

## Burrowing into Hamlet's *Old Mole*

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### Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to explore the apparitions of what Derrida called the “unnameable” or “almost unnameable thing”, whose visor effect haunts our imagination. The article attempts to trace a path through different canonical interpretations of the significance of Hamlet’s addressing the ghost in a familiar tone, as “old mole”, before the ghost returns to the grave (by Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Goethe, Coleridge, Eliot, Joyce, Derrida, Cixous, Lukacher).*

**Keywords:** *spectre, beaver, mole, thing, nothing*

### The visor effect

Since a ghost is something, nothing and anything at the same time, Derrida pointed out the impossibility to define it:

Here is -or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, “this thing” but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [*qui nous regarde*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy. [2, 6]

Having neither time (it comes in present from a past to defy the future) nor space (“it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer” [2, XIX]), the ghost cannot be spoken to, even if in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, both soldiers and Horatio try to approach it, since they need to find out the reason why it started to haunt Elsinore. Yet again, speaking to the ghost and getting the idea across to the ghost is an illusion:

It-is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. [2, XIX]

A spectre is a 'thing that is not a thing', since it does not correspond either to a name or to an identity. Marcellus calls the spectre 'this thing' (1.1.21) and 'this apparition' (1.1.28), Bernardo 'nothing' (1.1. 22), Horatio calls it 'our fantasy' (1.1.23) and 'illusion' (1.1.127), but does not prevent himself from telling Hamlet that he saw 'the king' of Denmark and Hamlet's 'father':

My father - methinks I see my father-  
*Hor.* Where, my lord?  
*Ham.* In my mind's eye, Horatio.  
*Hor.* I saw him once; he was a goodly king  
*Ham.* He was a man, take him for all in all,  
 I shall not look upon his like again.  
*Hor.* My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.  
*Ham.* Saw who?  
*Hor.* My lord, the king your father.  
*Ham.* The king, my father! (1.2.184-191)

There is a huge discrepancy between the way Horatio addresses to the ghost, all the time alluding to its intrusion, and the way he simply puts it to Hamlet, this time reconciling with his own self and being sure of what he had seen. Horatio refers to the ghost as 'it' the moment he is confronted by it, and as 'he' when relating the event to Hamlet. That it was the king he is sure, since even if 'arm'd from top to toe' (1.2. 228), it wore his 'beaver up' (1.2. 229). The beaver and the visor were normally the parts of the helmet that a soldier used to wear on the battlefield. The Arden *Hamlet* provides us with the explanation that "in the 16<sup>th</sup> century helmets beaver and visor had ceased to be distinct, and either word was applied to the whole face-guard, which 'could be pushed up entirely over the top of the helmet', thus leaving the face free." [see Works Cited, 1, 195]

It was precisely the term *visor* that Derrida picked up in order to define the spectral asymmetry. He called the "visor effect" [2, 6-7] our inability to see the one who looks at us:

This spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion. Here anachrony makes the law. To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the visor effect on the basis of which we inherited from the law. Since we do not see the one who sees us, and who makes the law, who delivers the injunction (which is, moreover, a contradictory injunction), since we do not see the one who orders 'swear', we cannot identify it in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice. The one who says 'I am thy Father's Spirit' can only be taken at his word. An essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction. It will condition all the others. It may always be the case of still someone else. Another can always lie, he can disguise himself as a ghost, another ghost may also be passing himself off for this one... [2, 8-9]

The position of the ghost who sees without being seen is the position of the psychoanalyst who sees and observes all his patients' reactions, gestures, mimics, without being seen. He is the God behind who establishes what the patient suffers from without the patient's possibility to see a single gesture, a single blink. He can make the patient feel better only if he keeps this position of permanent anteriority in order to interfere into the patient's future. The psychoanalyst does not prescribe pills, he helps the patient find his own self and help himself.

The visor effect in *Hamlet* is a therapeutic one. The ghost will help Denmark get rid of one of its worst rulers, a ruler who set up his kingdom on murder. Yet the therapy needs to be applied by and through Hamlet, the real heir of the throne, the only one who sees the ghost face to face and speaks to it the same way he used to speak to his father when he was alive. The ghost would speak to his son only, as his son is the one to share his secret. Hamlet must use the visor effect to catch the king's reactions, to see without being seen if Claudius committed the murder. He is the one who needs to stay at Claudius' back, to observe, to measure, to quantify and then to act like a God, to punish what God did not punish himself. Under this form Hamlet can see without being seen, as everybody takes him for a lunatic. It is impossible for him to disguise, therefore he metaphorically disguises himself in the mad Hamlet, a new Hamlet, a ghost of the old Hamlet, whose irrational behaviour cannot be understood by the royal family. Under this form Hamlet can use his own visor effect, seeing without being seen, as everybody takes him for a lunatic and pays no attention to his play. This is the only way in which he can escape the ones who spy on him without seeing his secret. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius, Ophelia, and the Queen herself cannot see what is wrong with Hamlet even if they are in front of him.

There is precisely only one single character in the play who can get the visor effect. Because of Claudius' machinations, Hamlet was not the heir of his father's throne, but he is the heir of his ghost's visor effect. All the rest try to see without being seen, but they do not succeed. They end up tragically like Polonius behind the curtains, or like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The spectre quickly returns to the earth immediately after revealing the truth to Hamlet, and without being seen, it bids Marcellus and Horatio to swear. Four times can they hear it to make their oath more valid upon Hamlet's sword, after they have already sworn 'never make known what' they 'have seen' (1.5.149):

Ghost. (Cries under the stage) Swear.  
 Ham. Ah ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?  
 Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarage.  
 Consent to swear.  
 Hor Propose the oath, my lord.  
 Ham. Never to speak of this that you have seen.  
 Swear by my sword.  
 Ghost. Swear. [They swear]  
 Ham. Hic et ubique? Then we'll shift our ground.  
 Come hither, gentlemen,  
 And lay your hands again upon my sword.  
 Swear by my sword  
 Never to speak of this that you have heard.  
 Ghost. Swear by his sword.  
 Ham. Well said, old mole. Canst work i'th'earth so fast? [...]  
 That you, at such time seeing me, never shall,  
 With arms encumber'd thus, or this head-shake,  
 Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,  
 As 'Well, we know', or 'We could and if we would',  
 Or 'If we list to speak', or 'There be if they might',  
 Or such ambiguous giving out, to note  
 That you know aught of me – this do swear,  
 So grace and mercy at your most deed help you.  
 Ghost. Swear. [They swear] (1.5. 157-170, 181-189)

They swear three times that they have never seen or heard of the ghost at the moment they cannot see it anymore, at the moment it came back to earth as a mole. The obvious intended

repetition of number three which was supposed to give the oath a “binding force” in connection with the Holy Trinity was pointed out a number of times by A.C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, and by Harold Jenkins in the notes to *The Arden Hamlet*. Nicholas Royle makes a subtle reference to Derrida’s misreading of the play when he theorizes the ‘visor’: ‘when it comes to secrets non manifestation is never assured’. [see 6, 252]<sup>1</sup>. Commenting on this specific reference, Helene Cixous creates a kind of play-within-a play, which points to the Mousetrap in which even great philosophers could fall:

A Visor haunts a beaver

A beaver haunts a mole

*Bi : ver*

The beaver and the mole

Who haunts whom? Who is the mole of whom?

Shakespeare haunts Joyce, Jacques Derrida, Marx, Freud, etc. Shakespeare himself haunted by whom? J.D. himself creeps under the ‘beaver’ of Hamlet the Ghost, under Shakespeare’s beaver.

He disguises himself as the Ghost, he disghosts himself, he is *under the beaver* but he does not know it. He thinks he is *under the visor*, whereas he is under the beaver. But as we know the mole is ‘blind’. One looks at things otherwise underground. But as we know the blind man knows otherwise what he does. The unconscious makes no mistakes. [1]

Later on, Hamlet asks his mother whether she can see what he can see, and her reply sends us back to Horatio’s definition of the ghost in the first act.

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen Gertrude: Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

Hamlet: Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen Gertrude: No, nothing but ourselves.

Hamlet: Why, look you there! look how it steals away!

My father, in his habit as he liv'd!

Look, where he goes, even now out at the portal!

[Exit Ghost.]

Queen. This is the very coinage of your brain.

This bodiless creation ecstasy

Is very cunning in. (*Hamlet*, 3.4.132-141)

For Horatio, the ghost had initially been “fantasy” [phantasy] which apart from its basic sense of something unreal, also unites in its myriad of senses the *phantasmal*/ the *phantom*/ the *phenomenal* (what appears on effect of the light). For the queen, the ghost was but “the very coinage” of Hamlet’s “brain” (3.4.139), therefore only a mere projection of imagination, instead of being something real.

## “Old Mole”

The question why Hamlet addressed to the ghost before it disappeared to the ground in such a familiar tone (“old mole”) was asked and answered by innumerable critics and writers who

<sup>1</sup> The text was first read in translation at the 1997 Cerisy *décade* on *L'Animal autobiographique*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet [Paris: Galilée, 1999], pp. 547-62

attempted to cross a pathway through *Hamlet* from Hegel to Nietzsche, from Freud to Lacan, from Goethe to Coleridge, Eliot and Joyce, from Derrida to Cixous and more recently to Lukacher.

The “old mole” meant for Freud the parricidal meaning of the Oedipal complex and for Lacan Hamlet’s desire for his own mother, “the point where Gertrude’s desire intersects that of her son.” [5, 215] In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel saw the “old mole” (phantom/phenomenological) as the ungoing work of the spirit even when unseen generating dialectical opposites: a mole burrows underneath the earth- the spirit carries on working without being seen, even when it generates an antithesis from a thesis; the dialectical work of the spirit is not necessarily seen in the open:

It goes ever on and on, because spirit is progress alone. Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward as Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, ‘Well done, old mole’ –until grown strong in itself it burst asunder the crust of earth which divided it from its sun, its Notion, so the earth crumbles away. [G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, quoted in a slightly altered translation in 5, 198]

Hegel came back to *Hamlet* in both *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Aesthetics*, making his observations alongside Goethe’s interpretation of *Hamlet* in his novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. In Goethe’s novel, Wilhelm, the one who played the leading role in *Hamlet*, was overwhelmed by his role as it reminded him of his own relationship with his father. For Goethe, Wilhelm is overwhelmed by the similarity between the play and his real life and unable to act. This is precisely the way Goethe interpreted Hamlet’s inertia: by being overwhelmed with the revenge message of the Ghost. Hegel was far from coming to terms with this rather simplistic view, holding that Hamlet’s will remains constant throughout the play and that in fact it is not that Hamlet does not know what to do but rather he does not do how to do what he needs to do.

The threefold oath that Horatio and Marcellus need to make (“Never to speak of this that you have seen”; “Never to speak of this that you have heard”, and not to expose the “antic disposition”) was uttered in the most solemn tone possible yet followed by the ironical vein of Hamlet’s comments which made Coleridge comment as follows:

The familiarity, comparative at least, of a brooding mind with shadows is something. Still more the necessary alternation when one muscle long strained is relaxed; the antagonist comes into action of itself. Terror [is] closely connected with the ludicrous; the latter [is] the common mode by which the mind tries to emancipate itself from terror. The laugh is rendered by nature itself the language of extremes, even as tears are. Add too, Hamlet’s wildness is but half-false. O that subtle trick to pretend the *acting* only when we are very near *being* what we act. [Coleridge, quoted in a slightly altered translation in 5, 204-205]

Thus, for Coleridge, the “old mole” is “a figure of Hamlet’s inner state, and by the sheer extravagance of the image Shakespeare is pointing to something deeper in Hamlet’s character than even the awesomeness of the moment could account for.” [5, 205] Indeed, Hamlet’s sudden shift of tone and of disposition is far from being real, as he needs to start acting from that precise moment, he needs to assure the two witnesses, Marcellus and Horatio that he is perfectly sane and untouched by what the spirit revealed to him but also that nothing happened. This is the best way he can act by making the two witnesses think that the appearance of the ghost was not real, while pursuing at the same time the very purpose of his life from that moment on. Hamlet is not indecisive for Nietzsche, he is certain and “Not (sic!) doubt, certainty is what drives one insane. – But one must be profound, an abyss, a philosopher to feel that

way. –We are all afraid of the truth.” [Nietzsche, quoted in a slightly altered translation in 5, 206] Joyce also relates the “old mole” to the question of nihilism: the old mole brings horror and it “is the last to go”. [Works Cited, 2, 187] To Eliot, the “old mole” reflects Shakespeare’s inability to bring issues “into the sunlight”: “Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize.” [T. S. Eliot quoted in 5, 208]

Indeed, when reading *Hamlet*, we feel so uncertain of the meaning of some *stuff*, to use Eliot’s word, that every new reading produces the feeling that we missed something that we initially did not see, that some work, some words were burrowed underneath and we did not see or hear but half of them, therefore half of the truth. Many critics attempted either through psychoanalytic means or phenomenological or deconstructive means to dig out the “old mole” and to infer its underground, therefore hidden work. Some succeeded more and others less in doing so, since, as Ned Lukacher mentions, “the ‘mole’ is always a figure of a figure. We might recall here what Hegel said of the spirit’s ‘unconscious work’, that first it appears not as spirit at all but as something radically other. Shakespeare reveals through his play on the word ‘mole’ that ‘the unconscious work’ of the spirit is synonymous with the work of language. Like Hegel, Shakespeare demands that we listen very closely to the ‘mole’.” [5, 212]

The “old mole” of Shakespeare does not reveal itself completely ever, even if we think we saw it once and we could hear it, as the image soon disintegrates into the *heart of darkness*, the *horror* as Conrad would say, and the voice becomes inaudible, as every time we read *Hamlet* we fear the truth that we have seen only half of the truth or not even that. *Hamlet* is the play in which we see two plays, a dumb show and a play, and at the end of the show, we are still left with the feeling that there is something that we have not seen. As Claudius poisoned the old king who turned into the ‘old mole’, “Shakespeare has poisoned (sic!) the notion of representation. [...] With beautifully Shakespearean symmetry, it is precisely the element of style that undermines the very notion of imitation that is protected from imitation in its turn.” [5, 232-233] Ned Lukacher considers the play-within-the play versus the dumb show the “trace of différance”, the trace of the always earlier, of the always pre-existent text: “Shakespeare’s archaic paratactic style of the subtitle for *The Murder of Gonzago* (“The Mousetrap-marry, how tropically” (3.2.232)) “burrows beneath the ground of representation, turning the trope into a trap.” [5, 233]

Hamlet is what he is and what we believe he is in the same way he is nothing of what he stated or we thought he was, he is the mysterious caller who produces his readers anxiety and becomes the voice beyond his creator, Shakespeare’s own beaver and mole haunting us as they haunted Derrida. Even letting us see the figure of the ghost with its beaver up through the eyes of Horatio, Bernardo, Marcellus and eventually Hamlet, Shakespeare lets us see nothing in the end and we wonder if what we saw was not but a simple illusion:

The Beaver and the Mole, two kinds of technologies which refer to visibility and invisibility, one hiding and nestling the other. Two images which hide and give rise to perplexing, filtering interpretations. Symptoms which obsess our two geniuses: each time we are dealing with insistent symptoms, Derrida muses, one must look for what happens without showing itself there. And each time these symptoms, which belong to the optical universe, are equipped, clothed, armed with verbal finery, with a costume which attracts and diverts attention. The spectre, who metamorphoses into a mole and exchanges into some ten different designations (spirit, thing, it, apparition, etc.), is there to remind us that, under the deceptive mask of the word and of the name, there is the teeming metonymic power of the unconscious. [1]

Both Jacques Derrida and Margaret W. Ferguson noticed the equivocal phrases that the ghost addresses to Hamlet like ‘Bear it not’ (1.5.81), ‘Taint not thy mind’ (1.5.85), ‘Remember me’ (1.5.91), thus creating perplexity in Hamlet’s mind because of the “multiple potential meanings of these commands”. [3, 300] Hamlet inherits the secret of *his* [father’s] *story* that must by all means become part of the *history* of Denmark. The story that the one who was repeatedly asked by the guards to *unfold* himself *unfolds* to Hamlet is a secret that must be transmitted to future generations:

But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold [...]' (*Hamlet*, 1.5.13-15)

The moment the spectre is able to return to his grave forever, Denmark will have a better chance, it will not to be rotten anymore. The quandary Hamlet finds himself in consists yet in the sad fact that we cannot write history as long as we live it. In Kearney’s view, “we find ourselves embroiled in a play about the terrible impossibility- yet inescapability – of memory,” [4, 158] as the protagonist needs to remember the impossible, an event he never participated at.

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## Săpând (prin) viziuna cârțiței bătrâne a lui Hamlet

### **Abstract**

*Articolul explorează aparițiile stafiei care, conform lui Jacques Derrida, este un lucru ce nu poate fi numit, sau aproape că nu poate fi numit. Articolul prezintă câteva interpretări canonice ale modului familiar în care Hamlet i se adresează stafiei, cu apelativul “cârțiță bătrână”, atunci când acesta părăsește scena, întorcându-se în lumea întunecată (interpretări aparținând unor critici, filosofi sau scriitori precum Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Goethe , Coleridge, Eliot, Joyce, Derrida, Cixous, Lukacher).*