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978-0-521-03686-3 - Narrative and Meaning in Early Modern England: Browne's Skull and Other Histories

Howard Marchitello

Excerpt

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Introduction: narrationalities

I am dead, Horatio.

(*Hamlet*)

I will begin with an ending (even though now I *end* this book – the process of its writing – with a *beginning*: this introduction; but I will come back to this): Hamlet's "I am dead, Horatio."¹ Here, near the end of the play, as he speaks what sound like (but are not, of course) his final words, Hamlet has never been more like his father. Or, he has never been more like the *ghost* of his father ("I am thy father's spirit"), announcing and professing his own death: "I am dead." This is precisely Hamlet's point: he wants both to be his father and to be his own ghost. On the one hand, we can consider this dilemma of "self" to be Hamlet's critical problem. His is a divided identity, Jonathan Goldberg argues, "divided by the doubling of his 'own' text and the ghost's. Hamlet's being is the fold in that single cloth . . . The depth of his interiority is his foldedness within a text that enfolds him and which cannot be unfolded."² On the other hand, we can see that Hamlet's dilemma has equally to do with temporality. Or, his notion of identity is itself understood in relation to temporality: in desiring to be his father *and* to be his own ghost, Hamlet desires to be both that which *precedes* and that which *follows* himself. To be *and* not to be: Hamlet's desire to negotiate a particular temporalization that in *Specters of Marx*³ Jacques Derrida calls "anachrony" or "untimeliness" – perhaps the central problematic of *Hamlet/Hamlet*: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.196–97).

I nearly wrote "Hamlet's *desperate* desire –" just now. But in fact Hamlet's desire to negotiate anachrony cannot be considered desperate any more than can his prophecy ("O my prophetic soul!") – "I am dead" – be called impossible. It surprises, to be sure, but perhaps it should not. Not only because by declaring "I am dead" Hamlet reproduces the father (the Ghost commands Hamlet, "Remember me," even as Hamlet requires Horatio to retell *his* story: "If thou didst 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" [5.2.351–54]), but also because, as Derrida has argued of

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Poe's story, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," being able to say "I am dead" may well be "the condition for a true act of language."⁴ Derrida's argument concerning the foundational nature of "I am dead" has explicitly to do with the matter of temporalization and its relation to writing: the decisive absence of the "present of discursive time" serves to render the "time of the *énonciation*" the result of "a movement of temporalization which . . . makes the present something complicated, the product of an original synthesis which also means that the present cannot be produced except in the movement which retains and effaces it."⁵ In *Specters of Marx*, the figure for such a simultaneous temporal retention and effacement of the present is the specter, the ghost – and the ghost of Hamlet's father, in particular, is of special importance to Derrida's discussion.

In a moment I am going to suggest that another way to think of such temporal retention and effacement of the present *for which the object is knowledge or meaning* is a certain deployment of narrative: what I call in this book *narrationality*. But first, I would like briefly to trace Derrida's discussion of the ghost or specter or (the term I prefer) the *revenant*: *that which comes back*. I wish to do so first because *Specters of Marx* offers powerful ways in which to think the ghost and to think temporalization. But also because *Hamlet* stands both as a kind of pre-text for my book and – at the same time – as its ghost. In order, then – under the sign of anachrony, of untimeliness – properly to preface here at the beginning (*as if* prophetically) the pages that follow, it is necessary that *Hamlet* should come (back) to us once again.

As Derrida rightly observes, *Hamlet* commences with the anticipation of the apparition – or, more precisely, with the "imminence of a re-appearance, but a reappearance of the specter as apparition *for the first time in the play*. The spirit of the father is going to come back . . . but here, at the beginning of the play, he comes back, so to speak, for the first time" (*Specters* 4). This double nature of the apparition – repetition *and* first time – is the critical (and defining) characteristic of the "hauntology" Derrida seeks to theorize.⁶ At the same time, the figure of the *revenant* is itself characterized by two unique (and enabling) "properties."⁷ The first of these has to do with its "paradoxical incorporation"; the specter (like Poe's Valdemar) is positioned precisely between life and death – or, better yet, between body and no body: "a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (*Specters* 6).⁸

The second "property" of the *revenant* concerns temporality (which the specter disrupts or disjoins) and arises specifically from the "nothing visible" of the specter: it is a "Thing" (Derrida will later call it "the Thing or the Athing called ghost" [*Specters* 138]) that is "invisible between its apparitions, when it reappears" but that nevertheless "looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there." This is crucial: the "spectral asymme-

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try” that results from our relentless visibility and the specter’s equally insistent invisible visibility “interrupts all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony.”⁹ For Derrida, this disjuncture of time – the “non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself” (*Specters* 24–25) – is not to be lamented, but rather recognized – along with its correlative injunction “to set it right” – as the very ground for our *ethical* action in the world.¹⁰

By virtue of his birth into a world subsequently corrupted (Hamlet laments having been *destined* to set time right – “that ever I was born to set it right”), Hamlet exists in a world in which justice, if it comes at all, comes – as a consequence of the “spectral anteriority of the crime” – only as an *effect* of vengeance. But even in the face of this, Derrida asks, is it not yet possible “[to] yearn for a justice . . . removed from the fatality of vengeance? Better than removed: infinitely foreign, heterogeneous at its source?” (*Specters* 21). It is disjuncture, then, that “opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other” (*Specters* 22):

Beyond right, and still more beyond juridicism, beyond morality, and still more beyond moralism, does not justice as relation to the other suppose on the contrary the irreducible excess of a disjuncture or an anachrony . . . some “out of joint” dislocation in Being and in time itself, a disjuncture that, in always risking the evil, expropriation, and injustice (*adikia*) against which there is no calculable insurance, would alone be able to *do justice* or to *render justice* to the other as other?

(*Specters* 27)

In this “interpretation” (as Derrida calls it) of disjuncture or disjuncture “would be played out the relation of deconstruction to the possibility of justice,” and, what is the same thing, “the relation of deconstruction . . . to what must (without debt and without duty) be rendered to the singularity of the other, to his or her absolute *precedence* or to his or her absolute *pre-viousness*, to the heterogeneity of a *pre-*” (*Specters* 27–28).

For Derrida, what I have tried to mark here as the ways in which *Specters of Marx* stages a thinking of the ghost/*revenant*, of temporality, and of justice, serves as a point of departure for a discussion of Marx and the specters of Marx in this moment of the “new international” – a discussion in which *Hamlet* is less at stake, less strictly in focus, though nevertheless “present” (as always) spectrally: Derrida confesses, “I cannot hear ‘since Marx,’ since Marx, without hearing, like Marx, ‘since Shakespeare’” (*Specters* 17). But for me – and for the book I am (after the fact, of course) *beginning* – this thinking of the *revenant* and of temporality (untimeliness) that depends, on the one hand, upon the retention and effacement of the present, and leads, on the other hand, to “the heterogeneity of a *pre-*,” and of justice, marks an approximation of the concerns of this book. In a manner of speaking, this study shares a similar interest in what Derrida characterizes as the attempt to think history:

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a certain deconstructive procedure . . . consisted from the outset in putting into question the onto-theo- but also archeo-teleological concept of history – in Hegel, Marx, or even in the epochal thinking of Heidegger. Not in order to oppose it with an end of history or an ahistoricity, but, on the contrary, in order to show that this onto-theo-archeo-teleology locks up, neutralizes, and finally cancels historicity. It was then a matter of thinking another historicity – not a new history or still less a “new historicism,” but another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teo-eschatological program or design. (*Specters* 74–75)

Where for Derrida the retention and effacement of the present serve ultimately for a staging of the inadequacy of ontology, I address what I will call *narrationality* – the retention and effacement of the present *for which the object is knowledge or meaning* – in a variety of early modern cultural practices. Narrationality is, in effect, narrative gone wrong. While narrationality (or, the narrational) shares certain characteristics with narrative – narrationality proceeds, for example, on the model of chronology; its production of meaning depends upon the identification (or creation) of plot; and it tends to *moralize* meaning – it is nevertheless distinct from narrative (as a rhetorical model or strategy) not only in its ambition, but also in its uses, its effects, its methodologies, and in its essential relation to its discursive objects: narrationality takes the “products” of narrative as the primary *objects* of its epistemology. It is in this way that narrationality manifests effects of “non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself.” In other words, I intend the term “narrationality” to access the ideational and, simultaneously, the ideological significance of narrative not merely as a mode of discourse but as an epistemology. To speak of narrationality is, then, to invoke a set of issues that arises within given attempts to construct meaning out of non-meaning. This non-meaning may take any of a number of forms, such as the appearance of chaos in a given discursive field or the observation of so-called raw data (or the appearance of the dead bodies that litter the stage at the conclusion of *Hamlet*). Meaning, for its part, can therefore also take a variety of forms: the sudden emergence of order out of chaos, the organization of data into useful information (or the promissory offering of the conventional plot of a revenge tragedy to explain Hamlet’s death). But this system of meaning I have just described itself arises narrationally, and its terms are always implicitly bracketed by a pair of quotation marks so that, for instance, “chaos” is understood not so much as a state of nature but rather as a discursive field whose narrative of meaning has yet to be explicitly articulated. This narrative, however, is already in place and is thereby able to construct the very concept of “order” against which “chaos” is subsequently defined. Or: “data” and

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“information” become terms applied to the objects of investigation (whether historical or scientific) though their status is not a matter of their nature but instead a function of the very “meaning” toward which the inquiry is tending. No object in the world – not Hamlet’s corpse, nor the body more generally – can stand phenomenologically as “data” or “information” until that object has already been appropriated by a meaning that then *anachronistically* produces the object as “datum” or “information.” Following Roland Barthes, we can say that there are no such things as facts; it is always necessary that there should first be a “meaning” in order that there can be “facts.”¹¹

Narrationality’s founding act is this presupposition of meaning; it declares the world to be saturated with meaning that is in every instance narrative in nature: Hamlet’s death simply cannot be “chance” (as he calls it) but must have a specific and, most importantly, *knowable* meaning; it is this “meaning” that is then used to produce substantiating evidence. This is the essential process of the narrational – the narrative production of meaning. Narrationality seeks a renegotiation of temporality: by way of the narrative – which is always by definition *historiographical* in nature, its object always lost, and its method, therefore, always allegedly reconstructive of absence – the narrational would secure meaning even (or, especially) in the face of loss, absence and death. At its core, narrationality – like historiographical discourses such as literary and cultural criticism – is inevitably about death for it is against death that narrative seeks to effect its temporal work. Derrida refers to this as the work of *mourning*: “It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (*Specters* 9).¹² So Hamlet writes his narrative – first, “I am dead,” and then the corresponding and supposedly compensatory production of Horatio as (his) historiographer. And critics write narrative, just as I have written mine. *In the end* (to invoke that most terrifying of narrative’s linguistic formulations), we write because we (otherwise) die.

In this book I take up several important instances of the deployment of the narrational across a wide range of cultural practices in early modern English culture: medical anatomy, textual production, cartography, New World discourse, and the emergent processes of artifaction in seventeenth-century natural science. In each of these practices we can detect the operations of the narrational and trace the stages in the narrative production of meaning. In each instance the particular strategies of investigation are determined, in part, by the objects of the investigation; the anatomical body, say, or the curiosities of the New World seem to demand

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or even create their own methodologies, but in every instance the informing epistemological model is the same: the analytical, technological and systematic inquiry into natural facts – dissected human bodies, textual detail, topographical space, New World discoveries, the objects of natural science – leads to an immediate apprehension of the “real.” In this regard, the cultural and discursive practices I examine in this book all *appear* to eschew narrative: Vesalius, for example, in his great work the *Fabrica*, explicitly repudiates the inherited anatomical teachings of classical medical theory – including Galen’s revered texts – precisely for their fanciful narrative understanding of human and comparative anatomy and replaces Galenic theory with what he refers to as a practice of the hands – the systematic dissection of human bodies by the teachers and students of anatomy. Vesalius claims to redeem anatomy from its fallen state in which it has come to be regarded more as a doctrine than as a science, and he does so by clearing away superstition, conventional wisdom and inherited dogma. In their place he will offer to the eyes of students of anatomy the body “itself.” But this idea is also a fanciful one. Or, to be more precise, this idea, too, proceeds along lines articulated by narrative – in this case the narrative of intellectual revolution cast as an epic generational change. Moreover, faith in a transparent meaningfulness of the body constitutes a mark of the narrational.

That Vesalius should imagine himself to be engaged in the revolutionary work of stripping away layers of accumulated narrative in his pursuit of knowledge while all along merely replacing new narratives for old is not surprising. Together with the programmatic presupposition of meaning, narrationality is also, and immediately, dedicated to the staging of its own apparent disappearance. Any claim to unmediated access to the thing-itself – the textual, the topographical, the curious, etc. – is specious: no object can be accessed except through a process of artifactation that places the thing-itself within a signifying narrative. We may think we have the thing-itself when we identify a textual error (chapter 2), for example, or when we quantify characteristics of the land in cartography (chapter 3), of the New World in travel narratives (chapter 4), of the body (chapters 1 and 5) within various technologies and sciences, but all that we can be said to possess is another narrative. This is the tyranny of narrationality.

The following chapters, then, examine the narrative production of meaning in these early modern cultural practices. At the same time, their objective is also to examine our own critical and theoretical practices that are brought to bear on these discourses, and examine their own relation to the narrational. In our own historical moment, which Lyotard describes as characterized by an “incredulity toward metanarrative,”¹³ we indeed have become suspicious of theories and critical practices that are underwritten

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Introduction

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by an epistemology of transcendence, and as writers and critics we have begun to turn to various theoretical strategies that promise to discard narrative (and metanarrative) – practices such as textual materialism, Foucauldian archaeology, body criticism, and new historicism. Part of the work of the chapters that follow will be to offer some discussion of the success of these claims – the degree to which new historicism, for instance, escapes the liabilities of the *grands récits* of narrative historiography it justifiably finds so problematical.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring the significance of skepticism in two types of early modern theater – the anatomical theater of Vesalius and the public theater of Shakespeare – and the crucial issue for both posed by skepticism occasioned by a human body seemingly reluctant to yield readily its semi-ological meaning. *Othello* and the *Fabrica* offer similar and related responses to moments of profound skepticism that center on the figure of the female body, as each turns to the narrationality of scientific visualism (ocularity) to produce epistemological certainty.

The narrational theory of visualism critiqued in chapter 1 is underwritten by the notion of immanence – that meaning is itself immanent in the body and that texts can demonstrate and make this textual immanence manifest. The second chapter continues the inquiry into this discourse of immanence and textuality as represented in the complex relation between letters and informing notions of textual embodiment in *The Merchant of Venice* – Shylock's belief, for example, in the pound of flesh embodied in his bond, or Portia's fate (and the expression of her dead father's will) embodied in the texts and icons that the three caskets hold. This chapter offers a discussion of the philosophy and practices of traditional textual criticism by which we *narrationally* produce such notions as authorial intent and the eclectic text – a set of practices, I argue, that is itself determined by the same sort of narrationality as governs the faith in textual embodiment deployed in *Merchant*.

Textual immanence takes a related form in early modern cartography. Chapter 3 investigates the production of early modern cartography and the ways in which the maps that it produces participate fully within the narrational. Although these maps claim to function as neutral observations of natural topographical space, they are in fact highly artificial textual constructs. Maps – like the historical topography of chorography that they attempt to displace (works such as Camden's famous *Britannia*) – are always narratives and as such are always both the effects and the tools of power – including monarchical, state, and (eventually) colonialist desires.

Chapter 4 focuses on New World discourse – made possible, at least in part, by the discourse of early modern cartography. I examine specifically

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the *anecdotal* nature of New World and new historicist discourse. In both, the anecdote is imagined as creating a space within which history can happen. In discussions of Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* and two critical texts on the European contact with and conquest of America – Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* and Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* – I argue, however, that the anecdote itself is entirely embedded within the narrational. Consequently, the “history” that the anecdote produces articulates and enacts the narrationalism of possession. As such, the anecdote and its narrative of possession work to deny the “heterogeneity of a *pre-*” identified by Derrida as the very grounds for the possibility of the encounter with the other.

The fifth and final chapter returns to the discourse of early modern science to consider the practices of what I will call artifaction first codified in their modern sense in seventeenth-century natural science, as articulated in the scientific (and devotional) writings of Sir Thomas Browne. The processes are then traced within pseudo-medical science – first in phrenology in the nineteenth century and then (in the 1920s) in racial craniology – two narrational practices that in their respective moments adopted as the object of their inquiries Browne's accidentally disinterred skull. Both phrenology and racial craniology posit the immediacy of the skull and the immanence of human identity within it, and both forms of pseudo-science lead to and participate in the production of narrationality of racism.

Finally – to return what the opening sentence of this introduction held out as a promised “reapparition”: a consideration of what we can perhaps now call my own implication in this book in anachrony and narrationality; to conclude, that is, with a beginning – I end with a brief consideration of *Narrative and Meaning* itself, of the ways in which I hope to have situated the book and its various arguments in relation to narrative and narrationality. As I want to make clear before the conclusion, there is a difference between narrative as a structuring device – or, after Hayden White, as a tropological strategy¹⁴ – and narrative as a fundamental epistemology structured upon a prior narrativization of the world and that is, as a consequence, narrational in nature. To sketch this distinction too hastily: while the former (narrative) self-consciously participates in certain teleologies (those of chronology, for example) in the service of the production of *interpretation*, it resists the tendency of narrationality that unselfconsciously posits *pure meaning* imagined to exist “naturally” in what is in fact a thoroughly narrativized world. Unlike narrationality, narrative – including this book – (ideally) attends to the “heterogeneity of a *pre-*” discussed above. So, while the following chapters are, to be sure, organized sequentially

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(both internally and relationally), and while I intend there to be something of a cumulative effect – that is to say, a *narratively satisfying* effect – of the organization, structure, and, even, the progression of this book, I nevertheless want to confess here at the end/beginning – beginning/end that this book is of course *untimely*. Written under the sway of anachrony, we could say that it was written by a ghost.

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1 Shakespeare's *Othello* and Vesalius's *Fabrica*: anatomy, gender, and the narrative production of meaning

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,
Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof . . . (*Othello*)

When as usual I had cut everything off the bones very quickly without
delaying for the examination of each organ, I dissected the uterus solely
for the sake of the hymen. (Vesalius, *Epitome*)

If the early modern period is that moment in the history of the west in which science in its distinctly modern form begins to emerge from complex pre-modern assemblages of mystical, hermetic, folkloric, metaphysical, and religious beliefs and practices, it is also the moment in which meaning *in general* begins a gradual transformation into the privileged domain of the discourses of science. This is the imperialism of what comes to be called the empirical sciences: not only are those divergent practices from which it in some manner emerged consolidated and at the same time vilified by their identification as “pre-” or “ir-rational” superstition – as “un-scientific” – but decisively, “meaning” is detached from “belief,” with the former elevated to the status of objective and absolute “truth” and the latter relegated to the growing list of history’s errors in knowledge. This project is manifest, for example, in one of the great (new) scientific texts of the seventeenth century, Sir Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* or *Vulgar Errors*. In Browne (as in emergent empirical science more generally) observation of natural fact replaces speculation on it with one especially significant result being that what before had required interpretation in order to reveal meaning in the natural world (the conventional lore, for example, of the chameleon) came instead to require only careful and studious observation. If anything was thought to require creative interpretation it was no longer primarily the phenomenal world or its objects construed simply as signs (of God’s providential will, say) but rather the methods, techniques and tools it was necessary to devise in order better and more accurately to see, to measure, to quantify. In the *Pseudodoxia*, as an example, Browne considers the chameleon and the conventional claim that (as Hamlet reminds Claudius) the chameleon eats only air:¹