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ENTER THE GHOST/EXIT THE GHOST/RE-ENTER THE GHOST: DERRIDA'S READING OF *HAMLET* IN *SPECTERS OF MARX*[1]

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1. Introduction

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel describes the ideal character in modern drama as follows: "The truly ideal character has for its content and 'pathos' nothing supernatural and ghost-ridden (*Gespensterhaftes*), but only true interests in which he is at one with himself." And a bit later:

> Shakespeare excels, precisely owing to the decisiveness and tautness of his characters, even in the purely formal greatness and firmness of evil. Hamlet indeed is indecisive in himself, yet he is not doubtful about *what* he is to do, but only *how*. Yet nowadays they make even Shakespeare's characters ghostly, and suppose that we must find interesting, precisely on their own account, nullity and indecision in changing and hesitating, and trash of this sort.[2]

Hegel thus criticises the prevalence of irony and other "perversities" among Romantics of his time such as Friedrich Schlegel and Heinrich von Kleist. However, his words seem to reach beyond his own time and also to be intended for a certain book on Marx published 163 years after Hegel's death. There is no doubt that Derrida's writings are haunted by the spirit of Hegel as much as by that of Marx. As Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, "the paternal shade of Hegel continues to come back, the plot thickens with its first apparition."[3]

Since Derrida is well aware that every effort to chase away the far-reaching shadows of Hegelianism is bound to cause their return, he must attempt to find a different way to relate to the ghost which time and again haunts our thinking and acting. Recognising that Hegel lives on to pervade our present time, Derrida neither opposes nor endorses Hegelian dialectics, but seeks instead to uncover a dynamic structure or principle that undermines not only the self-confident dynamic of dialectical progress, but also the realm of metaphysical thought as such. Furthermore, he considers this dynamic structure to have always been excluded from the realm within which metaphysics unfolds its possibilities. As we know, in his early texts Derrida calls this principle 'différance' and writes it with an 'a' instead of an 'e' to mark its dynamic character. In the essay 'Différance' he notes that

> différance, thus written, although maintaining relations of profound affinity with Hegelian discourse (such as it must be read) is also, up to a certain point, unable to break with that discourse (which has no kind of meaning or chance); but it can operate a kind of infinitesimal and radical displacement of it.[4]

In *Positions* Derrida notes that the silent letter 'a' in the word *différance* refers to the incessant work of a strange 'logic';[5] more than twenty years

later, in *Specters of Marx*, he refers to this logic as "a logic of haunting", "a hauntology", or "a logic of the ghost". This logic is said to point

> toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence).[6]

To determine the character of a logic that no longer conceives of an event in terms of an ideal possibility that necessarily actualises itself, let alone as something that is the case or is not the case, one should first of all investigate its deep affinity with and radical displacement of Hegelian dialectics. However, this is not what I propose to do in this essay, at least not in a direct way. Instead, I will prepare the ground for such an investigation by arguing that *Specters of Marx* is not mainly concerned with the possible responses to Marxism for their own sake, nor even with the possibility or impossibility of political justice as such. Rather, I take Derrida's elaborations on the spectre to indicate that the ontological distinctions which ground the prevailing self-interpretations of our culture fail to account for that which essentially threatens our efforts to become what we are, to accomplish our goals, to do what we promised to do, to be at one with ourselves, to turn our losses into gains; in other words, to embody the values which Hegel seems to ascribe to the truly ideal character of modern drama.[7] I will argue that Derrida's peculiar 'logic' aims at uncovering the utterly precarious character of any kind of self-actualisation by indicating that any event is threatened to become impossible by that which first makes it possible. It will be shown that his understanding of this precariousness is intrinsically related to the conception of time sketched out in *Specters of Marx*. It is, according to Derrida, precisely due to the primordial disjointedness of time that the history of metaphysics is incapable of facing that which is neither present nor absent, and hence of recognising the self-undermining dynamic of any event in which something attempts to come into its own. I will further interpret Derrida's understanding of this precariousness in terms of what might be called the radically tragic character of human life. In this respect Derrida refers to the "irreparable tragedy" and even to "the essence of the tragic".[8] By means of these two interrelated detours – time and tragedy – it may become clear that Hegel's critique of the Romantic interpretations of *Hamlet* does not apply to Derrida's comments on *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx* insofar as Derrida precisely undermines the opposition between steadfastness and instability on which Hegel's critique is based.

I would note in advance that *Specters of Marx* barely contains anything like an interpretation of *Hamlet*. Rather, Derrida concentrates on the appearance of the ghost in the first act, and repeatedly comments on two phrases, one spoken by Marcellus, the other by Hamlet. At the first appearance of the ghost, Marcellus spurs Horatio on to speak to it, saying:

"Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio".[9] We cannot suppose Marcellus to have had a deep understanding of the specific capacities of a scholar (cf. SM 33/11-12). He may just have wanted to hide his fear and to put someone else forward to deal with the ghost. The second phrase that Derrida picks out occurs after the ghost has told Hamlet the truth about his violent death and Horatio and Marcellus have sworn to Hamlet never to speak of what they saw. Hamlet then exclaims: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right."[10] Although Derrida's elaborations on these bitter phrases seem to go beyond anything that Shakespeare might have intended, they may well contribute, I think, to a better understanding of what is at stake in Derrida's work.

After presenting what I take to be the central issue in *Specters of Marx* I will briefly consider Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and then focus on Derrida's rather elliptic comments on the play. The main themes that I will address – ghost, time, and justice – all have a bearing on questions that are most pertinent to Derrida's concerns: what does it mean, nowadays, to be a scholar and respond to ghosts as a scholar? How can one do justice to that which unsettles our classical conceptual distinctions, first of all that between being and nothingness, and between the possible and the impossible?[11]

2. Responding to Specters

Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx* that the question concerning the mode of being of the spectre cannot be answered by opposing the mere appearance or the simulacrum to the thing itself (31/10). One cannot say of a spectre that it is merely a product of our fantasy, as Horatio initially does, nor that it exists somewhere outside of ourselves. The distinction between being and appearance fails as much to account for the 'thing' that incessantly haunts us as does the distinction between effectivity and ideality.[12] When thinking aims to address that which is neither present nor absent, that which refuses to let itself be caught by the concepts that have determined our history, it will have to develop different concepts, and, as I said, a different logic. Derrida holds that the existence of Europe – and I think we can extend that to the history of Western culture as such – is marked by the incessant effort to exclude the spectre from its domain. It is precisely by virtue of this excluding gesture that Western culture has been able to delimit the domain within which it could achieve ever more knowledge of the world and of itself. In other words, the very inside of what we call culture is based, according to Derrida, on the exclusion of something that from the outset undermines every effort to control reality by means of stable and unchanging concepts (23/4). Now *Specters of Marx* addresses the different possible responses to communism in order to uncover the fundamental incapacity to do justice to that which presents itself to us as a past and future possibility, but cannot be reduced to mere presence

or absence. As in many other texts, Derrida seems to be trying to prevent the reader from reducing the text to a central, essential argument. It is hard to unravel the criss-cross of traces that lead to Valery, Marx, Stirner, Heidegger, Fukuyama, and to many others. Rather then summarising at least some of these digressions, I will limit myself here to indicating what I take to be at issue in Derrida's comments on the possible responses to communism.

First of all, Derrida denounces any facile triumph over the downfall of Marxism (90/51-52). Even if the original promise of liberation, equality, and justice that he considers to have inspired Marxism was from the outset doomed to cause immense violence and suppression (150/91), one cannot simply identify Marxism with this actual historical development. There is something in Marxism, one of its many spectres, one of its feeble voices, which keeps trying to reach us, to speak to us, to summon us to live otherwise – that is, more justly – and which urges us not to forget that we are the heirs of a never fulfilled promise.[13] This voice tells us that justice can and must take place in this world, and that we are responsible for enacting that justice whenever we can (15/xix). However, one should immediately add that any enactment of justice necessarily – that is to say, logically – tends to make impossible its own accomplishment. Derrida will always emphasise that the corruption of justice is not concomitant and accidental, but originates with the promise of justice as such. It is because of this "originary corruption", as he calls it in *Specters of Marx*, that it is hardly possible, if at all, to live up to the call for justice that keeps haunting our history (47/21).

If one does not do justice to the originary possibility of justice by triumphantly celebrating the downfall of Marxism, then, neither does one do justice to this possibility by believing that the dreams of Marx about a just society could and should, according to the inner necessity of historical developments, have come true. Derrida explains this by reflecting on the historical responses to the spectre of communism to which Marx refers at the very beginning of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.[14] How did one respond to the spectre of communism before it, as spirit, had been given the chance to materialise itself? What does it mean for a spectre or a spirit to materialise? Marx refers to the fear of the spectre of communism that haunted the "powers of old Europe" (69/37). The leading forces of the industrialised states of Europe had very good reasons for not wanting this spectre to materialise. They could not but do their utmost to chase from their political domain the ghost that announced the end of suppression, exploitation, and violence. It is just a ghost, they must have thought to reassure themselves, something that has no power at all to undermine the progress we have achieved and will continue to achieve.

Derrida indicates, however, that those who believed that the spectre of communism could and should become real, like Marx himself, were no more

in a position to respond to the mode of presence proper to a spectre than their capitalist adversaries. While the European states reassured themselves of the strict dividing line between a spectre and the actually present reality, Marx was just as sure "that the dividing line between the ghost and actuality ought to be crossed, like utopia as such, by a *realisation*, that is, by a revolution" (70-71/38-39). Thus, even if Marx, or, to be more precise, a certain side of Marx, acknowledged that the distinction between the real and the ideal can never be totally abolished, both Marx and the capitalist societies thought they knew how to deal with a spectre like that of communism. Either you tell yourself and your allies that a spectre like that will never become real, or you tell yourself and your allies that a spectre like that must of necessity become real – one day, that is.

What Derrida wishes to point out is that both sides of the political spectrum were incapable of conceiving the essence of decisive events – or of the event as such – other than in terms of the distinction between possibility and actuality.[15] Neither the communists nor their conservative adversaries could face the tragic essence of any movement in which an initial promise attempts to fulfil itself. A spectre, a promise, or an essential possibility is not something that must of necessity come true. And yet neither is it something that is nothing at all. The spectral possibility of justice announces itself from out of an immemorial past as a promise we have somehow promised to keep, or as a future possibility we have somehow promised to keep open. We are responsible for that future. And yet it is hardly possible, if at all, to respond to the future possibility of justice in such a way that the spectrality of the promise is not dissolved into a future presence – as tends to be the case with Marxism – or, on the other hand, into nothing at all:

> Marx continues to want to ground his critique or his exorcism of the spectral simulacrum in an ontology. It is a – critical but pre-deconstructive – ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity. This critical ontology means to unfold the possibility of dissipating the phantom.[16]

Derrida thus suggests that deconstruction is in line with Marxism insofar as the latter consists in a radical response to the promise of justice, but that it turns against Marxism insofar as the latter, in doing so, could not yet respond to the spectral character of this promise, that is to say, to the impossibility that necessarily haunts its possible realisation (cf. 126-27/75). There is no justice without the actual enactment of justice. And yet, as Derrida wants us to begin to understand, any actual enactment of justice is made possible by that which at the same time threatens to corrupt that very enactment.[17] In other words, one can only do justice "by becoming an inheritor, redresser of wrongs, that is, only by castigating, punishing, killing" (47/21). That insight must certainly have come as a shock to Hamlet when the ghost of his father returned onto the scene to confirm his tormenting misgivings.

How, then, is one to respond *at once* to the necessity of acting and to the impossibility of acting without corrupting or perverting that which one seeks to accomplish? I believe that Derrida indicates an answer to this question by opening up a – hauntological – space for thinking that is no longer delimited by presence alone and hence allows one to respond to the spectral promise of justice in such a way that the aporetic tension between its possibility and its impossibility is given its due. Derrida thus sets the scene for the appearance of the spectre in the middle of the night. Wavering as it does between being and nothingness, presence and absence, the spectre demands that we not refrain from acting, nor forget the utter precariousness of whatever we undertake.

The space within which this spectre might be allowed, so to speak, to appear as it is in itself, by no means exclusively pertains to the domains of language, literature, politics, or jurisdiction. Rather, Derrida is concerned with the way in which any self-organisation and self-interpretation of human life – that is to say any culture, or, if you like, spirit – tends to exclude the spectre from its domain and precisely owes its possibilities to that exclusion. Whenever we are faced with something that exceeds our conceptual distinctions, we will tend to reassure ourselves by saying, like Horatio, that it is just our fantasy. We are afraid to let ourselves be shaken "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls", as Hamlet says upon first seeing the ghost.[18] Whatever it is that we encounter, it should be present or absent, actual or ideal, possible or impossible, essential or accidental, form or content, belonging to the mind or to the world. Since these and similar conceptual distinctions constitute the basic frame of all our dealings with the world and with ourselves, Derrida's questioning primarily pertains to the basic ontological decisions that shaped Western culture.

On the basis of the ontological distinction between that which is and that which should be, any event will at the most be understood in terms of the actualisation of a certain end. According to Derrida, this perspective makes it impossible to acknowledge that any process in which something actualises itself threatens to overturn into its contrary without being able to subsequently retrieve what it has lost. Exposing the inherent dynamic of what he calls "the event", that is to say, of the utterly unstable structure that underlies the ways in which we relate to the world, to others and to ourselves, Derrida's strange logic attempts to do justice to the spectral threat that pervades our culture, while it is constantly being chased from the domain that this culture considers its own. "One is only occupied with ghosts by being occupied with exorcising them, kicking them out of the door" (223/141). Derrida's 'hauntology' thus uncovers something which in his view neither semantics, nor psychoanalysis, ontology or theology, to name but a few of the theoretical self-interpretations of our culture, has been able to address.[19]

Hamlet summons his friend Horatio, the scholar, to welcome the ghost of

his father as one would welcome a stranger. He is aware, however, that this must be very difficult for his friend; Horatio's philosophy seems to leave no room for strange things like ghosts, things which are neither in heaven nor on earth, that is, neither ideal nor actual.[20] Though Horatio is a scholar, the philosophy that he was taught in Wittenberg seems to leave him quite helpless when it comes to responding to ghosts. I will now first briefly turn to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and then consider Derrida's comments on it.

3. Hamlet

Although nobody would hesitate to call *Hamlet* a tragedy, there is a difference between Greek and modern tragedy which has some bearings on Derrida's elaboration on *Hamlet*. To use one of the most famous examples, the conflict between Antigone and Creon, that yields the tragic development of Sophocles' play, arises because both characters – at least according to Hegel's interpretation – pursue ends that are in principle good in themselves, yet actually exclude one another.[21] Both Antigone and her uncle act in accordance with what they believe to be good, and if things turn bad they do so by necessity, not by personal choice. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, on the other hand, leaves no doubt about the wickedness of Claudius. Driven by lust and a craving for power, he kills Hamlet's father to marry his mother. The play does not, however, pivot upon the young Hamlet's relation to his wicked uncle – nor, for that matter, upon his relations to the other characters – but primarily concerns the desperate struggle taking place within the confines of Hamlet's head (awaiting, as it were, the time when its brain will have been replaced by worms and earth). Since nocturnal messages of ghosts were not accepted as evidence, Hamlet knew that his case would never stand up in court. On the other hand, if he killed his uncle – whose marriage also threatened to deprive him of the crown – he would probably be condemned as a traitor himself.

The dramatic development of the play is therefore primarily animated by Hamlet's incapacity to immediately avenge his father's death. Whatever the precise reasons for Hamlet's wavering, one might say that it opens up the space within which Shakespeare can let the full spectrum of possible decisions unfold before our eyes. From scene to scene we see Hamlet being tormented by sorrow about the loss of his father, bitter contempt for the weakness of his mother and of women in general, while his thoughts waver between doubt about the reality of the ghost, the possibilities of killing his uncle, committing suicide and being a coward. He realises that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."[22] Perhaps it would have been more accurate for Hamlet to say that once one starts thinking, every decision turns out to be hardly possible, if at all. Killing his uncle would have meant perpetuating the chain of violence; marrying Ophelia

would have meant tainting her and his future children with his inalienable debt. In a most extraordinary manner, Shakespeare exposes the different possible responses to the murder of the king not only by means of Hamlet's inner deliberations, but also by letting Laertes' and Ophelia's deeds reflect the choices Hamlet himself refrains from making. After Hamlet has more or less accidentally killed their father Polonius, Ophelia, overcome by grief, kills herself, while her brother, on returning from France, immediately decides to avenge the murder of his father.[23]

4. The Time is Out of Joint

In *Specters of Marx* we find no discussion of the actual development of the play. As far as Hamlet is concerned, Derrida focuses almost exclusively on the prince's first acknowledgement of his cruel fate: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right."[24] This passage suggests that the murder of the old king and its consequences are caused not so much by Claudius' accidental wickedness as by a more fundamental corruption of the state of Denmark. Derrida goes even further and proposes to read the passage as pertaining to a yet more primordial level, that is to say, to the condition of human life and human history as such. He not only suggests that a certain primordial disjointedness or corruption constitutes the condition of possibility of any justice (44/19-20), but also relates this primordial disjointedness to the structure of time.

Following Heidegger in this respect, Derrida proposes to conceive time not so much as a homogeneous stream of now-moments, but rather as that which allows our thoughts to reach beyond the experience of what is present into a past and future absence. Only because time has, as it were, always already disjointed itself so as to break up into a past and a future that have never been present, and into a present that reaches into the absence of this past and future, does it become possible for human beings to respond to the promise of future justice at all. Now the primordial disjointedness of time *at once* constitutes the condition of the possibility of justice and the condition of the utter precariousness of its accomplishment:

> The necessary disjointure, the de-totalizing condition of justice, is indeed here that of the present – and by the same token the very condition of the presence and of the presence of the present.[25]

I take this rather elliptic phrase to mean that the differencing force which brings about the disjointedness of time not only opens up a past and a future that for ever exceed the domain of the present, but also constitutes the ontological realm within which facts and events can be interpreted against the backdrop of the present and of presence as such. The 'out-of-joint' which makes it possible for the promise of justice to occur at all – that is to say, to be inherited from out of an immemorial past and projected onto a future that

does not let itself be actualised – would thus itself necessarily give rise to an ontological realm from whence these past and future possibilities cannot be maintained as possibilities, but are instead determined as that which either can become actual, that is, present, or has no meaning at all.

If our history is marked by the incapacity to respond to the promise of justice in an appropriate manner, this can now be understood as being based on the incapacity to let oneself be opened onto a past and future that exceed the domain within which things are either present or absent and events either possible or impossible. Derrida seems to consider the ontological domain that allowed Western culture to accomplish itself to be based on the movement in which a disjointed time confines itself to mere presence, that is to say, on the exclusion of the primordial disjointedness of its three dimensions.[26] The exclusion of the temporal dimensions that allow human beings to relate to that which is radically absent can be seen to underlie the incapacity of our culture to deal with the promise of a future justice, with events that obey a stranger logic than the logic of necessary self-actualisation. Derrida thus points at a double – and hence uncontrollable – movement of the disjointedness of time: on the one hand it opens up the possibility of responding to that which is neither present nor absent, and on the other it always again threatens to foreclose that very possibility by letting mere presence dominate the domain of thought. Derrida remarks in parentheses that he tries to think the ghost on the basis of this radical anachronism (52/25). This means, I think, that the figure of the ghost intimates a possibility that cannot be reduced to either presence or absence, while we, for our part, can hardly but recoil from the summons of the ghost to let this possibility occur, and seek refuge in an ontological domain informed by fixed oppositions.

We have seen how, according to Derrida, both capitalism and communism bear witness to the incapacity to face the way in which an event like the advent of justice necessarily tends to make itself impossible, while continuing to promise itself as a future chance. I take Derrida's comments on *Hamlet* to indicate that Hamlet, by contrast, is aware of the radically aporetic character of the command to let justice prevail. Precisely insofar as Hamlet is able to speak with the ghost – that is to say, with something that defies our conceptual dichotomies – and accepts the obligation to relieve him of his torments, he is also able to face the radical entanglement of the necessity and the impossibility of deciding, of acting, of doing justice. Being born as the only son of a king who was to be murdered, Hamlet suffers from

> a bottomless wound, an irreparable tragedy, the indefinite malediction that marks the history of the law or history as law: that 'time is out of joint' is what is also attested by birth itself when it dooms someone to be the man of right and law only by becoming an inheritor, redresser of wrongs, that is, only by castigating, punishing, killing (46/21).

As I noted at the beginning, Hegel conceives of Hamlet as a truly ideal character because "he is not doubtful about *what* he is to do, but only *how*". This interpretation seems to reduce Hamlet's hesitation, his endless delay of the killing, to a subordinate moment embedded within a fundamental certainty. We have seen how Hegel reproaches the literary critics of his time for extricating Hamlet's indecision from his unwavering certainty as to the end he is to achieve, and hence for presenting Hamlet as profoundly marked by indecision and weakness. It would be too easy, I believe, to oppose Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* to Hegel's by placing him with those whom Hegel regarded as romantic perverts. The opposition that Hegel creates between those who believe in Hamlet's fundamental steadfastness and those who contest it, is precisely an opposition that arises when philosophy excludes the spectre from its domain – as it has always done and will always be tempted to do. Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* can certainly be considered to overrate the fatality of Hamlet's birth and the radicality of the disjointedness by which he is marked.[27] This emphasis is meant, however, to indicate a dynamic which traditional philosophy has never been able to thematise. Had Derrida elaborated his reading of *Hamlet* beyond the few pages he actually devotes to the play, he might have exposed that Hamlet's hesitation does not constitute a subordinate moment embedded within an essential certainty, nor testifies to an all-pervading indecisiveness, but precisely responds to the equiprimordiality – to borrow a term from Heidegger – of the necessity and the impossibility of acting justly. Insight into this radical entanglement by no means relieves the hero of the obligation to act.[28] The difference between, for instance, Hamlet and Laertes resides exclusively in the fact that Hamlet cannot but let his acting be haunted by the unsettling insight into the utter precariousness of any effort to let justice prevail.

5. The Essence of the Tragic

The insight that any actualisation of justice threatens to overturn into its contrary can be regarded as an insight into the essentially tragic dynamic of any event that determines the ethical and political self-organisation of human life. Thus, Derrida writes with respect to Hamlet that

> [t]here is tragedy, there is the essence of the tragic only on the condition of this originarity, more precisely of this pre-originary and properly spectral anteriority of the crime.[29]

The "irreparable tragedy" (46/21) by which Hamlet is marked is irreparable precisely because the disjointedness which dislodges his life – as it does the state of Denmark – is not a secondary, accidental effect, but constitutes the very condition of its possibility. Although it is quite seldom that Derrida mentions the issue of the tragic, I think that one could justifiably interpret his work as seeking to come to grips with what could be called a radically tragic dynamic.

In *On Hospitality* Derrida refers to tragedy when elaborating on the way in which the absolute possibility of justice, of unlimited hospitality, or however one chooses to name what is good in itself, always needs certain specific laws, that is to say, specific delimitations of the good, in order to actually accomplish itself and become more than an empty fantasy.[30] On the other hand, however, these specific laws necessarily tend to corrupt the very accomplishment of that justice. Derrida here notes that the *perfectibility* of the specific laws is inextricably intertwined with the *pervertibility* of justice as such.[31] That which radically threatens the innermost human possibilities is thus nothing secondary, external and accidental, but emerges from the very movement in which these possibilities attempt to accomplish themselves. It is this essential pervertibility, I think, to which Derrida seeks to respond in *Specters of Marx* and in many, if not all, of his other works.

Derrida's texts not only indicate that we are to endure the irreparable tension between the possibility of justice and its unavoidable pervertibility, but also seek to comprehend the logical basis of that tension. According to Hegel's *dialectical* logic one could say that a possibility – whether it be the possibility of justice, freedom, or knowledge – actualises itself by dividing itself into itself and an otherness that it posits over against itself. This otherness, for instance the totality of concrete, determinate laws, then constitutes the element which enables the initial possibility to actually accomplish itself in and through the other of itself.[32] Derrida indicates in *Specters of Marx* that his logic of haunting, his hauntology, his logic of the ghost, points "toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic" in that it no longer opposes actuality and ideality (108/63). This logic complicates Hegel's conception of the event as such by showing that the otherness which according to Hegel makes it possible for an ideal possibility to actualise itself does not *result from* the movement in which something externalises itself, but rather *precedes* the very constitution of that ideal possibility *as* possibility. Only if the otherness which constitutes the condition of possibility of any actualisation is considered more originary than that which attempts to actualise itself in and through that otherness, does it become possible to do justice to the double – and hence uncontrollable – movement that it performs; only then can be affirmed that the differencing element which enables something to actually accomplish itself is *at the same time* the element which always again tends to make this accomplishment impossible, that the condition of possibility of the event is also the condition of its impossibility (112/65). To put it in a yet different way, the silent letter 'a' in the word *différance* refers to a differencing force which is similar to Hegel's conception of difference in that it makes possible any event of (self)-actualisation, but radically differs from the latter in that it precedes every possible 'in-itself' and hence also threatens to make impossible any becoming

'for-itself'. This implies that whereas Hegel conceives of tragedy in terms of the possible solution to a conflict that constitutes the necessary precondition for the accomplishment of the good, Derrida no longer sees this conflict as a secondary and hence 'reparable' moment.[33]

"Without this experience of the impossible", Derrida writes, "one might as well give up on both justice and the event" (112/65). It is, according to him, only on the basis of this experience that one might begin to understand the immemorial promise of justice in a different manner than Marxism and its bourgeois opponents – no longer in terms of its necessary or impossible actualisation, but rather in terms of the utterly precarious character of its occurrence:

> Wherever deconstruction is at stake, it would be a matter of linking an affirmation ... to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the *perhaps* (65/35).

The *peut-être*, wavering as it does between possibility and actuality, or, like the ghost, between being and nothingness, is thus, if one may say so, the basic category which according to Derrida should accompany one's response to the radically undecidable outcome of any event in which something attempts to actualise itself.[34] However enigmatic Derrida's comments on Hamlet may sometimes be, they in any case testify to the effort to dislodge Hegelian dialectics so as to let the originary disjointedness of time open up a domain of thought that, contrary to the closure of metaphysics, allows for the possibility of such a response.

6. Scholars

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare presents not only the range of possible responses to the violent death of a father, but also the possible responses to the appearance of a ghost. We witness the awe of the soldiers and hear – from them – about Horatio's initial scepticism. When the ghost reappears during Hamlet's nightly visit to his mother, Gertrude sees nothing at all, and merely notices how the hair of her agitated son "starts up and stands on end."[35] Clearly, Hamlet is the only one capable of speaking with the ghost. He is, perhaps, akin to the ghost not only because he is the son of what used to be his father, but also because his mind somehow reflects the wavering between presence and absence that constitutes the mode of being of a ghost. It seems that Hamlet and the ghost of his father are on speaking terms precisely because they are, so to speak, kindred spirits. Thus, despite Horatio's learning, Hamlet's state of mind seems more fit to welcome the ghost as one would welcome a stranger, that is to say, to respond to the radical disjointedness that both underlies and tends to corrupt whatever we undertake.

Derrida does not say in so many words that only if scholars learned to think in a way that is more akin to Hamlet than to Horatio might the ghost re-enter the scene of contemporary thought. He *does* distinguish, however, between two different kinds of scholars. Thus, he notes that a scholar like Horatio

does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the unactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (33/11).

It is clear that Marcellus cannot be supposed to have reflected on this when he urged Horatio to speak to the ghost. Nevertheless, Derrida suggests that Marcellus may have been thinking of another kind of scholar, a scholar yet to come:

Marcellus was perhaps anticipating the coming, one day, one night, *several centuries later*, of another 'scholar'. The latter would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and absence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the spectre, the spectre as possibility. Better (or worse), he would know how to address himself to spirits.[h]

"Several centuries later", Derrida notes inconspicuously. In a most subtle manner, pretending to read Marcellus' thoughts, he tells us that Marcellus may have been thinking of a future scholar, let us say, somewhat less than four centuries after Shakespeare wrote his play, who – surprisingly – fits perfectly Derrida's own intellectual profile. Undoubtedly, then, Derrida sees his own writing as setting the scene for the materialisation, the incarnation, or the reincarnation of a spirit that is more akin to Hamlet's tormented soul than to Horatio's rationality. Near the end of *Specters of Marx* Derrida again raises the question as to how we, scholars, are to address the spectre, and, moreover, how we are to address anything at all:

If he loves justice at least, the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow should learn it, and from the ghost. He should learn to live 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, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.[i]

If, then, these spectres seek to re-enter the scene of our thoughts, it seems to be in order to tell us that we should not fear them, that they need us as much as we need them.

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References

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2. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), eds. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 315-16 / *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art I*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 243-44 (translation slightly modified).
3. J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 211 / *Specters of Marx*, translated by P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 132. Hereafter I will refer to this as SM, followed by the page numbers of the French and English editions respectively.
4. J. Derrida, 'Différance', *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1972), 15 / 'Différance', *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 14.

5. J. Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1972), 54 / *Positions*, translated by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 40.
6. SM 108 / 63; cf. 31, 89 / 10, 51. Cf.: "[I]t is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration" (255 / 161).
7. Insofar as its focus on "the philosophical background and implications of deconstructionism" is concerned my reading of Derrida concurs with Rodolphe Gasché's decisive interpretations of Derrida's work in *The Tain of the Mirror* and *Inventions of Difference* and it endorses his critique of those interpretations that disconnect Derrida from his philosophical heritage. Cf. R. Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, Massachusetts / London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3-9. Since my essay does not focus on Derrida's concern with Marxism, I will not consider here the responses to *Specters of Marx* which primarily discuss its pertinence to political issues. See on this the contributions gathered in M. Sprinkler (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'*, op. cit., and A. Callinicos, 'Messianic Ruminations: Derrida, Stirner and Marx', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 75, 1996, 37-41.
8. SM 46/21, 51/25.
9. W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by G.R. Hibbard (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 146.
10. *Hamlet*, 196.
11. I will elaborate on *Specters of Marx* only insofar as this text – in particular its sections on the ghost and on time – may help to clarify the stakes of Derrida's deconstruction of the preconceptions that he claims govern the history of metaphysics. I will therefore make no effort at discussing at any lenght even the most prominent of the many different issues broached in *Specters of Marx*. Although many of these issues occur in texts published both before and after *Specters of Marx*, I will refer almost exclusively to the latter. See for a more general, yet somewhat unfocused discussion of *Specters of Marx*: S. Chritchley, 'On Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', in: *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1-30.
12. Right at the beginning of the play Marcellus asks Barnardo: "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" (*Hamlet*, 144, cf. SM 26 / 6).
13. "This transformation and this opening up of Marxism are in conformity with what we are calling a moment ago the *spirit of Marxism*." Although Marxism necessarily participates in "the ideologems and theologems whose critique or demystification it calls for", there is something in Marxism which "remains as undeconstructable as the possibility itself of deconstruction", and this 'rest' is what Derrida calls "a certain experience of the emancipatory promise" (SM 102 / 59, cf. 126, 146-47 / 75, 89). It is in the name of this promise that deconstruction considers itself a heir of one of the spirits of Marx. Cf. also J. Derrida, 'Marx & Sons', in: M. Sprinkler (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'* (London / New York: Verso, 1999), 230-232.
14. SM 22 / 4; cf. 71 / 37-38.
15. See on the 'event' SM 108, 125-26, 150 / 63, 75, 91.
16. SM 269 / 170, translation slightly modified; cf. S. Chritchley, 'On Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', art. cit., 6-8.
17. With regard to Marxism and the "totalitarian perversions to which it gave rise" Derrida notes that these "perversions ... are not pathological and accidental corruptions but the necessary unfolding of an essential logic present at the birth, of an originary disadjustment" (SM 150 / 91, translation slightly modified).
18. *Hamlet*, 182.
19. Cf. SM 26, 89 / 6, 51.
20. *Hamlet*, 195.
21. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988),

304-311 / *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 279-285.

22. *Hamlet*, 216.
23. Hamlet realizes the symmetry between Laertes' fate and his own: "For by the image of my cause I see the portraiture of his." *Hamlet*, 339.
24. *Hamlet*, 196.
25. SM 56 / 28. Cf: "Inscribing the possibility of ... radical alterity and of heterogeneity, of differance ... in the very event of presence, in the presence of the present that it dis-joins *a priori* in order to make it possible, [deconstructive thinking] does not deprive itself of the means with which to take into account ... the effects of ghosts" (126 / 75). Without "a disjointed or dis-adjusted time" there would be "neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice" (270 / 170). See also the last words of a text in which Derrida recurses to some of the topics addressed in *Specters of Marx*, among which *Hamlet*: "[Justice] will always have to be at once threatened and made possible in all languages by the being out of joint: *aus den Fugen*." J. Derrida, 'The Time is Out of Joint', in: A. Haverkamp (ed.), *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political* (New York / London: New York University Press, 1995), 37.
26. Concurring with Heidegger's elaborations on the temporal juncture and disjointedness of temporality in the *Anaximander Fragment* Derrida purports to distinguish himself from the philosopher to whom he is undoubtedly most indebted by suggesting that the latter still inscribes "this whole movement of justice under the sign of presence, be it of presence in the sense of *Anwesen*." He continues by asking: "[D]oes not justice as relation to the other suppose on the contrary the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony, some *Un-Fuge*, some 'out-of-joint' dislocation in Being and in time itself?" (SM 55 / 27, translation slightly modified). I would argue against Derrida that Heidegger precisely attempts to show that the constitution of *any* mode of presence is grounded in a certain disjointedness of the different temporal ecstases, a disjointedness which only increases in the mode of temporality that delimits the ontological domain within which being is understood as constant presence. Thus Heidegger remarks in *The Anaximander Fragment*: "Present beings (*das Anwesende*) as such, being what they are, are out of joint. Both juncture and the possibility of being out of joint must belong to presencing (*Anwesen*)." M. Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980^6), 327 / *Early Greek Thinking*, translated by D. F. Krell and F. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 41 (translation modified). In his course on Heraclitus from 1943 (*Heraklit*, (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987^2), 146) Heidegger refers to the primordial disjointedness of being (*der anfängliche Un-Fug*). I discuss this issue in 'Giving Due: Heidegger's Interpretation of the Anaximander Fragment', in: *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. XXVII, 1997, 150-166, and in *Thinking in the Light of Time: Heidegger's Encounter with Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 176-188.
27. See for a criticism of Derrida's reading of *Hamlet* along these lines J. Fletcher, 'Marx the Uncanny? Ghosts and their Relation to the Mode of Production', *Radical Philosophy*, 75, 1996, 31-37, esp. 36. It may well be the case that Derrida neglects the historical embedment of the play and overrates the uncanny character of the ghost as it figures in *Hamlet*. However, as Derrida is never concerned with the correctness of his readings and always uses the texts he addresses to point at something that is of a different order than the historical, I take this kind of criticism to be rather less pertinent.
28. "This messianic hesitation does not paralyze any decision, any affirmation, any responsibility. On the contrary, it grants them their elementary condition. It is their very experience" (SM 269 / 170). *Specters of Marx* addresses the infinitely unstable distinction between the originary experience of the promise of justice and its concrete historical guises not only in terms of the distinction between a certain spirit of Marx and its historical perversions, but also, and perhaps more generally, in terms of the distinction between the messianic promise of salvation and concrete, 'restricted' messianisms (cf. 266 / 167). Like

the guises of Marxism, concrete messianisms tend to interpret the promise of justice as something that should some day come true. The messianic promise, which is nothing in itself (or almost nothing), not only needs these concrete messianisms to enact itself, but also threatens to lose itself once and for all in its concrete historical enactments: "[T]he effectivity or the actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come ... of an alterity that cannot be anticipated. ... [S]uch a hospitality without reserve ... is the impossible itself" (111-112 / 65, cf. 102, 146-47 / 59, 89). The logic of the distinction between the messianic and messianisms thus entails that the distinction must at once be maintained and cannot be maintained: a "messianic without messianism" (112, 124 / 65, 73) is itself a future possibility to which one should be able to relate as a possibility that exceeds the domain within which things either come true or don't come true: the messianic "would no longer be messianic if it ceased to hesitate" (268 / 169, translation slightly modified). W. Hamacher (in 'Lingua Amissa: the Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, op. cit., 168-212) notes on the messianic that it, "exactly because it is not prefigurable, ... must thwart its promise to retain its promissability and instead of pledging a future, appresents, in its exposition, futurity. ... As there must be a possibility of no future so that there can be a future, so must the messianic always be open to its lapse, if it is to be messianic at all" (205). I would push this still further and argue that what Derrida calls the messianic does entail not merely the *possibility* of its 'lapse', that is, of its presentification, but also the very *unavoidability* of that lapse.

29. SM 46 / 21; cf. 51 / 25. Derrida here refers to a passage were Heidegger writes that in order to trace the essence of the tragic it should not be interpreted in psychological or aesthetical terms. Cf. M. Heidegger, 'Der Spruch des Anaximander', *Holzwege*, 330 / 'The Anaximander Fragment', *Early Greek Thinking*, 43.
30. J. Derrida, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1997), 73-75.
31. Ibid., 75.
32. I should add to this that Hegel with respect to *Antigone* in fact argues that the ethical substance, that is, the absolute good, accomplishes itself by dividing itself into, on the one hand, itself as formal generality and, on the other, into the two opposed concrete determinations of the good that are represented by Antigone and Creon. With respect to this latter – lowlier – level he shows that these determinations become opposed to each other and ultimately cause their mutual destruction. This self-destruction of the determinate moments of the good is at the same time the way in which the ethical substance actualises itself; destruction thus plays a merely subordinate part in the movement of absolute self-actualisation (cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 310 / *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 285). One might say that Derrida no longer keeps these two levels apart and hence lets the possibility of irreparable self-destruction pervade the heart of the ethical substance itself (which for that reason should probably no longer be called 'substance').
33. Insofar as both classical and Shakespearean tragedies, representing actions as a whole, must contain a plot that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, I suppose that Derrida would consider them incapable of rendering the radical undecidability which I believe he holds to constitutes the core of the tragic; from the fact that he sometimes refers to tragedy we can infer, however, that he is willing to distinguish between the experience of the unavoidable self-destruction of ethical actions on the one hand, and the limited way in which this experience of the tragic is represented on the stage on the other. It goes without saying that this restricted and so to speak inappropriate representation constitutes itself the 'tragic' fate of the radical experience of the tragic; this representation is both its only chance to occur and the endless deferral of that occurrence. Cf.: "To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation." J. Derrida, 'Le théatre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation', *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), 368 / 'The Theater of Cruelty

and the Closure of Representation', *Writing and Difference*, translated by A. Bass (London: Routledge / Kegan Paul, 1978), 250.

34. "But at a certain point promise and decision, which is to say responsibility, owe their possibility to the ordeal of undecidability which will always remain their condition" (SM 126 / 75).
35. *Hamlet*, 282.
36. SM 34 / 12, my emphasis.
37. SM 279 / 176; cf.: "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.' Perhaps for a spectator in general" (32 / 11).