# "SPOOKS" "IN DIGNIFIED VENTRILOQUY":
## Shakespeare's Ghost Story in Joyce's Ulysses

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*It seems to me therefore that there are spirits of all kinds, except perhaps for spirits of the female gender.*
Hugo Boxel to Baruch de Spinoza

*It surprises me that those who have seen spectres in a state of nudity have not glanced at their genitals!*
Baruch de Spinoza to Hugo Boxel

At some point of their normally long lives, it is the destiny of myths to meet their travesties. Unlike the Sphinx, which leaves Oedipus alone after the riddle is answered, a travesty, with its inversions and mockeries, may not be so easily cast off, and may return to haunt the perpetuators of myths. Through their own momentum, however, parodies and the intertextual rewriting of myths also help to preserve that which they debunk. And in the literary tradition, few myths have been as resilient as that of William Shakespeare. In this essay, I would like to go through the strange presence/absence, better characterised as the haunting, of William Shakespeare and of *Hamlet* in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I will however not focus on the much-debated "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter, but on the "Circe" chapter, which is much more adequate for ghostly apparitions and impersonations, having been described as a dream play or an expressionistic reverie.

I will be looking at mostly three things: firstly the way the spectre's apparition is travestied in this chapter, as part of a series of ridiculed immaterial presences, many of them fatherly, which cohabit with deeply material, or bodily, drives. Throughout a succession of events and characters, these conflicts make explicit the tension inherent to the figure of the spectre, that is, its short-circuiting the opposition between body and soul. As Jacques Derrida puts it in *Spectres de Marx*, "le spectre

est une incorporation paradoxale, le devenir-corps, une certaine forme phénoménale et charnelle de l'esprit" (Derrida 1993: 25).[1] Secondly, this travesty – the ghost's indeterminacy, its status between real and unreal, actual and inactual, living and non-living, being and non-being, to paraphrase Derrida yet again (cf. idem: 33) – invokes irony and satire. Ghosts may be said to impersonate (this much is suggested in Shakespeare), but in *Ulysses* this behaviour becomes farcical and excessive. Finally, since ghosts are the troubled sublimation of how the past survives in the present, be it through memory or history, this nightmarish pageant of ghosts will, at the end of the essay, be briefly connected to the presence in *Ulysses* of 19th-century philosophies of history, namely those of Hegel and Marx.

### I

In "Circe", spectres appear from everywhere – the stage is filled with reveries, strange apparitions, in a recycling of much of what has gone down during the previous 500 pages. We encounter the ghost of Paddy Dignam, buried earlier that day, the ghost of Lipoti Virag (Bloom's grandfather), Stephen's mother and the figure of William Shakespeare himself, to name but a few. The phantasmagoria described by Stephen in the "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter, that is, in his theory about *Hamlet*, comes back to tease, reprehend and create confusion among the living.[2]

Paddy Dignam's ghost is vividly described as a rotting corpse, grown from a mere face to "human size and shape" (Joyce 2000: 597). Shortly after appearing, Paddy announces: "Bloom, I am Paddy Dignam's spirit.

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[1] The ghost is traditionally a figure of indeterminacy, a spirit which is still very much a material thing, often appearing as a rotting corpse. Susan Zimmerman refers to two cultural documents relevant to this topic: the homily on idolatry ("Against Peril of Idolatry and the Superfluous Decking of Churches", from 1563) and a 15th-century manuscript of ghost stories from Yorkshire (referred to in a study by Jean-Claude Schmitt), in which "the odd physicality of these ghosts" (Zimmerman 2004: 85) is accompanied by their speaking "with the strange voices of ventriloquists" (*apud* ibidem). Zimmerman goes on to describe it as the "half-life, half-death of the revenant, not so much a 'state' as a kind of suspension in the in-between, simultaneously denied material wholeness *and* decomposition" (idem: 86).

[2] Martin Scofield argues that the obsessive presence of Shakespeare in *Ulysses*, above all through Stephen's theory on *Hamlet*, finds its comic purge in the "Circe" chapter, through a *reductio ad absurdum* (cf. Scofield 1980: 67-70). Although his invocation of farce could not be more accurate (cf. idem: 69), I would argue that Scofield is overoptimistic about the purging effects, as my text will try to show.

List, list, O list!" (ibidem), in an impersonation of King Hamlet's ghost. Zoe, a prostitute in Bella Cohen's brothel, later parodies the same line: "(*Tragically*) Hamlet, I am thy father's gimlet" (idem: 667). When other characters question the possibility of Paddy being able to come back – after all, "It is not in the penny catechism" (idem: 597) –, he answers with one of the motifs of *Ulysses*: "By metempsychosis. Spooks" (ibidem). This lack of dignified gravity recalls an earlier comment by John Eglinton, during Stephen's presentation of his theory in the library: "He [Stephen] will have it that *Hamlet* is a ghoststory" (idem: 240), which means that, for Eglinton, Stephen is turning *Hamlet*, the monumental centre of the canon, into little more than a few scares, into trivial literature, into what Bello Cohen asks of Bloom later on, "smut or a bloody goodghoststory or a line of poetry" (idem: 650). Ghosts are not a serious subject and in the "Circe" chapter, we will see, they are indeed not "grave men". Consider Virag's first comments, after coming down through the chimney into the brothel: "Promiscuous nakedness is much in evidence hereabouts, eh?" (idem: 628). His figure, "*sausaged into several overcoats,* (…) [on the head] *an Egyptian pshent* (…) [and two] *quills* [projected] *over his ears*" (ibidem), cuts an image similar in extravagance to King Hamlet's reappearance in Gertrude's closet, in the first, so-called "bad" quarto of *Hamlet*, as a stage direction announces: "*Enter the GHOST in his night-gown*" (Shakespeare 2007: 132; 11.57.1).[3] The awkwardly intimate piece of clothing debunks the ghost's previous authority as it solemnly demanded "remember me" (Shakespeare 2006: 218; 1.5.91). On the other hand, it strangely recuperates the mode of Hamlet's remarks during the swearing scene, when, from under the stage, the ghost cries "Swear" (idem: 223; 1.5.149). In his response, Hamlet deflates all solemnity:

> Ha, ha, boy, sayst thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?
> Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarage? (idem: 224; 1.5.151-152)

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[3] These few comments on *Hamlet* and the section on Marx further ahead follow closely Peter Stalybrass' essay "'Well grubbed, old mole': Marx, *Hamlet*, and the (un)fixing of Representation". Especially relevant are his considerations on Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and the "mole" imagery, as well as on the importance of farce for the subversion of the father figure. Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* also develops these themes, but Stalybrass admits only having read Derrida's book after having delivered his paper (cf. Stalybrass 2001: 30n.2). Margreta de Grazia's essay, "Teleology, Delay, and the 'Old Mole'", complements Stalybrass's by digging deeper into Hegel's own use of the "mole" imagery.

After the spectators hear Hamlet additionally call his father's ghost an "old mole" and a "worthy pioner" (idem: 225; 1.5.161/162), there can be little doubt that, despite functioning as an authority figure, this ghost is already challenged by being treated as something bodily, familiar and unkempt, digging in the earth, instead of dwelling in a pure realm of spirits.[4]

Nevertheless, returning to Eglinton's remark, why should *Hamlet* not be a ghost story? Russell, who is present at Stephen's library lecture, opposes to Stephen the following dictum: "Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences" (Joyce 2000: 236). But *Hamlet*, the doorstep to "Plato's world of ideas" (ibidem), the corridor of access to the spirit, constantly risks being taken over by ghosts, and the ethereal spirit chances ridicule at the hands of bodily, gross spectres. The immaterial principle in *Ulysses* is incarnated (never a word was so misused) as a Nymph, who says, after Bloom has let out some air, that "We, immortals (…) have not such a place and no hair there either. We are stonecold and pure" (idem: 660), later on adding: "No more desire. (*She reclines her head, sighing*). Only the ethereal. Where dreamy creamy gull waves o'er the waters dull" (idem: 661).

But "From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step" (idem: 631). Almost as if responding to the already fragile position of Russel, who defends a literature revealing pure spiritual essences, there enters, several hundred pages later, the dignified apparition of William Shakespeare, the immortal Bard himself, in a mirror, reflecting Bloom's and Stephen's faces, his poetry a ruin:

> (*Stephen and Bloom gaze in the mirror. The face of William Shakespeare, beardless, appears there, rigid in facial paralysis, crowned by the reflection of the reindeer antlered hatrack in the hall.*)
> SHAKESPEARE: (*In dignified ventriloquy*) 'Tis the loud laugh bespeaks the vacant mind. (*To Bloom*) Thou thoughtest as how thou wastest invisible. Gaze. (*He crows with a black capon's laugh*) Iagogo! How my Oldfellow chokit his Thursdaymomun. Iagogogo! (idem: 671).

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[4] An additional parody of King Hamlet's ghost is detected by Richard Halpern in Yorick's skull: "there is nothing spooky about this later return. Yorick's spirit does not ascend from the torments of purgatory; rather, his bone is simply cast up, in a perfectly natural and ordinary fashion, by the hand of the Gravedigger (…). But the skull does not lack all relation to the spiritual; indeed, it produces a parody of spirit in the malodorous gas or smell it gives off" (Halpern 2001: 45/46), something Halpern calls a "stink of the real" (idem: 46), a reminder of materiality.

The thematic stress is not on ethereal essences, not on the world of ideas, but on earthly matters – cuckolding, with a reference to Iago.[5] The past, the dead and their inheritance (the fact that they fathered, or did not father, the present) are overpowering. Bloom is inevitably subjected to the pressure of genealogies – from "Moses begat Noah" (idem: 615) to "and Virag begat Bloom" (idem: 616).[6] One can indeed be too much in the "son".[7]

The motifs of incarnation, representation and impersonation can be seen to come from *Hamlet*, of course – the play within the play and the antic disposition come to mind. We know that all this acting also affects Hamlet's description of the ghost in his meditations. First it is said to "assume my noble father's person" (Shakespeare 2006: 187; 1.2.242); then it is said to have "a questionable shape" (idem: 206; 1.4.43);[8] finally Hamlet fully spells out his doubt about the ghost's identity:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me! (idem: 278-279; 2.2.533-538).

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[5] Just before Shakespeare is refigured as Martin Cunningham, there is time for another instance of Shakespearean quote-mangling, in which the Player Queen's (after a script from Hamlet) "None wed the second but who killed the first" (Shakespeare 2006: 310; 3.2.174) is turned into "SHAKESPEARE: (*With paralytic rage*) Weda seca whokilla farst" (Joyce 2000: 672).

[6] This biblical structure is also used in Paul Valery's essay, "La Crise de l'esprit", referred to by Derrida (cf. Derrida 1993: 23-24). Valery's essay refers to Hamlet – "l'Hamlet européen regarde des milliers de spectres" –, after which the following genealogy of influential skulls appears: "*Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit…*" (*apud* idem: 4).

[7] It is now almost a commonplace about *Ulysses* to say that there is an obsession with fatherhood and with self-begetting. I hope it is not forcing a note to remember that in "Circe", where all the ghosts appear, it is Bloom who changes into a woman, first "*virgo intacta*" (Joyce 2000: 613) and afterwards having an arm plunged "elbowdeep in (…) [his] vulva" (idem: 651). Bloom also expresses a wish: "O, I so want to be a mother" (idem: 614). In yet another rewriting of *Hamlet*, *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977), by the East German playwright Heiner Müller, Hamlet's traumatic misogyny similarly leads to a cross-dressing scene: Hamlet wears a "whore's mask" and adopts the "pose of a whore", while saying the line "I want to be a woman" (Müller 2001: 548, my translation).

[8] However, "questionable" historically meant "inviting questions" and not yet "uncertain" (cf. Shakespeare 2006: 206, note to line 43).

This indeterminacy, this fundamental ambivalence, continues into *Ulysses*, namely in the "Circe" chapter, as we have seen, with a travesty, even carnival of ghosts. It is then significant that, as the ghost of Stephen's mother appears to him, his reaction is quite similar to the lines by Hamlet which I have just quoted. Suspicious of deceit, Stephen asks: "Lemur, who are you? What bogeyman's trick is this?" (Joyce 2000: 681).

*II*

As I mentioned at the beginning, ghosts are the troubled sublimation of how the past survives in the present, so that one might try to determine why the ghosts in *Ulysses* behave farcically. For that purpose, it will be necessary to briefly consider a few selected traces of 19th-century philosophies of history in *Ulysses*, more specifically those of Hegel and Marx. This is not in any way meant to alter what has already been said about Joyce's philosophy of history, nor the importance for it of authors such as Bruno and above all Vico, although both authors tend to be mentioned more in relation to *Finnegans Wake* than to *Ulysses*.[9] The influence of Hegel and the lack of influence of Marx in Joyce, as some have argued, should not be approached here as the global and direct presence of Hegel's or Marx's philosophies of history in Joyce's historical thinking.[10] The study of intertextuality teaches us otherwise, and this has been argued in the case of Joyce, that is, that Joyce had, for example, contact with Hegelian thinking through other, minor authors (cf. Norris 2004: 213); also not to

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[9] The issue of Joyce and philosophy of history is well synthesised in Margot Norris's article, "Joyce, History, and the Philosophy of History", which offers an update on the advances made in studies concerning Joyce's relation to philosophy of history. To put it in a nutshell, history, in Joyce, is given "revisionary, dispersed, non-progressive, non-teleological, cyclical, and deconstructed forms" (Norris 2004: 207). Norris further adds that "Joyce appears to have been drawn to speculative rather than positivistic methodologies", that is, "theories of history that conflated history with consciousness, and historiography with narrative" (idem: 219).

[10] In the case of Marx, this turns around the anecdote about Joyce reading the first paragraph of *Capital* and returning the book to the lender, because he found it so absurd; however, others have argued against this lack of influence (cf. Norris 2004: 214-215). Although not arguing for an actual influence in the traditional sense, Patrick MacGee makes a convincing case for the presence in *Finnegans Wake* of some of Marx's images, themes (theory of value and commodity circulation, for example), and even puns on Marx's name, in chapter 11 of his *Joyce Beyond Marx*, "'Politicoecomedy' and Communism".

be underestimated is how certain phrases find themselves transmitted in a cultural milieu, how they end up disseminated through language use, leaving its source behind, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's and Julia Kristeva's theories of intertextuality (cf. Kristeva 1969: 83).

This preamble is meant to introduce the well-known conversation about history between Stephen Dedalus and Mr. Deasy, in the "Nestor" chapter, a chapter whose "art", in the famous diagram published by Stuart Gilbert, is precisely "history" (cf. Kiberd 2000: xxiii). At a certain point, Stephen complains: "History (…) is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 2000: 42). At first, this may seem like the surface impression of Mr. Deasy's more Hegelian answer: "All history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God" (ibidem). But it might, in fact, be read as a possible echo of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,[11] of these well-known sentences:

> The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them: they borrow their names, slogans, and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language (Marx 1981: 146).

Again the spirits of the past conjured, again the costumes, the disguise, the stage, the quotes – the nightmare is also that this re-enactment, this

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[11]   The image known as "the nightmare of history" in Joyce criticism has been considered in detail by several authors, some of which are listed in Spoo 1999: 26. Choosing not to decide for any specific source, Robert Spoo argues that the nightmare image, as applied to history, was in the air ever since the late 19th century, having become routine during the First World War. Spoo further elaborates on the conversation between Stephen and Mr. Deasy: "Deasy's proud faith in the steady unfolding of Spirit in time is sharply contested by Stephen's antidevelopmental, counterteleological scepticism. The notion of a progressive spirit calls forth in him, as it did in Joyce, a counterdiscourse that figures history perversely as static, lifeless corporeality, that denies the temporal process as self-determining soul and points instead to its burdensome body, to the failure of providentialism as a shared cultural truth. Stephen's and Joyce's attitudes toward history partake of what I have elsewhere described as a 'counterdiscourse of history' that gained currency in the nineteenth century. Sceptical of dominant spiritual conceptions of historical process, writers and thinkers as diverse as Karl Marx, Henry Adams, George Eliot, Jules Laforgue, and Henrik Ibsen imaged history as an uncanny body, a spectre or ghoul, a graveyard or tomb, a nightmare" (idem: 25).

second-time around, is a caricature. According to Marx's (possibly fake) Hegel allusion, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (ibidem). As Hayden White has observed, this is history writing in the mode of satire (cf. White 1975: 321), and as such, few things remain unturned. One of these is the French Revolution itself, initially the positive pole of the opposition between both revolutions. As some authors have noted, Marx's parody of the events in France from 1848 to 1851, namely in their imitation of the 1789 revolution, throws some negative light on the French Revolution's own disguises and costumes, on its having "draped itself alternatively as the Roman republic and the Roman empire (…) in Roman costume and with Roman speeches" (Marx 1981: 147), "pour se dissimuler, dans l'illusion, le contenu mediocre de l'ambition bourgeoise" (Derrida 1993: 183). The first revolution reveals itself already as repetition, subject to farce, not having benefited from the comparison after all.[12] Peter Stalybrass has put it in good derridean: "the effect of this 'debased' repetition is to unsettle the status of the origin" (Stalybrass 2001: 19).

Marx may have found this theme in one of Hegel's comments about the French Revolution in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, in which Hegel already criticized what he called the "insipid" use of Roman and Greek motifs by the French revolutionaries, claiming that no two individual historical events or situations could ever be entirely the same (cf. Hegel 1986: 17). Hegel uses this example to argue that "What experience and history teach us is this – that peoples and governments have never learnt anything from history" (ibidem, my translation).[13] Actually, we know this theme from the conventions of comedy – the mistake which gets repeated over and over again, because the character never learns from experience, because memory is not duly exercised and put to use.

But what has all this to do with *Ulysses*, its ghosts and their relation to *Hamlet*? We should not forget the last words of King Hamlet's ghost in his first apparition to Hamlet: "remember me" (Shakespeare 2006: 218; 1.5.91); and again in Gertrude's closet: "Do not forget!" (idem: 345;

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[12]  To this opening by Marx, Gérard Genette has added: "toute imitation, toute répétition est comique par nature. D'ailleurs, l'Histoire n'attend pas toujours la récidive pour se montrer farcesque. '*Twice: once too often*', disait Bierce, pour le coup bien optimiste: de trop, la première l'est souvent déjà" (Genette 2006: 140).

[13]  Paul Valery also insisted on this point, saying that history "teaches precisely nothing" (*apud* White 1975: 100).

3.4.106). In *Ulysses*, Virag, Bloom's grandfather, also asks him: "I presume you shall remember what I will have taught you on that head? (…) See, you have forgotten. Exercise your mnemotechnic. *La causa è santa*. (…) (*Aside*) He will surely remember" (Joyce 2000: 630-631). In *Ulysses*, the ghosts' demand that the living learn from the dead and act according to knowledge of the past is wasted, and, one could indeed argue, was never seriously meant from the very beginning. The farcical behaviour of ghosts is the acknowledgment of the already expected failure of memory. History is a nightmare because, never an object of learning, it repeats itself as a self-travesty – as the exposure of the absence of historical memory and historically informed action – thus restating a variation of the comic topos of not learning from experience. The characters in *Ulysses* never realize that they are re-enacting the *Odyssey*. They go about their lives oblivious of the analogy. Only the spooks, in their dignified ventriloquy, seem to have a better time haunting and taunting the living.

And yet, to end here is to forget a small, discreet detail at the very end of the "Circe" chapter, after 140 pages of mad spectral pageant. Bloom and Stephen are alone, Stephen half conscious, and

> (*Silent, thoughtful, alert,* (...) [Bloom] *stands on guard, his fingers at his lips in the attitude of secret master. Against the dark wall a figure appears slowly, a fairy boy of eleven, a changeling, kidnapped, dressed in an Eton suit with glass shoes and a little bronze helmet, holding a book in his hand. He reads from right to left inaudibly, smiling, kissing the page.*)
> BLOOM: (*Wonderstruck, calls inaudibly*) Rudy! (idem: 702-703).

No longer a farcical apparition, the ghost of Rudy, Bloom's dead son, is shown with only mild irony at his idealization with a "*white lambkin* [peeping] *out of his waistcoat pocket*" (idem: 703). This is the moment of the supposed identification by Bloom of Stephen with Rudy and only it makes for the possible, minimal countering to all the nightmarish insistence on the farcicality of memory and on the uselessness of its efforts.

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