"The Action to the Word, the Word to the Action": Reading *Hamlet* with Cavell and Derrida

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> *"Also to be distinguished are cases of* suiting the action to the word – *a special type of case which may generate performatives but which is not in itself a case of the performative utterance"*
>
> (J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Lecture VI)

> *"It argues an act, and an act hath three branches: it is to act, to do, and to perform"*
>
> (*Hamlet*, 5.1.11-13)

When asked if he knows what a philosopher is, Aldous Huxley's character John the Savage defines one as "a man who dreams of fewer things than there are in heaven and earth" (1965: 178). The epigrammatic brevity and wit of this allusion to *Hamlet* singles out a thread of the play that is at best skeptical about, and arguably dismissive of, the academic study of philosophy. Yet one could hardly claim that the play dismisses philosophy itself: on the contrary, it famously anticipates a good deal of modern philosophising, from Descartes (who, like Hamlet, demands proof that he is not being bewitched by an evil demon) to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (which, like *Hamlet,* concludes that the rest is silence). So it is apt that *Hamlet* has itself proven a fruitful point of departure for the two contemporary

philosophers who have departed further than most from traditional academic philosophy precisely by bringing it into contact with literature: namely, Jacques Derrida and Stanley Cavell. For our purposes, then, *Hamlet* is not merely a topic of conversation in the dialogue between philosophy and literature. It is a topic for dialogue between different traditions of philosophy, and one of the points of agreement in this dialogue is that *Hamlet* is *itself* a conversation between philosophy and literature.

Of course, Derrida and Cavell's philosophies, and especially their writings on literary/philosophical relations, intersect in any number of ways. So why start with *Hamlet*? It is not just that the play's philosophical dimensions lend themselves to educing the nuances of these different thinkers' ideas (though they do). More importantly, in their discussions of the play, Derrida and Cavell repeatedly broach the same kinds of question. For example, Cavell's "Hamlet's Burden of Proof" shares Derrida's sense (as voiced in his essay "The Time is Out of Joint") that *Hamlet* draws out the "enigmas" of mourning.[1] More briefly but no less strikingly, it also shares the fascination with spectrality that runs through Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.[2] These notions of mourning and spectrality have a transforming force in relation to philosophical thought.

Though these coinciding preoccupations establish a good deal of common ground between Cavell and Derrida in their writings on *Hamlet*, our concern here is rather to unravel a particular strand running through both thinkers' readings of the play. That strand is bound up with a more direct encounter between their philosophies: namely, the issue of the performative, and their different interpretations of J.L. Austin. Derrida's reading of *How To Do Things With Words*, which so famously provoked the wrath of John Searle, has itself been revisited by Cavell in his insightful essay "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?" Cavell, who attended the William James lectures and describes himself as "a pupil of Austin's," engages at length and in depth with Derrida's (mis)reading of Austin, and points out a number of

ways in which Austin's and Derrida's projects "bear deep features in common". When trying to account for Derrida's obliviousness to these similarities between his own deconstructing of western metaphysics and Austin's "dismantling" of the same philosophical tradition, Cavell suggests that "Derrida had not read certain texts of Austin that are inscribed in the text … [of] *How To Do Things With Words*". In particular, claims Cavell, Derrida "simply hadn't read" Austin's earlier works "A Plea for Excuses" and "Pretending", which, he says, are "presupposed by" his discussions of the performative in *How To Do Things With Words* (Cavell, 1995b: 67, 68-9, 70, 71). Thus, Austin's now infamous claim that "a performative utterance will […] be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage" (1975: 22) is less a methodological move to bracket off the realms of literature and theatre, as Derrida takes it to be, and more a reference to the fact that Austin had already covered this ground in his 1958 discussion of pretending – a discussion which, by his own admission, was one of Austin's flimsier contributions to philosophy. Intriguingly, however, Cavell – perhaps the foremost of Austin's inheritors – takes up *Hamlet* as a means of taking Austin's formulation to task, while Derrida – perhaps the foremost of Austin's critics – takes up *Hamlet* as an opportunity subtly to revisit his earlier critique. Thus, performativity is a force no less important to these readings of *Hamlet,* and no less transformative of philosophy itself, than mourning or spectrality.

I

In an essay entitled "The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?)," first published five years after the initial Derrida/Searle altercation, Cavell turns to *Hamlet* almost in passing. In a brief passage, he alludes to a certain scene (to which we will return) to

illustrate his own reservations about Austin's poorly formulated views on the status of theatrically performed performatives:

> When [Austin] says that a performative utterance will be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, that is either false or too poorly described to assess. It is false to say, for example, that Horatio and Marcellus do not really or felicitously swear by Hamlet's sword never to speak of what they have seen and heard; and to say that the actors playing those roles have not really sworn would be as useful as to say that those actors are not really, except *per accidens*, in Denmark. Say that what actors do is imitate actions. Then the conditions of any act you can specify can be imitated. So you can imitate any way in which one of these conditions might fail and hence perfectly imitate an infelicitous act of speech. If Hamlet has no sword or if Horatio had crossed his fingers or winked aside to the audience, then he would not exactly have sworn on Hamlet's sword. But if Austin had in mind an actor speaking not to other actors but rather to us in the audience, then the case has to be imagined as one in which we or the other actors do not know that the actor speaking is on the stage or that we are members of an audience. And whatever it is to know this and however we might be imagined to fail to know it are matters that have nothing special to do with performative utterances. The question raised by Austin's passage is why he should be prompted at all to such exclusions, what misunderstanding it is he takes himself to be guarding against. (1984: 39)

This passage – which, by our reckoning, is probably the first substantial discussion of *Hamlet* by either thinker – is remarkably close to many of the criticisms Derrida makes of Austin and Searle,[3] and it is no less remarkable that Cavell, for whom Shakespeare so often acts as a conduit into philosophical problems, should turn to *Hamlet* in order to highlight problems

with a philosopher so central to his own thought as Austin. But more remarkable still is that the very scene that serves this purpose for Cavell is precisely the scene that serves Derrida as an opening for a rapprochement with Austin's concept of the performative.

The first chapter in *Specters of Marx* opens with this epigraph:

> *Hamlet:* ... Sweare.
>
> *Ghost* [*beneath*]: Sweare.
>
> [*They swear*]

Unsurprisingly in a book about Marx, Derrida regards this as (amongst other things) a political moment: as an example of a "conspiracy (*Verschwörung* in German) of those who promise solemnly, sometimes secretly, by swearing together an oath (*Schwur*) to struggle against a superior power" (Derrida, 2006: 50). As such, it cannot but be performative, embroiled in illocutionary effects and perlocutionary forces. Yet Derrida perceptively observes that there is something unusual about this particular oath.

> Hamlet […] evoking the "Vision" they have just seen and the "honest ghost" […] asks Horatio and Marcellus to swear ("swear't," "Consent to swear"). To swear upon his sword, but to swear or to swear together *on the subject of the spectral apparition itself*, and to promise secrecy on the subject of the apparition of an honest ghost that, from beneath the stage, conspires with Hamlet to ask the same thing from the sworn: ("*The Ghost cries from under the stage*: Sweare"). It is the apparition that enjoins them to conspire to *silence the apparition*, and to promise secrecy on the subject of the one who demands such an oath from them: one must not know whence comes the injunction, the conspiracy, the promised secret. (2006: 50)

One could extrapolate that in a sense this performative is self-negating: *qua* speech act, it is both a speech that binds its speakers not to speak, and an act that compels them not to act. Thus, Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* might easily add grist to the mill in which he deconstructed Austin. But the scene is not as simple as this, as Derrida points out, for the text itself announces that there is something "out of joint" here. After all, it is immediately after instigating this conspiracy that Hamlet utters the line that, in both of Derrida's discussions of the play, comes to bear more interpretative weight than any other in Shakespeare's text:

> Injunctions and sworn faith: that is what we are trying to think here. We ought to try to understand together, to adjoin, if one prefers, two signs in one, a double sign. Hamlet declares "The time is out of joint" precisely at the moment of the oath, of the injunction to swear, to *swear together* [conjurer], at the moment in which the specter, who is always a sworn conspirator [*conjuré*], one more time, from beneath, from beneath the earth or beneath the stage, has just ordered: "Swear". And the sworn conspirators swear together ("*They swear"*). (2006: 34)

Determining what it might mean for Hamlet to say that the time is out of joint preoccupies Derrida more than any other interpretative task in his reading of the play. (This is unsurprising, since exploring the stakes in trying to formulate a verdict on one's times is more or less Derrida's political gesture behind *Specters of Marx* in the first place). Amongst the manifold suggestions he makes, however, one in particular hinges on the kind of performativity involved in the oath scene.

If, as Derrida has it, this oath is in part a political conspiracy, it is worth calling to mind how Derrida reads the performative status of another document of political conspiracy, namely the American Declaration of Independence,[4] since he describes his reading as another attempt to "put to the test … those conceptual schemes – such as a critical problematic of 'speech acts', a theory of 'performative' writing" (1986: 7). For Derrida, this declaration, in

which the "signature invents the signer" (1986: 10), is a performative which founds its own conditions of possibility, because the declaration brings the declarers into being. Thus, *pace* Austin and Searle, performatives do not always depend upon contextually or conventionally determined criteria, or upon the intentionality of a coherent, self-identical speaker. Indeed, performativity can act as a force that, rather than depending on conventions, contexts, and institutions, actually shatters them. This is more or less how Derrida describes the political nature of the oath in *Hamlet*:

> the political injunction, the pledge or the promise (the oath, if one prefers: "swear!"), the originary performativity that does not conform to preexisting conventions, unlike all the performatives analyzed by the theoreticians of speech acts, but whose force of *rupture* produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself, which is to say also the meaning that appears to, that ought to, or that appears to have to guarantee it in return. *Violence* of the law before the law and before meaning, violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: out of joint. (2006: 36-7).

Thus, *Hamlet* serves Derrida as, amongst many other things, an opportunity subtly to revisit his deconstruction of performativity: here, *Hamlet* shows us that the performativity involved in swearing this oath has consequences that far outstrip Austin's preliminary isolation of the performative in *How To Do Things With Words* – yet remains recognisably performative nonetheless.

The condition of spectrality which Derrida explores in his writings on *Hamlet* is often taken to question, or to expose as inadequate, the nature of ontology – to offer a hauntology in its place. But apparently this spectrality extends beyond ontology to language, disrupting the nature of its effects and forces. This much is in evidence when Derrida poses "the question of the event as question of the ghost. *What* is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the

presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum?" (2006: 10). In other words, not only is the effectiveness of language strained when it comes to speaking of (let alone with) a spectre, but the effectiveness of the spectral effect is itself open to question. Derek Attridge points out that there is something inherently performative in the nature of the ghost itself:

> The ghost is as much *event* as *object* (the word "apparition" holds both of these together). The ghost speaks performatively – it is itself a performative – nothing will be the same again after it has appeared and spoken. … And it is an event which demands a *response.* (1995: 224)

However, if Derrida's discussions in *Specters of Marx* involve a certain rapprochement with the idea of performativity, they nevertheless establish that spectral performativity haunts language use in ways every bit as troublesome as those in which spectrality haunts ontology.[5] It is not simply that Hamlet is asking his conspirators to swear never to speak of something that has never spoken to them. He asks that they swear to "Never make known what you have seen tonight" (1.5.149) – an oath which they can hardly break, because it is not as if any of them (or us) could "make" the spectral "known". In this respect, of course, Hamlet is at odds with *Hamlet*: *Hamlet* itself sets about the impossible task of making the spectral known even as Hamlet himself forbids it.

Where Derrida points out that what follows the oath scene is Hamlet declaring the time to be out of joint, Cavell observes that what precedes it is Hamlet swearing an oath he does not (or not immediately) seem to keep. It is, of course, an oath sworn to the ghost. As Cavell has it, "in the scene in which, as the Ghost departs on the injunction 'Remember me', Hamlet swears to obey the injunction by entirely replacing the table of his memory with new writing, and does write on his tables" (2003: 183-4). It is worth asking whether Hamlet keeps this promise. Numerous literary critics have suggested that, over the course of the play, he

ultimately fails to do so: “Whatever it is in Hamlet’s mind as he attacks and kills Claudius, it does not seem to be his father, of whom he says nothing and whose ghost has long since disappeared from the frame of the action” (Prenderghast, 2005: 47). If, however, Hamlet has a problem with his long-term memory in this matter, then Cavell points out that the prognosis for the short term does not look too good either:

> To my mind the significance of this moment of writing that we are shown [is] namely that it is incredible as an act of obedience to the Ghost’s injunction to remember him. Indeed Hamlet’s “tables” speech seems to go out of its way to show that the line (Hamlet calls it his “word”) containing the words “remember me” is *not* what he sets down in his tables. (2003: 184)

Interestingly, Cavell’s misgivings about Hamlet’s track record in remembering his father are shared and amplified by Derrida:

> [Hamlet’s] memory is suffering from the death of a king, a father, and a homonym, but it is suffering first of all and by that very token, *as memory*, from amnesia … It is suffering because it cannot remember, thus because it cannot think the event of this unnatural death. (1995: 17)

It would, however, be making a strange claim indeed to suggest that Hamlet disregards his promise to the ghost from the outset, not least because of the lengths he goes to in compelling his companions to conspire with him. How, then, does Cavell account for the apparently anomalous situation in which Hamlet, whilst swearing to remember the ghost in his mind and in his writing, apparently does no such thing? As Cavell puts it,

> I imagine that this enacted absence of obedience means, among other things, and unless we take it that Hamlet is false in swearing to remember the Ghost his father by writing, that the obedience is deferred, and takes place as the dumb-show and ensuing play-within-the-play. (2003:184)

That is, if what Hamlet promises the ghost is to remember him by producing new writing (and, Cavell observes, Hamlet pens no fewer than five pieces of writing in this play), then the most obvious way in which he fulfils this promise is in writing the "speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.529) that is inserted into "The Mouse-trap".

The vocabulary Cavell uses here – "absence," "writing," "deferred" – sounds somewhat Derridean. Be this as it may, however, it is worth making two quick points to serve as a caveat about any such o'erhasty marriage: firstly, though the terms are Derridean enough, they are nevertheless terms raised and used in *Hamlet* itself; secondly, Cavell uses these terms specifically to describe the play-within-the-play, and his reading of *Hamlet* attaches a pivotal importance to it, whereas Derrida makes little to no mention of it.[6] Cavell, by contrast, describes his "work in progress towards *Hamlet*" as "epitomized by the way I am thinking about the crux of the play-within-the-play" (2003: 179). This is because, as in most of his writings on Shakespeare's plays, Cavell argues that *Hamlet* contains what can only be called an "aesthetics of itself":[7]

> How may we understand the dumb-show, so construed, to work at the heart of *Hamlet*? How does it figure the body of the play? Of course I am using it, in such a question, as an image of what Shakespeare thinks a play is; that is, to interrogate *Hamlet* for its testimony as to the work of theatre. (2003: 186)

But, in Cavell's view, regarding the dumb-show "as the play's figure for itself" does not amount to the (comparatively) straightforward "figuring process" known as *mise-en-abyme*, because *mise-en-abyme* involves "one thing containing another that looks like or copies it, repeats it in miniature. But the way the dumb-show would figure *Hamlet* is exactly not by looking like it" (2003: 188).

What Cavell's reading of the play-within-the-play draws attention to are the puzzling ways in which it seems to resemble a primal scene – not the least of which is the way its

manifest content presents itself so as *not* to resemble a primal scene. Specifically, the play-within-the-play stages the father as the passive, recumbent party who is violated by a fluid poured into his orifice. Clearly, this involves a striking reversal of the gender roles in Freud's classic analyses of the primal scene. Yet, Cavell argues, such a reversal is perfectly in order, because Freud's analyses – in particular the case of the Wolf Man – themselves involved "the reversal of a thing into its opposite" (Cavell, 2003: 184). Thus, for Cavell, the play-within-the-play offers what he calls a "fantasy, hence cipher, for the idea of Gertrude as killer" (2003: 185). He points to the fact that Hamlet can all too readily conflate or interchange the roles of Gertrude and Claudius, as is shown when he calls Claudius "dear mother" (4.4.51; 2003: 184-5). But we would suggest that more conducive evidence is offered by the well-known fact that Hamlet, knowing Claudius calls Gertrude "his mouse" (3.4.172), entitles his play "The Mouse-trap". This lends weight to Cavell's argument because it illustrates his claims "that the play-within-the-play was to catch her conscience as well as her new husband's … that in speaking of catching the king's conscience Hamlet was thinking of her, hence that he fantasizes her as king". Thus, Hamlet is staging his own fears and fantasies about his mother – his "sense of Gertrude's power to annihilate all Hamlets" (2003: 185, 187).[8]

Before debating Cavell's claims, and placing them in dialogue with Derrida's, it is worth pausing to reflect – as neither Cavell nor Derrida does – that the play-within-the-play returns us to the discussion of the issue of swearing, promises, and oaths. Amongst its (many) other functions and effects, the play-within-the-play theatricalises the performative act of promising by staging it, thus tackling head-on Austin's equivocation about performatives "said by an actor on the stage". The substance of this text written by Hamlet is, after all, an oath sworn by a queen; her king is satisfied that "'Tis deeply sworn" (3.2.211). Hamlet – the

impresario of this oath scene – greets his arriving audience by commenting on the airiness of promises in a remarkable exchange with Claudius:

> CLAUDIUS: How fares our cousin Hamlet?
>
> HAMLET: Excellent, i'faith […] I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so.
>
> CLAUDIUS: I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet: these words are not mine.
>
> HAMLET: No, nor mine now. (3.2.86-91)

It is curious that, in this exchange, Claudius replies to a comment about empty promises by saying that these words are not his. If "word" is a synonym for "promise" – as in Hamlet's "Now to my word" (1.5.111) – then Claudius is insisting that his promises are not empty. Hamlet, in showing how easily words are disavowed, is playing on the key theme of keeping or breaking one's word, which the play-within-the-play is about to unfold.[9] He then torments his audience with an almost Brechtian teaser ("If she should break it now?" [3.2.210]), and singles out Gertrude for particular mockery ("O! but she'll keep her word" [3.2.218]).

The prominence given to this staging of a sworn vow places this scene in a clear relationship with the oath-swearing scene at the start of the play, by theatricalising the act of promising. This theatricalisation echoes and amplifies the importance of promising as a theme throughout it: Laertes will bluster "To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!" (4.5.131), and even Ophelia sings of a broken promise in her final scene (4.5.61-4). Indeed, if Cavell is right that Hamlet fulfils his promise to remember his father by writing the play-within-the-play, then what is arguably most striking about it is that Hamlet fulfils his promise to his father by staging a promise made to his (theatricalised) father. In this respect, the play is notably divergent from *The Spanish Tragedy,* with which it is so frequently compared: in Kyd's prototype, the moment of theatricalising the crime is simultaneously the moment in which revenge is enacted. By contrast, if Cavell is right that "The Mouse-trap" is a figure for

Hamlet, then *Hamlet* – whatever else it may be – is rather a play about making and breaking promises, both on and off the stage. To use Austin's phrase, the Player Queen's promise is "*in a peculiar way* hollow or void" (1975: 22) not because she says it on the stage, but because the promise she alludes to has already been broken, and broken by a character who is not on the (same) stage with her, but in her audience. By any standards, this is a *very* peculiar way of being hollow or void.[10]

II

Promises are not the only performatives that feature in Derrida's writings on *Hamlet.* Where *Specters of Marx* places great emphasis on the swearing of an oath, his reading of the play in the essay "The Time is Out of Joint" foregrounds another dimension in which *Hamlet* is embroiled with the concept of performativity:

> In *Hamlet*, the dramatization deploys a spectacular and supernaturally miraculous *mise en abîme* of testimonies […] testifying to the impossible possibility of testimony. […] Hamlet is alone in being able to bear witness in this way to the testimony. The play named *Hamlet* thus becomes, like "Aschenglorie," a testimony on the essence of testimony, which also becomes the absence of testimony. (Derrida, 1995: 33)

Not only does Derrida call attention to the central role of witnessing and testimony in *Hamlet*, but he goes out of his way to call attention to the relationship this establishes between the play and the idea of performativity: "When we speak of testimony as active or performative, we are talking about bearing witness, the declaration, the oath, and so forth. But the witness-witness, the one who sees, is in principle passive" (1995: 34). Hamlet, then, is more the substrate that is written upon than the writing itself, let alone the writer. In other words,

Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* simultaneously foregrounds the importance of Austin's idea of doing things with words – testifying and witnessing, *qua* speech acts, are actions – whilst showing that Hamlet's famed inaction troubles this idea: *Hamlet* shows us how to not do things, either with words or with deeds, but in showing us this, it testifies and bears witness all the same.

It is at this point that the absence of the play-within-the-play from Derrida's discussion of *Hamlet* becomes problematic, for how does Hamlet go about bearing witness to what he has seen? Most obviously, by restaging the events so that the perpetrator can witness the murder he (or, following Cavell's reading of Hamlet's purpose, "she" or "they") has committed. Not only does the play-within-the-play place Claudius (and perhaps Gertrude) in the uncomfortable position of witness to their own crime, it is also serves as another form of testimony: it is Hamlet's way of bearing witness to the world and testifying what really happened to his father. Certainly, he regards the players as "the abstracts, and brief chronicles, of the time" (2.2.529-30), and this is indeed the function he asks them to perform by staging this play: apparently, he asks them to attest to his father's murder. Moreover, he asks Horatio to act as a witness to the whole spectacle by asking him to "observe" Claudius and "give him heedful note" (3.2.75, 79). On the face of it, then, the play-within-the-play ought to be as central to Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* as it is to Cavell's.

Things, however, are not quite as simple as this. It is worth recalling, and expanding upon, Cavell's suggestion that the events of the play-within-the-play figure the events of *Hamlet* precisely by *not* looking like them. Cavell, as we have seen, "propos[es] that we look at the dumb-show as Hamlet's invention, let me say his fantasy, and in particular a fantasy that deciphers into the memory of a primal scene, a scene of parental intercourse" (2003: 182-3). On this reading, the play-within-the-play acts out a fantasy rather than bearing witness to events that have taken place, and, as in dreamwork, this work of fantasy deforms, disfigures,

and re-encodes its latent content. Like the post-traumatic work of *durcharbeiten,* it re-enacts a kinds of witnessing that avoids knowledge of what it bears witness to. Thus, what it bears witness to is (literally) inadmissible testimony – testimony of a scene Hamlet cannot admit to witnessing.

This point is epitomised in Cavell's somewhat odd contention that Claudius did not actually poison Hamlet's father through his ear. The argument is roughly this: Claudius does not recognise the crime as his when it is mimed out before him in the dumb-show; apparently he only realises its connection with his crime once Hamlet spells out that the poisoner will seduce his victim's wife. Since aural poisoning is such a very specific way of committing murder, this is not credible. Moreover, we know that Claudius murdered Hamlet senior – he confesses to it at prayer – but when the play comes to show us Claudius's *modus operandi* as a poisoner, "what Shakespeare shows us is that Claudius poisons by poisoning a drink" (Cavell, 2003: 190). For Cavell, the scene of the father being inseminated by a poisonous fluid introduced into an orifice while he lies sleeping smacks so strongly of a fantasy or dream that he suggests Hamlet's staging of this scene has, at least in part, the purpose of a psychoanalytic "working through". Thus, the play-within-the-play does *not* bear witness to what happened to Hamlet's father; it enciphers his fantasies about his parents. Admittedly, some critics have claimed that Cavell's writings on Shakespeare are occasionally sidetracked by an "armchair Freudianism" (Rudrum, 2103: 69). But if Cavell's reading holds water, then not only must the play-within-the-play be discounted as bearing reliable witness to the murder: so too must the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Since we have it from the mouth of the ghost that Hamlet's father was poisoned through the ear, there is no way of questioning this event without questioning the veracity of the ghost. "But why, at all costs, is that veracity to be preserved?" asks Cavell:

> the most obvious *positive* explanation for the occurrence of Shakespeare's repetitive dumb-show … is exactly that it emphasizes the *question* of the Ghost's veracity. Must the Ghost's word be preserved because of some dramatic conventions concerning ghosts, or because of some theories contemporary with the play concerning the walking of ghosts – conventions or theories that Shakespeare is presumably incapable of challenging? You might as well say that in writing the revenge play to end revenge plays, Shakespeare had nothing new of interest to offer concerning the idea of revenge. (2003: 181).

Hamlet explicitly sets out to test whether indeed "It is an honest ghost" (1.5.143), so the question is certainly there to be asked. Indeed, a number of noteworthy Shakespeare scholars have asked it too – some before Cavell, others more recently.[11] And it is important to note that Derrida also considers it a valid question: "Another can always lie, he can disguise himself as a ghost, another ghost may also be passing himself off for this one. It's always possible" (2006: 7).

Derrida, like Cavell, hints at the possibility that both Hamlet and the ghost are unreliable. He does so, however, without resorting to elaborate psychoanalytic explanations: indeed, he is more than a little dismissive of these (see Derrida, 1995: 34).[12] For Derrida, the play itself gives us enough grounds for suspicion. "Concern[ing] the violent death of his father […] there seems to be unimpeachable testimony". But the precise circumstances of the king's death actually turn out to be less than certain: "The proof? The proof that "the time is out of joint"? One proof at least? Well, no one can agree about the time, about the date of the King's death" (1995: 18). All in all, the play variously locates this moment as "two months" ago, then (just a few lines later) "one month," then "two hours," then "twice two months". Well may Derrida point out that "Hamlet, and everyone in *Hamlet*, seems to be wandering around in confusion on this subject. Now, *when* and *if* one does not know *when* an event took

place, one has to wonder *if* it indeed took place". By this rationale, Hamlet is, for Derrida, "the heir of a spectre concerning which no one knows any longer *at what moment* and therefore *if* death has happened to him" (1995: 20-1, 30).

What, then, becomes of the idea of testimony and bearing witness in *Hamlet*, once both Derrida and Cavell have drawn attention to the possibility (whether plausible or far-fetched) that the play's account of its complicating action – the murder – might be open to question? Aren't truth-telling and reliability criterial for witnessing? If the idea of the performativity of *Hamlet* is linked to the work of bearing witness, then it is important to ask who bears witness, to whom, about what. As we have seen, the ghost is the most obvious witness in the play: it testifies that it has been the victim of a secret crime. But, importantly, it testifies this to Hamlet, and to no-one else. Its testimony is for his ears only. Irrespective of whether what the ghost says is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, its status as witness is questionable because bearing witness is not normally a private or secret act: it is normally done before a public, or a body representing the public. That the ghost gives evidence to Hamlet alone, and that both of them then require that all the other witnesses are sworn to silence, suggests that this particular scene ought to be of interest to Derrida not because it involves an act of witnessing or a sworn oath, but rather because it involves another key Derridean concern – the secret.

There are, however, different ways of looking at the matter of witnessing. Surely the star witness in *Hamlet* is Hamlet himself. Derrida does indeed emphasise that Hamlet "saw as a witness" (1995: 34). However, he goes on to deconstruct this idea by observing that "this witness will have been the witness of a witness […] the witness of that witness that was his ghost of a father" (1995: 35). Such an observation, at first blush, would seem to offer ample opportunity to debunk Hamlet's testimony, by reducing it to what is essentially hearsay ("Hamlet says that he heard it from a very reliable source that…"), hence inadmissible

evidence. But that is not the point of Derrida's observation, nor is it a warrantable conclusion on its own terms, for Hamlet is not content simply to parrot what he has heard from the ghost: the play-within-the-play is motivated precisely by his recognising the importance of *not* taking the ghost's word for it. Rather, the point is that what Hamlet witnesses is *not* just another witness. Derrida, in fact, goes to quite some lengths to spell out what exactly Hamlet bears witness to:

> In sum, Hamlet, surviving witness, is also the one who has seen death. He has seen the impossible and he cannot survive what he has survived. After having seen the worst, after having been the witness of the worst disaster, of absolute injustice, he has the experience of surviving – which is the condition of witnessing – but in order to survive what one does not survive. Because one *should not* survive. And that is what Hamlet *says*, and that is what *Hamlet*, the work, *does*. (1995: 36)

This passage succinctly illustrates two of our principal theses: firstly, that Derrida's challenges to the idea of performativity in his earlier writings are substantially modified by his subtle and more complex drawings on this idea in his writings on *Hamlet*; and secondly, that Derrida's writings on *Hamlet* demonstrate that spectrality haunts language (and especially performative language) at least as much as it haunts ontology. These two ideas are held together in the notion of Hamlet's bearing witness to the impossible – to death and beyond death.

And yet *Hamlet* contains more witnesses than Hamlet. The purpose of the play-within-the-play, after all, is to place Claudius in the unlikely position of witness to the crime he has committed. Its intended effect is to produce one performative from another – that is, it aims to extract an act of confession from the act of bearing witness. And it does indeed produce this very effect: in the next scene, Claudius kneels to pray after making a full

confession. But this confession seems to be unsuccessful, or in Austin's terms, hollow and void: from Claudius's point of view, it is hollow, because it is unaccompanied by penitence or penance, and from Hamlet's point of view, it is void, because no one (least of all Hamlet) hears the king confess to the murder, when the original idea was to have Claudius proclaim his malefactions (2.2.581) – and thus forfeit his throne.

However, before we conclude that the strategy of making Claudius a witness ends in failure, it is worth pausing to ask what Claudius actually witnesses in the play-within-the-play. The first thing he says after storming out of the performance is that his life is in danger, and in danger from Hamlet at that (3.3.1-7). Perhaps this is a warrantable conclusion, since Claudius now knows that Hamlet knows about Claudius's crime. But why would Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – who know none of these things – leap to the same conclusion as Claudius? Why their sudden concern about "the cease of majesty"? (3.3.15). Is it simply because they are merely Claudius's yes-men? More likely, it is because they have seen what the whole court has just seen: a play, staged by the nephew of the king, in which "one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (3.2.229) commits an act of regicide. If Cavell is right in seeing the play-within-the-play as Hamlet's fantasy, then surely there is a likelier candidate for what it fantasises than the primal scene: it fantasises Hamlet's revenge. In other words, the play-within-the-play simultaneously theatricalises *both* the murder Claudius has committed *and* the murder by which Hamlet will avenge it. Thus, what Claudius has witnessed is both his own crime and his own death. What he bears witness to is exactly what Derrida regards Hamlet as bearing witness to: the impossibility of surviving what one does not survive. By overlooking the play-within-the-play, then, Derrida misses the extent to which all three of the leading men in *Hamlet* – King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet, and Claudius – partake in the same impossible possibility of surviving what cannot be survived.[13]

There remains yet one witness left to take the stand: Horatio, the one who lives to tell the tale, the sole survivor who "speak[s] to th' yet unknowing world" (5.2.332). Derrida does indeed mention that Horatio's role is to "serve as third party and witness (*terstis*): '... if againe this Apparition come, He may approue our eyes and speake to it'" (2006: 5), and further points out that Horatio's qualification for the task is precisely that he is a "scholar". But this very qualification is, according to Derrida, simultaneously a handicap:

> What seems almost impossible is to speak always *of the* specter, to speak *to the* specter, to speak with it, therefore especially *to make or to let* a spirit *speak.* And the thing seems even more difficult for a reader, an expert, a professor, an interpreter, in short, for what Marcellus calls a "scholar". […] The reasons for this are essential. As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter. […] "Thou art a Scholler – speake to it, Horatio", [Marcellus] says naively, as if he were taking part in a colloquium. He appeals to the scholar or to the learned intellectual, to the man of culture as a spectator who better understands how to establish the necessary distance or how to find the appropriate words for observing, better yet, for apostrophizing the ghost, which is to say also for speaking the language of the dead. (2006: 11-12)

What is implied or pictured in the act of a scholar taking a stand as a witness *because* of his status as a scholar is a very particular kind of testimony: in short, an expert witness. Not every witness counts as an expert witness: some scholars are apparently more qualified to do so than the rest of us – and it appears to be this kind of scholar that Derrida has in mind when setting out the importance of scholars bearing witness for the dead.

Yet there is more to Horatio's role as witness than this. Whilst it is certainly true that Horatio bears witness to the apparition of the ghost in the play's first scene, this task is arguably best understood as a precondition for his later (and surely more important, though not addressed by Derrida) task of bearing witness for Hamlet, and telling his story, as he is asked to do in its final scene (5.2.302). As Derrida sees it, Horatio's act of bearing witness to the ghost teaches scholars a valuable lesson: "If he loves justice at least, the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost […] by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech" (2006: 221). As valuable a precept as this may be, when the play ends with Horatio effectively taking the stand to serve as witness for the dead ("Horatio, I am dead; | Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright" [5.2.291-2]), what he is asked to do is to speak, on behalf of the dead, to those left behind (5.2.298) – that is, to the present, to posterity, and to futurity. In other words, when the scholar bears witness for the ghosts of the dead, the aim is not simply to give them back speech: the testimony aims to speak to the world, and to act on the world, and thus it is performative. Horatio shows us, then, that it is not enough for the scholar to be content with giving voice to the voiceless. Indeed, an important addendum to Derrida's discussion would be to point out that when asked to speak to the ghost, Horatio the scholar begins by asking it both what he [Horatio] can do for it, *and* what the ghost might do for the common good of the nation (1.1.112-20).

III

Interestingly, besides referring to Horatio as a scholar, Derrida also calls him a "skeptic" (2006: 5) – and sure enough, he "will not let belief take hold of him" (1.1.24). He does indeed begin by expressing suspicion or contempt towards the metaphysical ("Tush, tush" [1.1.30])

– but it is equally important to note that just a few lines later, he also voices the very unskeptical view that seeing is believing (1.1.56-8). This is philosophically necessary for the play to work as it does, because it is Horatio's bearing witness to what has happened that relays the story to posterity, and it would hardly do to rely on a skeptic, who doubts the evidence of his senses or the veracity of a ghost's word, to speak "of woe and wonder" and "unnatural acts" (5.2.316, 334). Put simply, the importance that the play attaches to the role of the witness is predicated on the notion that the witness can "truly deliver" (5.2.339), but the notion that a witness's words can truthfully bear witness to the evidence of the witness's senses is precisely what is rejected by skepticism. In other words, to be a witness is to speak with conviction of what you have seen and know to be true, whereas to be a skeptic is to lack all conviction in speaking, seeing, knowing, and truth (and no doubt in conviction, too).

This problematic once again places Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* in dialogue with Cavell's. Cavell's writings on Shakespeare regard the plays as "studies of matters your philosophy … has intellectualized as skepticism," and thus he seeks to map out "the surprising place of skepticism in Hamlet's burden" (2003: 179). Cavell discusses Hamlet's proto-Cartesian need to test whether the evidence of his senses has been bewitched by an evil spirit, and his failure fully to acknowledge the upshot of this test. But, as we have seen, skepticism in *Hamlet* is not confined to Hamlet. Instead, Horatio's role shows us that there is a strong counterpoint to Hamlet's story of skepticism.[14] At his first encounter with the spirit, Hamlet instantly voices the unexamined belief that it is the honest ghost of his father – only to develop a skepticism towards it a couple of scenes later. But Horatio's journey proceeds in the opposite direction: he starts out with a skeptical view of ghosts – only to develop enough conviction in what he has seen to bear witness first about the apparition of the ghost, and later for Hamlet.

In the early years of deconstructive criticism, the obvious move here would have been to suggest that these two journeys in opposite directions are counterposed in an aporetic face-off, with the drive towards skepticism deconstructing the knowledge attested to in the act of witnessing, such that it would become questionable whether any act of witnessing actually occurs at all. That the play ends with Horatio *promising to bear witness*, rather than with any act of testimony, would moreover defer any possibility of answering the question, with the performativity of the promise acting as a substitute or supplement for the performativity of the testimony. Yet the later work of Derrida points us in a surprisingly different direction: his writings on *Hamlet*, as we have seen, go out of their way to acknowledge the crucial importance of witnessing, promising, and hence of performativity to the play.

Equally, one might expect a recognisably Cavellian reading to follow in the vein of his celebrated "redemptive" reading of *The Winter's Tale*, which ends in a similar way to *Hamlet* – with a king demanding the other character(s) account for a singularly bizarre turn of events (Fortinbras's "Let us haste to hear it" [5.2.339] is strikingly close to Leontes's order to "hastily lead away" to a place where each character can "demand an answer to his part" [5.3.155, 133]). In *The Winter's Tale*, this order comes from a character once so suspicious and skeptical that he could doubt whether his children were his own, and it indicates the overcoming of skepticism that brings redemption at the end of a play that began as a tragedy. Though the circumstances in *Hamlet* are different, they are not so dissimilar as to suggest that the play's ending endorses a skeptical attitude towards Horatio's promised testimony. And yet any such "Cavellian" reading fails to acknowledge that one of the main purposes of Cavell's writings on *Hamlet* is to call into question some of the key testimony on which the play depends.

One possible conclusion, then, would be that Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* is unexpectedly Cavellian, while Cavell's reading of *Hamlet* is no less surprisingly Derridean.

True though this may be, it nonetheless reduces *Hamlet* to a mere backdrop against which a rendezvous between two philosophers can be staged. It is *Hamlet* itself that shows us how complex and unpredictable the act of bearing witness is – that it depends on language having *both* a constative *and* a performative function, and carries *both* perlocutionary force *and* illocutionary effect. So rather than picturing *Hamlet* as a symposium, where philosophers of different stripes can meet and 'hang out,' we would do better to think of it as a séance. *Hamlet* is the medium that brings together the living and the dead, and that enables communication between people who could not otherwise talk to each other – such as deconstructionists and ordinary language philosophers, or even, perhaps, philosophy and literature *tout court*. As with every séance, there are always skeptics in the crowd, trying to ascertain whether what they see before them is testimony or theatricality. And yet *Hamlet* owes its remarkable and enduring power to its ability to keep both options in the frame as live possibilities, to elude our investigations, and to keep us wondering, thinking, marvelling. In this, it places all of us – even our finest philosophers, like Derrida and Cavell – in the position of Hamlet himself, and not just "but mutes and audience to this act" (5.2.288).

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[1] Cavell: "The play interprets the taking of one's place in the world as a process of mourning, as if there is a taking up of the world that is humanly a question of giving it up" (2003: 189). Derrida: "To carry mourning beyond its 'normal' term is no longer the gesture of a son, says the King to Hamlet; and it is even 'unmanly', thus perhaps inhuman, he suggests." "One must, he tells him in effect, know how to put an end to mourning. This presumes (but this is one of the enigmas of the play, as it is of mourning) that mourning depends on us, in us, and not on the other in us" (1995: 20-1).

[2] Derrida: "Hamlet curses the destiny that would have destined him to be the man of right, precisely [*justement*], as if he were cursing the right or the law itself that has made of him a righter of wrongs, … that is, … destined to *inherit.* One never inherits without coming to

terms with [*s'expliquer avec*] some specter, and therefore with more than one specter" (2006: 24). Cavell: "Hamlet performs the murder and substitute murder only after announcing that he is dead, thus demonstrating that to take the Ghost's revenge is to become the Ghost" (2003: 190).

[3] It is worth noting that whilst Cavell wrote these words roughly a decade before taking up Derrida's critique of Austin, the passage nevertheless chimes remarkably closely with Derrida's arguments therein – most obviously about imitating performatives, but also about scenarios similar to those Cavell describes here. For example, Searle's reply to Derrida insisted that:

> Austin's idea is simply this: If we want to know what it is to make a promise or make a statement we had better not *start* our investigation with promises made by actors on stage in the course of a play … because in a fairly obvious way such utterances are not standard cases of promises and statements.

Derrida responded:

> *Sec never* suggested that the "investigation" "start" with promises made by actors on stage. (Moreover, I want to stress that according to the logic of this hypothesis, it would not be the actor who should be held responsible but rather the speaker committed by the promise *in the scene*, that is, the character. And indeed, he is held responsible in the play and in the *ideal* – i.e. in a certain way *fictional* – analysis of a promise, the choice between the two being a matter of indifference here. But let's leave that for the moment.) (1988: 89)

[4] See Derrida (1986). An entertaining discussion of the issues raised by Derrida can be found in Miller (2001).

[5] Consider, for example, the apposite case of exorcism – there can be no clearer example of a performative haunted by spectrality, and, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida gives more attention to

discussing the problematic (or haunted) performativity of exorcism than he gives to any other kind of performative utterance (see Derrida, 2006: 59-60). Incidentally, in his discussion, Derrida misses a golden opportunity to engage with Stephen Greenblatt's fascinating analysis of exorcism in Shakespearean times, which includes regarding it as a form of performance (see Greenblatt, 1988).

[6] Indeed, it is noteworthy that some of the more distinguished commentators on Derrida's engagement with *Hamlet* have called more attention to this scene than does Derrida himself. Nicholas Royle observes that "The play within the play in *Hamlet* is in effect already being specified here as the 'miraculous organ' […] a strangely private-public theatre, a sort of interior magic show that passes show, the exposure or exscription of a character's otherwise secret and unknown thought and feelings" (2012: 144). Hélène Cixous, for her part, follows Stanley Cavell in attributing a psychoanalytic significance to it: she calls it "the inaugural scene of the unconscious" (Cixous, 2012: 4).

[7] For an elaboration of how Cavell sees an "aesthetics of itself" at work in each play of Shakespeare's, see Chapter Two of Rudrum (2013).

[8] The psychoanalytic inflections of Cavell's reading of *Hamlet* do not, it seems to us, account for Hamlet's fraught relationship with his stepfather as convincingly as does Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the play, which argues that Hamlet's fantasy is rather an oedipal desire to rid himself of his father – which, thanks to Claudius, is now an impossibility. This sheds light on why Hamlet is so resentful of Claudius *before* learning the identity of King Hamlet's murderer (he has beaten Hamlet to it), *and* why Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill the man who has in fact done what he (Hamlet) had always fantasised. See Lacan (1977).

[9] Like Claudius, Hamlet is more adept at breaking promises than he lets on. Polonius's warning to Ophelia – "Do not believe [Hamlet's] vows" (1.3.127) – will turn out to be as sound a piece of advice as any he gives to Laertes.

[10] Cf. J. Hillis Miller on Austin's formulation: "What's peculiar about it? Why does he say that and italicize it? Is there some unpeculiar way to be hollow and void?" (2001: 34).

[11] Eleanor Prosser points out that an audience steeped in Catholic traditions but reformed by Protestant correction would have seen a revenant in conflicting, oppositional ways, and cannot be assumed to have taken its truthfulness for granted (1971: 101-2). Catherine Belsey observes that Hamlet's equivocation on this point could well be seen as the "proper response" to a call for murderous revenge from a potentially demonic source (2007: 115). R M Christofides argues that rather than simply assuming that a ghost tells the truth, a Shakespearean audience would associate an apparition emerging from the cellarage with hell and the underworld, and, since Hamlet calls the ghost "old mole" (1.5.170) – i.e., the devil – the ghost carries at least as many connotations of falsehood, trickery, and deceit as it does of honesty and truthfulness (2012: 22-36).

[12] There is a remarkable symmetry between "The Time is Out of Joint" and "Hamlet's Burden of Proof": Derrida twice nods in the direction of Freudian interpretations of *Hamlet*, but concludes that these are less persuasive than Nietzsche's reading of the play in *The Birth of Tragedy*; Cavell nods towards Nietzsche twice, but does so in order to put Nietzsche's ideas in the service of a basically Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet*.

[13] For a discussion of the extent to which these three principals are all in their different ways "dead men walking," see Lodge (2014).

[14] It is therefore strange that Horatio is conspicuous in his absence from Cavell's argument, an absence as unfortunate for his essay as that of the play-within-the-play is for Derrida's.