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978-0-521-13552-8 - The Ghosts of Hamlet: The Play and Modern Writers

Martin Scofield

Excerpt

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# PART 1

Modern writers and the ghosts of *Hamlet*

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*Hamlet* is a specular and ductile medium: it has reflected its readers and been used as material by other writers. Everyone ‘knows the story’, but not only do countless critics differ as to its interpretation, there is also fundamental disagreement about what happens in it. As a result the play has become a critical ocean

where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find.

Hamlet says that the purpose of playing is ‘to hold a mirror up to nature’, and the play has done this in a special sense, for it is a mirror in which every man has seen his own face. Hamlet also says (half changing the metaphor) that the mirror will show ‘the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure’; and like a piece of wax the play has either taken the impress of the age which has interpreted it, or been moulded into other forms.

This quality presents a particular challenge to criticism. There do not seem to have been any critical theories which have fundamentally replaced Arnold’s dictum, that the aim of criticism is ‘to see the object as in itself it really is’. But what is *Hamlet* ‘really’, if different ages and different critics within each age have seen it so differently? One answer might be that the differences are not always so great as they seem. A reader might still find much in Coleridge’s or in Bradley’s account of the play without in the end agreeing with his view of what is the centre of interest. This seems to be a necessary attitude to take to criticism, or we are in danger of thinking we have exhausted the value of a great critic just because we feel his main idea about a play to be unsatisfactory. Another answer which is sometimes given is that since all critical positions

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are 'relative' there is no one 'right' interpretation of a work of literature, and that we should give up looking for such an interpretation and be content with a plurality of readings. But this seems unsatisfactory, and contrary both to the natural desire of the reader and the experience of criticism.

What I, the reader, want to achieve is an understanding of *Hamlet*. If I am presented with various views I want to know how they are related to each other, and which is to have prime place in my experience of the play. What do I experience when I read or see *Hamlet*? It is a question which seeks, ultimately, a single answer: *this* is what I have experienced. We ask criticism to help us place ourselves in the fullest relation to the work in question. But our sense of it must be ours, must be subjective. This is a truism but is still forgotten. It is also still confused with the idea that there can be no shared standards or readings. On the one hand there is the sentiment of the casual reader, 'Well this is what *I* think, and that's enough for me.' On the other there is what one might call the Olympian-professorial view: 'There are many plausible readings. Let us entertain as many as possible without committing ourselves to any of them.' Both these attitudes seem equally inadequate. The first denies the possibility of deepening our understanding by means of criticism. The second abandons the necessary subjectivity of the genuine reader, and the aim at defining and agreeing on a reading that best establishes the view of one's own age. Arnold's 'object as in itself it really is' must remain the aim, tantalizing, unobtainable perhaps in a full scientific sense (i.e. provable, demonstrably true or false) but attainable in the limited sense that a particular age may achieve a predominant view of the object.

But with *Hamlet* more than with any of Shakespeare's plays the 'object' has almost completely disappeared in our time. The text is there, refined and analysed: though even the text is disputed, and two 'good' versions and an earlier makeshift version have to be considered before we can really be sure what object to look at, let alone describe or interpret. Beyond this, the object in the sense of what we agree to look at as the play, with commonly seen outlines and masses, light and shade, is something of a blur. In performance, where we expect selection and emphasis, we have often received renderings without a guiding idea, or else emphases personal to the

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point of idiosyncrasy. The only common denominator is the lowest: the play is enjoyed, if at all, as a revenge melodrama with some famous philosophizing tacked on.

The last coherent and generally accepted view was probably Coleridge's; this persists to some extent in our own time. But of the best-known counter-Coleridgean views of this century there is probably not one that has commanded general assent. T. S. Eliot, Salvador de Madariaga, G. Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights: three or four names spring readily to mind of critics who have added something to our sense of the play. In so far as one can readily estimate these things, Wilson Knight's essay would seem to have had more general influence than any of the others. His first essay in *The Wheel of Fire*, with its strong emphasis on Hamlet's morbidity and paralysing consciousness of death, is an extreme counter-Romantic view. It has aroused 'orthodox' rejoinders, but the elements of the play which it isolates are perhaps now felt to be *in* the play and part of our experience of it. But it is significant that Wilson Knight felt the need to add two reconsiderations of the play. Like him, perhaps, we cannot feel that his first essay is an account of the whole play: we cannot forget so easily the healthier side of Hamlet's sense of life, his free disinterested enthusiasm for the players, his admiration for Horatio, and the possibility (if no more than that) of his love for Ophelia. Nor does Wilson Knight's view deal with the problem of what we are to make of the Ghost, or settle how exactly we should see Claudius.

There is not yet, then, a shared modern sense of the play. There are signs that first-hand critical thinking about the play is still going on, which may more freshly and firmly define our sense of it, and I shall attempt to draw on some of these in Part 2 of this study, a reading of the play. But for the reader and playgoer who is still looking for 'sight-lines' on the play there is one avenue which is still relatively unexplored – that of the response to *Hamlet* in modern creative literature, or of what one might call the image of *Hamlet*.

A number of the most important writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have employed this image. It exists where Hamlet the character, or *Hamlet* the play, is taken up by a creative writer and used as a *persona*, or myth, or symbol in the

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writers' own creations. The unique malleability or indeterminate nature of the play almost invites this: it seems to leave room for further creation. Eliot noted this fact as a danger for criticism and sought to exclude it from his own; but he finely availed himself of it in his poetry. The play has seemed for these writers to be a kind of symbol for a certain type of experience, but one which is not clearly defined. When we ask of the play 'Who's there?' it challenges us to stand and unfold ourselves. Modern literature in the broad sense of the term seems unique in this: it has found in *Hamlet* as no previous literature has done a special stimulus and symbol. The enigmatic character of the hero and the different perspectives it is possible to take of the play as a whole have made them themes for reflection and symbols for the perplexing, fragmented experience of modern life. The ghosts of *Hamlet* haunt the imagination of modern writers and bid them 'Remember me', providing them with both a standard and a riddle.

Criticism and creation are both involved in this response. On one hand the writers have all been in varying degrees concerned with what the play means in itself: on the other they have drawn on it in the constructions of their own imaginations. The following study has therefore two related aims. One is to look at the 'image' of *Hamlet* in the imaginative creations, the criticism, and sometimes just the passing allusions and references, of six writers who I hope it will be agreed can broadly be called modern: Mallarmé, Laforgue, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence and Kafka. As a kind of postscript to Chapter 1 on Mallarmé I have added a briefer chapter on some observations of Claudel and Valéry which continue the Mallarméan themes. And I have added a further writer, Kierkegaard, who, although he wrote in the mid nineteenth century, seems in spirit and even more in terms of his influence on thought to be characteristically modern, and is related interestingly to Kafka's view of *Hamlet*. By shining a particular kind of lamp on the works of these writers we may hope to illuminate certain features in a new way; to show what, in relation to their response to *Hamlet*, they have in common with one another and where they differ. To look at their response to the play will be a way of highlighting qualities of their thought and imagination. Secondly, this investigation should throw light back on to the play itself. In the work of these creative writers we may begin

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to discover features of a modern sense of the play which is not entirely present in the tradition of modern criticism. The investigation and conclusions will necessarily be tentative. It is a question of seeing what aspects of the play the modern creative mind has been most concerned with, and from these to begin to formulate certain features common to the different responses. No single 'view' can be expected to emerge, but elements which might help to construct that view will be discernible.

Sometimes, then (as in the chapters on Laforgue and Joyce), this study will become more absorbed in the works of the writers themselves and how Shakespeare's play works itself into their primary creations, and plays its part in their achievement. In other chapters (e.g. on Claudel and Valéry, and on Kierkegaard), their ideas will be used as starting-points for developing thoughts about the play. In the case of Kafka, a remark in his diaries about the play leads to a comparison of the world of *Hamlet* with the real and fictional worlds of Kafka. The present book can be seen as a study of tradition in the sense in which Eliot used the word: of the way in which a past work of art helps to form the art of the present and is in turn 'changed' by it. The chapters can be read as separate essays on each writer, but they are intended to be held together by this main preoccupation.

There is one group of modern writers, who have made of Hamlet a symbol in their own art, with whom this study might be expected to deal. They are the twentieth-century Russian poets, particularly Pasternak and Akhmatova. I have not included them partly because of the difficulty of getting a real sense of their poetry in translation; but mainly because their response to *Hamlet* still seems to be what could be called romantic rather than modern. Hamlet for them is still the isolated romantic hero pitted against society, through whose mask they look at the world. Pasternak's poem 'Hamlet' uses the character as a *persona* through whom the poet speaks of his sense of fate, of being caught up in both the drama of his personal life and the larger drama of history.

The noise is stilled. I come out on to the stage.  
Leaning against the doorpost  
I try to guess from the distant echo  
What is to happen in my lifetime.

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The darkness of night is aimed at me  
 Along the sights of a thousand opera glasses  
 Abba, Father, if it be possible,  
 Let this cup pass from me.<sup>1</sup>

What I have called its romanticism is summed up in the line 'I am alone; all drowns in the Pharisees' hypocrisy.' Akhmatova puts on the mask of Ophelia, and in 'Reading Hamlet' uses the prince to evoke a sense of heroism which contrasts with her own implied weaknesses.<sup>2</sup> In some ways Turgenyev's response to Hamlet sixty or so years earlier is less romantic than that of the later writers. In the story 'A Hamlet of the Schtigri district' he presents a garrulous failure who talks through the night of his romantic yearnings and his actual failures, his cultivated mind and his profound unoriginality. He is to be associated with Turgenyev's view of Hamlet in his essay 'Hamlet and Don Quixote', where the two are contrasted as at the opposite poles of heroism, and Turgenyev urges that Russia needs more of the latter type, reckless and idealistic, and less of the Hamlet-like philosophical dreaminess. Turgenyev is closer to someone like Laforgue in this view of Shakespeare's figure: but still there is not the suggestion of the radically divided and ambiguous figure of the French symbolists, or of Kafka, or of the modern English writers I shall consider. Turgenyev essentially only pushes the romantic Hamlet of Coleridge or of Goethe just over the edge of comedy, by associating the figure with the 'superfluous man' of his day. And of course in doing this he was primarily satirizing the vogue for the melancholy 'Hamlet' posture among Russian young men, rather than offering a reading of the play itself.

Yeats, too, has some interesting things to say about *Hamlet* in his prose writing; and brings Hamlet into at least two poems. But this study will not discuss him in detail since his view of the play and character is still what could be called a primarily romantic one: he does not, it seems to me, share the distinctively modern concern with the play which characterizes the writers under consideration. For much of his life his sense of Hamlet was derived from the deep impression on him of Henry Irving's performance, which his father took him to see when he was ten or twelve. 'For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and

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childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself.’<sup>3</sup> His Hamlet, together with Byron, was a source of heroic poses. Later on he saw Hamlet as the type of the intellectual, ‘the wavering, lean image of hungry speculation’, but still also the heroic swordsman with ‘agile rapier and dagger’ between his fingers (p. 142). His sense of Hamlet’s spirituality was more intense in a diary entry of 1909, in which he wrote: ‘I feel in *Hamlet*, as so often in Shakespeare, that I am in the presence of a soul lingering on the stormbeaten threshold of sanctity. Has not that threshold always been terrible, crime-haunted?’ (p. 522). But it is still a view that may very much, I think, be called romantic. Curiously enough this idea of Hamlet’s approach to sanctity has a parallel in Pasternak’s poem ‘Hamlet’, where the speaker uses the words of Christ in Gethsemane, ‘Abba, Father, if it be possible, / Let this cup pass from me.’ In neither writer is there the sense of Hamlet’s radically divided nature, his uncertain perception, or his sense of a fundamentally ambiguous paternal authority, which, I hope to show, are characteristic of the modern views of *Hamlet* I propose to explore. Nor do the two late references to Hamlet in Yeats’s *Last Poems* seriously qualify the sketch I have given. In ‘Lapis Lazuli’ Hamlet’s tragic gaiety is not distinguished from that of Lear, Ophelia and Cordelia – that is, from the gaiety of the tragic hero in general. The idea of ‘Gaiety transfiguring all that dread’ could, perhaps, be more easily applied to Hamlet than to the other characters Yeats mentions, but I confess the idea seems to me a difficult one. Certainly I think that most of the writers examined in these pages would have found it difficult to think of Hamlet’s ‘dread’ as so easily transfigured by ‘gaiety’ at the end of the play. Finally, the reference in ‘The Statues’ to ‘No Hamlet thin from eating flies’ again seems to return to the Coleridgean Hamlet, the Hamlet who feeds on the impalpable air of ideas: he typifies, in this poem, Western reason and intellect as opposed to Asiatic sensuality. Yeats’s Hamlet is undoubtedly interesting, but it does not associate itself with the nexus of problems which I think is more or less common to the writers explored in this book.

It would have been possible to conclude this study with the reflection that *Hamlet* is a play which prompts different writers to very different kinds of response and interpretation, and that it resists any attempt to find in it a single meaning. But while it would



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be foolish to be dogmatic about an individual reading, it still seems the natural aim of criticism to want to reach a particular way of seeing, that which is most broadly satisfying to the critic himself and which seems to him to contain what is central to the play. It cannot, of course, be satisfying in any real way if it is uninformed, or merely idiosyncratic, or unaware of other, different responses to the play. But it can also hardly be satisfying to leave a number of different, often conflicting views in suspension in one's mind, as if they were all equally valid and every part of them equally suggestive. If his ideas are going to be of any interest to anyone else, a critic must doubtless be asking a broader question than simply 'What does this mean to me?' But if he is not also asking that question, the question 'What has this meant to others?' will be rootless and uninteresting, and the final question, 'What should this mean to anyone?', cannot be asked.

Part 2 of this study, then, consists of a reading of the play in the light of certain ideas that, I think, predominate in the responses of the modern authors examined earlier. I had been struck by some of these ideas, particularly that of authority, and had explored them in the play, before I undertook the studies of the modern writers. The connections with Kafka were the first to interest me, and it is still, I think, the influence of Kafka that is uppermost in my reading of the play. If it is objected that I may have approached the modern writers with certain already formed ideas about the play, and have therefore been led to find what I was looking for, I must partly submit to that objection. But I would also claim that the elements I describe of the writers' relations to the play are features of their works and minds, and not simply imposed by me. Whether, with the writers and with the play, I have succeeded in identifying things that are really there, or, in Arnold's sobering phrase,<sup>4</sup> have simply aired my own psychology, I must leave the reader to judge.

## 1

‘Bounded in a nutshell . . . king of infinite space’  
Stéphane Mallarmé

Mallarmé made Hamlet a symbol of himself as poet, and *Hamlet* a symbol of poetry. Hamlet is cited by name in one poem, ‘Le Pitre Châtié’; in at least two others he is there implicitly, unnamed, and in a new guise; and in two prose essays Mallarmé addresses himself to the meaning of the play. In all this the view of Hamlet can be summed up as follows: he epitomizes the problem of the opposition in life of the ideal and the real; of contemplation and action; of essence and existence. He is called upon to act, but action is a false compromise. In his soul he is noble, but in the exigencies of his existence he is evil. He also epitomizes the preoccupation that is behind all Mallarmé’s work, the preoccupation with impotence – more specifically, with the inability to realize or to become the true self, or, for the artist, the inability to create, to add to the life of the race. For Mallarmé, the drama of *Hamlet* is an interior drama, fought out in the protagonist’s mind. He is the symbol of the poet, whose duty is to the Ideal, but who must ‘make’, and in making compromise the purity of that Ideal. As a criticism of *Hamlet* this is immediately, perhaps, open to objections; but we are concerned with it as an example of the ‘creative use’ of the play in mask or mythification. The interest will lie primarily in what poetic use Mallarmé makes of the mask and the myth. But if we trace its effect in his art we may find that it contributes something of value also in relation to the play.

What seems to be Mallarmé’s first reference to *Hamlet* in his writing comes in a letter to Cazalis in 1862. He compares himself to Hamlet, but to a ‘ridiculous Hamlet’:

How disillusioned you will be when you see this peevish individual who spends whole days without thinking, his head resting on the marble chimney-piece: a ridiculous Hamlet who cannot explain his weakness.<sup>1</sup>