

Alas, poor Yorick! ... The Being of Spirit is a Bone

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Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* contain two of the most recognizable enunciations in Western culture: “Alas, poor Yorick!” and “The being of spirit is a bone.”¹ What is it that we recognize when we hear or read these famous words?

These are enunciations of recognition. Hamlet has already been watching the gravedigger throw skulls out of the earth for some time when he asks of one in particular, “Whose was it?” (5.1.163). He cannot recognize it by sight. “Nay, I know not,” he replies when the gravedigger asks, “Whose do you think it was?” (5.1.164-165). In the case of a skull, the relay between appearance and thinking cannot produce recognition, but only the negation of knowledge. Rather, it is *name* and *station* that recalls Hamlet to the identity of he whose skull it was:

CLOWN	This same skull, sir, was Sir Yorick’s skull, the king’s jester.
HAMLET	This? [<i>Takes the skull.</i>]
CLOWN	E’en that.
HAMLET	Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. (5.1.170-175)

¹ Citations of *Hamlet* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in text hereafter, refer to: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller, New York: Penguin, 2001; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

We set out from tautology and stutter: “this same skull”; “sir... Sir.” We arrive at recognition: “I knew him.” Name and station are the tokens of possession denoted by apostrophes: the skull belonged to Sir Yorick; Sir Yorick belonged to the king. And as he takes possession of the skull, Hamlet is possessed by memory, which speaks the language of the particular: This? But as Hegel shows in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his discussion of deictic signs, our efforts to denote what is here and now—*this*, right before our eyes—rely upon and produce the universal. Reference to what is here depends upon its distinction from what is there, just as the identity of an “I” depends on its distinction from a “you.” Confronted with the thing, language says *this*. A clown replies, “E’en that.” *This* and *that* trade places as they occupy the same place, the switching point of the thing as it moves among bodies from there to here and here to there. *This* is *that*, “this same skull,” just as “sir” refers both to Hamlet and Sir Yorick. The obduracy of the material object sustains itself through the flux of the signifier, and the encounter of the thing and the name, sutured in the past tense by the grammar of possession, gives rise to memory expressed in the language of pathos: “Alas, poor Yorick!”

Yorick was a fellow of infinite jest: his tragic finitude is bound with the infinite through comedy. He was a man of most excellent fancy: though he once excelled in imagination, now he hasn’t a thought in his head. The skull of Yorick, the king’s jester, is the synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of matter and imagination, of impassivity and pathos, of tragedy and comedy, of this and that. But this is a synthesis that unbinds what it holds together. Recognition is the element in which the material *becomes* immaterial—memory—just as what is remembered is what is no longer. What is here is not what is there, but a remainder of what it was. And this somber remainder of a person, of laughter itself, is what decides the synthesis of tragedy and comedy on the side of tragedy—an asymmetrical synthesis bespeaking the irrevocable fact of mortality:

HAMLET

He hath bore me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chopfallen? (5.1.175-182)

Metonymy revives the dead and breathes spirit into the inanimate through the memory of the living: it was once the case that *a table* could be set on a roar by flashes of merriment. But the form of the rhetorical question registers the absorption of the living by death: the skull cannot turn back upon its merriment to mock its own grinning; the reflexivity of self-consciousness has given way to the unanswered question. Sarcasm is the bitterness of sweetness forever lost. Recognition of the living, through the skull of the name, is the recognition that life falls away into the nameless, the vanished lips that once smiled are called “lips” according to what they were, but now their living form is dissolved into dirt, incorporated into what they were not. “Alas” is the name of the memory’s asymmetrical synthesis of the living and the dead, the signifier of symmetry’s tragic remainder. What is recognized is that remainder, at once the same thing and something other than what is said. *This?* is the question. *That* is the answer.

“The being of spirit is a bone.” Hegel’s proposition, which he will call “the infinite judgment,” springs from a critique of the pseudoscience of phrenology, which would assign indications of character to a protuberance or indentation of the skull bone. But the significance of Hegel’s proposition reaches far beyond the critique of vulgar materialist ideology. Hegel *affirms* the proposition as a recognition of the *existence* of spirit, of the fact that *it is*. Let’s review the passage in which it is located in the section of the *Phenomenology* on Observing Reason:

Observation has thus reached the point where it gives expression to what our concept of observation was, namely, that the certainty of reason seeks itself as an objective actuality. —By this it is not meant that spirit, represented by a skull, is declared to be a thing. What is supposed to lie in this thought is certainly not materialism, as it is called. Rather, spirit must instead be something very different from these bones. But that spirit *is* means nothing other than that it is a *thing*. However much *being* as such, or being-a-thing, is predicated of spirit, still, for that reason, this is genuinely expressed by saying that spirit is the sort of thing that a *bone* is. Hence, it must be considered to be of supreme importance that the true expression of this has been found. Of spirit it is simply to be said, “it *is*.” However much it is otherwise said of spirit that it *is*, it has a *being*, it is a *thing*, a singular *actuality*, still it is not thereby *meant* that it is something we can see, or take in our hands, or push around and so forth, but that is what is *said* of it, and what in truth the foregoing has been saying may be expressed in this way: The *being of spirit is a bone*. (*PhS* 343)

What is said is not what is meant. We are not to conclude from the declaration that spirit may be represented by a skull or that spirit may be *reduced* to a thing. As Hegel notes, “spirit must be something very different from these bones.” But if one should not think that spirit is “something we can see, or take in our hands, or push around and so forth,” what is properly *expressed* by the representation of spirit as a skull is that spirit *is*, that it has a *being*. “The being of spirit is a bone” is a true expression of this judgment, but only if it is conceptualized in truth, which is to say dialectically. “This proposition is the *infinite judgment*,” Hegel writes, because it is “a judgment which sublates itself” (*PhS* 344). To say *the being of spirit is a bone* is to enunciate a *speculative* proposition, which must be grasped through the negativity of its articulation, preserving what is meant by canceling the literal sense of the statement—and this very movement of cancelation and preservation is what is properly expressed: the modality of spirit’s existence as material-ideal, as absorbed into

and expressed through material existence, even as it is irreducible to it. Hegel concludes his morbid speculations with a joke: the combination of the higher and lower sense of his proposition in one statement is akin to the way in which nature combines the organ of highest fulfillment (of generation) with the organ of urination. Grasped according to its speculative sense, the infinite judgment is “the completion of self-comprehending life.” But if it is grasped according to its representational content, through mere picture-thinking, it amounts to nothing more than taking a piss (*als Pissen*) (*PhS* 346).

Now the proximity of Hegel’s infinite judgment to Hamlet’s remembrance of Yorick through his skull is not coincidental: Hegel is thinking not only of phrenology but of this scene in *Hamlet*, which he discusses ten paragraphs earlier. “In the presence of a skull,” he writes, “one can surely think of many things, just as Hamlet does with Yorick’s, but the skull-bone for itself is such an indifferent, unencumbered thing that there is nothing else immediately to be seen in it nor to think about; there is just it itself” (*PhG* 333). *This* is indeed what troubles Hamlet, as he picks up the skull and asks, incredulously, “This?” The skull-bone is the token of that with which it is incompatible—Yorick’s infinite jest—yet which it also supported and was indeed inseparable from. Now it has been separated. It occupies space; it is there (or here?), yet all the animation of the spirit that laughed through it is now dearly departed. It’s because Hegel’s meditation is derived, in part, from this scene in *Hamlet* that his dialectical exposition of the infinite judgment so readily helps us understand that scene.

Hamlet’s question when confronted with Yorick’s skull—“This?”—is quite closely related to his more famous question, “To be, or not to be—” (3.1.56). Let us read that question from Hegel’s perspective, rather than from Hamlet’s—or rather from a perspective Hamlet will only attain later, precisely in the graveyard scene. In Hamlet’s soliloquy the opposition is between life

and death, where “to be” is aligned with the former and “not to be” with the latter. The problem then becomes whether consciousness will persist beyond death, through dreams that come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil. It’s “the dread of something after death” (3.1.78) through which conscience makes cowards of us all. But *to be* is also to be a bone. Spirit already bears insensible unconsciousness within it, *as* its mere existence, its thingliness. The infinite judgment reverses the prospect upon which Hamlet broods: rather than life continuing after death, it is the dead matter of living spirit that gives Hegel pause, yet which also announces the highest recognition of self-comprehending life. Later Hamlet will remark, “That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once” (5.1.71-72). The singing skull is the emblem not only of the dead who were once quick, but also of the quick *as* the dead, singing through their own unhearing bones. Most importantly, the tongue is said to have been *in* the skull. Through its dead objecthood, we are given to consider the living body as an assemblage of parts that will be dismembered by death and decomposition. From the perspective of the contemplated skull, the living body becomes the uncanny, undead marionette of the *danse macabre*. While Hamlet had earlier contemplated the persistence of being even if one chooses “not to be,” now death enters into “to be.”

It is precisely the tradition of the *danse macabre* that Shakespeare’s scene joins as Hamlet considers the possible professions of those whose skulls remain: politician, courtier, lawyer, landowner. The last is to the point, because it is *land* that links the existential pathos of the graveyard scene to the political and historical dimensions of the play. The “great buyer of land” had his “statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries” (5.1.98-99)—the legal and bureaucratic machinery of the conversion of land into property. But, when he is dead, he will come “to have his fine pate full of fine dirt” (5.1.101): property, land that can be bought and sold, undergoes its reduction

to earth, the common ground of a common fate. That is the lesson of the *memento mori*. Thus Hamlet queries Horatio, “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?” (5.1.193-194). The opening of a barrel may come to be plugged with the body of a conqueror because the material of that body is dust, made noble according to the *station* it attains while alive, reduced to ignobility by death:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O, that the earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall, t’expel the winter’s flaw! (5.1.203-206)

Again, we see the reversal of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy. Rather than meditating upon the dread of the afterlife, now Hamlet meditates on the earth that the living body already is, dust that will return to dust. Most importantly, what matters here is that the body *occupies space*—both as living conqueror and as dead dirt. This is the minimal level of existence traversing the quick and the dead: the mere fact of occupying space.

If we say “*Hamlet* is a play about what it means to exist,” we may not get too far with many aspects of its complex structure. Rather, we are likely to reduce the play to the existential drama of its protagonist. If we say, “*Hamlet* is a play about what it means to occupy space,” we say something very close to the same thing, but now our perspective opens onto broader vistas—apparently peripheral scenes—while also bringing into focus their intricate connections with central episodes of the play. We cannot recognize what is expressed in Hamlet’s enunciation (Alas, poor Yorick!), nor can we appreciate the full force of its relation to Hegel’s infinite judgment, if we focus only on the graveyard scene, or on its relation to other major speeches by the play’s title character. The title of Shakespeare’s play is a kind of trap, encouraging an identification of play with protagonist

that is, of course, important—but the way in which it is important can only be understood if we go beyond that identification.² To fully grasp what it means, in *Hamlet*, that the being of spirit is a bone, we must address the structural complexity of the play, the sense of which hinges upon the relation between its tangent plots and what may seem like its curiously superfluous details. As usual in great literature, and also in philosophy, such superfluity will prove to be of the essence.

For example, after Hamlet kills Polonius, two scenes are devoted to the question of *where* the body is. “What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?” (4.2.3) asks Rosencrantz. “Where the dead body is bestowed,” Rosencrantz informs Claudius, “we cannot get from him” (4.3.13-14). “But where is he?” the King asks Hamlet; the *he* is a corpse, and Claudius has to ask three more times before Hamlet offers the following reply:

In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there,
seek him i' th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not
within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into
the lobby. (4.3.32-36)

Polonius may be in heaven or in hell, but if he cannot be found in either place then his body is under the stairs. Body and spirit are apparently disjoined, but then again they are not: if *his* body cannot be found where his body is not, then *he* is where his corpse is. Polonius is at supper, Hamlet quips, “not where he eats but where he is eaten” (4.3.19). Hamlet proceeds to reason that “a man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm,” and when asked to say what he means he responds: “Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.29-30).

² On this point, see Margreta de Grazia’s *Hamlet without Hamlet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

The king wants to know where someone else's body is—where the physical object may be found—but the dialectician tells him where *his own* body will *not* be found: in its progress through the intestines of his lowliest subjects.

A question about the spatial location of a dead body becomes a scathing reflection on the mutability not only of matter but of rank, linking social and physical positions. The single word that best denotes this complex of physical and social positions would be *station*. The word is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the place or position occupied by a person or thing”; and also as “a position in a social scale” or hierarchy. It is the bare fact of occupying space—a place or position—that *does not* distinguish “a person or a thing,” nor between persons, regardless of their position within a social hierarchy. So, when Rosencrantz says, “My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the king,” we get the famous reply:

HAMLET The body is with the king, but the king is not
 with the body. The king is a thing —
GUILDENSTERN A thing, my lord?
HAMLET Of nothing. Bring me to him. (4.3.21-27)

This exchange bears upon the doctrine of the King's two bodies: on the one hand, the physical existence and historical continuity of kingship through the particular corporeal body of *this* or *that* king; on the other hand, the metaphysical and collective body politic that any particular king enters into and instantiates. But below the level of that historically specific doctrine is the mere fact that to occupy a station (a rank) is to occupy a station (a physical position) in the manner of *either* a person or a thing. Metonymic references to “the throne” or “the crown” make this clear. It is in this latter sense that a king is a thing of nothing: the *station* of the king is there waiting for the one who comes to occupy it, which is why that station can be usurped—with

the “wrong” head under the right crown, or sitting in the same throne that *should* be occupied by a legitimate successor. The traditional function of the *memento mori* is to tell us that the common ground of death unites us all, regardless of station. But before we go to our death, the mere fact of occupying space is what we already have in common not only with our superiors or inferiors, but also with things. A king has his crown, a gravedigger his spade, a scrivener his pen, a courtier his feathered cap, and these metonymic markers of station and of role are at once the implements and indications of *what* we are and the accompaniments of the bare fact *that* we are.

The occupation of space is the overarching concern of the play’s political framework, and it is the minimal condition for an understanding of how the complex structure of the play supports its existential drama. This perspective allows us to offer an account of how the conflict with Norway intersects with the family romance and the philosophical questions articulated by its main characters. Immediately following the scenes concerned with the whereabouts of Polonius’s corpse, Hamlet encounters the army led by Fortinbras, and he asks the Norwegian Captain where they are headed. The Captain replies, “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath no profit in it but the name” (4.4.18-19). This is the play’s succinct commentary on the ends of warfare. Property is ground, subsumed by nationhood in name only, and since the little patch of ground at stake in this conflict is relatively worthless (not worth five ducats, the Captain says), *there is no reason* to die for it. Hamlet regards the coming war as a symptom of decadence: “This is th’impostume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies” (4.4.27-29). The patch of ground is accorded a negative significance: it *is not* a cause. As a reason to die—which is to say as *grounds* for death—it amounts to nothing.

Indeed, Hamlet will then recognize that it is not the patch of ground itself that is at stake—not its worth, or its possession

as quantity of space—but rather an incorporeal quality that it symbolizes: honor.

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake. (4.4.53-56)

For Hamlet, this reflection presents another opportunity to castigate himself for his failure to avenge his father. But behind his own personal drama, with its attendant historical drama of kingship, we can detect a more universal metaphysical problem: the incorporeal quality of honor may be at stake not only in a corporeal *thing* that occupies space, like a straw, but in the bare fact of occupying space at all. Because spirit must have a body, its prerogatives are at issue not only in the physical being of that body, its existence, but are also potentially at issue in *anything that occupies space at all*. The physical existence of anything at all is potentially a metonymy of spirit, and therefore puts honor at the stake. *Possession*—whether self-possession or possession of something other than oneself—is the metaphysical/historical hinge that articulates and secures this relay between the metaphysical being of spirit and its physical existence, which is why the security of possession is always somewhat insecure. The honor of possession is not where it is—in the thing possessed—nor is it not where that thing is. Honor is a question of our *stake* in the thing.³ Honor is incorporeal, but it seems to require corporeal tokens: like a straw, or like Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*. A Capulet can spark a brawl with a Montague by biting his thumb.

In the first scene of the play, Horatio explains the legal basis of King Hamlet's conquest of lands held by Norway in Poland:

³ This is why I think the untranslatable expression *die Sache selbst*—which Hegel uses to designate that which spirit cares about, its existential investments—would best be approximated in English by the phrase “the thing at stake.”

our valiant Hamlet
(For so this side of our known world esteemed him)
Did slay this Fortinbras; who, by a sealed compact
Well ratified by law and heraldry,
Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
Which he stood seized of to the conqueror;
Against which a moiety competent
Was gaged by our king, which had returned
To the inheritance of Fortinbras
Had he been vanquisher, as, by the same comart
And carriage of the article designed,
His fell to Hamlet. (1.1.84-95)

Denmark had acquired land in Poland through King Hamlet's victory over King Fortinbras, through a compact "well ratified by law and heraldry." A little patch of ground, land made property by law, becomes merely ground once more insofar as a nation's *right* to that land is secured by *might*: by material force. It is the force of bodies and weapons—warfare carried out by armies—that decides who gains possession of what portions of the earth. Now, Horatio says, young Fortinbras seeks "to recover of us by strong hand / And terms compulsory those foresaid lands / So by his father lost" (1.1.102-104).

The implications of this history and its bearing upon the present are pressed home in the graveyard scene. "How long hast thou been a gravemaker," Hamlet asks his interlocutor:

CLOWN Of all the days i' th' year, I came to't that day
that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.

HAMLET How long was that since?

CLOWN Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It
was that very day that young Hamlet was born — he
that is mad, and sent to England. (5.1.133-140)

Every fool can tell time according to Prince Hamlet's date of birth, the same date on which King Hamlet overcame King Fortinbras and gained possession of the Norwegian lands. And ever since

then, the riddling Clown has been at his station, digging graves. A prince is born into the legal inheritance of his father's kingdom, including a worthless little patch of ground in Poland acquired on the same day he came into the world, and now—dispossessed of his inheritance by a treasonous usurper—he meditates upon the reduction of property to earth and of bodies to decomposition. “How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?” (5.1.154), he asks, and then he reasons:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel? (5.1.198-202)

A little patch of ground can be the object of conquest, but the earth will conquer the conqueror, who becomes a patch of ground used to stop up a hole: to hold the place of nothing. Time is the medium of these transformations: “How long hast thou?”; “How long is that since?”; “How long will a man lie?” Time is the element of earth's conquest of property, wherein titles turn to dust as persons become things, moving from station to station: from social position to physical location, from order of rank to the rank odor of decomposition.

Throughout the play, persons and things trade places. “Who's there?” the play famously opens, and the question is asked by the wrong man: not by the sentinel at his station but rather by the one who approaches him. “Nay, answer me,” the sentinel replies, “stand and unfold yourself.” A person stands in a place wherein a name must unfold that person's identity. But the question *Who's there?* is already a reversal, enunciated by the one to whom it should be addressed, so it solicits a negation, *Nay*. The question goes unanswered, and among the words of which is it composed—Who's there?—*there* is just as important as *who*: it marks the problem of place that unfolds throughout the drama. “Long live the king!” Barnardo replies

when asked to unfold himself, but the king is dead, while an illegitimate usurper occupies his position. The play begins with a changing of the guard: “Who hath relieved you,” Marcellus asks; “Barnardo hath my place,” says Francisco. “What, is Horatio there?” Barnardo asks. “A piece of him,” Horatio replies. A little patch of ground, a piece of a person. The ghost will appear “in the same figure like the king that’s dead” (1.1.41). But the question of whether the same figure amounts to the same thing, the same person, haunts Hamlet as he broods upon the legitimacy of its demand for revenge. The same suit of armour may hold the place of a devil, which “hath power / T’ assume a pleasing shape.” A person is a shape an apparition might assume, a spatial presence whose appearance may be duplicated. So “I’ll have grounds / More relative than this,” Hamlet declares (2.2.538-539). By *grounds* he means reasons. But we see that his reasoning eventually leads to a literalization of this metaphor: not only may the devil assume a pleasing shape, it is also the case that the remains of Imperious Caesar, “which kept the world in awe,” may “patch a wall t’ expel the winter’s flaw.” The *world* is the place of shapes with names and titles; the *earth* is the ground of their indifference, where they interchangeably occupy space.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are interchangeable, reduced grammatically to a single fate when Hamlet compares them to an “enginer / hoist with his own petard” (3.4.207). The maker of grenades is blown up with his own device, taking the place of the intended target. Hamlet replaces the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern containing orders to have him killed, describing the accomplishment of his plan to Horatio in some detail:

Up from my cabin,
My sea gown scarfed about me, in the dark
Groped I to find them, had my desire,
Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew
To mine own room again, making so bold,
My fears forgetting manners, to unseal
Their grand commission. (5.2.13-17)

The ship becomes a delimited spatial universe wherein Hamlet gropes in the dark, as if cloaked in the sea itself. He picks the pocket of his interchangeable former friends, unseals their commission, forges a new document in the fair hand of a professional scrivener, reseals the envelope with his father's signet—which he happens to have in his purse—and returns the packet to its place:

Folded the writ up in the form of the other,
Subscribed it, gave't th' impression, placed it safely,
The changeling never known. (5.2.51-53)

The changeling letter is a synecdoche for the dramas of displacement traversing the play, wherein mislaid plans and wayward fates intersect through indirections. "O tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.209-210), says Hamlet of his plan to redirect the betrayal of his former friends.

When the players arrive at Elsinore—perhaps the most important of the play's superfluous necessities—Hamlet recites a scene from the Aeneid that situates us within the Trojan horse, where Pyrrus, "Black as his purpose, did the night resemble" (2.2.393). The interior of "the ominous horse" is like Hegel's "night in which all cows are black"—the locus of deception wherein purposes are indiscernible from persons and resemblance is identical to the darkness of indifference. The Player picks up where a speech by Hamlet leaves off, narrating the murder of Priam by Pyrrus and the curious suspension of time and of action that proceeds it:

For lo! his sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick.
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter
Did nothing. (2.2.417-422)

The sword pauses, unaccountably, in mid-air. Pyrrhus is “like a neutral to his will and matter.” The scene freezes, like a painting; Pyrrus stood as if beside himself and did nothing, separated at once from both his incorporeal will and his corporeal matter: nothing more than an image suspended in time. He becomes a shape, a spatial outline, a painted tyrant. Then he goes about his business, slaughtering Priam with a bleeding sword, and Polonius says “This is too long” (2.2.438). Within a superfluous pause in a superfluous speech, holding up the action of the play before the play within a play, we find the *neutral* incarnated as a suspended shape that did nothing—that was simply there, for a moment in time, before proceeding with the inevitable. That which is “too long” takes up space; time is properly registered when it grinds to halt, is experienced as duration or as a pause. This effect is crucial to the feeling of Shakespeare’s play, which is so long we might experience it, retrospectively, as a kind of tableaux—not just action, but time become space, as space is suspended in time.

The play’s great emblem of such suspension is the “envious sliver” that supports Ophelia upon the pendant boughs of a willow tree as she hangs fantastic garlands of flowers from its branches—until the sliver breaks and she drowns. Why is the sliver envious? We can give a precise answer. It is envious because it *does* support her: she cannot decorate with crownet weeds the same branch that bears her weight, since it is underneath her feet. Her death is an anthropomorphic drama, wherein nature so craves the ornaments we fashion for it that it resents our occupation of the space where they might otherwise be. Nature wants the art we have to give, but it grows weary of supporting our weight and our activities; it wants the place where we are for the beauties that we proffer. The very presence of the human body, in nature, is an impediment to nature’s union with the superfluity of ornament. Because our bodies are *necessary* to the production of ornament, they contradict the very contingency which is the substance of its beauty. Thus,

an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (4.7.171-181)

Song is the magic cape, says Thomas Pynchon, but the tragic fact is that Ophelia's clothes can only support her song for so long. "Awhile they bore her up...But long it could not be." The same garments that keep her afloat, for a while, pull her down to muddy death. They spread wide, augmenting the space her body occupies, like a flower in bloom, and then pull the song she sings under the surface, back to the earth from which it stemmed and flourished. Earlier Ophelia offered, in song, a devastating figure of her father's death as spatial absence.

And will he not come again?
And will he not come again?
No, no, he is dead;
Go to thy deathbed;
He never will come again. (4.5.184-188)

The dead are not only those who are gone, but those who will not come again: who will never again be *here*.

Thus Laertes cries, as Ophelia is lowered into the grave, "Hold off the earth awhile, / Till I have caught her once more in my arms" (5.1.239-240). He leaps into the grave, so as to hold his sister in place, and he and Hamlet launch into a contest of spatial hyperbole:

LAERTES Now pile your dust upon the quick and the dead
Till of this flat a mountain you have made
T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus.

HAMLET 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. (5.1.241-248)

It is not enough to bury the dead, or to be buried with them. The *place* of that burial must take on impossibly monumental proportions, outdoing even the heights of the home of the gods. Hamlet recognizes in the grief of Laertes “that within which passeth show”—he recognizes the infinite scope of grief enunciated by his double—and he declares it his own. He is finally in position to be the answer to his own question: “I, / Hamlet the Dane,” is the one “whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wandr’ing stars, and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers.” Again: that which wanders is made to stand, movement is captured by stasis, time suspended in space, like the wonder-wounded hearers who listen to the play fixed in place by its phrase of sorrow. The grave is the spatially delimited site of infinite mourning and cathartic rivalry, and here the theater becomes a grave called The Globe. As Hegel understood perfectly, self-consciousness demands recognition in order to recognize itself; Shakespeare had already dramatized the articulation of the “I” through a rivalry over who has most completely suffered the reality of death.

I have been tracing figures of the spatialization of spirit in *Hamlet*, of the way in which the displacement of space by persons and things bespeaks the thingliness of our existence, and of the way in which this motif weaves together different aspects of the play, from a little patch of land in Poland, to the hiding place of Polonius’s body, to the envelope containing the destiny of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to the envious sliver that breaks

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under Ophelia, to the grave in which she comes to rest. As I move toward a conclusion, let me turn to a remarkable portrayal of *Hamlet's* graveyard scene by Eugene Delacroix.



Eugène Delacroix, *Hamlet and Horatio in the Graveyard*, 1939, Oil on Canvas

I notice one thing above all about this painting: that the feather in Hamlet's cap and the shape of the cloud above him have the same form, the same outline. Just as they are in the description of Ophelia's death, nature and fashion become curious counterparts, while the encounter of spirit and bone plays out its drama. That which is most artificial—the ornament of an ornament, the feather or the flourish of one's cap—is akin to nature insofar as each is an other of consciousness and of the body. What we wear is what we will become: matter. But here that thoughtless substance is fashioned, worked by spirit and by history into decorous form, even as the clouds are by Delacroix. The feather in the cap says as surely as the deep and distant substance of the cloud: what we are looking at is not only the mimetic representation of a scene but a material thing, a painting. It's their doubling by one another—the artistic act performed by Delacroix—that makes this unavoidable. Nature and artifice find their synthesis in the bristles of the brush, right at the surface of their encounter with the texture of the canvas. That's where we can find spirit and bone not faced off in a *tete-à-tete*—there where we can see them—but integral in their movement, assimilated by it, mediating the absolute judgment as material image in the process of its making. Delacroix's doubling of cap and cloud gives us the key to the torn and troubled skies we find in so many of his paintings. All those riven skies in their moody majesty are signs of that within which passeth show, but they are not quite drawn back into that interiority. They remain exterior, mysterious, unassimilable, and that's why they look the way they do. The riddle is that their ungraspable mystery depends on its recognition while repelling recognition, like the way the ornaments of our garments decorate the body and lend it their signature without yet being one with it, such that they may hang, for example, unregarded upon a hook—merely existing.

The dialectical problem of exteriority is made manifest by Delacroix's painting, and it is inscribed at the heart of Shakespeare's play. What is within resists expression through that

which is without; what is without resists absorption by that which is within. Yet we can know this; we can come to think the concept of this irreducibility of bone to spirit and of spirit to bone, even as we think their being as one. Doing so through Hegel's infinite judgment requires us to wrestle with the way in which spirit is a thing even as it is not, a speculative contradiction bearing upon the historical spiritualization of ground by culture and the reduction of culture to ground.

This approach to the play allows us to grasp the meaning of its final imperative, spoken by Fortinbras:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and this passage
The soldier's music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot. (5.2.379-386)

Hamlet *would* "have proved most royal." But on the palace floor, the bodies show much amiss: that the time is out of joint, that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. They mark the skewed intersection of time with space, of history with the ground that will be called "land" or "nation." On the palace floor, the bodies are not where they should be: on the battlefield. So they must be placed where they are: on the stage. The stage is the site of the re-placement of bodies, the reenactment of their lives and their deaths. Music and the rite of war are requested for Hamlet's passage to the stage, the sound of spirit and the sound of leaden gunshots. High on a stage, where the bodies will be placed in view, Horatio will "speak to th' yet unknowing world / How these things came about" (5.2.362-323). At the end of the play, it is as though we do not yet know what we already know; the bodies are not where they should be, nor

where they are: they still have to be carried to the stage. *Drama* will be—it is—the speculative actualization of the play’s movement, the being-where-it-is-not of story, and sorrow, and time. In dramatic art we come to see that bodies are not identical with persons—an actor on a stage may play a part—yet the body is precisely the non-identical site of that performance, of the contradictory identity of what we are with who we are not. Hamlet is the name of both Prince and play, but the word “Hamlet” cannot be written both in and out of italics at the same time, cannot be inscribed, at once, as the name of the drama and of the character within it. The bone of the signifier resists, yet bears within it, the identity of *who* and *what* it names. Each and every time, through the performance of the play, we have to undergo that displaced synthesis of content and form. We have to watch and to listen to what is right there in front of us, conceptualizing what stands and unfolds itself in time, the drama of speaking bodies as they come to know what the poet Joe Wenderoth calls “the true silence of the tongue,”⁴ as they come to think the void of the speaking tongue’s eventual absence from the skull, the hollow absence of the song its silence once could sing.

Confronted with a skull bone and a name, the voice of tragedy says “Alas, poor Yorick!” But through the experience of tragic art—through our immersion in its pathos at the place of its unfolding—we may come to know the meaning of its matter: *The being of spirit is a bone*. To know tragic art in that way is indeed to think the unfolding of its drama as the highest fulfillment of self-comprehending life. Delacroix’s painting freezes the scene at the pregnant moment where the name is spoken and the skull is passed from one to another. But if we know the play, we can recognize and feel therein the complex articulations of the drama’s unfolding, the movement of the whole through a still image. *This? E’en that*. That is to say, spirit.

⁴ Joe Wenderoth, “Language” in *If I Don’t Breathe How Do I Sleep*, Seattle: Wave Books, 2014, p. 16.

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