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## Hamlet or Europe and the end of modern Trauerspiel. On some shakespeareans motifs in Walter Benjamin

FABRIZIO DESIDERI

**Abstract.** Hamlet's character sets, under different shapes and extents, the benchmark against which a large part of the European philosophy of the very long «short twentieth-century» behind us has had to measure. In the name of Hamlet as the most enigmatic among Shakespeare's creatures, even Europe, its spirit and destiny, is identified, according to the well-known claim by Paul Valéry.

Common trait to a big part of these interpretations – from the juvenile works of Pavel Florenskij and Lev S. Vygotskij (respectively written in 1905 and 1915) to Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet oder Ekuba. Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (1956) – is offered by the detection, in Hamlet's figure, of the contradiction inherent to an epochal transition: the time of an unresolved passage between two ages that only knows the endless pain of an “interim”. My paper concerns the possibility to interpret Hamlet's time as the time of an “interim” in light of Benjamin's claims about Shakespeare's drama contained in his book on the German Trauerspiel.

While Florenskij interprets both the time and the figure of Hamlet as tragic, in my essay, in my essay - moving from some observations on the “Hamlet Problem” by the young Franz Rosenzweig - I consider the original Benjaminian thesis about the character and the drama of Hamlet as the end of the modern Trauerspiel. Starting from a statement by Theodor Adorno in the famed *Hornberger Brief* to Benjamin of August 2, 1935, I outline, therefore, how Benjamin characterizes the figure of Hamlet. This, from his early writings on the relationship between tragedy and Trauerspiel up to the great book on the Origin of the German Trauerspiel.

In the frame of Benjamin's interpretation, exactly by virtue of its distance from the thesis on the duality of tragedy (evoked by Florenskij's interpretation as well as other ones), the Shakespearean *theatrum* of consciousness, paradigmatically represented in the figure of Hamlet and in the intimately dialectic character of his drama, is accounted for as necessary correlate of the Cartesian's *theatrum* of consciousness. From a theoretical point of view, the Benjaminian characterization of Hamlet's figure reveals, therefore, something of the nature of modern consciousness and of consciousness in general in relation to the problem of truth and its representation. Hence the end of modern Trauerspiel coincides with the original incompleteness of its time. Consequently, I also claim Hamlet's dramatic figure to represent the aporetic characters of modern politics. This contrasts the thesis of Carl Schmitt who (in direct controversy with Benjamin) speaks, instead, of the Shakespearean drama as an expression of a pre-modern barbaric time.

**Keywords.** Walter Benjamin, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Trauerspiel (End of), Melancholy, Carl Schmitt, Pavel Florenskij, Paul Valéry, Franz Rosenzweig, Th. Adorno,

## OUVERTURE

Hamlet's figure sets, under different shapes and extents, the benchmark against which a large part of the European philosophy of the very long «short twentieth-century» behind us has had to measure. In the name of Hamlet as the most enigmatic among Shakespeare's creatures, even Europe, its spirit and destiny, is identified, according to Paul Valéry's words in a famous passage contained in the text of 1919, *La crise de L'Esprit*:

« Maintenant, sur une immense terrasse d'Elsinore, qui va de Bâle à Cologne, qui touche aux sables de Nieuport, aux marais de la Somme, aux craies de Champagne, aux granits d'Alsace, — l'Hamlet européen regarde des millions de spectres. »<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of a world conflict that would have brought to the old continent everything but peace and progress, the identification of Europe with the protagonist of the Shakespearean drama could have the meaning of reopening the wound from which modernity derives its origin: reopening and proposing it again as the scene of a drama that no longer has its perimeter in the royal courts or in the chancelleries. The formula implicated in the passage of Valéry (*Hamlet or Europe*) could also be in connection with that *Die Christenheit oder Europa* Novalis wrote in another point of catastrophe, in another critical break in European history. 1799, the year in which the Novalisian script was written (first published only in 1826, in the third edition of the *Schriften*, with the subtitle *Ein Fragment*), is the year in which Napoleon, returned to France, is preparing to overthrow the Directory and the Great Coalition is reconstituting itself for a new war, while no one is sitting on the papal throne after the death in exile of Pius VI. Avoiding to understand the famous Novalis' text in a nostalgic-reactionary key and rather catching his Johannine spirit and the prophetic-messianic tone, Valéry's expression could also sound like the origin and, at the same time, the outcome of that

drama of the affliction, of that *Trauerspiel* able to unify, in his different representations, the sense of history involved in the theological-political formula that identifies Europe with *Die Christenheit*. A drama of which we can see in the present time, in the *Jetzt-Zeit*, the extreme and exhausted forms, even more ominously endowed with unknowns.

In querying the crisis of an age in the name of Hamlet, as if in his enigma - "Hamlet" as the most enigmatic of Shakespearean creations! - the character and destiny of Europe is condensed, Paul Valéry is certainly not alone. Many are the other voices that precede and follow him, interpreting the question in other ways. Common trait to a big part of these interpretations - from the juvenile works of Pavel Florenskij and Lev S. Vygotskij (respectively written in 1905 and 1915) to Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet oder Ekuba. Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (1956) - is offered by the detection, in the Hamlet's figure, of the contradiction inherent to an epochal transition: the time of an unresolved passage between two ages that only knows the endless pain of an "interim", the time of an unresolved transition between two ages that doesn't want to make a decision. All in all, doesn't Hamlet himself emphasize that "the interim is mine" (cfr. Hamlet 5.2.73)? From this emphasis to identifying the Hamletic problem in its non-action, in its inability to resolve itself in a decision, in the action capable of responding to the paternal appeal that comes from the spirits' world, the interpretative step has often been short, as if it had the strength of consequentiality. "Hamletic" becomes, therefore, synonym to the inability to decide, abdication from sovereignty over events and personal faith first, even before than over a State.

1. FRANZ ROSENZWEIG  
AND «DAS HAMLET 'PROBLEM'»

In a diary note dated 21 October 1906, significantly entitled *Das Hamlet 'Problem'*, a young Franz Rosenzweig states this is not the right way to deal with the character of Hamlet and the

<sup>1</sup> P. Valéry, *La crise de l'Esprit*, in « NRE, août 1919, pp. 321-337.

issue it represents. The reason is the fact that the numerous ‘Hamlet-Theorien’ do not account for the drama as a work of art, but rather as an actual reality. All these theories – Rosenzweig holds – ask themselves “why does not Hamlet take the action”. But Shakespeare didn’t seek to represent this “why?”, this “Warum?”, but “rather the non-acting”. By detaching such “why” as a powerful and autonomous singularity to set against the dramatic plot and the non-acting of its protagonist, the *Hamlettheoretiker* (and who is not? - remarks Rosenzweig) fail to see its inseparability from the character of Hamlet himself. Simply put, they do not see “what Shakespeare proposes them not as a problem but as a happening”<sup>2</sup>.

By accepting and developing the thread of Rosenzweig’s argumentation, we can sustain, preliminarily, that the outcomes and fertility of a confrontation between the XXth century’s (as well as the contemporary) philosophy and the Hamlet-problem depends at large stakes from the awareness of facing a *Kunstwerk*, a work of art whose specific language we are asked to listen and grasp. Thus, in the very case of the Shakespearean work we must not neglect what might appear so obvious as to be forgotten, that is: the happening of which Hamlet is at the same time protagonist and victim is a happening in form of representation. Not action, but rather *mimesis* of the action, to resume the matter under its classic terminology. The *theatrum*, the human theatricality represented in itself, is, therefore, the philosophical core of Shakespearean’s Hamlet, up to be reflected in the knot that constitutes the intimate relationship between its form and its content. So forth, it is only as *mimesis* of a possible action (in the Aristotelian sense) that Hamlet’s acting has to be grasped by its necessity: in the necessity of the mimetic bond it intends to represent. And so also as non-acting, that is as position of the problem that the non-acting reveals, as expression of something that cannot be decided: of the undecidable

that precedes every *decision* to the point of carrying in itself the cut (the caesura) it implies. This something, the same thing in question in the Shakespearean play, I argue, must be identified with the figure of consciousness, of which Hamlet epitomizes the dramatic and dialectic nature, by showing, staging its literal and – at the same time – reflected drama: its *theatrum*. That the Hamlet’s conflict was essentially an irresolvable, hence tragic conflict between two kinds of consciousness, that of bloodline (of the revenge it recalls) and that of a superior justice, is the fundamental intuition of the interpretation given in the eponym essay by Pavel Florenskij, who resembles the drama to a “gigantic monologue”<sup>3</sup>.

Likewise to Florenskij’s reading, also that of Walter Benjamin, contained in particular in the fundamental *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, reveals and develops the connection between the drama of conscience and the dramaturgical structure (the plot staged), albeit denying that this connection can be understood in tragic form. Precisely because *Trauerspiel*, a Baroque dramatic form that secularizes that of the medieval *Mysterium*, the drama of Hamlet - in Benjamin’s interpretation - cannot be resolved into tragedy. Of the European *Trauerspiel* (in its dual meaning of dramatic form and apperception of history), *Hamlet*, like other Shakespearean dramas, rather means its fulfillment.

## 2. DESCARTES, HAMLET AND THE THEATRE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Exactly by virtue of this distance from the duality of tragedy (evoked by Florenskij’s interpretation as well as other ones), the Shakespearean *theatrum* of consciousness paradigmatically represented in the figure of Hamlet and in the intimately dialectic character of his drama, can be accounted for as necessary correlate of the Cartesian’s *theatrum* of pure *cogitare*.

This is where the formal distance from Shake-

<sup>2</sup> F. Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften, 1 Briefe und Tagebücher. 1. Band 1900-1918*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague 1979, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> P. Florenskij, *Amleto*, tr. It., Bompiani, Milano 2004, p.46.

spere's own poetic-literary presuppositions draws: from the saga in which Hamlet - according to Saxo's version, "becomes king and reigns happily". Here the reading of Benjamin converges, at least for this aspect, with that of Giorgio de Santillana. In the words of the latter: «Shakespeare has focused exactly right. He has avoided restoring the brutal, heroic element required by the saga, and made the drama instead wholly one of the mind.»<sup>4</sup> Precisely for this reason, the drama as dramatics of consciousness (interweaving of voices in its plural and therefore literally pluri-logical constitution) can be understood as an essential counterpoint to the Cartesian *theatrum* of the mind.

A theatre of consciousness, that of both the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Meditations*<sup>5</sup>, much of the contemporary philosophy of mind urges to tear down, just as if it was a pure illusion that could be dispelled by the self-reflexive certainty under which the cogito forces any doubting. If the performativity of Cartesian's *ego cogitans*, in its own utterance, already supposes an *audience*, someone else listening, Hamlet's inner drama reveals the irreducible plurality of actors, masks, instances composing and deploying the life of human consciousness in the sense of the theatrical acting: a *theatrum* of representation and self-representation in which a *spectator*, sited before the difference between effective action and non-action, is always constitutively implicit.

The one of consciousness is a both a literal and allegorical drama that during the course of the story, as the several monologues of Hamlet manifest, tends to coagulate in conflicting polarities and ripping differences: from the hiatus between impulse to action and execution, to the paralyzing tension between "the native hue of resolution" and "the pale cast of thought" (Hamlet, 2.1.84-85), down to the wide-opening of a gap - almost an

*intimior intimo meo* of the drama - between what is left to the sphere of appearance, of the semblance ("These indeed 'seem'", Hamlet, 1.2.83), that is the whole complex or *theatrum* of actions "that a man might play", and that which is moving by the inside of the soul exceeding any chance to be expressed and shown ("which passet show", Hamlet, 1.2.85).

Also for this irreducible plurality of consciousness voices attempting to reach for a chord, Hamlet confirms itself as the political drama par excellence. As also attested, after all, by the explicit connection, also in form of parody, it sets with the *Julius Caesar*, where the matter of consciousness as self-knowledge is immediately defined by the need of self-reflecting-knowing in the other "as in a mirror". It is Cassius, in fact, to reveal to Brutus, in the opening dialogue, he knows nothing about himself, since he owns access to his own sight only "as by reflection" (cfr. *Julius Caesar* I, 2, 66-69). Thus, the persistent possibility for the nature of consciousness to turn, catastrophically, in a radical internal conflict derives from its native confrontation with otherness, from its constitutively political disposition. To the point to let Brutus, in the first scene of the II act, when the conspirators decide to kill Caesar, give voice to the internal turmoil of consciousness from which such decision derives:

*Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream: / The genius and the mortal instruments / Are then in council; and the state of man, / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection." (Julius Caesar, II, 1, 61-69).*

Only the awareness that through such action the form of the *respublica* will stay safe, allows such insurrection, internal to the soul, to convert in heroic act. Here is where the exhortation to "kill him boldly but not wrathfully" (JC, II, 1, 172) comes from. It is, in fact, a matter of counteracting the spirit, to which blood does not pertain. Though, on the other hand, blood is the only thing that might solve such contrast. It is, there-

<sup>4</sup> G. De Santillana, H. von Dechend, *An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and its Transmission through Myth*, David R. Godine, Boston Mass. 1992, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. F. Desideri, *L'ascolto della coscienza. Una ricerca filosofica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1998, pp. 150-155.

fore, only this intimate connection between blood and spirit, totally internal to the dialectic of such act, to give Caesar's death the political value of necessity. His passing is a destiny setting itself apart from pure contingency, from chance – as indeed the obscure inceptive omens announce, by the warning of the “soothsayer”.

Perfectly understanding this political-sacral nexus, René Girard insists, in his crucial book on Shakespeare<sup>6</sup>, on the sacrificial character of Caesar's murder: “Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius” (JC, II, 1, 166) claims Brutus strongly. In the words of Girard himself, here «sacrifice is the violence that heals, unites and reconciles in opposition to the bad violence that corrupts, divides, disintegrates, undifferentiates.»<sup>7</sup> What is established is thus a connection between sacrifice and the rationality of politics; a connection from which derives the transformation of the rite into political theatricality in parallel with that at work in the theater itself, where the victim's immolation is only simulated. However, while, - unlike Girard's understanding - in the classical tragedy a memory of its sacrificial origin is maintained, in the modern Trauerspiel this origin is erased in the secularized space of the Court. The Julius Caesar is still on the threshold of this secularization, by its very theme, intertwining the end of the *Respublica's* *ordo* and that of the tradition that founds it with the immanent crisis at the creatural origin of sovereignty. But the *stasis*, that inner turmoil in Brutus' soul that nurtures the decision to kill Caesar as a scapegoat able, with his sacrifice, to maintain the ancient republican order, reflects itself in a specular way on the political effect of the civil war it causes. This is how a fatal correspondence between the past of a consciousness-internal insurrection and the historical-political future of the civil war is established. A nexus both historical and dramaturgical that, according to Girard, has the effect of revealing in the *Julius Caesar* the

crisis of the sacrificial logics immanent to the construction of the political rationality, showing the violence of the mimetic rivalry that gives it birth. With respect to the meaning of such connection (from the turmoil of consciousness to civil war), *Hamlet* offers an inverse path, departing from the extreme contingency marking the death of both the prince and the king.

Through *Hamlet*, the harshest exterior political conflict is rooted back, at its origin, to the dramatic-dialectic phenomenology of the life of consciousness, being this one the distinctive feature of human nature. Not only because consciousness is in charge of self-governance, but also by virtue of the ability it has to query itself about its own destiny and the meaning of its actions. Therefore, Hamlet's drama does not account for consciousness as an abstract generality, but is rather addressed to each one's, exactly because it is represented (known) as that *quintessentia*, that superfragile *proprium* of man who is, in turn, constantly on the verge of dissolution, of revealing himself as nothing else but ashes and dust: “And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”, asks Hamlet (*Hamlet*, 2.,2. 307-308).

Besides, to understand this character of consciousness, to grasp it through and beyond (at the borders of) the doubting at its foundations, means to bring the drama to lap the meta-ethic root of the Self, the one that can only be attested for its being anterior to the individual self-differentiating, anterior to the destiny of the single being, and, for that reason, susceptible of being paradigmatically expressed and symbolically represented by the royal figure. Albeit with the promise-announcement of a new political order, the Shakespearean drama ends without a king, bringing to completion the aporias immanent to the creatural character of sovereignty. A conclusion, this latter, that could be understood as totally internal to *Trauer's* logic, to the feeling of mourning that drags down and drowns the very existence of the “sweet prince” in a faith sealed by a hopeless fail. As if the dialectic arising from the ashes of *Trauerspiel* could only be a negative one.

<sup>6</sup> R. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy. William Shakespeare*, OUP, Oxford 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 214.

### 3. ADORNO ON ODRADEK, HAMLET AND THE END OF TRAUERSPIEL

Perhaps Adorno had something similar in mind while establishing with penetrating lucidity, in the course of the famed *Hornberger Brief* to his friend dated 2 August 1935, a parallel between the Kafkian *Odradek* and the *Hamlet* in the context of that relationship between the *Passagenarbeit* and the *Trauerspielbuch* Benjamin himself had postulated:

*We have the promise of immortality in commodities and not for people, and - to develop the relationship to the book on the baroque, which you rightly established - the fetish is a treacherously final image for the nineteenth century, comparable only to the death's head. It seems to me that this is where the decisive epistemological character of Kafka lies, especially in Odradek, as the commodity that survives to no purpose: surrealism may come to an end in this fairy tale, just as the Trauerspiel does in Hamlet.*<sup>8</sup>

The useless and forgotten reel, a mere material thing devoid of any exchange value since transcending any possible use, relates to the end of Surrealism as Hamlet does to that of *Trauerspiel*. By criticizing those that, according to his advice, were Brechtian motifs inherent to the *Paris, Capital of the XIX Century's* Exposé – themes leveraging on the critical potential of the notion of use value in relationship with the “character of commodity” – Adorno rather claimed the need for “a radicalization of dialectics down to its incandescent theological core”. If with respect to the nexus Odradek-Surrealism, Benjamin’s theory of the dialectic image might already configure itself as an opening to understand history as something that could not be separated from theological categories (that is the theme *par excellence* of the latest phase of Benjamin’s thought, down to the *Theses on the concept of history*), then exactly the link between *Hamlet*

and the end of *Trauerspiel* offers a masterful proof, often overlooked by Benjamin’s interpreters, of a radicalization of dialectics in a theological sense. A dialectic which, by showing itself in the both historic-critical and critic-gnoseological relation with aesthetics, politics and *theatrum*, concerns the drama intimate to the problem of representing the idea of *Trauerspiel* at its origin. In order to see how this drama does not solve in pure negativity, we need to patiently analyze the meaning and the role the *Hamlet* plays, as work of art, in the book on German baroque drama, also in the context of a broader relationship that the philosophy of Benjamin institutes with Shakespeare.

### 4. “OUT OF JOINT”: THE TRAUERSPIEL AS ZWISCHENFORM

Already in one of his earlier writings, signed under the pseudonym of Ardor – the text *Dornröschen*, wherein youth is identified with the sleeping beauty a prince could set free – Benjamin quotes two famed Hamlet’s lines recalled in the title of this very talk:

*The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right! (Hamlet, 1, 5, 188-189).*

As the wisest commentators<sup>9</sup> do not fail to see, there is irony in Hamlet’s words and the reader/spectator of the drama can’t stop asking himself whether this huge task (to reset time back into joint) is performed or even performable at all by the protagonist. The way Benjamin gives continuity to this quote from Shakespeare, in his writing of 1911, does not and could not tell anything about that. Hamlet’s task of setting back the time is here foreshadowed in a purely ethical-voluntary key or identified in that ‘suffering for an ideal’ which is proper to other dramatic characters drawn by the likes of Ibsen or Spitteler. And

<sup>8</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin. 1910-1940*, M. R. Jacobson, E. M. Jacobson (eds.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 498.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Keir Elam in W. Shakespeare, *Amleto*, cura, introduzione e note di K. Elam, trad. it. di G. Baldini with an essay by Viola Papetti, BUR, Milano 2016, p. 199.

yet, as Benjamin says in a *Lebenslauf* of 1912, it is exactly during this age that the Shakespearean *Hamlet* as well as the Goethean *Tasso* are objects of accurate studies. He certainly keeps these researches under consideration in the two short essays – both of 1916 – containing *in nuce* the book on *Trauerspiel*, that is *Trauerspiel and tragedy* and *The role of language in Trauerspiel and tragedy*. Notwithstanding the fact that in the letter to Hofmannstahl dated December, 28<sup>th</sup> 1925, Benjamin claims not to be “a real connoisseur of Shakespeare” and to have “approached him but singly and intermittently” (OGT., cit. p.448) probably willing to amend himself from the task of explaining the role of the metaphor in Shakespeare (to which Hofmannstahl had him solicited), both the writings of 1916 would be incomprehensible without an either explicit or implicit, though distinctly perceptible, reference to the Shakespearean work and to *Hamlet* in particular. There is no doubt we are accounting for a romantic Shakespeare, here. In fact, in the dissertation on the *Begriff der Kunstkritik*, Benjamin, on the basis of romantic thinkers as Novalis and the Schlegel brothers, will underline in Shakespeare’s dramas the strategic value of the retarding moment, of what, along with action, delays fulfilment. This is how, at the core of *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, is set the contraposition between the completeness of tragic time, where “the hero dies because no one can live fulfilled in time”<sup>10</sup> – hence he dies of immortality – and the constitutively incomplete and enclosed character of time in *Trauerspiel*.

As it represents an unfulfilled time, that of *Trauerspiel* is a “Zwischenform”, an intermediate form. An intermediate dramatic form, which is destined not to be overcome as governed by the principle of repetition. In a sense, however, completely antithetical to the way in which repetition characterizes the time of myth. While in myth the form of repetition is nestled in that of destiny, catastrophically marking the epilogue of the tragedy

with the force of a vertical break, in *Trauerspiel* the repetition principle works as the variation of a scheme which represents the specular and symbolic image of another spectacle. In such figural variation, defining, by its repeating, the time of *Trauerspiel*, death is drowned as well, for it does not end the show in which everyone is acting, but rather restarts it in another world.

Thus, the character of death is seen as transition to a higher form of life as well as entry in a world of spirits. As confirmed above all in the second essay, so in the language of the *Trauerspiel* manifests an unsurpassable split between the sound and the sense, that difference between the creaturely character of the word and the shattered world of meanings that, in the book, will lead to the theming of the allegoric form. “In the midst of this unfolding – as Benjamin observes, lapidary – errant feeling gives voice to mourning in lament” (OGT, cit., p. 270).

##### 5. HAMLET’S DEATH BY CHANCE: *THEATRUM* AND *META-THEATRUM*

Mourning resounds, and in this resonating as echo of the lament, such feeling finds its redemption. Consequently, death does not represent the last word of *Trauerspiel*. A motif, this latter, already explicitly formulated in the essays of 1916. But this time with a difference, compared to the great development such theme will experience in the second part of the book. In the essays of 1916 as much as in the work of 1925, the end of *Trauerspiel* is intended by Benjamin with reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. However, in the first case “the rest is silence” is romantically converted in “the rest is music”. The end of *Trauerspiel* is therefore seen in music, as the beginning of language and of the symphonic unfolding of the characters of drama: in music as “that redemptive mystery – the rebirth of feelings in a suprasensuous nature” (OGT, cit., p. 269).

Albeit remaining substantially true to the spirit of this conclusion, the *Trauerspielbuch* silently moves away from its romantic resolution. This

<sup>10</sup> W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Eng. Transl. of H. Eiland, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, p. 261 (OGT).

happens in terms of a speculative sobriety reflecting, in an enigmatic foreshortening, the complex architecture of the book, starting from its *gnoseological-critical Foreword*. In fact, only by evoking the figure of Hamlet and the entire drama to which it gives its name can we grasp the idea of *Trauerspiel* in the essential boundaries that separate it from tragedy and define it as a dramatic form characterized by the constitutive incompleteness of an interim. Provided, however, that the Shakespearian drama is considered as an aporetic representation and as a manifestation of the crisis immanent to the politic theology proper to baroque. This, moving from the radicalization that in this work meets the theme of the creaturely nature of the sovereign as pivotal to every *Trauerspiel*. In such radicalization, the Hamlet-character is set as inaugural figure of modern consciousness, as opposed to the expression of a barbaric past claimed by Carl Schmitt in his *Hamlet and Hecuba* in direct controversy against Benjamin. If on the one hand Schmitt is definitely sharp in noting that the paradigmatic trait of the *Hamlet* – what makes this dramatic work a reference benchmark for any other one – consists in the implication of a play into the play (a *Spiel im Spiel*), on the other hand the theoretical consequences inferable from the short observations which Benjamin in the *Trauerspielbuch* dedicates to the Hamlet are opposed to Schmitt's theses. While for Schmitt such motif represents one of the main reasons why the Shakespearian drama transforms in tragedy, implying a break-in of historical time in the time of representation (Schmitt, p.86), for Benjamin the play into the play defines the very nature of *Trauerspiel* in its boundaries, endowing the *Hamlet* with a self-reflexive meaning with respect to its own form: *theatrum and meta-theatrum* at the same time.

The *Trauerspiel* can eventually reach to its literal conclusion exclusively thanks to Hamlet as “spectator by the grace of God” (cit., p. 158): spectator of his own destiny and, therefore, truly consciens – witness of himself down to reaching its redemption. In Hamlet's ending, in the “flight of angels” singing him to his rest (Cfr. Hamlet 2, 5, 346), the perfection of an eternally unfulfilled time shows itself

in enigmatic quietness. Indeed, it is exactly this one aspect to subtract the work to that succumbing, and at the same time triumphant, confrontation with the destiny which is specific to the death of the hero in tragedy. Hamlet is the pure character, parting with his destiny without any heroism. As testified by the ultimate dialogue with Laertes, before challenging the florets for the duel (cfr. Hamlet, 5.2.220-235). Here Hamlet, opposing himself to himself as the one who has wronged Laertes (“And when he's not himself be ta'en away, / Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it”, 5.2.230-31), states how the dialectic of consciousness passes through the threshold of otherness. Hence Hamlet gets to the point of accounting for himself as someone else, not only recognizing his own insanity but also denying that his identity might be doomed and determined by the spirit of revenge<sup>11</sup>, which, in turn, cannot amend itself from the logics of intrigue in order to find fulfillment. Taking leave of this logics *in extremis*, Hamlet acknowledges that the mechanism of the intrigue as it is, is suffocating even for he who bears the illusion of dominating it. This, however, also means setting apart from the phantom of the father, without denying the force it exercises on the drama as a whole. Only with this passage or with the distance from the spirit of the father, when he rejoins him (with his world), Hamlet's conscience reaches the transparency of the crystal. In a paradoxical return in itself, Hamlet's consciousness finally finds redemption. In Benjamin's words, what we understand particularly in the talk with Osric (where a subtly deadly irony is reserved to the courtly courtesy of the latter), is Hamlet “wants to imbibe the fate-saturated air, like a poisonous substance, in one deep breath” (OGT, cit. p.138). A heavy air of which Hamlet seems to free himself with the levity of a breath, even if extreme, going towards death as an event in the sign of pure contingency: violence of exteriority

<sup>11</sup> We feel in debt, here, with the interpretation given by Girard to the theme of vengeance up to considering the *Hamlet* as a subversion of such spirit: dialectic even with respect to its being alike to a revenge drama. cfr. R. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*. William Shakespeare, cit., pp. 271-289.

subtracted to every logic and reason, first and foremost that of sacrifice.

“Let four captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage” – Fortinbras orders conclusively. In such ending we might also see an ironic counterpoint to the exposure of Caesar’s body as the showing of a scapegoat. Hamlet’s body is exhibited on stage; it is *theatrum* to the second power: representation of the very same principle of theatricality. Taken under this perspective, the symbol of regality comes to an irreversible transformation because of which *The King’s Two Bodies*<sup>12</sup> separate functionally. Through Hamlet’s death-by-chance, the principle of contingency finally breaks into the historical-political space of the court. With the effective development of such principle, the secularization of Christian eschatology becomes perfect, emptying from the inside the symbolic-substantial power of regal sovereignty. The fact that Hamlet’s purpose to “catch the conscience of the king”<sup>13</sup> by a theatrical staging concurs to this emptying, reinforces the idea hitherto defended, that the dramatic heart of the work is the question of the *theatrum* of conscience and the problem of its representation, in permanent tension with what only “seems”. This tension feeds both on Wittgenstein’s philosophy and on the rebellion against it:

“What sense was there to human life if, as in Calvinism, not even faith had to be tested – if, on

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. for this notion the fundamental book of E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1957.

<sup>13</sup> «The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.» (Hamlet, 2.2.603-604). In terms of the Platonic *Sophist*: a mimetic art par excellence as the theater is here in function of a ktetic art, where it is a question of capturing a prey. Significant in this regard is that the extraordinary book by Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Sacrificio e sovranità. Teologia e politica nell’Europa di Shakespeare e Bruno*, deals with the theological-political problem of sovereignty in modern times just starting from a curious deer hunting scene, in which the princess who came to visit the King of Navarre dedicated herself, in the first scene of the fourth act of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. See now the new edition with an introduction by Michele Ciliberto (subsequent to the first one published by Einaudi in 2002) Quodlibet, Macerata 2016.

one hand, faith was naked, absolute efficacious and, on the other hand, there was no difference between one human action and another?” (OGT, cit. p. 141)

At the climax of a feeling of world’s devaluation, which opens up to the gaze of the melancholic who sees himself «interposed in existence as in a rubble field of half-completed, inauthentic actions» («als in ein Trümmerfeld halber, unechter Handlungen»), «life itself lashed out against this» (ibid.). In the intuition-contemplation of the world as an enigmatic mask, the feeling of mourning knows, in extreme intensification, the bottom of his object as a chance of a paradoxical overturning, almost a return in itself. This is the step that Benjamin sees accomplished in the figure of Hamlet, in the light that glows from the bottom of his brooding: “only in this prince does melancholy immersion attain to Christianity” (OGT, cit., p. 164), so that the *Trauerspiel* reaches “the bright gaze of self-reflection in its Interior” (OGT, p.164). “The rest is silence”, and so it remains.

If « only in this prince does melancholy immersion attain to Christianity» [«nur in diesem Prinzen kommt die melancholische Versenkung zur Christlichkeit»] (ibidem), the german *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin comments in conclusion to his brief excursus, is destined to remain opaque to itself. A similar fate will, then, concern the form itself of the *Trauerspiel*, its perpetually unfinished drama by virtue of its very origin and, precisely for this reason, still expressing the time assigned to us, of the Jetztzeit?

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#### WARBURG’S SYNDERESIS: IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

What we have to ask ourselves, in other words, is whether the glance of the self-reflection of the winged genius of melancholy can see beyond the empty throne and hear a music where not only the notes of affliction are dominant. In the melancholic feeling - in its dimension not merely afflictive (mindful of the “heroic” melancholy of Ficino

and Melanchthon) - is still perceptible that spark of thought capable of nourishing in minds a new European spirit? 1928, the year in which Benjamin publishes his book on the *Trauerspiel*, is the same one in which Aby Warburg discovers Giordano Bruno<sup>14</sup> and in particular discovers the theme of *synderesis*, that medieval notion reserved for conscience as an indefectible principle, apex animi, which the Nolanus resumes In the Epistola Esplanatoria of the *Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante*, his most political-programmatic text published in the Elizabethan London:

*Yesterday afternoon Cassirer was here: he listened with evident and participated consensus the brunian travel report. And what we could wish for most was that he himself had already analyzed Synderesis as a keyword even in relation to Shakespeare. What more could we have wanted?  
Salvation!  
God in detail.<sup>15</sup>*

Here, with these words the circle of reflection is not closed but opens up. That meeting which, for many reasons (some of which were entirely contingent) did not occur between Benjamin's and Warburg's research, sounds to us as a task for thought, in particular with respect to the new faces of European Hamlet.

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<sup>14</sup> To this discovery Warburg is prompted by a Leonardo Olschki's article and also comforted by Cassirer's research; see for this the essay by C. D. Johnson, *In cammino verso Bruno. Synderesis e "intuizione sintetica"* in A. Barale, F. Desideri, S. Ferretti (edited by), *Energia e rappresentazione. Warburg, Panofsky, Wind*, Mimesis, Milano 2016, pp. 17-39.

<sup>15</sup> A. Warburg, *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII, a cura di K. Michels, Ch. Schoell-Glass, Akademie Verlag, Berlino 2001, p. 484.