

# Malallegories of Reading: Three Ghosts and a Spectre in *Hamlet*, Jameson, and Lacan

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Reflexivity, auto-referentiality, the negativity of self-designation – these are the hallmarks not only of the modern in Fredric Jameson’s estimation, but also of desire in Jacques Lacan’s discussion of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Seminar VI.<sup>1</sup> In Lacan’s analysis, Hamlet’s celebrated question becomes performatively reconfigured as an allegory of the process by which the subject encounters the possibility of its non-being when it accedes to Symbolic representation. What psychoanalysis calls “castration,” namely, the ‘forced choice’ to negate oneself that the subject paradoxically freely makes when permitting a signifier to stand in for it, is the gateway into the dialectic of desire. Indeed, in Lacan’s account, what is remarkable about *Hamlet* – which he emphatically names “*the* tragedy of desire” – is the way Shakespeare’s play presents a kind of blueprint, a “cartography,” of all the possible positions one can assume in relation to desire.<sup>2</sup>

When he addresses *Hamlet* and Lacan in the third chapter of *Allegory and Ideology*, Jameson similarly finds Shakespeare’s tragedy operating at multiple levels – literal, moral, anagogical, allegorical. Yet what chiefly interests the Marxist critic is the play’s staging of the “misrecognized emergence” of modernity. To Jameson, *Hamlet* reads as an unconscious meta-commentary on the historical shift from one

mode of production (the monarchy) to another (capitalism) at the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the figure of Hamlet, Jameson uncovers an emergent modern subject: defined by self-reflexivity, traversed by duality, "Hamlet" names the negativity of a subject in a state of "ontological playacting."<sup>3</sup> At stake in Jameson's reading, then, is also the status of desire which, for Jameson, can no longer be assumed to be the expression of an authentic subject, arising rather as a structure of deception enclosing a void. Mobile, dialectical, self-reflexive, "modern" or Hamletian (Oedipal) desire is more attached to its own unfolding quest rather than to any goal of fulfilment by a specific object. Such a desire-to-desire coalesces as a floating mood, as Jameson conceives it, a certain energy or affect which is principally taken up with *trying on* different positions vis-a-vis the Other.

For Jameson, then, *Hamlet's* 'modernity' would lie precisely in the self-negating, ironic perspective the play simultaneously auto-theorizes and performs, a perspective reflecting the play's own historical situation on the "cusp between two worlds."<sup>4</sup> It is as an "incomplete project," divided between two epistemes, that *Hamlet* appears to Jameson and as such it must remain unsatisfying as a tragedy, the critic claims. Ending on an "accidental massacre," *Hamlet's* chaotic and bloody denouement fails to deliver the "great allegorical triumph" that should result from a "Symbolic" resolution of Hamlet's desire. This is because, taking place entirely in the Imaginary register, the play's sole "deeper aesthetic satisfaction," he suggests, can come only from the ironic realization of the profound contingency that the play unveils as the unconscious truth of dynastic logic. Jameson explains, in *Hamlet*,

it is the Imaginary that blocks access to any Symbolic solution (whether in the form of some true revenge or of a conversion of the mother figure, perhaps even of a renunciation of the Ghost's command altogether). The sense that the denouement is cobbled together, in haste and without any genuine necessity, is thereby both explained and justified: we are meant to be unsatisfied as the very recognition of our fixation in the Imaginary sphere."<sup>5</sup>

By way of contrast, Jameson offers a counter-example from Lacan's account of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" in *Seminar II*.<sup>6</sup> Here Dupin, able to perceive a positive, "Symbolic," nothing where the police merely see Imaginary absence, discovers the Queen's letter exactly where it should be, that is, in the card-rack "full in the view of every visitor" between the 'legs' of the mantelpiece...

The first complex of questions concerns this question of the Imaginary: why should the Imaginary be inherently unsatisfying? Recall that the Imaginary is the register of what Lacan termed the "mirror stage". One of Lacan's most commonly discussed

concepts, the *stade du miroir* first enters Lacan's public vocabulary in his 1936 presentation at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) in Marienbad, and by 1949 appears in more fully worked out form in his 1949 presentation, published in *Écrits* as "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I/Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."<sup>7</sup> In this text, Lacan elaborates how the I or ego is acquired through a process of identification with a specular image. Lacan puts it in this way: the ego is "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image."<sup>8</sup> One's I would therefore more accurately be called an Illusion, based on the miscognition that jump-starts the ego's circuits and sets a temporal dialectic in motion. The I represents the infant's "jubilant assumption" of an imaginary totality at a time when its experience of its body is marked by "motor impotence."<sup>9</sup> As a result, the I is essentially "fictional," a temporal projection, a "statue" as Lacan also suggestively calls it, of a future identity that it will never actually reach.<sup>10</sup> Lacan comments,

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality – and to the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.<sup>11</sup>

Lacan's reference to the "donned armour" also points to another important feature of the I, which is its fundamentally rivalrous nature. In his third seminar, on *The Psychoses* (1955-56), Lacan explains that an "aggressive tension" always dominates the Imaginary relation. Because the other "is always on the point of re-adopting the place of mastery in relation to [the subject]", a jealous "either me or the other is entirely integrated into every kind of imaginary functioning in man."<sup>12</sup> These, then, are the chief attributes of the Imaginary: characterized by aggressivity, precipitated by a mirror encounter that founds the illusion of an integrated self, the ego, "already by itself an other," sets up a "duality internal to the subject."<sup>13</sup> One already sees why Jameson would be interested in the Imaginary– it is because he regards it as the register that epitomises the ironic, dual perspective characteristic of modernity. He points to Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* as the quintessential ironic narrative. In this novel, Merton Densher, one of James's three main "reflectors," is instructed by his *fiancée*, Kate Croy to make love to the stricken heroine, Milly Theale only to find himself at the end of the tale with his entire subjective perspective "brutally torn away." This is then replicated allegorically, at another level, when we,

the readers who have been immersed until this point in Densher's "subjective blindness," also finally see, as Jameson explains "that the whole plot of *The Wings of the Dove*, which [Densher] has simply lived as his own life, was in reality, when seen from the outside, a sordid matter of extortion and prostitution."<sup>14</sup>

This double narrative is encountered in *Hamlet* as well. For all of the play's ostensible focus on its titular character, Jameson offers that Shakespeare's play could be counter-read as Claudius's story. Claudius, a figure "beset in his newly acquired sovereignty by potential enemies on all sides" is "living in a different plot than that of Hamlet himself":

Norway as well as Hamlet, and later on the Polonius clan and the mob as such; the formerly adulterous relationship – and indeed the murder itself – being the least of his worries. The designation of a nephew as a regicide then has for Claudius a very different meaning than it does for the nephew himself. [...] No wonder it is at this point that he cries out in alarm and halts the production."<sup>15</sup>

In these variants of *Hamlet's* plot, Jameson discovers traces of a trauma induced by the passing over of an older mode of production, one whose contemporary analogy is found in an episode of recent history, which Jameson also references, namely, the massacre of the Nepalese monarchy by one of its members at the turn of the last century. On June 1st, 2001, the Nepalese Crown Prince Dipendra opened fire on the royal palace and killed his father and mother, the King and Queen of Nepal, and seven other members of his family, including a younger brother and sister before shooting himself in the head. The Nepalese and Hamletian events interact with each other as mutually politically unconscious expressions of an historical shift in forms of governmentality for, if the motive for the 2001 massacre (at least as the Wikipedia account has it) was the Nepalese Prince's objection to the monarchy becoming a constitutional rather than an absolute monarchy, a similar dynamic is traced in *Hamlet*, Jameson recalls, in the shift from the older Stuart Monarchy to an emerging capitalist modernity.

This shift finally converges on the figure of Hamlet. Critics as diverse as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to Harold Bloom have understood Shakespeare's great accomplishment in this play to lie in his recognition of the illusory unity of personality. But crucially, for Jameson, this transition from an older model of "personality" to modern "personae" gets negotiated in *Hamlet* as an essentially *formal* transition whereby the genre of tragic drama cedes to a nascent new form: the novel. Thus for Jameson, *The Tragedy of Hamlet* morphs into "the

novel of Hamlet.” And, just as in James’s *The Wings of the Dove*, *Hamlet’s* unsatisfying ending tears us decisively from older (“Symbolic”) models of resolution, the dramatic impulses otherwise racing us towards tragic or comic closure retard into the coils of novelistic irony in a mise-en-abyme of Imaginary reflections.

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Having given this – necessarily too cursory – account of Jameson’s richly textured chapter, my next set of questions concern what seems a minor observation in Jameson’s account: his own “seemingly offhand remark” that the Imaginary register seems unlikely to produce a signifier that can take on Symbolic status.<sup>16</sup> This observation comes in the context of the critic’s reflections on *Hamlet’s* unsatisfying ending where, drawing on Lacan’s discussion of Hamlet’s speech in the famous graveyard scene, Jameson comments on the status of Laertes as an Imaginary figure.

What does Lacan himself say about this scene? If one consults the lesson of 22 April, 1959, we find Lacan deliberating on the following words:

“What is he whose grief  
Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow  
Conjures the wand’ring stars, and makes them stand  
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,  
Hamlet the Dane.”

Here is how Lacan interprets Hamlet’s speech:

Not only can Hamlet not stand [Laertes’s] display of grief over the loss of a girl whom he had clearly mistreated up until then, but he throws himself into the grave with Laertes after having truly bellowed, having given a war cry in which he says the most unexpected thing: who is grieving the death of this young girl? And he concludes, ‘This is I, Hamlet the Dane’ (V, I, 244-5).<sup>17</sup>

Extrapolating from Lacan, in his account, Jameson claims that Hamlet’s sudden access to his name, “I, Hamlet the Dane” must be understood as the reactivation of “the mirror stage with a vengeance.”<sup>18</sup> He argues that when Hamlet assumes Laertes’s “rhetorical emotions,” he assumes a “pre-prepared Imaginary role of an active self or subject.”<sup>19</sup> Hamlet is able to give “full-throated expression (without consequences)” of his desire, Jameson explains, because death has “neutralized”

Ophelia, Hamlet's "object petit a," and his desire is "no longer embedded in the Oedipal entanglements that unexpectedly came to smother it."<sup>20</sup> However, and this is key for Jameson's argument, what Hamlet fails to understand is the extent to which his desiring act is in fact not his at all but, rather, "his service in a role Claudius has planned for him." Hamlet, asserts Jameson deploying Lacan's phrase, "is *le champion de l'Autre*." Having had his temporality reset to the clock of the Other, Hamlet now shows himself "willing to do battle for his mortal enemy the usurper – the King – thereby remaining even more deeply mired in his feudal and familial subalternity."<sup>21</sup>

It is this point Jameson makes his comment about the signifier. He writes,

Here in *Hamlet* it is the Imaginary that blocks access to any Symbolic solution (whether in the form of some true revenge or of a conversion of the mother figure, perhaps even of a renunciation of the Ghost's command altogether).<sup>22</sup> As I understand it there can be regressions of a familial signifier into the Imaginary realm [...] but the promotion of a mirror figure to Symbolic status seems a good deal less likely.<sup>23</sup>

As a pathway into our discussion of Jameson's comment, we can turn to what Tom Cohen has recently named The Throttlecene – a neologism coined to describe the acceleration of what can only be described as humanity's death drive in this moment of the late Anthropocene.<sup>24</sup> The Throttlecene would be the social formation presiding over not only the catastrophic failure of global political responses to the climate emergency, but also over what increasingly seems to be the dissolution of the neurotic-discursive structures of the modern period – code-named "*Hamlet*" – insofar as they were founded upon Oedipal desire and its repression. The avatars of The Throttlecene, Donald Trump, and his B-Team of mini-me's - Boris, Berlusconi, Bolsonaro et. al., would seem to contradict Jameson's assertion regarding the status of the Imaginary signifier. For they assert themselves precisely as Imaginary mirror images who have been cleaved onto a Symbolic identity as they oversee a global full-scale retreat from the regulatory apparatuses of desire that formerly kept *jouissance* – especially in its metaphors as capital's surplus value – in check. For we know that progressively since at least the 2008 Global Financial Crisis we have entered into a strange new economic reality. What the European Bank still hopefully continues to call our "abnormal times" is defined by "modern" or "unconventional" monetary policy kitted out with warped economic tools such as negative interest rates, quantitative easing, bond buy-backs through so-called "twist programs," among others.

In psychoanalytic terms, one might describe these and other striking features of 21st century life as symptoms of the collapse of the prevailing, “Hamletian,” structure of desire as founded on the repression of the paternal or “familial” signifier: what Lacan named the *Nom-du-père* (the No/Name-of-the-Father). It is worth recalling, too, that such neurotic desire definitionally entails the postponement of satisfaction. The standard, Oedipal, ‘contract’ states “you must give up your *jouissance* (your wish to sleep with your mother) and accede to the Symbolic identity bestowed by the Father’s castrating Name. But in doing so you will regain more than what you lost, at a later time, through the operational paths of desire.”<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the contemporary era of what one might call the “worse Real” marks a lethal pact with the superego’s injunction to “Enjoy!”<sup>26</sup> Over the past half-century or so, the older “Law of desire” seems to have been overthrown by a headless *jouissance* that promises immediate, total satisfaction for all.

What might this devolution of desire imply for the fate of the paternal signifier? Juliet Flower MacCannell, who has been tracking these developments for quite some time, has named the post-war period the “Regime of the Brother.”<sup>27</sup> She threads her insight through an analysis of the Freudian myth of *Totem and Taboo*. In this Freudian “myth,” the band of brothers kill the primal father in order to have access to the women of the tribe. But where, in Freud, the brothers quickly discovered that the primal Father dead is more powerful than alive, ushering in the “Oedipal” community based on the deferral of *jouissance*, in MacCannell’s account, something has in the meantime happened to this social order. A faux modernity, the post-Oedipal era betokens a society based on “an absolute right [...] to self-governance, and an absolute equality for everyone.”<sup>28</sup> “After the patriarchy” we are no longer ruled by Symbolic fathers or elders, but by the Imaginary’s fraternity of sons and brothers. One might plot these developments across two possible readings of the Ghost of King Hamlet. On an initial approach, the Ghost appears to point to the primal Father of *Totem and Taboo*, the one whose unlawful death places an implicit injunction on the son to avenge him. Both the son and the Father in this case know that he has been killed, they inhabit a “community of knowing,” as Lacan puts it, and in this sense the Ghost would be, in essence, superfluous to the play’s unfolding narrative. Lacan explains,

This is the important point, the father knows it, and he is the one who comes to tell it to us “There needs no ghost, my lord,” – Freud quotes it on several occasions because it has become a proverb – “there needs no ghost, my lord come from the grave to tell us this” (I, 5, 125).<sup>29</sup>

Yet on a second approach – which both Lacan and, following him, Jameson invoke – we encounter another structure of the Ghost, this time as a Father who does not know that he is dead. This second interpretation takes its inspiration from a dream by a patient of Ella Sharpe's that Lacan discusses at some length in *Seminar VI*. In Lacan's recount of Sharpe's case study, the patient related how the father "was alive once more and was talking to him in his usual way, but the remarkable thing was that he had really died, only he did not know it."<sup>30</sup> The Father who doesn't know he is dead represents, for Jameson, the waning of the paternal signifier in the late capitalist period, entering us into a uniquely 'Lacanian' modernity that Jameson proposes as the true allegorical horizon of *Hamlet*, as we will now see.

By deploying his signature close reading method that enables him to uncover the textual evidence of epochal shifts from stylistic 'symptoms' exhibited by the literary body, Jameson identifies the unconscious traces of this Lacanian modernity in a unique expression that is permitted by the French language. This is the grammatical term called the "*ne explétif* – *explétif* used here in the sense of filling a space in language. What is important to note is that this "*ne*" is optional. It is only used after certain verbs, verbs expressing a negative feeling. However, the "*ne explétif*" must be distinguished from negation proper, which in French, as one knows, takes the form of "*ne pas*" ("not"). The not-quite equivalent in English, in Bruce Fink's translation, is the colloquial phrase "not but."

Lacan's example of the *ne explétif* (or "expressive *ne*") is the phrase, "*Je crains qu'il ne vienne*" - "I am afraid he will come," which he glosses in this way:

In the turn of phrase, *Je crains qu'il ne vienne*, the most elementary analytic art can sense the desire that constitutes the ambivalence characteristic of the unconscious. [...]. In its uncertain obsolescence, [...], this *ne* suggests the idea of a trace that is effaced along the path of a migration or, more precisely, of a puddle that brings out its outline.<sup>31</sup>

For Jameson, this dangling "*ne*", not fully a negation but still expressing some kind of negative affect, could be read as the French language's formal registration of the contemporary post-Oedipal unconscious. Through this textual symptom, the Father's supplanting by another historical form of the signifier is unconsciously signaled, even if, like Shakespeare's audience, we are as yet incapable of recognizing this. Jameson writes, "Perhaps our own moment of late capitalism is in a similar situation, of denial and rebirth."<sup>32</sup> And indeed, this quite aptly seems to sum up our contemporary situation. If, in 1959, Lacan claimed that "The tragedy of *Hamlet* is the tragedy which from a certain point of view, literally, brings this fool, this clown, this player on words

down to zero,” in contemporary public discourse this zero no longer seems to retain any negative power. In a ‘post-truth’ world, any saying can be contradicted or overturned. Always able to be rescinded as mere “sarcasm,” Trump’s Throttlecene presides over a “No” that neither prohibits nor prevents.”<sup>33</sup>

Again, why should this not be surprising? The primary characteristic of an Imaginary social order, as MacCannell explains, once more referencing Freud’s *Group Psychology*, is that the original Father or ego-ideal, the figure who wields the true power of the negative – “castration” – has been replaced by what Freud termed a Leader. Needing only, as Freud puts it, “to possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in a particularly clearly marked and pure form,” the Leader recasts the exceptional status of the Father by entering into Symbolic circulation *as just one of the brothers or sons*. As such, the group identifies with an Imaginary figure – the hypnotic ideal-ego – who, far from prohibiting enjoyment, promises equal satisfaction for everyone. By way of its identification with an image, a mere appearance of the No, “the Oedipally split ego is healed, made whole, with no further need to sacrifice its jouissance to the collective.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus the Leader brings a third structure of the Ghost, as the special province of Vladimir Nabokov, into our discussion. In his 1947 dystopian novel, *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov parodies the “infamous models” totalitarianism represented by Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. About halfway into the novel, we learn about an upcoming production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by the new State Theater, directed by the playwright Ember. Ember has been required by his authoritarian government to base his production on a certain late Professor Hamm’s revised edition, “The Real Plot of Hamlet,” in which the focus of the play is not on Hamlet but rather on Fortinbras, who is described as “a blooming young knight, beautiful and sound to the core.” This “fine Nordic youth” has assumed the control of “miserable Denmark which had been so criminally misruled by degenerate King Hamlet and Judeo-Latin Claudius.”<sup>35</sup>

The twist in Professor Hamm’s revision of Shakespeare’s plot is the realization that the Ghost on the battlements is not old King Hamlet’s:

It is that of Fortinbras the Elder whom King Hamlet has slain. The ghost of the victim posing as the ghost of the murderer – what a wonderful bit of farseeing strategy, how deeply it excites our intense admiration! [...]. Thus, old Fortinbras, disguised as his enemy’s ghost, prepares the peril of his enemy’s son and the triumph of his own offspring. No, the ‘judgements’ were not so accidental, the ‘slaughters’ not so casual as they seemed to Horatio the Recorder, and there is a note of deep satisfaction (which the audience cannot

help sharing) in the young hero's guttural exclamation – Ha-ha, this quarry cries on havoc (meaning: the foxes have devoured one another) as he surveys the rich heap of dead bodies, all that is left of the rotten state of Denmark.<sup>36</sup>

In Nabokov, the Father is finally recognized as an imposter. Nabokov's insight lies in the realization that the paternal signifier was never anything other than a semblance that duped us into becoming its subjects.<sup>37</sup> And, crucially, as a consequence of this discovery, the orders of negation it inaugurated also transform. Under the older, Oedipal model of desire, as Justin Clemens once quipped, the neurotic subject says "Yes' to the No," meaning that the neurotic represses the paternal signifier's prohibition on *jouissance*. The perverse subject, by contrast, says "Yes and No' to the No," disavowing the prohibition by publicly acceding to it while maintaining a private space of the fetish where the father's power is denied, whereas in psychosis, the subject says "No' to the No," decisively foreclosing it.<sup>38</sup> What one sees emerging in the meantime, however, is yet another organization of the psychic 'choice,' one that seems to elude altogether this logic of the yes or no: it is a fake or Make-Believe Father, a *semblable* of the "No" that proffers the subject a sort of Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card, usable at any narrative level. This '*Nomblable-du-père*' would be the ultimate "Trump" card of the new psycho-social order in the process of dismantling the older, monopolizing Oedipal logic from all possible directions.

But at the same time, as if séanced by this *blabbling*, a fourth structure of the Ghost now inserts itself – or, rather, a spectre in Derrida's sense, that is, as a certain "spectral asymmetry [that] interrupts all specularity."<sup>39</sup> A non-specular entity, it takes the vibratory shape of M. Valdemar in the Poe story who awakens from the hypnotic trance he has been suspended in on the brink of death:

"Yes;—no;—I have been sleeping—and now—now—I am dead."<sup>40</sup>

Seeping through Poe's horizontal em-dashes, something streams away from Time's uni-directional arrow: a dead man who has slept through his own death and discovers himself in the act of decomposing.

"For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!"

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely bursting from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less,

shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity.<sup>41</sup>

M. Valdemar arrives as a “post-death” spectre, haunting the contemporary moment as a time “out of joint” with every previous historical epoch. Projecting onto some kind of ‘fourth dimension’ which would exceed the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic triad, this a-spectral, a-symmetrical, a-specular a-llogic invokes some form of “rationality” that as Lacan puts it in *Seminar XXI, Les non-dupes errent* has yet “to be constructed.”<sup>42</sup>

In a recent essay, “Shakespeare’s Global Weirding: MacBeth’s Posting of ‘Anthropos,’ Cinematization, and the Era of Extinction,” Tom Cohen suggested that *Hamlet* is “the nodal text of climate change.”<sup>43</sup> *Hamlet*, as he puts it, “is of the time after irreversibility has been triggered.”<sup>44</sup> This is because for us, just as it was for Hamlet, it is no longer a question of the knowledge that impelled desire and its interpretation along. We already “know” everything we need to know about climate change, Cohen writes, “there is nothing more to learn, only things to put off, defer, delay.”<sup>45</sup> Old King Hamlet’s Ghost would be allied with this double-knowledge of climate change, Cohen observes, as we simultaneously accelerate towards ecocide while still continuing on as ‘normal.’ From out of this – Humanity’s own comic graveyard scene – Poe’s M. Valdemar awakens from the hypnotic trance cast by the phallic signifier which suspended us in a state of non-being and tied us to the Other’s time.

How does one evacuate from the Other’s time whose clock has almost run down? From this perspective I would say that, *pace* Jameson, the problem with *Hamlet* is not that it is unsatisfying but that it is not deeply dissatisfying enough. As one knows, the unshakeable Law of desire is its eternal dissatisfaction and infinite postponement. As such, desire presents a life-sustaining openness that, at least in Milly Theale’s case, enabled her to ward off her apotheosis, preventing the linguistic totality from closing in on her.<sup>46</sup> The hyper-jouissance of *The Throbbecene*, on the other hand, maps out only the dead-ends of Imaginary rivalrous aggression, acted out beneath the gaze of a hyper-elite that surveys with a “deep satisfaction” a devastated, depopulated, “rotten state” of Earth. But if even the world’s 1% are starting to question how rich is rich enough to buy themselves out of the Earth’s increasingly uninhabitable climate, as new political solidarities and new ‘evental names’<sup>47</sup> begin to re-carve the social fabric, what protocols of reading would be appropriate for such changed and changing conditions? That is, if the Oedipal

historical model of desire and its interpretation has exhausted its routines, what might take its place?

The method of Freudian psychoanalysis was founded upon the supposition of a repressed wish whose coded message, concealed in the neurotic symptom, could be decrypted through the method of free association. However, the clinical presentations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century include a dramatic rise in affect and anxiety. Borderline personality structures, PTSD, toxicomania, somatic phenomena, these are features of a different relation to *jouissance* that the Belgian analysts, Paul Verhaeghe and Stijn Vanheule, identify as the structure of “actual neurosis.” As such, they do not lend themselves well to traditional forms of analytic interpretation.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, the Lacanian must update her methods. Indeed, already over a decade ago, Lacan’s son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller provoked the analytic community by saying the object (a) is “the ultimate waste of a grandiose attempt.”<sup>49</sup> Miller maintained that if what is needed today is a way of interpreting “against the grain of the unconscious,” what he, following Lacan, calls “reverse interpretation” involves “withholding S2” (knowledge) in order “to circumscribe S1” (the paternal signifier). “Reverse interpretation” therefore eschews the technique of punctuation that characterized the older Lacanian session. Punctuation seeks to generate new knowledge in the form of the creation of new signifiers but a post-interpretive analysis aims instead to bring the subject back to its “primarily elementary signifiers.” It will be a question of another dimension – a hybrid mixture of signifier and letter such as a number, say 0, inflating itself into a letter: O...

In Nabokov’s revised *Hamlet*, Denmark was crippled by a “plethora of words”:

If the state is to be saved, if the nation desires to be worthy of a new robust government, then everything must be changed, popular commonsense must spit out the caviar of moonshine and poetry, and the simple word, *verbum sine ornatu*, intelligible to man and beast alike, and accompanied by fit action, must be restored to power.<sup>50</sup>

And yet the only thing that brings the playwright, Ember, out of his depression is precisely a play of words. As he attempts to cheer him up, the philosopher Adam Krug describes “a curious character [...], a man who was fanatically eager to make a film out of *Hamlet*.”<sup>51</sup> In what follows are six pages of an imaginary screenplay of *Hamlet*, a fantastic weaving in and out of different temporalities and subjectivities circling around Ophelia’s name. Ophelia, spinning out as a letteral combination in rotation, thwarts all forward movement, liquifying the Cartesian subject. Lacan’s famous S is carelessly “lost in the damp grass”:

Yes, she was found by a shepherd. In fact her name can be derived from that of an amorous shepherd in Arcadia. Or quite possibly it is an anagram of Alpheios, with the “S” lost in the damp grass – Alpheus the rivergod, who pursued a long-legged nymph until Artemis changed her into a stream, which of course suited his liquidity to a tee. [...]. Or again we can base it on the Greek rendering of an old Danske serpent name. Lithe, lithping, thin-lipped Ophelia, Amleth’s wet dream, a mermaid of Lethe, a rare water serpent, Russalka letheana of science (to match your long purples).<sup>52</sup>

The post-Hamletian analytic session seeks to construct an “a-semantic unity,” bringing the subject back to the originary “hey non nonny nonny” nonsense of the signifier. Nabokov’s hybrid, ‘cinaesthetic’ writing is similarly de-identifying, de-modernizing and de-desiring. It simulates the effect of post-interpretive analysis.

### §§§

At the end of his discussion of Act V, scene one, the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, we encounter a rare Lacan finally expressing his own desire. “I wish,” he muses, that

someone would paint a picture in which one would see a cemetery on the horizon, and here the hole of the grave, people going away like people at the end of the Oedipal tragedy dispersing and covering their eyes in order not to see what is happening, namely something which with respect to Oedipus is more or less the liquefaction of Mr. Valdemar.<sup>53</sup>

What seeps, suppuratingly, through the cut of the paternal signifier? Serpentine, “dreamily droning” as if from “from some deep cavern within the earth,” a certain “slim slimy ophidian maiden”<sup>54</sup> repels the sons of Hamlet and James. “Still better and worse” (III.2. 2143), Ophelia, a mal-allegory, signally fails to distinguish between narrative levels and their respective orders of negation. All of the histories of Kronos and Logos dissolve in the encircling vortex of her watery embrace. The structures of knowledge splutter and gag. Hyperreflexive to the last, Hamlet and his forty thousand brothers (“all Lamord’s pupils”<sup>55</sup>) stopper their ears but her roar is abyssal: “You are naught, you are naught. ///mark the play” (III.2, 2038).

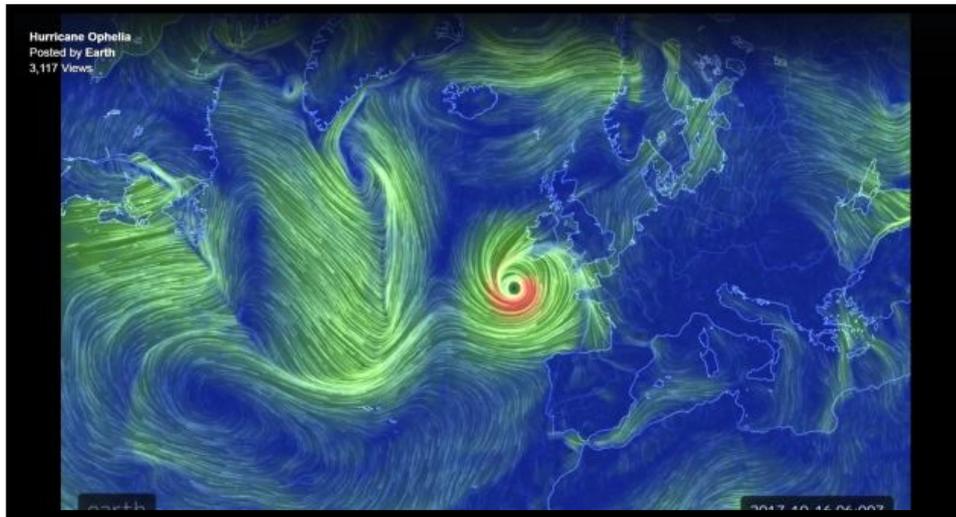


Figure 1: A visualisation of the path of Storm Ophelia as it was expected to hit the UK, from the Earthwindmap website.<sup>56</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 159; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI, Desire and its Interpretation (1958-1959)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, unpublished, lesson of 11.3. 59. Retrieved from <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/translations/seminars/>. Hereafter Book VI.

<sup>2</sup> “Shakespeare has gone further than anybody, to the point that his work [...] is the one where we see described a sort of cartography of all possible human relationships.” Lacan, Book VI, 27.5.59. See also his earlier comment, “It is because of the structure of the problem that Hamlet as such poses about desire, namely the thesis that I am putting forward here that Hamlet brings into play the different planes, the very framework [...] in which desire comes to situate itself” (lesson of 11.3.59).

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 95. Hereafter *Allegory*.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson, *Allegory*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Jameson, *Allegory*, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, (1954-1955)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvia Tomaselli, notes John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, Heloise Fink, Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 75-81.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III, The Psychoses (1955-1956)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1997), 91; 95. Hereafter *The Psychoses*.

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<sup>13</sup>Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 93.

<sup>14</sup>Jameson, *Allegory*, 112.

<sup>15</sup>Jameson, *Allegory*, 108.

<sup>16</sup>Jameson comments on Lacan's phrase, "*plans superposés*" as a "seemingly offhand remark" that is nevertheless key to both Lacanianism and to Jameson's own framework, where allegorical levels open onto to "spatial discontinuities," *Allegory*, 97; 111.

<sup>17</sup>Lacan, Book VI, 22.4.59.

<sup>18</sup>Jameson, *Allegory*, 109.

<sup>19</sup>Jameson, *Allegory*, 110.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Jameson, *Allegory*, 111.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Cohen, personal communication.

<sup>25</sup> See Lacan, "Castration means that jouissance must be refused, in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire." Lacan, *Écrits*, 700.

<sup>26</sup> See Jacques-Alain Miller: "The real emancipated from nature is so much worse that it becomes more and more unbearable." Presentation of the Theme of the IXth Congress of the WAP, 26 April, 2012. Retrieved from [http://www.congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/Presentation-du-theme\\_Jacques-Alain-Miller.html](http://www.congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/Presentation-du-theme_Jacques-Alain-Miller.html)

<sup>27</sup> Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (London: Routledge, 1991). Hereafter *Regime*.

<sup>28</sup> MacCannell, *Regime*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, Book VI, 4.3.59.

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, Book VI, 26.11.58.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation: Psychoanalysis and Personality Structure", *Écrits*, 556-557.

<sup>32</sup> Jameson, *Allegory*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> As, for example, when Trump was called out on proposing bleach injections as a cure for Covid-19 in 2020.

<sup>34</sup> MacCannell, "Refashioning Jouissance for the Age of the Imaginary," *Filozofski vestnik: special issue on Reason + Enjoyment* 37.2 (2016): 183.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister, in Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 254.

<sup>36</sup> Nabokov, 255-256.

<sup>37</sup> Recall Nabokov's animated memory in chapter 1 of *Speak, Memory*, where his father dons the "trappings of his old regiment," the "resplendent uniform of the Horse Guards, with that smooth golden swell of cuirass burning upon his chest and back" as a "festive joke." "To a joke, then, I owe my first gleam of complete consciousness." Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, in *Novels and Memoirs*, 371.

<sup>38</sup> Justin Clemens, personal communication.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

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<sup>40</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 2, The Raven edition. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2148/2148-h/2148-h.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Poe, n.p.

<sup>42</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 21: Les non-dupes errant (1973-1974)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, unpublished. See his lesson of 20.11.73. Retrieved from <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/translations/seminars/>

<sup>43</sup> Tom Cohen, "Shakespeare's Global Weiriding: MacBeth's Posting of 'Anthropos,' Cinematization, and the Era of Extinction," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (Sept, 2017): 537-552.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, 546.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of Milly Theale and the defensive role of desire, see chapter 2 of my *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 43-97.

<sup>47</sup> In Badiou, the evental name is what designates a multiple which belongs to a situation that has had an indiscernible forced into it through a subject's truth procedure. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 offer themselves as a potential evental site that sees the "indiscernible" of Black humanity forced into the definition of the American polis.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Verhaeghe and Stijn Vanheule, "Actual Neurosis and PTSD: The Impact of the Other," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 22.4. (2005): 493-507.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "Interpretation in Reverse," in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, ed. Veronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>50</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 255.

<sup>51</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 257.

<sup>52</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 259.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan, Book VI, lesson of 11.3.59

<sup>54</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 259.

<sup>55</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 260.

<sup>56</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/tracking-ophelia-where-did-it-come-from-why-did-it-whip-up-1.3258465>