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On ‘a certain convocation of politic worms’ (*Hamlet*)

MISCHA TWITCHIN

> Make mad the guilty and appal the free,/ Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed/ The very faculties of eyes and ears.
> *Hamlet* (2.2.499–501)

> I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf BLABLA, the ruins of Europe in back of me.
> Heiner Müller (1984 [1977]: 53)

How might repertoire be thought of through Hamlet’s image of ‘a certain convocation of politic worms’ (4.3.19–20)? That is, through a metaphor of what lives on in the dramatic corpus, nourishing theatricality – besides, if not beyond, blahblah – with its bodies of words in the changing present of the past? Metaphor, as is exemplified by *Hamlet*, says more than plot, especially when that is reduced to exposition or to an interpretative ‘post-mortem’. Transformations of meaning, after all, are made in relation to established usage, where even metaphor may become the husk of cliché. ‘Language,’ Annie Le Brun writes (as if addressing this same convocation), ‘is a living organism that is nourished by what it absorbs. And it is an organism whose vitality depends especially on whether or not its absorptive abilities become a transformational power’ (2008: 40). Indeed, even when thought ‘dead’, the metaphors of theatre – drawn from a centuries-old repertoire – are always subject to change, offering a ‘transformational power’ that ever haunts performance ‘again tonight’ (1.1.20).

The inscription of bodies in and by repertoire can be seen, for instance, with the ‘brute’ in-joke (3.2.101) of the deadly encounter at Elsinore between Polonius and Hamlet, re-presenting that of the two actors, John Heminges and Richard Burbage, from their earlier roles as Caesar and Brutus on the Capitoline. As part of the Globe company’s repertoire, references to the murder of Julius Caesar (played by Heminges-Polonius) recur in *Hamlet*, ‘which not only aims to draw historic parallels but also to remind the audience of the actor’s previous performance’ (Rokem 2010: 70) – as Burbage-Hamlet kills him once again in the ‘world’ that is a stage (Thompson and Taylor 2020: 601). Played beneath the Globe’s motto, *Totus mundus agit histrionem* (or, as Jaques has it, in *As You Like it*, ‘All the world’s a stage/ And all the men and women merely players’ (2.7.139)), the question of metaphor – as, precisely, between world and stage – may evoke the ‘transformational power of language’ in a brutal play of words.

Besides (re-)discovering the dramatic texts of playwrights, repertoire may also concern an actor’s desire to play a famous role (to make it their ‘own’), or to be the first to ‘create’ a new role (one perhaps written especially for them). And, since the twentieth century, directors have wanted to be the one to make of a classic play something contemporary, or to establish a contemporary play as something classic. Mostly these ambitions are forgettable and, indeed, forgotten (satirized, for instance, by Agnieszka Holland in her 1978 film *Provincial Actors*). While theatrical repertoire may be thought of (as it is, famously, by Polonius) in terms of genre – comedies, tragedies, devised performances, period pieces, costume dramas and so on – it is informed by (and itself informs) a seemingly core distinction today between ‘new writing’ and ‘old’, the contemporary and the classic. In ‘holding up, as ’twere, a mirror’ (3.2.21–2) to the times, however, it is evident that neither of these necessarily serves better for theatrically reflecting the cultural-political ‘present’.

But, occasionally, productions are created that do ‘reflect’ the times in the mirror of repertoire, where the contemporary acquires a form that makes it visible beyond its own moment (even to the surprise of those involved in the making of that production). Repertoire offers an interpretation of the theatrical archive, then, where examples of the canon are embodied on

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stage, raising the question as to whom repertoire 'belongs' – to the ensemble that performs it or the audience that attends it? By and for whom is it owned or, perhaps, disowned? How are the 'politic worms' of repertoire themselves eaten in their own turn, becoming the supper of interpretative fish that 'show you how a king may go progress through the guts of a beggar' (4.3.30)?

Repertoire here is a rehearsal for the (re-)creation of theatrical canons, constantly tested as a representational medium, through the production of new meaning within – and for – cultural memory. As Yuri Lotman writes of *Hamlet*:

> Nowadays *Hamlet* is not just a play by Shakespeare, but … also the memory of all its interpretations, and … all those historical events which occurred outside the text but with which [it] can evoke associations. We may have forgotten what Shakespeare and his spectators knew, but we cannot forget what we have learnt since their time. And this is what gives the text new meanings. (Lotman 1990: 18–19)

Concerning the reciprocity of text and context, performance and memory, the historical and the contemporary, repertoire – expanding Lotman's sense of 'the text' here – is the very condition of any sense of the 'new' in a production. It is as a catalyst of and for this ostensibly paradoxical relation – the simultaneity of what (as represented) is not present and yet is only present (as remembered and theatrical) – that repertoire generates its new meanings. In Hamlet's final appeal to Horatio to give a report of what has just been enacted (5.2.330–3; 341–2), after taking up the bodies (5.2.385), what is in question is the very appearance of theatre; not only in the time of its performance but in its 'after life', where what has yet to occur is not simply in and of the future, but also – as remembered – the past.

The ways in which these bodies are spoken of when they are not themselves speaking nourishes the sense that they have not only existed (in the life – and death – of the stage) but that they still exist in the 'new' understanding of cultural memory. The sense that 'the end' is both still to come and has already happened is encoded in repertoire – of which we are given a startling reminder in a *Hamlet* production by Oskaras Koršunovas (2008) that was in his company's repertoire for more than a decade. Here the famous soliloquy on the question of being was repeated by the actor playing Hamlet (Darius Meškauskas) at the very end of the performance, as it were posthumously – echoing in the now secular sense of 'the dread of something after death' (3.1.77). For if we no longer believe in a divinely sanctioned 'natural order', then our understanding of legitimacy – whether in birth (through marriage) or death (through last rites) – demands 'new' readings of the play's anachronism. While the genre of revenge tragedy is historically common, after all, *Hamlet* has become virtually a genre unto itself.

Between the First Folio and the shattered mirror of *Hamlet* fragments in Heiner Müller's theatre machine (1984 [1977]: 53–8), who is Hamlet to us? Or what, indeed, is Hamlet to the actor playing him (or even her) – such that the audience, let alone the actor, might weep for them? What is this 'nothing' (2.2.492), a 'quintessence of dust' (2.2.274), that nonetheless brings tears to the eye through the embodied form of its conceit, as the epitome of European repertoire today? As Hamlet asks, concerning what it means to stage, to make present, an ancient repertoire (invoking stories of the Trojan war): 'Is it not monstrous that this player here,/ But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,/ Could force his soul so to his whole conceit/ That from her working all his visage waned,/ Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,/ A broken voice, and his whole function suiting/ With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing./ For Hecuba!/ What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,/ That he should weep for her?' (2.2.486–95). It is in this rhetorical reflection, in the very mirror – the metaphor – of its conceit, that we might even reverse the question ('What is Hamlet to us?') and wonder, 'What are we to Hamlet?'

As the metaphors of *Hamlet* become detached from the dramatic scenes in which they are still spoken – living on in new scenes, including ones far removed from the stage – who is to say 'I' in the name of Denmark today? Jan Kott notes, 'Every Hamlet has a book in his hand,' from which follows the astute question, 'what book does the modern Hamlet read?' (1981 [1965]: 56). What philosophical (or perhaps anti-

philosophical) worms provide the occasion for Hamlet's famous riposte to Polonius concerning 'words, words, words' (2.2.189)? What, indeed, is the *matter* in a performance of this exemplary convocation for a politics of repertoire? What of these cultural worms remains between the blahblah of what has already been said and what is still unsaid (or perhaps unspeakable) theatrically, regarding the contemporary evidence of those very words? Regarding actions (or appearances) that might yet 'make mad the guilty and appal the free' (2.2.499), how might one locate what asks to be remembered and what claims to be feigned in the work of theatrical repertoire – between the method and the madness (2.2.202–3), a hawk and a handsaw (2.2.316)?

A performance of *Hamlet*, after all, concerns bodies that, even in their silence, 'have also cause to speak' (5.2.375). Between the appeal of and to cultural memory, and that of and to political legitimacy, how does the play – the epitome of European theatrical repertoire – rehearse questions about the violence that masquerades as 'reasons of state'? Indeed, censorship offers its own history of repertoire – where the worms are not simply academic, feeding on 'reputation', but where their convocation may also be politically murderous. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, Kott cites the question of Polonius' dead body as one of 'modern political cabaret'. 'Not where he eats but where he is eaten' is a joke that is, on the one hand, 'derisive, on the other cruel' (1981 [1965]: 52) when the state of Communist Poland is mirrored theatrically in that of Shakespeare's Denmark. (Kott's essay discusses two productions in the wake of Khruschev's 'secret speech', one from 1956, in Krakow, and one from 1959, in Warsaw.) Hamlet's reply to Rosencrantz concerning where to find the body of the murdered courtier is neither lament nor elegy. Its wit verges, rather, on the cynical. Recalling T. S. Eliot's critique of the incommensurability of motive and expression (not to say of action) in *Hamlet*, we see that his reply (like the title role itself) is 'less than madness and more than feigned' (1999 [1919]: 146) – a discrepancy in meaning that still echoes in any production today. What makes of Hamlet 'our contemporary' is precisely a question of and for a theatrical repertoire that offers a haunting imperative to remember – or to be remembered. This is not to venerate the past, but to be troubled 'in the mind's eye' (1.1.111), in the present (as 'a little ere the mightiest Julius fell' (1.1.13)), by a state of injustice and political illegitimacy.

In murder trials, there must be a body (indeed, a forensic 'body of evidence') and testimony must be given in person ('I swear…'), not by hearsay. Adjudicating the truth of events – as to what it means (not) to have 'been there' – the supposed ontology of performance also requires bodies and speech 'in person', albeit (as Hamlet says) for its fictions, including those of conscience. The stage(d) repertoire of the dead – as the art of theatre distinct, for example, from religious practices of burial and commemoration (Twitchin 2016) – concerns the poetics of tragedy in the European tradition, where 'the play's the thing' (3.1.539). Romeo Castellucci, for instance, observes: 'Tragedy is a mechanism to expose the dead body, a mechanism whose fundamental aim is to display death' (2004: 17) – but as a rehearsal of present (social-political) questions of truth (and, indeed, metaphor), not simply of fact.

The 'presence' of the body, such that the wormy convocation of repertoire might feed on it, is its own metaphor – brought to life, as it were, in each 'new' production. As Oliver Frljic writes, after addressing the question (echoing Peggy Phelan (1993)) of whether 'theatre as a medium become[s] itself also through disappearance', and giving *Hamlet* as his example: 'But there is another question implicated in disappearances and the traces it leaves in physical reality. To answer it, one can borrow a short excerpt from *Hamlet*: 'Rosencrantz – "What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?"' (2020: 92). This is a body – or, indeed, a theatrical 'thing' – of words, a *matter* spoken of and for (even brutally) in its present absence, as a knot of (and for) remembrance tied with the two threads of Diana Taylor's famous distinction between archive and repertoire.

Unpicking these two terms (as if separating the eating and the eaten) leads to new questions. After all, the play appears, in Hamlet's own pun, 'in such a questionable shape' (1.4.44) as, famously, to prompt reflection on what it means

'to be or not to be'. As a question of both actor and character – and of either or both for an audience – 'this thing', as it 'has appeared again tonight' (1.1.20), concerns relations between the living and the dead, fiction and its context, what 'is' and what 'seems', what is present and what is remembered – not least, as a question of and for repertoire. Frljic's citation from the play could be continued with Hamlet's following words: '"The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing – / Guildenstern: "A thing, my lord?"/ Hamlet: "Of nothing…"' (4.2.24–7). The singular 'thing' in question here is multiple – a ghost or 'apparition' (which Horatio calls 'the form of the thing' (1.2.219)); a play within a play (the form of the Mousetrap (3.2.231)); and a body that is as 'nothing'. This is at the heart of what the philosopher might ask of tragic theatre, just as the actor might ask it of a director, or the playwright of both – and as the ghost of repertoire, that 'old mole' (1.5.161), asks it of the audience: 'Remember me' (1.5.111).

In its appeal to 'the very faculties of ears and eyes' (2.2.501), the 'mirror' of repertoire attests to the politics of theatre, where (still with Frljic):

> Part of the world isolated in the frame we traditionally call theatre speaks – if there are ears to hear it and eyes to see it – more about what is absent from this frame than what is there. This internal paradox was formative for my understanding of theatre – to always search for the things that I couldn't see on the stage and reasons for their absence, underlying politics of exclusion and inclusion which we usually call representation. (Frljic 2020: 92)

Making visible the mechanisms that act to make other things invisible is the very work of *Hamlet*, exploring the 'internal paradox… [of] representation'. In his own production (of 2014 and 'currently [in 2018] in the repertoire of the Youth Theatre (ZeKaeM) in Zagreb'), Frljic turns the drama inside out, with a

> directorial concept in which everyone conspired against Hamlet from the very beginning in order to eliminate him as the only legitimate heir to his assassinated father. In lieu of Hamlet's performative lunacy as a truth-seeking procedure in this production the society causes Hamlet's lunacy by using a collective game to deform the reality in which he is supposed to act. (Frljic cited in Marjanic 2020: 211)

The production was set around a diner table at which the Court sits, waited on by the marginalized figure of Hamlet (with an echo, perhaps, of Grzegorz Jarzyna's production of Thomas Vinterberg and Mogens Rukov's adaptation of their film, *Festen*). Regarding the key metaphor in the discussion of repertoire here, after Hamlet has killed Polonius he put the body 'back in his chair [at the table] in front of Laertes who needs to watch his father's corpse. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask for the body it becomes a bizarre and comical situation because Polonius is right at the table "at supper"' (Sakowska 2018: 98).

Duska Radosavljevic, introducing an interview with him, even compares Frljic to the figure of Hamlet, highlighting aspects of Friljic's work that she describes several times as being 'like Hamlet' (2018a: 2). This is perhaps paradoxical, however, given that she also tells us of his Zagreb production: 'The Mousetrap scene is dismissed by this Hamlet as an ineffectual method in the present historical moment, and the protagonist is slaughtered by his mother in the end rather than killing anyone himself' (2018a: 1). As Aleksandra Sakowska describes this ending: 'In a final twist of this adaptation Hamlet is held down [on the table] by the male characters while Gertrude cuts his throat. Afterwards all the characters offer homage to Claudius by shaking his hand, even Horatio' (2018: 98). This on-stage play of actor and audience ciphers what it means to see and to hear theatrically – to want 'to make mad the guilty and appal the free' (2.2.499) – as it embodies new meanings through the worms of a tragic repertoire. Indeed, for Sakowska:

> Frljic makes the audience observe the few actors 'imprisoned' on stage, thus making the spectators silent witnesses complicit in the evil acts committed in this production. The grim ending in which Hamlet is murdered by his own family without any repercussions for the perpetrators makes this adaptation the most tragic I have seen. (Sakowska 2018: 98)

With its theatrical framing – often eschewed in the name of 'the real'; of that oxymoron 'theatre of immanence'; or of a conflation with political activism – repertoire enacts a question of dramatic forms. Traditionally conceived in terms of the 'historical' and 'contemporary' in *mise-*

en-scène (even as the theatrical today no longer depends on reference to the dramatic), repertoire offers an interplay between the philological and the allegorical, as also the literal and the symbolic. In Frljic's own account of this continual rehearsal of the discrepancy between act and word, gesture and meaning, 'theatre is not an end but a means. Theatre for sure won't change or improve the society in which we live, but it can evoke some sort of a critical conscience, if nothing else' (cited in Toporišič 2015–16: 27).

To such concerns of 'critical conscience' in the name of repertoire, one might still retort 'blahblah', especially now that 'the ruins of Europe' are once again in front of us and no longer simply behind us. The erstwhile politics of post-war Europe (from the Nuremberg trials, through the Cold War to the re-unification of Germany, to the post-1990 expansion of the EU; not to mention the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s) have been profoundly challenged by Russia's revanchist imperialist war, aiming to prevent Ukraine from joining 'the West' (as both sides like to call it). In this context, *Hamlet* again provides metaphors for rehearsing questions of the body, where (echoing, precisely, Eliot's analysis) we feel the incommensurability (the lack of an 'objective correlative') between the individual and the political. The former may kill or be killed – but in the name of a cause identified with the latter ('a thing of nothing'). Whether that of 'sovereignty' or the grotesque claim to be 'defeating Nazism' once again, it is the existential question of a political cause that *Hamlet* so eloquently explores – still – while staging the murder and lies involved in usurpation, as well as the haunting motive of revenge within the questionable restoration of legitimacy. This is powerfully explored in a recent German-Polish film, made just before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, under the title precisely of *The Hamlet Syndrome* (dirs Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosolowski), which uses the stage work – as both metaphor and material – to explore the social traumas of a war waged both against and in defence of nationalism, with its manifold violations of civil society.

As Frljic observes: 'War has a kind of discursive mask – the claims of freedom and homeland, etc. – but when you scratch that surface, you can see… All those stories of freedom – freedom is also a form of ideology…' (cited in Radosavljevic 2018b: 9). It is in this still 'contemporary' context (with its writhing of ever-hungry worms) that, for Frljic: 'The only aspect that I think might have some relevance in the theatre is the notion of conflict' (ibid.). This is not simply the dramatic conflict on stage, but a conflict concerning what is meant by the stage itself, with questions of interpretation that, precisely, stage the limits of 'dramatic' repertoire in (and for) the present.

> As I said many times before, in my work the conflict does not unfold between fictional characters, but relationally between performers and the audience which in a way represents the society and the system of values of that society and how those values have been normalised. That is the level on which I try to build conflict… (Frljic cited in Radosavljevic 2018b: 9)

The question of motivation apparent in performance – in the manifold forms of the Mousetrap, for instance – concerns a palimpsest of sources (as with the possible books that Hamlet reads, whether Montaigne or Sartre, Goethe or Barad) and their contemporary resonances for both actors and audience. Besides literary dramaturgy (considering the implications of the 'ur-Hamlet' or of the Quartos for the Folio), repertoire concerns questions of production dramaturgy – where the theatrical eats, or is eaten by, a particular cultural-political convocation. Why (not) perform *Hamlet* today? How does the staging itself generate (or, more typically, not generate) the tension of theatricality, which, after all, is the very subject, the *matter*, of the play? Here, *Hamlet* turns the 'working' of repertoire into the forms of its own conceit through the language of theatre. As Lotman reminds us:

> For as long as theatre has existed, there has been a struggle between two concepts of theatricality: the viewer should forget that he is in a theatre, the viewer should constantly feel that he is in a theatre… In fact, the viewers should *simultaneously* forget and always remember that they are in a theatre. Depending on the aesthetic concepts, the cultural orientation, the individual task, stress may be placed on either part of this twofold formulation; the director may determine that he or she 'ruins' or 'creates' theatricality, but *in fact so long as there is theatre*, both sides of its effect are present: belief

> that the illusive reality of the stage is real, and that it is not life, but 'playing life'. It is real – and we weep over Desdemona's fate; it is illusion – and we do not rise to her aid. During the intermission, we draw ourselves out of the theatricality and calmly go out for a smoke, but the lights go down, and we return to the world of interrupted emotions, to the point where we had left off, to the world of illusory reality. (Lotman 2020 [1989]: 86–7, emphasis added)

It is this 'world of illusory reality', in its contradictory simultaneities, that Koršunovas highlights in the opening gesture of his 2008 production of *Hamlet* – transforming the question of the play's beginning ('Who's there?') into that of the actors addressing their own 'questionable shape' in a line of dressing room mirrors: 'Who are you?' All the scene setting of Elsinore is put aside – there are no battlements overlooking the sea (whether evoked by sound or image) – as the actors put this question to their own reflections, in what are simultaneously theatrical and actual mirrors. The mirror serves as a metonym for the theatre – part of a backstage make-up room or changing room – that, in its on-stage appearance, becomes a metaphor for theatre itself; indeed, for the very theatre that we are attending as its audience.

The reflections, of course, offer no reply. The glass is impassive, and the increasing sound of the actors' insistent voices simply heightens the silence that (as we know) has already followed the tragedy – with the question as to who, indeed, Hamlet is for us invoked with the repeated soliloquy at the end. As with Frljic, the whole drama is staged by Koršunovas as 'a play-within-a-play' – refracting the question of conscience in a series of doublings beyond those of the mirrors (where Claudius and the ghost of Old Hamlet are played by the same actor, as are Horatio and Fortinbras). What of this 'thing' here is caught in the mirror, which the staging holds up to the appearance of its players (as simultaneously to the presence of its audience)? In the mirror that this performance holds up to repertoire, what is the 'matter' in the very metaphor of theatre, in which repertoire equally holds up a mirror to the performance? Who, or what, is this 'thing' of repertoire, become a metaphor called Hamlet, for both actor and audience?

Of course, it is the privilege of Hamlet to be the one who asks, 'Who am I?' (beyond the staging of 'who are you?'); but, as already observed with respect to Hecuba, the question is equally, what is (this) theatre or staging as an instance of distinguishing between attributes, as 'actions that a man might play' and 'what passeth show' (1.2.84–5)? What, indeed, 'can denote me truly' (1.2.83) in the ambiguities of what it could mean 'to act'? While the state of mind ('within') is distinguished from that of the Court ('without'), the former may itself be put on – may be all that 'seems' distinct from what 'is' in the mirror of theatre – with the play of 'madness', as of an 'antic disposition' (1.5.179). What may be and what appears to be are interwoven – albeit that a 'broken heart', lived in 'silence' (ultimately that of death), is contrasted with a 'broken voice' – in the understanding of the part, as precisely that of acting: 'And all for nothing' (2.2.548).

Koršunovas reflects on this when he comments:

> I have always been interested in one aspect of the theatre: the possibility to express what cannot be expressed in words, to create a mysterious inner communication between spectators and actors. The inadequacy between a word and an action, a word and a view, are very important to me. The discrepancy helps new meanings to appear. (Koršunovas cited in Vasinauskaite 2021: 94–5)

We return, then, to the rehearsal of new meanings as the potential of repertoire. Hamlet, of course, famously addresses this 'inadequacy' in his advice to the players, offering a theatrical metaphor of his own role for the audience:

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2.16–23)

It is this discrepancy – as, again, between 'actions that a man might play' and 'what passeth show' (1.2.84–5) – that keeps the form and pressure of the time open to the new meanings generated by theatrical repertoire. The 'convocation of politic worms' here concerns the nourishment of anachronism, of recognizing that we are never simply in and of

our time but always testing our sensibilities and our judgement by comparison – whether with the ancient past (as in the Renaissance), a millennial or messianic future (as with the Abrahamic religions) or in the cleft between pre- and post- with respect to some historical reference point (as with 1945; or, now, 2022).

This question of anachronism can be reframed in different ways, even perhaps as a transformation of cultural memory into a form of paranoia, prompting not only the rhetoric of an 'inadequacy between word and action' but, indeed, the tragedy of revenge, the evidence of which is everywhere in the ruins that surround us. We separate ourselves from 'the past', but appeal to those aspects in which we like to recognize ourselves in its mirror – claiming to know about it as 'history' from our own point of view. To rehearse what was not understood in and of its own time – where its future is already in the past – is what repertoire allows for, 'so long as there is theatre' (Lotman). At the time of his production (2008), Koršunovas reflects:

> We may even need to nurture a certain 'paranoia' in ourselves, in order to protect ourselves from making fundamental errors in understanding the world. We need to overcome the calm that surrounds us, we need to learn and relearn that it's an illusion. That's why *Hamlet* is the most topical play for our times. (Koršunovas 2008)

What is 'new', then, in the meanings generated through repertoire, as if our knowledge of 'revenge' has changed when its tragedy remains 'topical'? In the 1990s, this question particularly concerned the post-Cold War 'future' of a so-called 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992), with the supposed atavism of what the editors of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* in English called 'the destructive, even violent "nationalisms" which have followed in the wake of the collapse of communism, not to mention virulent forms of ethnocentrism and xenophobia perhaps not seen since Hitler's Germany' (1994: viii). The 're-emergence' of ethnonationalism is no longer a concern simply of the former East. The revenge of the past on the present – where the haunting powers of injustice in its inheritance also produce a reactionary revenge of the present on the past – is the subject of Derrida's famous essay (1994 [1993]).

At the very least, one can say that this is also the work of metaphor, through a convocation of worms that may or may not be concerned with questions of justice in relations between past and present. The erstwhile 'post' Cold War period has been transformed – through Putin's imperialist war on Ukraine – into what Polish President Donald Tusk (cited in Bayer 2024), has called a 'pre-War period' in Europe (as already seen in *Hamlet Syndrome*). The mutual illumination of text and context that Derrida offers with *Hamlet* and the ghost of Marx, in a time that was widely declared to be 'post-Communist', lies at the heart of what repertoire addresses. Already in 1977, during the armed peace of the Cold War, Heiner Müller suggested, in the name of *Hamletmachine*'s protagonist (whether as author or actor): 'my drama didn't happen' (1984 [1977]: 56). More than a decade later, at the time of his play's belated first performance in East Germany in 1990, the politics of this emblem of a 'post-dramatic' repertoire seemed to have 'lost its subversive function' (cited in Höfele 2016: 278).

Nonetheless, Müller's (East) Berlin production of *Hamlet* (into which *Hamletmachine* was interleaved) in the year that the Wall came down appeared to him to be especially 'topical', exploring 'a rift between two epochs… from state crisis to state crisis, a young man in between, an intellectual' (that is, one of the 'privileged') (cited in Höfele 2016: 284). What becomes of this Hamlet's mordant commentary – 'in his box, the prompter is rotting' (ibid.) – now that Putin has once again opened the war graves of Europe? Through the profound questions of philosophical repertoire engaged by the books he reads – or with which he is read – Hamlet remains our contemporary. The haunting disjunctions of the play suggest what is 'contemporary' (or even 'topical') in the sense of a time that is not simply present to itself. (This is explicitly shown in the devising work for the *Hamlet Syndrome* film, informing the production of a parallel stage performance, directed by Roza Sarikisian, called *H-Effect*.) Indeed, as Müller already observed, concerning the anachronistic convocations of repertoire (distinct from the autopsies of conventional interpretation): 'Shakespeare is a mirror

through the ages, our hope a world he doesn't reflect anymore. We haven't arrived at ourselves as long as Shakespeare is writing our plays' (2001 [1988]: 119).

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