

# The Question: *Hamlet's* Life After Life

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## Abstract

What exactly does it mean to say that *Hamlet* has an afterlife? Taking seriously the notion of "life" embedded in the idea of a literary afterlife, this essay pursues the living-on or, in Derrida's terms, sur-vival of *Hamlet* through two of its many literary incarnations: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem *The Question* (1882) and Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966). These texts are forms of "translation" — that is, they simultaneously ensure the survival of the source text and confirm the need for it to be carried over from one space to another. The resulting afterlives are thus best understood as uncanny; they are recognizably versions of a seemingly pre-existing text, and yet there is something unfamiliar, or even more peculiarly, *strangely* familiar about them.

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Is a literary afterlife a repetition? To some extent, the answer to this question has to be "yes." There must be something about a literary afterlife that strikes a reader or an audience as familiar; it has to possess some quality in common with that which it follows, with some putative "original" such that the original may be rendered identifiable. Common sense suggests that the afterlife cannot be exactly the "same" as the original — assuming for a moment, and despite all the evidence, that this identification of sameness would be possible, and that common sense has any role to play here — since the afterlife has to be identifiable as something other than a reappearance of the original, which means that there has to be some alteration of the original such that the afterlife cannot be thought of as more than similar. At best then, there can only be iteration rather than pure repetition (in Derrida's sense of iteration as repetition plus difference); that is, there has to be an element of transformation, and thus there would appear to be an uncanny quality to this sense of strange familiarity.<sup>1</sup> What this suggests is that we have to be able to tell the difference between similarity and sameness. It is all a question of identity and identification.<sup>2</sup> A first proposition, then: Afterlives are uncanny.<sup>3</sup>

If for no other reason, *Hamlet* becomes the obvious play to address in this context; it is, after all, a play that begins with the question "Who's there?" This call for a response — this call for those who hear it to identify themselves — has not lacked answers (and it is hard to overstate the level

of understatement involved in making such a statement).<sup>4</sup> Relating *Hamlet* to questioning is not a new idea, either. Harry Levin, for example, suggests that *Hamlet* is itself a question, but not one that can or should be explained away (Levin 1970). So, for anyone wishing to produce a response to the question that *Hamlet* raises and that for some critics simply *is* — and this includes those wishing to produce or understand an afterlife — there is a double necessity: to respond to the call for identification and to identify who or what it is that is being responded to. There is, of course, nothing less simple than the "simply *is*" when it comes to *Hamlet*. The weight of commentary alone suggests that. As Derrida puts it: "One shouldn't complicate things for the pleasure of complicating, but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten around, as you say in English" (Derrida 1988b, 119).<sup>5</sup> What I am describing here as a process of doubled identification is more usually called reading, and it is reading that allows for complexity to be recognized. All rewritings of *Hamlet*, then, are first of all readings of *Hamlet* to the extent that they constitute a response and recognize their responsibility to respond (this is where ethics becomes an aspect of the question). This might lead us to a second proposition: All afterlives are readings as much as they are (re)writings.

What, then, *is* what I have been calling a literary "afterlife"?<sup>6</sup> Several possibilities present themselves, most obviously forms of adaptation and appropriation — including translation — and in the context of drama this must also include performance, even if it is not always necessarily appropriate to think of performance as "literary." So here I will focus on a certain understanding of translation, thinking not only of the movement of a text from one "language" into another (say, from English to German or French), but also extending that idea of language into thinking about other genres, and other forms of readable objects, such as visual images.<sup>7</sup> My central example in this essay will be Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which is a case of an afterlife remaining within the same broad category of drama, and yet being written in a way that would not have been possible without the intercession of material that comes from a linguistic and cultural domain that is not that of the "original," which is why I think it remains appropriate to use the term translation.<sup>8</sup> Like any question of the "What is . . . " form, to ask a question about the status of an afterlife is really to pose a question about presence, about what Derrida calls the *sur-vie*, literally a living-on, that is, a parasitic survival that depends upon some sign of life: "Living on can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, 'life after life' or life after death, more life or more than life, and better" (Derrida 1994a, 77). Or, as he puts it elsewhere:

A text is original insofar as it is a thing, not to be confused with an organic or a physical body, but a thing, let us say, of the mind, meant to survive the death of the author or the

signatory, and to be above or beyond the physical corpus of the text, and so on. The structure of the original text is survival . . . To understand a text as an original is to understand it independently of its living conditions — the conditions, obviously, of its author's life — and to understand it instead in its *surviving* structure. (Derrida 1988a, 121-22, italics in original)

These remarks stem from a consideration of Walter Benjamin's famous essay on translation, and Derrida is keen to underline this sense of survival as itself a matter of translation.<sup>9</sup> The French verb *survivre*, like the English "survive," is used to render two German terms in Benjamin's text: *Überleben* as a form of survival that rises above life, and *Fortleben*, which carries the sense of a prolonging of life. Which of these forms of survival, then, is most promising in thinking through the idea of a literary afterlife? I will only be able to give a tangential answer here.

It should be obvious why this quotation from Derrida concerning the structures of survival might lead me to think of *Hamlet*, a play that is itself obsessed with notions of living on, of life after life, of life after death, and of more life or more than life.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this is a play that seeks to phenomenalize the conception of an afterlife, to make it present on the stage and page, perceptible to the spectator or reader, however impossibly. This leads us from the opening apparition of the ghost, and the demands that it makes on the characters within the play as well as on the audience, to Hamlet's impossibly pseudo-posthumous "Horatio, I am dead" (*Hamlet*, 5.2.343).<sup>11</sup> Translations of the play may be read in these terms, offering a reprieve, a life after life, for the play. But as Paul de Man proposes in his discussion of Benjamin's essay on translation, the process of translation has a disquieting effect on the "life" of the original: "The translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, *thus assuming and confirming the death of the original*" (De Man 1986, 85, italics added). In the case of a play such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, then, we might say that *Hamlet* is — if not missing — then certainly presumed dead: such, at least, might be read from the title alone. Stoppard's use of this phrase as a title raises the problem of repetition again: is it a descriptive statement or a quotation? And what about the problematic nature of the presence of its central characters that the verb "are" implies? I will return to these questions later.

In the light of de Man's suggestion regarding the status of the original for a translation, I want briefly to examine an exemplary translation of *Hamlet* (in a broad sense) in order to provide a framework for my reading of Stoppard's play. As I have argued elsewhere, it is possible to trace a line that develops from the German Romantic reception of *Hamlet* (and of tragedy, more widely), through the French Romantic and Symbolist readings and representations and into the

later nineteenth and twentieth-centuries in England and Europe. In this movement across cultures and languages, *Hamlet* becomes the locus for two opposed ways of reading tragedy, which for simplicity I call the "heroic" and the "anti-heroic." Both of these readings of tragedy stem from a certain conception of Greek art, and in particular the version of that concept that has come to be known as "the German dream of Greece."<sup>12</sup>

Having sketched an outline of this Romantic interpretation and translation of the play, I want to focus briefly on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem and painting, entitled *The Question*, before moving on to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Each of these texts might be read as a response to the Romantic treatments of *Hamlet* in Germany and France, and each attempts to negotiate ideas of life, death, and authenticity.<sup>13</sup> As such, the stakes of tragedy in its political dimensions become apparent, where the aesthetic, and thus implicitly philosophical, reading of the play becomes part of a wider movement towards a nationalist-heroic interpretation of tragedy. Ultimately — and it will only be possible to sketch a trajectory within the confines of this discussion — I want to read the play against this tragic-heroic conception in order to gesture towards another reading of tragedy that is evident in *Hamlet's* afterlife.

### "Romantic" Readings: Tragedy and the Hero

Let me repeat a familiar story. One of the dominant ways of thinking about tragedy is what has become known as the "tragic-heroic paradigm."<sup>14</sup> This emerges from a connection between Greek tragedy and attempts to define a Romantic form of art that would be able to unify subject and object in consciousness (which, for shorthand, we might call the central aspect of Kant's Critical project). Modern poetry and drama are, then, praised for their ability to capture the power of Greek drama, which is held up as the prime example of this fusion of human, natural, and divine. Among modern writers, Shakespeare is frequently privileged in this connection to Greek drama — particularly that of Sophocles — by German and French romantic writers (and the English who follow them). In the commentaries of the Schlegels, Herder, Lessing, Tieck, and others, *Hamlet* is praised precisely because its main character is taken to be representative of philosophical self-consciousness, at the heart of which is a specific understanding of destiny. Shakespeare's play is related to the Greek Sphinx, and thus to the riddle that confronts Oedipus, and to which the answer is "man" or "himself." As such, the connection between the Oedipal riddle and Shakespeare's dramatization of the pale cast of thought falls squarely into the philosophical dramatization of human consciousness in which man is both object and subject for reason.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggests an explanation for the specific political charge that tragedy takes on in this location:<sup>15</sup>

Tragedy had been thought, in any case in the whole tradition of German idealism, to be the political art par excellence. That it had been, historically, a sort of political religion is not in doubt, but it acquired this reputation in the German dream of Greece . . . essentially because it was understood as the ideal and unsurpassed presentation of the great mythic figures, with whom an assembled people could identify and thanks to whom its identity was properly constituted or organized. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994, xxi)

Lacoue-Labarthe is not suggesting that tragedy only becomes political within the ambit of German idealism. Elsewhere, he reminds us that, even in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the emotions of pity and fear that tragedy is supposed to evoke are primarily political in significance, rather than confined to an individual psychological state, and are produced in response to the essentially political disruption that tragedy stages.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of post-Kantian idealist thought, tragedy operates in the space between freedom and necessity, between a sense of the predictable and unchangeable often associated with the past (history, destiny, fate, and so on) and a future that offers a glimpse of a freedom that hinges on the idea that the future might be otherwise. This other future runs counter to the tragic-heroic paradigm, which might best be thought of as an over-valuation of the end of life — of the end of life as the end of life — in which the sacrificial death slides into a disastrous form of political philosophy. This is not the necessary end of the meeting of philosophy and politics in aesthetics. As Simon Critchley suggests of the tragic paradigm in which aesthetics takes on the role formerly accorded to religion in answering the question of the meaning or purpose of life, while the tragic paradigm does offer a way of thinking through finitude, "it is a thinking-through which *disfigures* finitude by making the human being *heroic*" (Critchley 1999, 220, italics in original). For Critchley, the way of thinking this inheritance otherwise is to be found in humor. He argues that it is in a particular kind of humor — especially that found in Samuel Beckett, who is of course one of the most frequently cited sources of inspiration for the humor of Stoppard — that any tragic or heroic sense of the world evaporates through a laughter that cancels idealism. What I would like to propose, alongside this concept, is a rethinking of community, and in particular of those forms of community revealed in and as the aesthetic. As Jacques Rancière has proposed, the aesthetic is a necessarily political category to the extent that it involves a sharing and a sharing out (in French the term is *partage*) of what within a given culture is to be taken into account — that is, to be perceived as meaningful in terms of *aesthesis* (see Robson 2005). In political terms, this extends to the division of the political

space such that certain voices are seen to "count." For Rancière, aesthetics "is the originary knot that ties a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community," and it is this sense of its originality that runs counter to any notion of the aestheticization of politics (Rancière 2000, 33).

(An aside or, more likely, a glimpse of a different scene altogether: in terms of the play, such a reading would begin from a sense of death as common in *Hamlet*, 1.2.64-106. While this passage is often read through the emergence of a distinct and modern notion of individuality — emphasising Hamlet's "that within which passes show" and his comments distinguishing being and seeming — what is given less weight is the fact that this is as much a debate about kinship, relation, community, and sociality. This debate centers not on individuality, but on death as the communal, offering a disfigured vision of social bonds in the context of the death of Hamlet's father and its individual and collective consequences. In the larger project of which this essay is a part, I extend this apparently dialectical sense of the relation between individuality and community in light of Jean-Luc Nancy's proposal that "the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community" [Nancy 1991, 3].)<sup>17</sup>

### Rossetti's *The Question*

If, on the occasion of any public performance of Shakspeare's great tragedy, the actors who perform the parts of Rosencranz and Guildenstern were, by a preconcerted arrangement and by means of what is technically known as "gagging," to make themselves fully as prominent as the leading character, and to indulge in soliloquies and business strictly belonging to Hamlet himself, the result would be, to say the least of it, astonishing; yet a very similar effect is produced on the unprejudiced mind when the "walking gentlemen" of the fleshly school of poetry, who bear precisely the same relation to Mr. Tennyson as Rosencranz and Guildenstern do to the Prince of Denmark in the play, obtrude their lesser identities and parade their smaller idiosyncrasies in the front rank of leading performers. (Buchanan 1871, 334)

So opens a review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Poems* of 1870. While Tennyson and Browning alternate the lead role, Rossetti is given the part of Osric. Published under the name of Thomas Maitland, this attack by Robert Buchanan launched a notorious battle over the nature of poetry and the status of those attacked. But what is less often noted is the opening gambit of framing the attack through *Hamlet*. As one of the "lesser identities," Rossetti's poetic pretensions are equivalent to a

Rosencrantz or Guildenstern becoming as prominent as Hamlet, offering a strange foreshadowing of Stoppard's play, in which precisely that happens.

Oddly, Buchanan's suggestion is to some extent taken seriously by those he seeks to undermine. Rossetti's responses to this attack led him to think again about the play — including writing at least one parody of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in which Buchanan is figured as Hamlet — but this only amplifies a process already at work, since he had by this time already produced several drawings and paintings inspired by Shakespeare's text, most obviously a drawing entitled *Hamlet and Ophelia* of 1854 and a watercolor of the same scene in 1866 (see McGann 2006). *Hamlet and Ophelia* depicts a Hamlet who echoes precisely the Romantic reading of him as one "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," and the drawing embeds images which include the Tree of Knowledge and a paradise lost, which Rossetti describes in a letter as "symbols of rash introspection" (Poole 2004, 63-65). This is the Hamlet of Goethe (for whom the play presents "a heavy deed placed on a soul which is not adequate to cope with it"); of A. W. Schlegel ("a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting"); of Coleridge (who notes Hamlet's "endless reasoning and urging — perpetual solicitation of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action"); and of Laurence Olivier (whose film notoriously begins with the voiced-over statement, "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind") (Goethe 1989, 146; Schlegel 1815, 337; Coleridge 1971, 124; and *Hamlet* 1948).<sup>18</sup>

In 1875, Rossetti produced a drawing in preparation for an intended, but never completed painting, and it was later accompanied by some verses. The text, dictated by Rossetti on his death-bed in April 1882 — and thus becoming a kind of "dying voice" — explains and extends the image:

This sea, deep furrowed as the face of Time,  
Mirrors the ghost of the removed moon;  
The peaks stand bristling round the waste lagune;  
While up the difficult summit steeply climb  
Youth, Manhood, Age, one triple labouring mime;  
And to the measure of some mystic rune  
Hark how the restless waters importune  
These echoing steeps which chime and counter-chime.  
What seek they? Lo, upreared against the rock  
The Sphinx, Time's visible silence, frontleted  
With Psyche wings, with eagle plumes arched o'er.

Ah, when those everlasting lips unlock  
 And the old riddle of the world is read,  
 What shall man find? or seeks he evermore?

## II

Lo, the three seekers! Youth has sprung the first  
 To question the Unknown: but see! he sinks  
 Prone to the earth — becomes himself a Sphinx, —  
 A riddle of early death no love may burst.  
 Sorely anhungered, heavily athirst  
 For knowledge, Manhood next to reach the Truth  
 Peers in those eyes; till, haggard & uncouth  
 Weak Eld renews that question long rehearsed.  
 Oh! and what answer? From the sad sea brim  
 The eyes o' the Sphinx stare through the midnight spell,  
 Unwavering, — man's eternal quest to quell:  
 While round the rock-steps of her throne doth swim  
 Through the wind-serried wave the moon's faint rim,  
 Sole answer from the heaven invisible. (McGann 2006)

It is, perhaps, not obvious what this has got to do with *Hamlet*. But in a letter to F. G. Stephens, Rossetti explains his inspiration: "In the symbolism of the picture (which is clear and gives its title founded on Shakespeare's great line, 'To be or not to be, that is the question'), the swoon of the youth may be taken to shadow forth the mystery of early death, one of the hardest of all impenetrable dooms" (quoted in Surtees 1971, 140). Rossetti's portrayal of the three figures of man as Youth, Manhood, and Age echoes but modifies the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, with Youth falling to his knees to make the image work visually. Nonetheless, a tension persists that always troubles attempts to translate a literary or dramatic text into a visual image. The image is presented as a single moment in time; despite the use of perspective to position them relative to each other, the three figures cannot be shown as a progression or sequence, and the drawing is thus unable to avoid freezing that which in the text (or in dramatic performance) is unfolded through time. The drawing, then, falls into the temporality of the Sphinx, what Rossetti calls in the poem "Time's



visible silence," and the second stanza links the being of the creature to death as Youth becomes another Sphinx.

Clearly, one aspect of the interest for modern readers is in the connection that Rossetti makes between the Sphinx and *Hamlet*. In the wake of Freud's claims to originality in his reading of the play in terms of the Oedipus Complex, it is easy to forget that this link between the Greek figure and Shakespeare's play was already being made some years before Freud's great "discovery" (Freud 1990, 126). Indeed, Rossetti was himself following (although perhaps unwittingly) the French painter Gustave Moreau, whose own *Oedipus and the Sphinx* of 1864 had been praised by Théophile Gautier for its depiction of "*un Hamlet Grec*" (Chaleil 1998, 126). Certainly, Rossetti drew upon Ingres's well-known *Oedipus and the Sphinx* of 1849, and it has been claimed that his drawing anticipates some Symbolist work, including Moreau's *Oedipe voyageur* (see Marsh 2005, 486-87). But what this account misses is Moreau's earlier painting, and in fact Rossetti was in Paris in 1864, and so could have seen or heard about Moreau's image, which had been exhibited at that year's Salon and was itself indebted to Ingres.<sup>19</sup>

That a commentator such as Gautier is able to detect the presence of Hamlet in an image of Oedipus seems to be explicable by the frequency and specific nature of the connection in Romantic thought. The Oedipus who solves the riddle of the Sphinx and who becomes the image of the philosopher per se becomes as well a version of the hero of the tragedy of thought (see Goux 1993). The threat posed by the Sphinx is thus doubled: literal death, which awaited those unable to solve the riddle; and an annihilating lack of self-knowledge. But this self-knowledge, or at least the quest for it, could be seen as disabling, reducing the thinker-poet to an immobile figure, locked eternally to the gaze of the Sphinx. What Rossetti's poem calls the "eternal quest," the "question long rehearsed," is figured in these images as the hero transfixed before death. The poem inserts motion into the image: the human figures "climb," the waters are "restless," and all is measured by the chiming and counter-chiming of an echo that itself enacts a repetition that is faced down by the implacable silence of the Time of the Sphinx. At the entry of the Sphinx into the poem, there is a shift towards the future — "What shall man find? or seeks he evermore?" — that is itself countered by the invocation of the "old" riddle, the "shall" of the question immobilized by the familiarity of the always already-known answer. The problem facing the reader of Rossetti's image is not the enigmatic nature of the riddle, but instead the fact that, as the second stanza tells us, the question is "long rehearsed," and we should note the theatrical echo of what in French is called a *répétition*. "To be or not to be" becomes a rhetorical question, since death is inevitable. This is where Rossetti's

image comes closest to a Romantic sense of tragedy: death is seen as a necessity. Indeed, it is the confrontation with the inevitability of death that renders the hero heroic.

### Stoppard and the Reprieve

One way of reading *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is (recalling Derrida's conception of the afterlife) to see it as a reprieve, as an offer of life after death for two of the original play's minor characters. But the play contains suggestions that this may not be quite right. As I proposed earlier, even before the play begins, the title suggests that the eponymous pair *are* dead; they are dead in the present tense, they are "present" as already dead. Thus, this might be seen as closer to the confirmation of the death of the original of which de Man speaks. As Rosencrantz disconsolately puts it towards the end of the play: "They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning" (Stoppard 1976, 89). It is written, as we are told by the Player, so that the characters are "marked for death" before their performance begins. Consequently, when the Ambassador arrives too late to report their deaths to an already-dead Hamlet, his words are rendered even more hollow in Stoppard's play than in Shakespeare's by the repetition; we already know, we have known "right from the beginning," even if Stoppard prevents us (as does Shakespeare) from seeing their deaths enacted.<sup>20</sup> Rosencrantz's realization of his shared fate, however, only complicates matters. When exactly was "the beginning" for them? Was it the opening of Stoppard's play? Was it the arrival of the messenger to wake them, which they return to at several points in the play, but which remains a hazy event? Or was the beginning (in) *Hamlet*? (Let us ignore, for the moment, the supplementary complication of *Hamlet*'s unoriginality as a play, and its dependence on Saxo, Belleforest, *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*, a putative *Ur-Hamlet*, and so on, and also the problems of dating it precisely, either for original composition or revision. In thinking about three *Hamlets*, as modern editors now insist we do, the common refusal to prioritize one version over another reinforces the sense that, rather than three originals, we have inherited three equally unoriginal texts.)

All of this speculation is caught up in a conscious economy of representation within Stoppard's play. The Tragedians are consummate performers of death, exemplary in the variety with which those deaths may be performed, and as the Player tells them, "There's nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death" (Stoppard 1976, 55). Guildenstern, however, objects, first by doubting the very possibility of miming death — "I'm talking about death — and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it" (89) — and then by contrasting the exquisite performance of death with that which awaits them:<sup>21</sup>

No . . . no . . . not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over . . . Death is not anything . . . death is not . . . It's the absence of presence,

nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming back . . . a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound. (90-91, italics in original)

Guildestern rejects the heroic, sacrificial death, the death that is justified by reference to a cause, and it is this form of death that the two present: they simply disappear. Death is not a *telos*, it is the end without end, "the endless time of never coming back." Rather than an afterlife, more life as the more than life, Guildestern's death is "nothing more." Their dying is not romantic, but neither is it Romantic. In fact, there is a deliberate sense that the end is not the end, that it is at best only another form of displacement. Guildestern clings to the idea that he and Rosencrantz can learn from their experience such that things could have been and thus could still be different: "Well, we'll know better next time" (91). Just as the "beginning" is indeterminate, so too the end is equally inconclusive.

In the world of Stoppard's play, part of the problem lies in the nature of questioning itself. Rosencrantz evinces a certain nostalgia for a period prior to the emergence of the question, and yet, as Guildestern immediately rejoins, this is to mistake their position:

ROS: I remember when there were no questions.

GUIL: There were always questions. To exchange one set for another is no great matter. (28)

Indeed, as the play suggests at more than one point, the key is to keep asking questions. The central metaphor is their "playing at questions" at the end of act 1. Avoiding statements, repetition, synonyms, rhetoric, and non sequiturs, in rehearsing their game Rosencrantz and Guildestern reveal the problematic status of the question with respect to the philosophical self-consciousness prized by the Romantic readers of *Hamlet*. Their forms of questioning recall the confrontation with death of Rossetti's figures, but in a decidedly non-heroic manner. Indeed, their ineptitude leads them to doubt that they know the rules to their own game; their performance against Hamlet — who presumably does not even know that he is playing — is hopeless. They are led to conclude that what they gained from Hamlet was more than outweighed by what he scored against them. As Rosencrantz puts it, disconsolately: "Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all" (40). We are led to the notion — shared with the Romantic readers of *Hamlet* — that Hamlet is the one who knows, and that the play might tell us . . . something. But what? In the absence of a belief in the connection between human life, nature, and the divine, the knowledge that the play and its protagonist promise must itself remain suspended. (Rosencrantz and Guildestern express a mixture of at least some degree of incomprehension and

disbelief throughout Stoppard's play: the laws of nature undermined by the suspension of the laws of probability and by the impossibility of determining any sense of direction; the absence of any benign deity, and probably of any sense to the universe at all beyond the necessities of death and dramatic structure; the constant confusion of identities and motives; and so on.)

This brings us back again to Derrida and towards another politics of tragedy. In an essay that draws together the insights of his *Specters of Marx* with a reading of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Derrida suggests:

In sum, Hamlet, surviving witness, is also the one who has seen death. He has seen the impossible and he cannot survive what he has survived. After having seen the worst, after having been the witness of the worst disorder, of absolute injustice, he has the experience of surviving — which is the condition of witnessing — but in order to survive what one does not survive. Because one *should not* survive. And that is what Hamlet *says*, and that is what *Hamlet*, the work, *does*. The work alone, but alone with us, in us, as us. (Derrida 1995, 36, italics in original)

As Derrida notes, Nietzsche's reading of *Hamlet* "seems to disturb all the great interpretations, notably the psychoanalytic readings (Freud, Jones) of Hamlet and of Oedipus" (34). Beginning with the Romantic reading of Hamlet as one incapable of action, Nietzsche then rejects the usual form of this explanation. Hamlet is not overwhelmed by reflection, by the myriad possibilities, but instead, by what he calls "true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action — there is a longing for a world beyond death" (Nietzsche 1999, 40). Only art, says Nietzsche, is able to produce representations of that terrible truth with which it is possible to live. Survival, or afterlife, life beyond death or simply *more* life (remembering Benjamin's use of both *Überleben* and *Fortleben*), is what *Hamlet* both represents and presents, bearing witness to this true knowledge in the hope of doing justice to it. As Derrida concludes: "Here then is its chance and its ruin. Its beginning and its end. It will always be given thus as the common lot [*en partage*], it will always have to be at once threatened and made possible in all languages by the *being out of joint: aus den Fugen*" (Derrida 1995, 37, italics in original). There is in this necessarily doubled potential, an expression of the need for an afterlife for Hamlet and *Hamlet* to be both a promise and threat. It is only on the condition of this doubling of potential — and of this potential doubling — that *Hamlet* might have a future. It is necessary to remember this future. But the odds might appear to be stacked against us. A final thought for and from Stoppard:

GUIL: What's the first thing you remember?

ROS: Oh, let's see . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

GUIL: No — the first thing you remember.

ROS: Ah. (*Pause.*) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.

GUIL (*patient but edged*): You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

ROS: Oh I see. (*Pause.*) I've forgotten the question. (Stoppard 1976, 11)

### Notes

1. The most convenient source for Derrida's thinking here would be the essays in *Limited Inc.* (1988b).
2. *Hamlet* and Hamlet have always prompted identification. From William Hazlitt to Steven Berkoff, writers, performers — and critics — have identified themselves with the central character. It is perhaps also this sense of identification that in part explains the attraction of the play for psychoanalysis, which itself is predicated upon notions of identification. I have addressed some aspects of this subject in "'Trying to pick a lock with a wet herring': *Hamlet*, Film, and Spectres of Psychoanalysis" (2001). For an intriguing discussion of the relation between translation, identification, and questioning, see Derrida's commentary on Heidegger's statement, "Tell me what you think about translation and I will tell you who you are," in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (1989).
3. In employing this heavily-laden term, I am aware of the difficulties that assuming too much might raise. In place of a fuller discussion, I can only refer the reader to Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (2003), Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (2003), and two essays by Samuel Weber, "Uncanny Thinking" and "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," in his *The Legend of Freud* (2000, 1-31 and 207-35).
4. For those unfamiliar with this history, in lieu of the extensive list that should appear here, please see the chapter entitled "The Afterlife of *Hamlet*," in Thompson and Taylor 1996, 51-61.
5. And note in passing, that in order to put this in the simplest way, Derrida has to change languages.
6. The term "afterlife" was, of course, carefully chosen by the editor of this essay cluster from among several other, perhaps more obvious, alternatives (adaptation, appropriation, and so on). For an incisive account of these different terms, see Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005).
7. There are reasons to be suspicious about the suggestion that it is possible to move from one language to another, such objections hinging on the status of the "one." As Jacques Derrida comments, we always inhabit more than one language, and yet we can never claim to "possess" more than one — or even one — language. See, in this respect, his *Monolingualism of the*

- Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (1998) and the commentary by Marc Crépon, *Langues sans demeure* (2005).
8. An aspect of this intercession that I will not pursue here is Stoppard's overlaying of Shakespeare with or on much more contemporary dramatic exemplars, particularly Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett. On this, see Neil Sammells, "The Early Stage Plays" (2001) and Sanders (2005), 55-57, who terms Stoppard's play a "graft." It would be possible to link this idea to Derrida's sense of the relationship between graft and iteration in *Limited Inc.*
  9. Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1996-2003); Derrida also reads this essay in "Des tours de Babel" (2007).
  10. Derrida addresses *Hamlet* directly in *Specters of Marx* (1994b); in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996); and in an essay, "The Time is Out of Joint" (1995), cited below. See also Peggy Kamuf's essay, "The Ghosts of Critique and Deconstruction" (2005), in which she describes *Specters of Marx* as, at least in part, a translation of *Hamlet* (233). In the space of this essay, it is impossible to deal adequately with these texts, so I will do no more than register my indebtedness to, or my inheritance of Derrida's profound elaboration of the question of inheritance with respect to *Hamlet*.
  11. All references will be to *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins (Shakespeare 1997).
  12. I have traced an outline of this material elsewhere, so my discussion of it here will be necessarily telegraphic. See my "Oedipal Visuality: Freud, Romanticism, Hamlet" (Robson 2009); see also E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries* (1935) and Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (2001).
  13. The concept of authenticity — if it is one — carries a certain charge in the context of German thought, especially that which leads towards a heroic version of myth and tragedy often associated with National Socialism and ultimately with Heidegger. For a hostile reading of the Heideggerean and existentialist use of "authenticity," see Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (2003).
  14. This paradigm — and resistance to it — are central to Simon Critchley's recent work. The paradigm first emerges in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (1997) and is pursued up to his *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007).
  15. See also Lacoue-Labarthe, "Oedipus as Figure" (2003).

16. See Lacoue-Labarthe's comments in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *Postmodernism: ICA documents* (1989), 17.
17. See also my essay, "'A Little More than Kin': *Hamlet's* Communities" (in preparation).
18. In focusing his film version on Hamlet, Olivier opts to cut Rosencrantz and Guildenstern entirely.
19. Moreau did produce some images based directly on *Hamlet*. These are reproduced in Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* (1977), 34-35 and Jane Martineau et al, eds. *Shakespeare in Art* (2005), 189.
20. A more formal reading of the play would note the use of repetition, including most obviously the quotation of lines from *Hamlet*. The play is indeed beset by repetition, and Stoppard has noted that it may be too repetitive at the level of dialogue. See *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, ed. Paul Delaney (1994), 12, 47, 236.
21. For a rather different reading of this passage, see Griselda Pollock, "Deadly Tales" (2000).

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