segmenti dell'Amleto i luoghi di straordinaria condensazione dei significati culturalmente contraddittori, e qui esposti nella loro indecidibilità, assegnati alla morte e al ricordo, nonchè la loro prevaricazione rispetto all'ideologia stabilizzante e redentiva del genere della *revenge tragedy.*

The anatomy of revenge

The traditional revenge tragedy deployed a narrative of sequiturs. As such it worked as the theatrical counterpart and the guarantee of monarchic succession, enjoying considerable popularity in the anything but peaceful transition from the Tudor to the Stuart lineage, from the end of the 16th century to the dawn of 17th.

Designed to make up for historical ruptures, the performance of revenge was expected to negotiate an unstable national history whose cohesiveness was threatened by growing conflictual political and religious claims. Like all theatre the revenge genre, however, inscribes history in unpredictable ways, often exceeding the boundaries of monarchic expectations: its unrecorded performances presumably absorbed and poured forth the variable moods of mixed and daily modified audiences. Until theatre closed in 1642, the Elizabethean revenge genre rehearsed self - contradictory historical scenarios, in which the conventional and consolidated outline of the main plot narrative became undermined by its outgrowing excesses. The exhibition of gruesome and gory violence

supersedes the redemptive narrative while foregrounding contemporary cultural obsessions for anatomical operations[1]. The sequential linearity of succession and of lineage as well as the reinstalment of the "body politic" are blocked off by the hypnotizing disclosure of fragmented bodies. While partaking in the turbulent shaping of early modernity, the revenge genre reshapes its core issue, and lays bare the cultural and historical contradictions which it was supposed to cover.

Later dismissed by literary criticism and expelled by the Canon of national literary history because of its excessive and "gratuitous" display of violence, the Elizabethan revenge tragedy defies cultural order by undermining its own constitutive presuppositions: by exhibiting the insufficient healing of the act of revenge, it exposes the uncontainability of a disrupted national history. The linear path of revenge is distracted by the emergent claims of modern subjectivity, by the abrupt unveiling of unredeemed mortality, in short, by the loss of Eden and by the rise of wordliness.

The compulsive passion for anatomizing and dissecting, the frustrating search for the innermost secret of the material body, mimick the wordly way of facing the issue of death anew. The inquiring and the interrogating which underly anatomy characterize modernity and sign the end of revenge. Called forth by the collapse of religious mediations between the dead and the living, the compulsion to search for the unattainable secret of life and death can be taken as the new shape of revenge required by the fear of oblivion and of indifferentation. What is demanded is not action but memory and thought, both inscribed in the survivors' guilt.

Anatomical theatres and anatomical revenge tragedies mark then the transition from the old to the new revenge, from reassuring ways of facing death to new issues of death.

Death by plague

Abrupt, unexpected and early death is known to have become sadly common as a consequence of devastating plague epidemics in the late 16th and early 17th century. Fear of indifferentiation, of contagious dis-

[1] The cultural implications of anatomic passion in the Renaissance have been recently explored by quite a number of critical contributions. See Barker 1984, Sawday 1995, Neill 1997, Violi 1998.

ease, and of contamination intensified and frustrated the need for difference and for individuality: mass deaths blurred boundaries and trivialized the old revengeful actions.

Throughout the summer of 1603 a particularly violent epidemic of bubonic plague was hitting not only the people of London, but the Jacobean entourage and the King himself. The dreadful threat of contagion embarrassingly forced James to flee from public celebrations, turning the pressure of the crowds into potential anarchy and insurrection, making cultural tragedy painfully visible. The plague thus impeded the proper empowerement of the new Ruler, whose vulnerability and enforced absence exposed the frailty of the monarchic institution and reanimated national anxieties about the legitimacy of James's succession[2].

Because of their liability to contradictory and changing versions, contemporary events were not either recordable or containable by theatre. But a number of visible traces of the increasing public concern with issues of political succession are inscribed in *Hamlet*'s *in-quarto* published in 1603.

The confusing plots of James's ascents to the thrones of Scotland and of England in particular are parallelled in the play by the contradiction between a revenge which involves the obliteration of monarchy and Hamlet's half–censored ambition of monarchic succession. What follows is an account of the ways the tragedy foregrounds contemporary anxieties while reframing the crucial issue of death within the context of the emerging modern culture[3].

Hamlet's inscriptions of revenge

Like in so many other Elizabethan revenge tragedies, also in *Hamlet*[4] deaths and corpses abound. There is however a significant difference, for in *Hamlet* revenge and death are casual and purposeless events, mat-

[2] I have adopted Eric Mallin's notion of inscription in Mallin (1995: 106-166). While redefining the relationship between Hamlet and history on the basis of historical materialism, Mallin also provides a thorough account of contemporary cultural anxieties about the plague and the Stuarts succession.

[3] Much of what I posit about Renaissance revenge tragedy and the mapping of the meanings of death, as well my re-reading of *Hamlet* is based on Michael Neill's seminal study of early modern rafashioning of death (Neill 1997).

[4] All the quotations refer to the following edition: Spencer 1980.

ters of chance and not of intention. Polonius dies by chance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to death by mechanical retaliation, Ophelia is accidentally killed by the breaking of an *envious sliver*[5]. The final slaughter marks the climax of death by chance as well as of casual, and envenomed revenge: poisoned weapons and cups kill the wrong people, never the intended victims. Casualness deprives revenge and death of their meanings, exposing them for the first time as nonsensical events open to the inquiry of modernity.

The loss of the meaning of death is powerfully and threateningly inscribed in the opening scenes of the play, whose climax is reached in Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost of his Father and in the Ghost's bid for revenge. The soldiers'anxious watch, hardened by bitter cold and heart sickness, the dismayed reports about the apparition, the Ghost's bursting in prompting unevaded questions, all poignantly anticipate the paradoxes of the whole tragedy.

What is straightforwardly set out as the source of all embracing threat is King Hamlet's questionable shape, forged as a duplicitous and confusingly blurred vision because of its just resembling and not being the King.

Because it is just like the King, but not the King:

> *In the same figure* ***like*** *the King that's dead*
> (I.i.41, emphasis added)

the Ghost is interpellated as a guilty, usurping *thing,* awkwardly and perturbingly associated with the royal shape of the dead King:

> ***What*** *art thou that usurpest this time of night,*
> ***Together with*** *that fair and warlike form*
> *In which the majesty of buried Denmark*
> *Did sometimes march?*
> (I.i.45-48, emphasis added)

[5] See Gertrude's narrative of Ophelia's death in Act IV: *There, on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds*
> *Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,*
> *When down her weedy trophies and herself*
> *Fell in the weeping brook.*
> (IV.7.172-175).

The rhetoric of Horatio's question built upon similes, and presupposing unnatural rifts or dissociations between the shape and the thing it stands for, marks the deformation of commonly recognized and accepted meanings, positing the premises for the refashioning of the meaning of death.

In Hamlet's reaction to the Ghost similes turn into disjunctions pointing to unreconcilable contradictions:

> *Be thou a spirit of health* ***or*** *goblin damned*
> *Bring with thee airs from heaven* ***or*** *blasts from hell,*
> *Be thy intents wicked* ***or*** *charitable,*
> *Thou comest in such a questionable shape*
> *That I will speak to thee.*
> (I.iv.40-45, emphasis added).

Questionability is therefore exposed as the specific feature of a quintessentially ambiguous shape which only wishfully and arbitrarily can be addressed as the embodiment of the family, of the Nation and of the Monarchy:

> *I'll call thee Hamlet, King, father, Royal Dane*.
> (I.iv.45-46)

Hamlet's distressed questioning duplicates the sentinels' in so far as it emphasizes and foregrounds the underlying compelling need to restore defective knowledge and language, to fill the gap which has been opened up between the signifier and the signified:

> *O answer, let me not burst in ignorance, tell why..... What may this mean ? So why is this? Wherefore? What should we do? ……*
> (I.iv.46-57)

Questioning stands out as the mesmerized answer to the challenging seduction of questionability, as Prince Hamlet is seen to be drawn and lured by the Ghost to a *more removed ground* (I.iv.61) away from and in spite of Horatio's warnings. Isolation, madness and desperate imagination loom over Hamlet's enamourment with the Ghost's shape, a verita-

ble 'danse macabre'[6], which throughout the play will tie the Danish prince to his partner, across the issue of death.

A questionable narrative

It is however in the Ghost's tale of the regicide, that the crisis of revenge and of death is utterly exposed.

The bid for revenge (*Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder*, I.v.25) loses its credibility as the regicide is unfolded, for what is foregrounded is not the killing of the King, but the disfiguring effects of leprous poisoning – minutely described, and disclosed as the physical marks and counterparts of unreedemed and unaccounted guilt:

> *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 leperous distilment; whose effect*
> *Holds such an enmity with blood of man*
> *That swift as quicksilver it courses through*
> *And with a sudden vigour it doth posset*
> *And curd, like eager droppings into milk,*
> *The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine.*
> *And a most instant tetter barked about,*
> *Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust*
> *All my smooth body.*
> *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 sins,*
> *Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,*
> *No reckoning made, but sent to my account*
> *With all my imperfections on my head.*
> (I.v.61-79)

The specificity of the regicide looks then blurred by its archetypal

[6] "From the moment Hamlet follows the Ghost, he is wedded to death itself, caught up in the erotics of a dance which proffers an alternative to love. The revenger seeks an object beyond pleasure" (Belsey 1999: 173). My essay endorses Belsey's exploration of Hamlet's refashioning of death, according to which the iconographic medieval tradition of danse macabre is reshaped as death love or death drive, as first analyzed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud data: 171-174).

connotations, the crime scene is changed into Lost Eden, and individual agency is submerged by the reference to the members of a universal Family, whose dreadful plots foreshadow the violence of Cain's fratricide following Adam and Eve's Fall. The tale is not about Claudius, Hamlet and Gertrude, but about two brothers, about an uncle and a queen, it is not about Gertrude's betrayal, but much more threateningly, about a universal falling-off, a decline from worthiness to wretchedness:

> *Oh 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 here in marriage; and to decline*
> *Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor*
> *To those of mine!*
> (I.v.47-52)

And yet, while lingering on the disruption of former values, the tale also contradictorily indicates the underlying continuity of guilt. By unveiling the regicide as the sudden disclosure of unreedemable universal guilt, previously disguised as virtue, the Ghost's narrative blurs the difference between the usurper and the usurped, and turns death into unretrievable deprivation. Revenge, called to redress a crime which is declared to be unredressable, exceeds the Renaissance code in which it is inscribed, and turns into the pursuit of the meaning which the Ghost's story, because of its defectiveness, has removed elsewhere.

The Ghost himself actually pre-empts his account by forestalling its incompleteness, and by pointing to its blanks:

> *But that I am forbid*
> *To tell the secrets of my prison house…..*
> (I.v.13-14)

As the literally disjointing effects of the forbidden story are morbidly explored:

> *I could a tale unfold whose lightest word*
> *Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,*
> *Make thy two eyes like 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.15-21)

the secret is however charged with irresistible appeal.

Revenge is turned into the intoxicating pursuit of an ever deferred and elusive ultimate truth made inaccessible by transcendental prohibition. As it overshadows and pre-empts the previous bid for revengeful actions against the murderer (*Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,* I.v.24), the Ghost's final peremptory order:

> *Adieu, adieu, adieu Remember me.* (V.i.91)

highlights the internalization of revenge, pointing to its transformation into memorial thoughts.

Because it is poisoned by the Ghost's previous narrative, *remembering* stands out however as a threatening and paradoxical commandment endowed with two contradictory meanings: Hamlet is required to linguistically re-assemble (*re-member*) his Father's divided shape into an idealized self, while at the same time keeping the memory (*remembering*) of what is exposed as beyond reconstitution[7].

Because it is preceded by a number of emphatic prohibitions:

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

the Ghost's commandment to remember figures as the epitome of an unconventional revengeful behaviour, based less on purposeful actions than on outraged denials and refusals of the violence whose effects have just been mercilessly exposed.

As he pours the venom of his incomplete narrative into Hamlet's ears, the Ghost also infects communication and revenge with the poison

[7] On the meanings of 'remember', as well as, more in general, of memory and revenge in *Hamlet* see Neill (1997: 251-258).

of paradoxes, whose proliferation throughout the tragedy mimicks the spreading of contaminating disease.

Questionability – the most prominent feature in the Ghost's narrative – will be subsequently magnified by Hamlet's questioning of old meanings and by his exposure of their untenability, so much so that the whole linguistic texture of the play can be taken as the extended duplication of the oxymoronic duplicity of the Ghost's narrative[8].

Questioning

In so far as it embodies the unsolvable paradox of the Ghost's questionability, Hamlet's questioning of the language code shapes itself awkwardly as both rhetorically disjunctive and semantically disjointing, as is masterfully exemplified by Hamlet's most celebrated monologue (III.i.56-89).

The disjunction between *being* and *not being* is here both questioned and pre-empted: the rhetorical articulation of the monologue, a balanced architecture of doublings, actually shows that not being (*taking arms against a sea of troubles,* III.i.59) is less an alternative to being (*suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,* III.i.58-59), than its other side. Taking arms, acting and reacting - revenging – turns into a verbal claim:

> *….To die, to sleep –*
> *No more – and by a sleep* ***to say*** *we end*
> (III.i.60-61, emphasis added)

whose illusorioness becomes evident once the evil it pretends to repair is disclosed as an inherited, unredeemable, and therefore fatal disease, belonging to the flesh, and diluted into the thousand natural shocks of daily lives:

> *The heartache and the thousand natural shocks*
> *That flesh is heir to.*
> (III.i.62-63)

[8] For the close and thorough analysis of doubling as the structuring mode of Shakespeare's language in *Hamlet* see Kermode 2000.

Linguistic contagion compels Hamlet to inscribe *not being* in *being* and to turn life, disclosed as a *consummation devoutly to be wished* (III.i.63-64), into slow daily dying. Questioning the disjunction turns out to be the only available rhetorical embodiment of the Ghost's paradox, but it is a device which is revealed as patently inappropriate in so far as its function (the postulation of two alternatives) is denied and disrupted by the rhetorical entanglement of the opposed views.

The language codes of love, of honour and of power, along with the relative actions and plots, are disrupted by the same endlessly repeated exposure of the simultaneous defectiveness and purposiveness of language. The questionability of language turns into the questioning of all family and social roles and into the parallel questioning of subjectivities. The ambiguity of the King's shape, the Queen's falling-off, the brother's crime, hollow out the fullness of characters pointing to their underlying namelessness, epitomized by the icon of Yorick's skull in the Graveyard scene. Deflected into plotting, the plot turns into the pursuit of lost names and identities, shifting straightforward communication into spying and converting action into acting.

The secrecy of spying highlights loss of authority and of legitimacy, undermining, along with the revenge plot, its traditional association with the succession plot. Hamlet's claims to the throne of Denmark only occasionally interspersed in the play as if in a half-censored plot, bear the contagion of diseased legitimacy disclosing an unreliable and unstable inheritance, alternatively and ambiguously affirmed and denied, biased from the onset by Hamlet's undecidable parental link with the royal incestous couple of Claudius and Gertrude[9].

Think of us / as of a father, pleads Claudius (I.ii.107-108), addressing Hamlet as *the most immediate to our throne* (I.ii.109) and as *our chiefest courtier, cousin and our son* (I.ii.117), bidding him *to be as ourself in Denmark* (I.ii. 122), while at the same time referring to Gertrude as to *our sometime sister, now our Queen/ the imperial jointress to this warlike state* (I.ii.7-8). Claudius' multiple modes of addressing Hamlet and Gertrude disclose an entangled net of jeopardized identities highlighting the precariousness of Hamlet's rights to the

[9] For a detailed and thorough account of the textual evidences for the succession plot in *Hamlet* see Mallin (1995: 111-124).

throne of Denmark. Claudius' acknowledgement of Gertrude's present imperial power, openly made to derive from her marital status, actually clashes with the legitimacy of Hamlet's ambition, while his reference to Gertrude as to the King's former sister-in-law and present Queen, effectively throws dismaying light on the blurring of differences between individual brothers and Kings. Claudius' balanced speech provides a precarious containment to the multiple layers of disquieting paradoxes, unsettling family and political maps, destabilizing roles, names, identities.

Because of this unsettlement Hamlet is from the outset bound to pursue full-fledged words instead of the throne. And yet, it's the very searching for the fullness of sound and unsplit names that lays bare their hollowness.

Hamlet's initial address to the Ghost:

> *I'll call thee Hamlet,*
> *King, father, royal Dane.*
> (I.iv.44-45)

showing that royalty is an arbitrary verbal icon, thus leads to the parallel undercutting of the Prince's royal identity and ambition. Significantly, only when confronted with Ophelia's dead body, with indifferentiating and anarchic death, does Hamlet fully identify himself as a subject with a proper name, belonging to the nation of Denmark:

> *This is I,*
> *Hamlet the Dane.*
> (V.i.253-254)

Only inside Ophelia's grave does Hamlet lay claim to his greater love, defying the memorial speech of Laertes with vigorous and healthy words:

> *I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers*
> *Could not with all their quantity of love*
> *Make up my sum.*
> (IV.i.264-267)

Hamlet's outpouring starts up a verbal competition which anticipates and pre-empts the language of commemoration: hyperbolic deeds, confined within the boundaries of verbal utterances, lose indeed the name of actions, turning into the grotesque pantomime of passion.

Questioning love

The disruptiveness of the love code, extensively deployed throughout the tragedy, is emblematically magnified by the paradox of Hamlet's contradictory addresses to Ophelia:

> *I did love you once* (III.i.114)
> *I loved you not* (III.i.118)

a redoubled echo of the core paradox embodied in the opening lines of Hamlet's previous monologue. Actually, Hamlet's mode of address to Ophelia in III.i, a combination of commandments[10] and threatening prophecies of plaguey disease[11], redouble and expand the Ghost's rhetoric in I.v[12], repeating its disclosure of women's deceitful semblance[13]:

> *For the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness* (III.1.110-113)

along with its prohibition to give it free play, epitomized by Hamlet's reiterated injunction: *Get thee to a nunnery.*

The contradictory meanings of the word *nunnery*, whose ambiguity inscribes both the debasement associated with brothels and the virginality related to convents, effectively condense the entwining of degraded love with virtue, and the entanglement of loving with not loving.

Far from being confined to Ophelia, Hamlet's contagion spreads into the questioning of marital and filial bonds, eventually turning into the anatomy of the dead family body: the *nunnery* is not only a doom but also a refuge from the breeding of sinners, and from Hamlet himself whose self-portraiture displays actual and potential sins:

[10] *Get thee to a nunnery.....Believe none of us …Go thy ways to a nunnery.....Let the doors be shut upon him……Marry a fool.* (III.i.120-140).

[11] *If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny* (III.i.136-138).

[12] *If thou hast nature in thee,* ***bear it not./Let not*** *the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damned incest. […]* ***Taint not*** *thy mind, or let thy soul contrive against your mother aught.* (I.V.81-85, emphasis added).

[13] *The will of* ***my most seeming virtuous*** *Queen* (I.v.45, emphasis added).

> *I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse myself of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.*
> (III.i.122-124)

Though pride, revenge and ambition, required by traditional revenge, are turned into the marks of guilt, they are also exhibited as unfulfilled achievements, so that Hamlet's offences, which are shown to exceed the containment of thought, of imagination and of time, are also shown to lose once again the name of action: the gap opened within the Ghost's words mirrors itself in the disproportion between the unspeakable horror of offences and the coming short of their enactment, which is in fact, paradoxically, the coming short of the actions necessary to repair the guilts.

In the closet–scene, a space which Hamlet's language turns into an anatomy theatre, Hamlet's dialogue with Ophelia in Act I is twisted into the thorough dissection of family bonds, and into the merciless exposure of the violence underlying them. Positioning himself as a mirror to his mother's inmost part:

> *You go not till I set you up a glass*
> *Where you may say the inmost part of you*
> (III.iv.20-21)

Hamlet also sets himself up as the mirror of his dead Father's narrative, fully re-enacting its defective tale of lost Eden with the verbal fury of a new avenger.

It is here, in the closet scene, that Hamlet most identifies with his dead father, speaking to Gertrude in much the same way as the Ghost had spoken to him, redeploying the same vocabulary, and the same broken rhetoric.

And yet, Hamlet's anatomy of Gertrude's soul makes undue and forbidden additions to the Ghost's generic account for, by highlighting Gertrude's agency, it locates and specifies the *falling -off* , turning it into Gertrude's fall, into her individual blurring of the difference. What emerges is the compulsive urge to penetrate the multiple layers of meaning and of flesh, in search of Gertrude's heart, the ultimate unrecoverable kernel of truth:

Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down,
And let me wring your heart. For so I shall,
If it be made of penetrable stuff,
If damned custom have not brassed it so
That it be proof and bulwark against sense.
(III.iv.35-40)

By postulating the disjointment of Gertrude's organs and senses as the only possibile cause of indifferentiation:

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope.
(III.iv.79-82)

Hamlet actually dissects her body with verbal daggers performing a deformed revenge whose non compliance with the Ghost's commandment (*Taint not thy mind,/nor let thy soul contriveAgainst thy mother aught*. v.85-86) is emphasized by the Ghost's arresting apparition.

Hamlet's anatomizing of Gertrude is the extreme, though vain, attempt to restore the difference between the king and his usurping brother by laying the blame on the woman subject belonging to the primal family nucleus. Exactly as in the Ghost's narrative, also in Hamlet's, the sub-text of non-difference emerges however from within the fiery assertion of difference: the rhetoric of differentiation, built upon the hyperbolic contrast of the two brothers, a godly King against a mildewed year, is marred by the contagion of synctatic and semantic similarities which disclose shared disease:

Look here upon this picture, and on this; (III.iv.55) …
*This was your husband.Look you now what follows (*III.iv.64).
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed
And batten on this moor?
(III.iv.66-67)

More than in any other part of the play, in the closet – scene the Ghost's narrative is unravelled as a paradox. Semantic contagion, intwined with and ennobled by the irresistible power of seduction, is seen

to contradict action and to come short of proper revenge for, just as he desperately tries to re-member his dead father, through the dis-memberment of his mother, Hamlet foregrounds the dis-memberment of the whole family and social nucleus.

It is not an accident that just in this scene the Ghost should appear again to Hamlet as if tomaterialize the prohibition to overstep the boundaries of meaning, the prohibition to dis-member and to forget:

> *Do not forget. This visitation is*
> *Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.*
> (III.iv.111-112)

Having been forbidden *to contrive* against his mother, Hamlet is now ordered by the Ghost to mediate between his mother and her 'fighting soul':

> *But look, amazement on thy mother sits.*
> *O, step between her and her fighting soul!*
> (III.iv.113-114)

Left only with the prohibitions pointed to by the Ghost's commandment:

> *Let not the royal bed of Denmark be*
> *A couch for luxury and damned incest.*
> (I.v.82-83)

Hamlet pours out in his turn prohibitions, commanding his mother to abstain from luxury and incest, to take refuge in make-believe:

> *Assume a virtue, if you have it not*
> (III.iv.161)

> *Refrain tonight,*
> *And that shall lend a kind of easiness*
> *To the next abstinence; the next more easy*
> (III.iv.166-168)

Prefigured by Hamlet's prescriptions, Getrude's future sexual behaviour looks awkwardly paralysed by oxymoronic imperatives, which echo

and intensify the entanglement of being and not being, verbalizing the disjointment of language torn between re-membering and dis-membering.

> Gertrude: *What shall I do ?*
> Hamlet: *Not this, by no means, that I bid you do*
> (III.iv.181-182)

The claims of History

The Ghost's questioning of Hamlet's 'blunted purpose' in the closet-scene threateningly revives the issue of history, of action, and of succession, urging not to overstep the boundaries of social language and of social meaning. Symptomatically the ghost's former exhortation

> *Remember me*
> (I.v.91)

is here transformed it into the negative of its antonym with no direct object to follow:

> *Do not forget.*
> (III.iv.111)

By asking Hamlet *not to forget* the Ghost shows the way to an acceptable social memory which, being less threateningly entangled with *dismembering,* is based less on the desire to re-cover and re-member lost identities and beings, than on the prohibition to un-cover and dis-member them. *Not forgetting* is then pointed to as the only permitted way *to remember.* The new revengeful memory, required by the reshaping of the issue of death, stands out as the outcome of erasures, removals and disentanglements, an idealizing memorial cemented by the rhetoric of denial[14].

Henceforth Hamlet will indeed hasten to deny and to separate issues, in order to loosen the oxymoronic, poisoned knot of meanings inherited

[14] I here disagree with Michael Neill's interpretation of 'Do not forget' as simply evocative of the previous commandment to remember: 'When the Ghost returns in the closet scene [….] his first words once again evoke an unappeasable longing for love and remembrance 'Do not forget' (III. Iv. 110) (Neill 1997: 255).

from his father. Surrendering to Claudius' plot, accepting to be sent to death by Claudius via Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, confining himself to retortion, defying auguries, Hamlet passively offers himself to the consummation of history turning into the naked and lonely spectator of his own fate.

Thus, rather than preventing or even denouncing Claudius's treacherous machination against his life, Hamlet denies it, confining himself to mechanical retortion deliberately deprived of any intentionality. The fear of being murdered by an agent is denied and replaced by the achievement of *readiness* in front of unpredictable and ungovernable death, and by the naturalization of man, compared to a sparrow:

> *We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come.*
> *If it is not come, it will be now. If 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.213-215)

For the sake of history Hamlet actually goes so far as to deny his own passionate fathoming of the body of language. Just before his combat with Laertes, he offers his royal audience a new and different version of his own story, rhetorically built on denials, and recounted in the third person as if from the more distant stance of a Historian:

> *What I have done*
> *That might your nature, honour and exception*
> *Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.*
> *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****. If't be so,*
> *Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged,*
> ***His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy***
> (V.ii.224-233, emphasis added)

As he denies himself, Hamlet also divorces his old self which he locates elsewhere, in the inimical alterity of distracting madness. The poi-

soning urge to search the ultimate meaning, transmitted by the Ghost's tale, is here resignified as actual seduction in the etymological sense of *taking away from himself*, classified and denounced as madness. In Hamlet's new semiotic map issues are separated, individual liabilities displaced and denied. The re-membering anatomy of language is safely confined within the boundaries of madness, a social space emphatically separated from history.

It is however an unstable, and provisional demarcation, pointing less to present occurrances than to the claims of future history. Hamlet's self-redefinition is not sufficient to heal the name of the Hamlets in the face of history. The pursuit of full names and identities, the revengeful memory which, however blemished and unaccomplished, is required of the dead, stands out at the end of the tragedy as the only challenge worth surviving and living for:

> *Oh God, Horatio, what a wounded name,*
> *Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!*
> *If thou dids't ever hold me in thy heart,*
> *Absent thee from felicity awhile,*
> *And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,*
> *To tell my story.*
> (V.ii.338-340)

The fatal disease of poisoned language is thus poured into Horatio's ear and the Ghost's call for memory (*Remember me*) is transfused into Hamlet's exhortation to tell his story, in order to heal the wounds of family and royal names, carrying on the endless pursuit of fullness. Hamlet's royal ambition, thwarted by poisoning and mischievous death, is deflected into the yearning for lost meaning, and for the language of memory, so that eventually Hamlet the Dane turns into a dying sweet Prince.

And yet, while prophesying the victory of Denmark's former enemy, Hamlet still points to more words which might have been said, to a *rest*, that must be *silence*:

> *But I do prophesy th'election lights*
> *On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.*
> *So tell him, with th' occurrents, more and less,*
> *Which have solicited – the rest is silence.*
> (V.ii.349-352)

Strewn with dead bodies and enwrapped in deadly silence, the stage ultimately tolls the bell of traditional revenge tragedy: royal lineages are interrupted, names are wounded or lost and the living full fledgedness of characters is unrecoverable.

As he splits his voice into two different and apparently opposed injunctions (to tell a tale and to rule) respectively addressed to a friend and to a former enemy, Hamlet channels the contradictory and disjointed meanings of his language into separate issues. In accordance with the Ghost's two different commandments (*Remember me* (I.v.91), *Do not forget* (III.iv.111)) Hamlet's double mandate prefigures and authorizes two separate ways of performing the duty of memory: *Re-membering and being* by anatomizing the body of language through the memorial function of literature on the one hand; *not forgetting and not being* by ruling and acting through the sublimating performance of Puritan activism and entrepreneurship on the other[15].

And yet, until the end, the boundary between these areas is blurred by contaminations and by the resurfacing of what should be denied. Hamlet's funeral war rites, which might be expected to compensate for the tragedy's maimed rituals of death are exposed as the memorial tribute to a merely virtual, unaccomplished royalty. Actually, the loudness of the soldiers' music stands out as a deliberately hyperbolic celebration, designed not to heal, but to overshadow and to suppress the wounds of Hamlet's name[16]:

> *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.*
> *Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this*
> *Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.*
> *Bid the soldiers shoot.*
> (V.ii.388-393)

[15] For *Hamlet's* anticipations and critique of Puritanism see Marzola 1985.

[16] Michael Neill makes this point convincingly: "[….] Fortinbras's 'soldier's music' is really no more than a vain attempt to ventriloquize a voice that has been stopped for ever. With all its pomp, language here parades on the brink of silence; and the play remains full of the tension of unfinished business" (Neill 1997: 241).

Though socially recodified through suppressions and separations, the meanings of death still emerge as threateningly unstable. The sorrowful ascent to the royal power of Denmark's former enemy marks the beginning of a new national history whose unity is however exhibited as a mythological construct, in so far as it is seen to require the social suppression of fratricide violence and of primal guilt.

In spite of, or because of its apparent sketchiness, the rhetorical structure of the play stands out as most revealing. The paradox inscribed in the oxymoronic entanglement of the Ghost's first narrative, redeployed by disjunctions, denials and interrogations, leading to the disjointment of language, is eventually redefined, though not untied, as the elements of the oxymoron are singled out and dealt with separately. While prefiguring the drawing of cultural, institutional and disciplinary boundaries, disjuncting and disjointing convert into separating and demarcating. And yet, though it predicts the recovery of communication, *Hamlet* still posits language as a half –forbidden and half-disclosed tale, as the object of boundless interpretative desire.

Because, unlike most Renaissance Revenge tragedies, it turns the crisis of revenge into the crisis of language, *Hamlet* actually foregrounds words and poetry, pushing the stage in the background. As it happens, the seduction of Hamlet's revenge play, deriving from visible theatrical incompleteness allayed with linguistic display, demands prior attention to the fabric of language,to the signifier, as it highlights the different ways language moulds modern culture by negotiating the meanings of death and of memory[17].

[17] While pointing to the ways literary criticism has told *Hamlet's* secret, supplying the undecidability of the text with meaning, Belsey indicates as a possible alternative, which my reading has endorsed, the pursuit of the signifier: "A possible alternative, however, is to relinquish the desire for closure and to follow the dance-steps of the signifier, permitting the text to take the lead. By this means we allow the play, like the mortality it depicts, to retain its mystery, its a-thetic knowledge, its triumphant undecidability – and its corresponding power to seduce". (Belsey 1999: 172).

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