Questions of Authority

Questions of Authority:

A Reading of Hamlet

By

Nizar Zouidi

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Be a writer! Set your heart upon it So your name shall be like theirs!
A book is finer than a graven stele,
More than a memorial wall.
Those men built pyramids and chapels of the mind to make their names renowned!
Surely it is a thing of glory, in the land beyond,
That one’s name be fresh in the speech of mankind.
……………………………………………………..
Alive in the mouths of any who read.
Better a book than a builded mansion

—From Amenemopet Wisdom translated by John L. Foster

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PREFACE:
THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The question of authority is primarily a philosophical question. Its importance in the history of Western philosophy is quite obvious. It occupies a central position in the philosophical debates on/in antiquity and the middle ages. In the Renaissance, the concept of authority started to become central to philosophical as well as scientific and literary debates. In fact, Renaissance interest in empirical science is usually seen "as a reaction to the prevailing stifling Aristotelianism […] taken as synonym for extreme conservatism and appeal to authority" (Proudfoot and Lacey, 2010, 25). The concept therefore is related to the question of truth. It is also related to history. Indeed, authority may be defined as referring to the past for "authentication."

The ancient authors are usually seen as the ultimate reference for knowledge and art, which explains why the ancient conception of art is based on mimesis. The term has "two primary senses: […] a representation of some ideal object (Plato) and […] something that is made by some causal process (Aristotle). In either case, art was conceived as a form of mimesis" (Townsend, 2006, 208). Mimesis and authority share a structural duality related to time. Indeed, causality and imitation presuppose a linearity that, in fact, is a hierarchy. This hierarchy privileges the past over the present, the cause over the effect, the imitated over the imitation and "non art" (Fried, 2003, 169) over art.

In literary criticism, authority is usually defined as:

> The power that comes from the assumption of being unique or originary, or the significance invested in the cultural status of an originator or author (from which the word derives) of a given work; the assumption of power invested in signs, practices, laws or discursive practices. Thus the limits placed on meaning when interpreters turn to the biographies or the known authorial intentions. (Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack, 2006, 14)

The genesis model underlying this view of art is supposed to have survived until the advent of textual criticism which displaced the author centred view of literature. The hierarchy that privileges the past over the present is further debunked by Roland Barthes (1986) who introduced the concept of the death of the author. The French theorist believes that the author should die to free the text from this hierarchy. He suggests that the death of the author will secure the birth of the reader. The author who belongs to the past should be proclaimed dead in order for the reader to be free of all interpretive restraints. For Barthes, in order to free the text and the reader, the authority of the author should disappear.

The aim of this book is to challenge the idea that the author's presence in the text is a hindrance to interpretation. We will argue that in the case of *Hamlet*, the very authority of Shakespeare guarantees the endless proliferation of the interpretive possibilities of his masterpiece. The Bard seems to have arranged to rescue himself from the Barthes-ian death of the author. This he achieves through asserting his questionable authority in and over the play.

How does Shakespeare – literally, otherwise and/or literally otherwise – proclaim his authority over *Hamlet* without restraining its interpretive possibilities? To answer this question, we need to examine the play and its interpretive possibilities. In this book, we intend to demonstrate that interpretation is viable even if (maybe only when) the critic acknowledges the authority of Shakespeare.

A curious fact that we have realized as we browsed many scholarly dictionaries and encyclopedias (we will list them in our bibliography) for a sophisticated definition is that the word "authority" recurs more than once especially in entries related to classical and Renaissance philosophy. The question of authority, therefore, is central to a long theoretical and philosophical debate. The scope of this book may appear very broad. However, it is self-defeating to attempt to cover such large theoretical and historical grounds. This is why we opted for confining ourselves to the question of authority as a question in relation to Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*.

The theoretical and historical ground we will attempt to cover is still huge, as the question of authority in *Hamlet* can certainly be approached in different ways. Therefore, we need to narrow the scope of our interest a little further. This is why we will be concerned with two major questions. The first is the question of authenticity and truth and the second is that of time, death and endurance. These two issues are interconnected, for we believe that they are addressed aesthetically in the play.

The question of authenticity haunts most of the characters of the play. They are all investigators. Hamlet is at a loss as to whether to believe the Ghost or not. Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are after the truth behind Hamlet's madness. Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio question the Ghost about his real identity. The latter tells the prince that he can tell him the secrets of the afterlife, yet he will not do that. Truth seems inaccessible despite the fact that it is potentially expressible. This links the question of truth to that of time. Indeed, being a potential and a denial, truth hovers between the past, the present and the future incessantly. This shows that in *Hamlet*, the question of time is inevitably an aesthetic question. Indeed, while the present is conveyed through theatrical presentation, the past is conveyed in narrative form.

The linearity of the narrative is at odds with the theatrical. The latter is in a state between reality and illusion. Theatre relies on what we will be calling the illusion of presence. It presents “real” people performing the roles of others. These actors’ identities are in a state of flux. Their physical presence is no guarantee of their reality. This puts our conception of “the real” in question.

The play examines our relationship to the world. It questions the different strategies whereby we connect to it. Whatever we see, hear or smell (the skulls) is always hovering between the real and the illusionary. We may say that any presence on stage in *Hamlet* is ghostly. This notion of ghostliness is related to time and reality. The Ghost in *Hamlet* is a case in point. The Bard, who plays the role of the apparition, comes in a questionable shape. He is both real and ethereal.

On stage the Bard is himself in two ways. He is Shakespeare the actor and Shakespeare the author. He comes onstage to state his claim to unlimited authority. He comes in questionable shape and says that he knows all about the past and the future. He also is the castrating fatherly presence. His entering (or better intrusion) in the closet scene dis-empowers his son both sexually and politically. These two realms are yoked together in the aesthetics of hiddenness. The concept of the hidden is quite intriguing. Indeed, unlike the invisible, the hidden is sublime because it is ultimately accessible, but no one except the author has access to it.

The hidden remains a realm between presence and absence. It is a presence in absence. It is the unseen erogenous zone of the text that everyone is after. Indeed, no matter how we perceive (if we ever do) this phenomenon, it is (in) a state of (interpretive) potentiality. By interpretive potentiality, we mean that the hidden generously lends itself to different interpretive strategies without losing its mysterious nature. It remains forever in abeyance. The hidden in this sense is an “authorial” strategy that keeps the text seductively infinite. It lurks in the uncharted spots of the play seducing everyone to find a path outside but not beyond the text. Unlike the ineffable and the invisible of Romanticism, the hidden is a state of uncertainty that we can scarcely live with. “Negative Capability” is a luxury that critics and characters in *Hamlet* cannot afford. The hidden seductively and coyly frustrates all attempts to crack the mysteries of the play while promising an answer to every question. The answer lies (the pun intended but not in the sexual sense) with the author. The author survives in the play that is shrouded in mystery.

Another "authorial strategy" of survival is "being otherwise" (Zouidi, 2013, 123). This concept is related to a certain type of absence in presence. The actor on stage, as we have seen, states the claim of the author in one way or another. Shakespeare is not the only one who played the Ghost, but the apparition, no matter who plays that role, always plays the Bard. The author (we are not going to enter the discussion of whether he is Shakespeare or someone else because this is the focus of a proper historical study of authorship and our book is not one) is always present on stage as a difference. The actors who come onstage as the apparition always state that he (whoever he may be) can tell more. The author comes in different forms to renew his claim to omniscience and authority using the "evanescent monumentality" of acting.

The scope of our work may seem broad but it has two main axes: the question of authenticity and the question of time. As we have seen, these issues are intertwined. This is why it is impossible to deal with them separately. We intend to study the two questions in relation to the cultural, political and aesthetic issues raised by the play. My method should therefore be interdisciplinary but not undisciplined. By this, we mean that we will not surrender ourselves to the seductive infiniteness of the issues under scrutiny. My argument is that these issues are rendered using different aesthetic strategies that tie them to generic problems of referentiality and temporality. Accordingly, the cultural and the political concern me only in so far as they help me elucidate the generic aspects of the play. My interest therefore is principally aesthetic.

This does not mean that our approach will be purely aesthetic. I intend to deal with the different cultural and political aspects of the play that we believe are aesthetically functional. We intend to show the aesthetic "structuralization" of ideologies of monarchic continuity, the police state, gender roles (stage roles included) etc. The strategies of aesthetic control and resistance are quite illuminating in relation to the nature of these phenomena and the potentialities of art. The scope of our book, therefore, will be limited to the aesthetical aspects of the play. Our interest in the other aspects is confined to the intersections between the realms of politics and culture and the realm of aesthetics. It is further limited by our primary concern with the questions of referentiality and temporality.

We do not propose to define any one of the terms that we are going to use at this stage. These concepts will take shape in the course of this analysis. This is because we believe that theoretical conceptualization is only possible in practice. Concepts are configured and reconfigured incessantly, because they are active potentialities. By active potentialities, I mean that technical terms have a semantic mobility that keeps them alive. This does not mean that I will not be operating within a theoretical framework.

I (consciously) believe (though certainly I cannot tell for sure) that I belong to the interpretive community of New Aestheticism. This movement may be seen as a reaction to the excessive political inclinations of literary criticism. It is a movement (and I insist on this term) which argues "that focusing on the specific aesthetic impact of a work of art has the potential to open radically different ways of thinking about identity, politics and culture" (Ryan et al., 2011, 736). New aestheticism, therefore, does not believe in art for art's sake. It rather approaches the other issues from an aesthetic point of view. Accordingly, if my interest in *Hamlet* is primarily aesthetic, this does not entail that I overlook the other aspects of the play. We will deal with them in relation to aesthetics. The generic properties of the play certainly shed light on the "other" aspects of it and of the dramatic art in general and vice versa. As a result, our work will be aesthetically oriented without overlooking the need to focus on political and cultural issues whenever necessary. There are certainly political and gender determinants of genres. They are still secondary to the Bard's main aim, which seems to be sempiternity[1]. Our book is an aesthetic journey through time and space. It tries to reveal the strategies whereby the author controls these potentialities of his work.

This book will have an argumentative structure. It is divided into eight chapters that are steps towards the final conclusion. In these chapters, I explore a number of hypotheses through different perspectives. The ultimate aim is to come out with a method that may clarify the workings of authorship and authority in the play.

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[1] See Ibn Gabriol and Joseph Falaquera (2007) for an analysis of the theological and philosophical foundations of the distinction between eternity as an atemporal state and sempiternity as evelatedness (infinite temporality).

CHAPTER ONE

HAMLET AND HI-S-TORY

Definitions

What is meant by the title of this chapter? What is it meant to be, to say and/or to do? According to Mustapha Kirca (2013), "the first [...] signal that the reader is provided with is the title" (13). A title is a promise, a prediction and a foretoken. The reader is prepared for something by means of the title. Reading the title of this chapter, *Hamlet* and (His) story, "entitles" the reader to give him/herself up to the pun. The use of parentheses indicates that there is a certain play on words (or in words). The capital H as well as the "i" and the "s" invoke the idea of the proper (with its "two stems of propriety and property").

History and his story hint at two contradictory categories of the proper. History as conceived by the early historians is that objective space that is owned by no one. A story is considered a narrative and a fiction. Still, when someone owns a story, s/he gives it a certain authenticity through what we shall refer to later as "the illusion of continuity." This illusion is sustained by the notion of property. It rests upon the claim "I am here telling *my* story." The word "here" is suggestive of the notion of presence. The interconnection between theatre (represented by the play *Hamlet*) and what we shall call the illusion of presence is at the core of our book as a whole. The illusions of continuity and that of presence are supported by one another. Ironically, they also challenge one another.

Hamlet offers us the opportunity to challenge these two illusions. Shakespeare's play deconstructs itself by questioning the different modes of re-presentation it "contains." We have put the word contain between inverted commas to indicate its polysemous nature. To contain is to include. It is also to limit and – more precisely – to neutralize. In the play under scrutiny, the effect of any mode is checked by a counter-effect of another. Performance, narration and writing destabilize one another. As a matter of course, they are deconstructing as well as deconstructed modes.

Hamlet explores the Platonic understanding of the relationship between Art and Truth. It questions the most common beliefs about both. What is representation? Being in itself a play that has its supposed "origins" in two "other" works of Art, namely *Danish History* by Saxo Grammaticus and *Histoires Tragiques Des Notres Temps* by Francois de Belleforest, *Hamlet* problematizes its relationship with its sources in that it questions them by presenting the possible factors that may have conditioned their composition (decomposing them and itself in the process).

We shall explain how the words Shakespeare "gives" to Fortinbras at the end of the play resemble those of the other two authors of *Hamlet.* The similarity is so striking that we can hardly decide whether Fortinbras repeats the sources or whether they "repeat" him. Shakespeare clouds the relationship between his play and its sources.

He does not use the illusion of presence to posit the anteriority of *Hamlet*'s theatrical presentation to its narrative recounting. Instead, the play offers a space for "deconstructive" work. It challenges itself as it challenges its narrative sources. The question of truth remains the ethical as well as the aesthetic centre of the play. Indeed, *Hamlet* shows that all modes of representation are incomplete and unreliable. As we shall see, it *unwrites* all writing, *untells* all tales and *unacts* all actions. Instead of a web of words, we have a maze many parts of which (if not all) lead to a dark space outside the play.

The "outext" here is not exactly the *horslivre* of Derrida. Derrida's outwork may be a title, a preface, a short preamble or a note written by the author. In any case, whatever it is, it is written about the work. In an interview with Derrik Attridge, Derrida (1992) says: "I know that everything is in Shakespeare; everything and the rest, so everything or near" (67). What does Derrida mean by "everything and the rest"? What exactly is meant by "the rest"? Is there no allusion to Hamlet's "the rest is silence" (*Hamlet*, V, ii, 340)? The term "outext", as I write it, may give us a hint at the answers. We can in no way find them, but we can touch on them only. By not writing another "t", we try to suggest that the dark space doesn't really lie outside the play. It is not inside it either. It is an amorphous (no)thing that keeps journeying between the play and its "supposed" outsides. It is possible that Derrida meant that there is nothing outside the text in Shakespeare. Note here that we did not say outside the Shakespearian text. There can be no "out-text" in Shakespeare.

We intend to argue that in *Hamlet,* one can only find "outexts." This term is more complex than simple offstage elements. Letters, for example, are brought on stage, but they are not always read. We do not see the signature and, what is more, we know that signatures can be forged. The signature in *Hamlet* remains problematic. We never see the act of signing. We also have no chance to inspect the hand. We can only suspect every word, whether it is written or uttered.

As the play announces its unreliability and incompleteness and challenges all the modes that it involves. The authorial signature dissolves and the readers who find themselves compelled to fill the fluidly gapped text of *Hamlet* lose their being as they try – unwillingly and unwittingly – to counterfeit the signature of William Shakespeare ascribing to him what they themselves write.

As critics, we feel obliged to construct that “outext.” We try to follow the threads, but as we “follow” them, we find ourselves lost for we start weaving tales that contradict each other. If we wish to check our findings against the play, we will be struck by its avowed unreliability. The dissolution of the authority of artistic modes makes our authorial doom suicidal.

Reading *Hamlet* is the nearest thing to committing suicide. The reader inevitably turns into a writer, which is his/her undoing – as a reader. This may be explained by the fact that the play is unreliable and incomplete. It compels us to endeavor at filling the lacunae that it visibly contains. As we belie one another, as the play gives us the lie and as we question every word in the play and about it, we lose the secure stance of “detached” readers and spectators and become involved. We unwillingly – though at times consciously – become the accomplices of Shakespeare. We lie on him only to be belied by him. He gives us space only to imprison us in his *Hamlet*. This space is a space we share with the writer. As we try to fill the gaps we lose our readerly purity and become contaminated and contaminating by writing.

Hamlet is a bigger (non)text than the play itself. Yet, it has its same “nature.” It is as elusive and mercurial as the play. Though visible, it escapes our grasp. It is like a mirage though not a mirage, for we know that it is there, appearing only to hide. We seekers of truth are mocked and played upon. In our furious hunting for truth, we turn into liars (or almost). We narrate stories about *Hamlet*, but no one of us has the story of *Hamlet*. What critics-authors do is akin to pure narration.

Narratology will help us clarify (to an extent) the doom *Hamlet* imposes on us.

Narrative Structures and Hamlet’s Uncertainties

One of the possible definitions of narratology is that it is the “theory, discourse or critique of narrative/narration”(Cuddon, 1998, 533). This definition suggests that there are three levels at which narrative/narration may be studied. These are the theoretical, the discursive and the interpretive levels. These three levels are complex in the sense that each one of them carries with it different connotations. None of the three is easily defined. This entails that they "preserve the secrets of [their] final signified" (Belsey, 2002, 15) in the Lacanian sense. Therefore, they cannot serve to define anything. Being themselves impossible to delimit, they cannot draw the borderlines of a discipline.

Moreover, the limits between the three categories – theory, discourse and interpretation – are themselves fluid and hazy. If, as some poststructuralists have it, "our ideas are not […] the origin of the language we speak" (Belsey, 2002, 15), then contemporary theory is theoretically believed to be the effect of language. In addition, it is also believed that "poetry […] works by proposing parallels, inviting the reader to make surprising connections between apparently distinct signifiers" (Belsey, 2002, 15).

Miller (1982, 20) maintains that what all interpreters share are the words that they read. Following the poststructuralist logic of Belsey (2002) and Miller (1982), we may think of the three realms as forming a possible chain. This should lead us to consider rejecting the rigorous classifications that separate them. For some postmodern theorists, classifications condition our understanding of the world rather than help us conceive it. For instance, Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume (2007, 82) believe that "classifications never reveal anything but serve as tools." If we renounce classifications, we deprive ourselves of the tools. We cannot read any text without tools.

This poses the problem of whether we can really be ideal mirrors that merely reflect the meanings of the text. To answer this question, we will turn to/on Miller's idea that all readers share the words of the text. We will develop this argument with reference to some of the findings of one of the prominent figures in semiotics, Umberto Eco. According to Eco (1992, 45), we live in a world of signs in the sense that "as subjects, we are what the shape of the world produced by signs makes us become." In this, he aligns himself with Lacan (1966) who believes that the subject exists only within the order of the symbolic. Therefore, as subjects, interpreters are existent only within that order.

Bother interpreters and subjects need what Eco (1991, 39) calls "a frame of reference." He believes that "we deal both with language and with every other kind of sign by implementing inferential processes" (43). These are rules and classifications. They presuppose that the words on the page carry or may be seen as carrying significances that can be elucidated or constructed by the different interpretive strategies.

In Eco's semiotic theory, utterances do not signify independently of the frame of reference or "the […] forms of world knowledge that allow the interpreter to draw […] co-textual references" (1991, 73). The word "frame" itself suggests a kind of containment and limitation, but does the word "reference" bind semiotics (though in a conscious manner) to the metaphysical idea that the logos "is essentially reproductive, that is, unproductive" (Derrida, 1982, 163)?

Although Eco's semiotics – like Miller's "deconstruction" – is sign-centred, in that its focus is on signs, the insights it brings with respect to the interpretive process are invaluable. Seemingly influenced by the findings of Lacan, Eco's semiotics seems to (implicitly) accept that the interpretive processes are (unconsciously) structured (like a language). This means that if "ideas are the effect of the meanings we learn and reproduce" (Belsey, 2002, 7), then we learn and interpret through language or systems of signs.

Learning and interpretation are processes of associations that are furnished by the existing structures and systems that we have internalized as we enter the symbolic order. One of these structures is produced in the mirror stage by what Julia Kristeva (1986, 107) refers to as the "thetic break". When the child sees his reflection in the mirror, his self becomes divided into two related yet opposed entities (or identities): the contemplator and the contemplated, the subject and the object and – ironically – the signified and the signifier. The mirror experience is not the only instance in which we may trace the effect of the thetic break.

Memory also is a continuous experiencing of the dividing effect of the thetic break. In the case of memory, the divide is temporal (in more than one sense of the term) and so is the relation. Some contemporary psychoanalysts believe that "collective history and individual memory are both tendentious fantasies, inventions motivated by present anxieties" (Armstrong, 2001, 154). This gives a new sense to Derrida's idea that "the alterity of the unconscious makes us concerned not with horizons of modified past or future presents, but with a past that has never been present" (1982, 21).

The unconscious represented in memory is "the other" of our conscious selves. Yet it is also recognized as the "I" at a certain "other" moment. It is true that the conscious self may distance itself from that "I," but this distancing is never complete. Distancing may be achieved through different strategies. The following example will help us understand two main tactics. If I were to watch a recorded tape depicting an embarrassing situation in which I had found myself at a certain moment in the past, I may refuse to acknowledge it or I may accept it and laugh with the others.

Neither attitude is simple. In both cases, I am bound to hear a protest. In the first case, other members of the audience along with a voice inside me would say: “no, this is you. You lie.” In the second case, a bitter voice inside me would say: “no, that is not me. I do not do that.” The first voice is the superego that aligns itself with the other members of the audience that it somewhat represents. The second voice is the ego. In both cases, “the psychic machine echoes theatrical model” (Armstrong, 2001, 150). This seems natural since “the inaugural psychoanalytic question was that of Hamlet’s motivation for his delay” (Armstrong, 2001, 153).

Hamlet (the character) is a case in point. In his very first soliloquy, he raises the question of memory. Before narrating how his mother used to love his father, he says “must I remember?” This question and the passage that follows it, which we do not find in the 1603 version of the play, show the workings of memory.

Hamlet seems to experience a kind of “spontaneous overflow” of memories. He seems to be assaulted by what appears to him as contradictory memories. He remembers both how his mother used to love his father and how she married his uncle “two months” (*Hamlet*, I, ii, 138) after his father’s death. He finds himself helpless being the one person who is doomed to remember in a world of forgetfulness. He addresses himself thus: “Must I remember […]?” (*Hamlet*, I, ii, 143).

This world not only seems to have forgotten its past, it also urges Hamlet to forget. The King voices this when he tells Hamlet that

> The survivor bound in filial obligation for some term
> to do *obsequious* sorrow. But to persever
> In obstinate condolement is a course
> Of impious stubbornness; ’tis unmanly grief.
> It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
> A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
> An understanding simple and unschooled
> For what we know must be, and is as common
> As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
> Why should we, in our peevish opposition,
> Take it to heart? Fie! ’Tis a fault to heaven,
> A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
> To reason most absurd, whose common theme
> Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
> From the first corse till he that died today,
> This must be so. We pray you, throw to earth
> This unprevailing woe, and think of us
> As of a father
>
> (*Hamlet*, I, ii, 90–109)

In these lines, we see how Claudius tries to reason Hamlet into forgetting the death of his father. If we ignore the foolish cramming of unconvincing reasons, we may see in every expression a tactic whereby the world keeps the subject under control.

Three of these tactics are the most prominent. These are chiding, dislocation and co(u)nse/olation. They follow this rationale: first, the rule is stated. Second, Hamlet is identified as a transgressor. As a matter of course, he should suffer a kind of excommunication or dislocation. He is stripped of his defining titles (man, scholar, Christian and even son). He must accept the king's advice and console himself by accepting him as a father and reconcile himself with the world by throwing to earth his "unprevailing woe."

The king points to the one way of reconciling oneself with the world, the way to enter the symbolic order. This is entering the chain of substitution. We know that it is impossible for Hamlet to substitute Claudius for his father. Ironically enough, he also does not accept the "thing" as his father. Therefore the sense of loss remains, and nothing can alleviate it, especially as Ophelia also fails to be his object of desire (a substitute for the *objet a*[1]).

As he cannot but refuse to enter the chain, Hamlet "loiters hesitantly on the brinks of the symbolic order (the system of allotted sexual and social roles in society), unable and unwilling to take up a determinate position within it. Indeed, he spends most of his time eluding whatever social and sexual positions society offers him, whether as a chivalrous lover, obedient revenger or future king" (Eagleton, 1987, 71). This is because he does not accept Ophelia, Claudius or even the Ghost as substitutes.

Why does not he accept them? To answer the above question, we must return to Hamlet's question: must I remember? The Ghost's command is "remember me" (*Hamlet*, I, v, 91). The Ghost, who "comest in such a questionable shape" (*Hamlet*, I, iv, 44) claiming that he is King Hamlet's spirit, exhorts hamlet to remember him and revenge his death. The "thing" claims the status of a signifier in the traditional sense.

Its authority and truthfulness depend on his being accepted as a reproduction of a past presence. In Western metaphysics, "the past and the future are always determined as past presents or as future presents" (Derrida, 1982, 34). "This presence is presented, is apprehended in *Legein* and *Noein* [saying and thinking], and by means of a process whose temporal structure is one of pure making present/of pure maintaining"

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[1] See Lacan, 1966 for a detailed description of this process.

(Derrida, 1982, 32).

The Ghost – and later the portrait of King Hamlet – represent or rather are posited as representing the dead king. Indeed, the Ghost claims solemnly: “I am thy father’s spirit” (*Hamlet*, I, v, 9). In the closet scene, Hamlet points to the portraits of King Hamlet and King Claudius saying: What judgment would step from this to this” (*Hamlet*, III, iv, 71–72). The two utterances propose an identity in difference. They invest the ghost and the portrait with the property of representation or reproduction. As such, they are unproductive signifiers. They are posited as a pure means of maintenance.

Memory is a means to escape the passage of time. It is, we (wish to/are made to) believe, a reproduction in the mind or in a certain “other” representational form of a moment or moments in the past. Whether true or false, the very act of remembrance implies a denial of the passage of time. Nevertheless, this denial is never total. Every act of remembrance is an act of forgetting/or denial. In act three scene two, Hamlet says, “my father died within’s two hours” (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 119). When he is reminded that his father died four months before, his forgetting or denying instinct causes him to say: “Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 122–123). Where have the other two months gone? The answer is they are forgotten/denied to keep the memory of Gertrude’s guilt green in the mind of Hamlet and forcing its greenness on Ophelia or the world.

As a matter of course, to remember is also to forget. This brings to mind what Hamlet says to the Ghost when he promises to remember him. Hamlet declares:

> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there;
> And thy command all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain
> Unmixed with baser matter
> (*Hamlet,* I, v, 98–104)

There is no need to elaborate the obvious; still what Hamlet does a few moments later should make us wonder.

He takes his tablets and writes “[t]hat one may smile, and smile, and be a villain” (*Hamlet,* I, v, 108). This pithy statement is bookish in two ways. First, it is deemed worth writing by Hamlet. Second, it is laconically witty in the style of someone like La Rochefoucauld.[2] The relationship of Hamlet to books has never been severed. In Act II, Scene ii, Polonius finds Hamlet reading a book. We may easily notice that Hamlet does not keep his promise. Although he disdainfully describes what he reads as "words, words, words" (*Hamlet,* II, ii, 193), when Polonius asks him what the subject matter of the book is, he first resorts to punning on the word matter, then he recites a number of aphoristic statements about the idiocy and folly of old men like Polonius.

His fascination with the wit and wisdom of books is never easily suppressed. It returns in his aphorisms. The hilarity with which he utters them shows that much energy is invested in them. The same can be said about the disdainful "words, words, words." Knight, therefore, is right when he argues that in *Hamlet,* the question of right and wrong is asked "not by discourse of reasons or argument, but by […] different modes of poetic vision or technique" (1959, 44). Hamlet struggles to remember and to forget. His one method (if we can call it so) is the psychological mechanism of denial.

Denial as a psychological phenomenon is never complete. The repressed always returns. The Ghost is an important example of this. Hamlet is never quite able or completely willing to accept the Ghost as his father. Equally, he cannot fully deny him, nor is he in any way completely willing to do so. By presenting the possibility of the ghost's being "a damned ghost" (*Hamlet,* III, ii, 78) as equal to that of his being the spirit of his father, He keeps the latter in the status of a possibility that needs proof. This in turn keeps his relationship both with the ghost and with his father as that of lack. In this manner, he (un)willingly resists the chain of substitutions. He will not accept any scenario. Consequently, he does not enter the order of the symbolic.

The need to forget is important in "the endless refigurations of the narrative imposed upon the past or anticipated in the future by the present" (Armstrong, 2001, 151). Unable to choose a narrative, Hamlet remains inactive. To critics like Jan Kott (1978), he is terrified of acquiring a subjectivity.[3] Even before the appearance of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kott could sense the lack that Hamlet struggles with – and ironically for.[4] This struggle is behind our sense that "Hamlet is a drama of imposed situation."[5]

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[2] Hamlet's aphorisms have a style that brings to mind something like "Il y a certains defaults qui, bien mis en oeuvre, brillent plus que la vertu meme" (La Rochefoucauld, 91) which I translate as "Practised skilfully, certain faults outshine virtue itself."

[3] "Hamlet a peur […] d'être défini sans ambiguïté" (Kott, 1978, 65).

[4] "[Hamlet] est affamé en son for intérieur" (Kott,1978, 64).

Ironically, Hamlet asserts his exteriority to the worlds in which he exists. He claims that he has "that within which passesth show" (*Hamlet,* I, ii, 85). Here, Hamlet denies his theatricality. He refuses to belong to the world of show and drama. Still, as he enumerates the different dramatic elements he embodies, he asserts (though indirectly) his belonging to that very world. Indeed, in the process of denying his theatricality, Hamlet builds what today we call stage directions. It seems, therefore, that the efforts of Hamlet here are self-defeating. He refuses to be thought a dramatic persona. Yet, in spite of this refusal, he has proven one.

This puts in question the claim that "at moments the playwright was barely in control of his materials" (Greenblatt, 2009, 1). It is only when we believe Hamlet that we feel that he is external to the world of the play. Hamlet, as we have seen, is not outside the world of theatre. Still, we need to accept that his theatrical being is of a complex nature. It suffices here to mention that Hamlet identifies as a playwright, a director and a narrator in relation to *The Murder of Gonzago.*

Even if Hamlet tells us that he has seen this play performed in Wittenberg, we cannot help asking like Alethea Hayter (1972, 30), "What was this play like?" (30). Like Hayter, we know that "it is Hamlet who comments 'He poisons him i' the garden', and has instructed the Players to provide the 'bank of flowers'" (31).

In this, Hamlet plays the role of the narrator that we find in the puppet theatre of the Japanese Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1961). We also know, like Hayter, that the scene replicates the story of the Ghost who says:

> Sleeping within my orchard,
> My custom always in the afternoon,
> Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
> With juice of cursed hebnon in a vial,
> And in the porches of mine ears did pour
> The leperous distilment
>
> (*Hamlet*, I, v, 59–65.)

The easiest explanations of the similarity are two. The first is that the original play depicts the Orchard scene. The second is that this is part of what Hamlet inserted in the play. However, Hamlet's hilarious narrative gives no validity to one over the other.

We know that Hamlet is a man of the theatre (in many senses of the term). His narrative statements may be those of an author. They may

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[5] "Hamlet est le drame des situations imposées" (Kott, 1978, 63).