

That Thing That Bites in Howard Barker's Night: A Reading of *Gertrude (The Cry)* from the Angle of Spectrality

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The thing, the ghost, third and the eye

The reading I am about to do of this play concerns what a god, ghost, holy or wretched spirit would do in an abyssal architectonic dramaturgy; it is an attempt to decipher some of the interwoven levels of this structure. Its starting point will be the thought of spectrality as invented and refined by Derrida, some sort of 'applied spectrality' so to speak, except for one nuance: this applied spectrality does not *apply* as much as it is *applied*. Tension between theory and a work of art can but feed on unknown and secret nourishment. Barker's *Gertrude* is a tale told by a ghost. It is a recounting which deploys the virtuality of quotation because it is virtually the ghost's story in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The Story is then told by some hidden voice, a kind of absent witness. Not an *eyewitness* but an *ear* witness. And *Hamlet* is, among so many other things, a play about eyes and ears (even the poison is administered by ear). The king's death and the narrative of how he died are revealed by the ghost, whose gaze, as Derrida insists, is impossible to cross. A ghost who seems to be something of an absolute witness, like God, seeing us, watching us, but not to be seen or watched by us. The king, alias Ghost, is the only one who knows what happened before the play starts, he is his own witness of both the act of murder and of the dying. This knowledge, which Howard Barker's dramatic genius reconstitutes, is the knowledge of the last moment of the king and the first moment of the play. First and last compose a moment of repletion which triggers the play by a cry. The King in the play itself (*Gertrude (The Cry)* says the title), becomes a ghost whose knowledge is that of ghosts, beyond sight, beyond the living, and further than death. His knowledge is about witnessing; it witnesses itself actually being the knowledge of the selfhood of the person who was a king before he was reduced to being a mere haunting witness. In

Gertrude, the ghost witnesses not just his own murder but witnesses what he was murdered for. This knowledge becomes his death mask. 'Gertrude: (tearing off her clothes)... Claudius: ...if his eyes open in agony/ show him the reason he is dying'.¹ Death is murder, all deaths in *Gertrude* are murders, hence the question of survival which gives Eros its vigour. Eros and Thanatos make up the texture of the cry '(Claudius and Gertrude couple above the dying man. All three utter a music of extremes' (G 10). If Gertrude's cry cries the corpse of the king, her ecstasy is the birth of the young girl to come. Her cry reaches God in his place of witness. No love, faith, belief, says Derrida can ever exist without this absent, ultimate, witness who sees without being seen.² What has passed is what is yet to come.

The first scene is already a recounting from the past of another text, the story of the wandering literary ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We know about the king's murder in *Hamlet* from the ghost, so the narrative bears the ambiguity of being either the ghost's truth or fiction. We are not assured of the knowledge, we are on the borderline between truth and its phantasmagorical shadow. The thing, as Claudius puts it, inverses itself into a dog, and the dog too is an ultimate witness, he witnesses the thing and the cry as the disintegration of faith, of what makes a link, an alliance possible; whose disintegration will set a machine of repetition into motion; the machine of the first and the last, the end of a start as a new beginning. 'Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time makes of it also a last time'.³ Claudius' tragedy lies in his need of multiplication, of repetition of the unique to the many. Of the one unique cry to many of the unique cry. The beginning of the play, which is already a repetition of the thing-ghost in *Hamlet*, sets in motion the interrupting machine of beginnings and ends. Beginning with the king, it ends with the king; beginning with Claudius, ends with Claudius; the beginning with Albert will bring his end outside the play.

Freud in *The Uncanny* speaks of the thing that lies in the impersonal pronoun *es* (it) as the thing that haunts, *Es spukt*. It (which I will call 'surviving', or 'living on') is also haunted as a structure by murder. It cries, *es spukt*,⁴ it haunts, that thing. Murder is precisely what gives the impulse, triggers and hastens the surviving process, surviving or living as the law of any relationship, as the law which rules the pact and the

economy between life and death. The survivor also mourns the deceased whither as a murderer or as witness.⁵ But all living beings are survivors to some dead, this is the law of the living, and that is why, out of this ontological ambivalence, murder is just as originary as birth. So Gertrude does mourn '(her shoulders heave in her grief)' (G 11). just after having murdered the king. Gertrude sinks into the jubilatory phase of the work of mourning which Freud describes as one of the possible answers to loss. The manic triumph of surviving or of living on can be as much an answer as melancholy.⁶ Gertrude surpasses her work of mourning, her surviving sets her long legs on a certain road '*...the road in both directions is a void.*'⁷ The work of mourning, says Derrida, is the paradigm of the word 'work', like lovemaking is also work, i.e., the work of creation of a third part, a virtual third. Not the lover, not the beloved, but a third whose body is both the two and the in-between, whose body is real and virtual, whose body is haunted in its very occurring by the ephemeral imminence of its concrete being and its virtual disappearance. How can the cry, Claudius' gift which crosses his ears as a divine destination to the world, become the cry whose exclusiveness becomes the exclusion of precisely the unique by the many? Progressively giving, progressively holding back, retreating to the point of nowhere, lone and alone, King Claudius will be deprived of his sin and deprived of his transgression, being no more the recipient of the cry. '*Repetition and first time...repetition and last time*' (Spectres 10). The cry of the dog, the cry of the dead man whose disappearance by act of murder flings the surviving act into tragedy. The dog, the thing, will bite into the heart.

Enter the dog

So the dog makes its entrance from the first scene: Claudius copulates with Gertrude above the head of the murdered man whose extinguishing eyes had to see things from beneath: '*Claudius : let him see what I have stolen ... THE THING/THE THING/LET THE DYING DOG'S EYES SWIM/YOUR I (pause) / he's not a dog/ (he shrugs) / I called him a dog*' (G 9-10). Within the same breath Claudius retreats and withdraws his word, after a pause, '*he's not a dog (he shrugs) I called him a dog*' (G 11). Why does he shrug at this uttering? Is it because Claudius is himself a dog? '*Claudius: Darling I am your hound, I am*

your dog (G 31). Gertrude exchanges both her murdered husband, a dog, for Claudius, a new dog, and later on Albert who restrains himself from being a dog because he is only the witness of murders and murderers. He is an eyewitness, not because he sees the murder but because he is always in its shadow and he is where he casts his own murderous shadow, some virtual and ghostly casting affecting all crime, triggering it while being out of the reach of its accomplishment, hoarding its effect. Albert is in the space where the spirit still haunts the void. When he fucks Gertrude for the first time he takes her from behind. She asks him to do it that way, while referring to herself in the third person. Her 'I' becomes 'she', she Gertrude says that she (I) '*must take her from behind*' (G 46). The animal analogy draws the human into the space of the copulation, dog copulation. A dog or a bitch. The author's indications say "*Gertrude forces her fist into her mouth*" (G 46). Not to cry. If she is the bitch, she is beneath her cry, her cry is beyond her, to have such a cry there will have to be a new murder, and the cry will become the cry of the world, the cry of the outside, the wilderness. That wordless wilderness swarming with dogs, where the cruelty of a terrible love is to run out of language (G 27). Love can die with the language of which it is deprived, otherwise love, Hamlet says, '*would howl of wordlessness like a starved dog nailed into a room implores the coming in to save it. I am saying the coming in does not come first ...*' (G 27). The love has to implore the saviour like a nailed dog; if there is a coming later it must be preceded by a coming first. This sequence and the succession of pain and relief is inversed, maybe pain is relieved by someone or something; maybe someone or something is relieved by pain; the beginning is the end and vice versa. The whole question lies in that nailed dog which will or will not give language to love. Is the nailed dog that waits for the coming which does not come first some crucifixion of God? Is it a dog or not a dog? The ontological question stops and starts with the question 'dog or not a dog'. We have to look where the anagram of the word lets us suspect the opposite. The love has to implore first, then the coming in of the saviour has to come second, but this duality can be very well reversed, otherwise there may be no coming in to save an imploring love nailed into a room, if there is no saviour in the first place. First of all. Above all. Not beneath but above. And the howl, the cry, did not come from a room, it occurred outside it, it occurred in an orchard.

When Claudius' mother Isola nags him about Gertrude's betrayal, he shrugs, dismisses the accusation by some hyperbolic negation: '*SO WHAT IF SHE STOOPS TO SWALLOW DOGS*' (G 34). 'Swallow dogs' translates as "swallow lovers'. The ellipse works, she loves Claudius. As for Gertrude herself, she who swallows dogs, we have Isola attributing to the many qualities of the creature who swallows dogs the quality of being of a female dog: '*OH LET THAT BITCH [Gertrude] WAIT*' (G 34). What if Gertrude herself is also a dog? If the thing-king is a dog, Claudius himself is a dog, Hamlet is a dog, Gertrude is a bitch, we can legitimately think that every man, thing, animal, is dog, or is haunted by some substantial essence that can be dog written backwards. Thus, here is the canvas of the dog, its network, its web, and the economy that rules its appearance while casting different shadows on this newly-formed couple, Gertrude and Albert. Albert aches with desire for Gertrude, he aches like a dog, and she, who is also another ghostly dog, has knowledge of the law, the knowledge that makes death overcome love, because one has to survive the other, because the third awaits its hour. '*Albert: Say you understand ...why... I do not run like some mad dog to climb your flesh all mouth and tongue and fists.../ Gertrude : Oh idiot I am your death*' (G 58-59). Albert pleads with Gertrude to be his death (G 59) and sinks to his knees in an act of worship and caresses her full belly (G 60). Full of the cry of love and murder. Longing as a dog to be killed by a god, because murder is not death, but is the saving from death, it is consecration and infinity beyond finitude or above the finite. '*Gertrude: My unkilld love*' (G 86).

Finally Hamlet's crucified dog, his nailed wordless dog, the god of love and death, becomes a hound. The cry, the wordless cry of love and death detaches itself from Gertrude, leaves her skin and her womb after Hamlet's murder; the cry escapes her to clutch the edge of the world, where it should belong. It will sink in the space of the frontiers, outside that same border of Chaos, like Saturn the planet of death hangs over the edge of the universe: '*Claudius: ...I thought the cry was in you / But it's not / It's outside / It waits / It walks / Some long hound pacing the perimeter*' (G 87).

Hence, the cry is a dog and a hound. Pacing the very border it clings to, where it dangles from the thin line between love and hate, love and death, between the dead and the alive, the living or the dead or both

mingled together. To survive is to witness, as Derrida insists, to witness is to see. To see without being seen, without crossing the eye of the seer, is to become a thing, a ghost, a god, or even a dog. God sees us, watches us, and he is never to be seen or to be watched by us. God is the absolutely asymmetrical witness. Dog, says Barker in his poem 'I dog dog I' (whose title recalls the Biblical 'I am who I am' in *Exodus* 3:14): '*Your abject eye will not meet mine / And I know why: / Our gaze would falter and on its sinking line/ some death would caper / Dog*'.

Hound or Heaven

The suspicion is there, and will never be resolved in this poem about Dog, the anagram for God, whose eyes, whose abject eyes will not meet his, as eyes and sight in *Hamlet* and *Gertrude* are what make the truth of god and what make the lies and murders of dog. Eyes in both plays meet, falter, gaze, see, look up and down, close, open: eyes make the difference between God and Dog. '*Our gaze will falter and on its sinking line, some death would caper*'; 'some' death, because there is always some of it, (i.e. some death is in action all the time), it (death) or something like it, some undetermined type of it would caper, some death would jump about or fall or sink.

God can also be a ghost Claudius. The variations are endless. He might indeed be the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost can be a dog nailed to a wall in a room, or a baby girl just sacrificed by pushing her head under water for the spirit of God to reincarnate. Claudius '*(...retrieves the body of the child) Claudius: ...The little mischief which they [I underline] heap at the feet of God*' (G 91). God then has both feet and a smile. That smile of God behaves on his face as a dog's mouth behaves: '*Claudius : IT [God's smile] DRIPS COMPLACENCY AS A DOG'S JAW STREAMS SALIVA ON THE RUMOUR OF ITS FOOD*' (G 91).

'*Hamlet: I/ Hamlet/ Drink/ The/ Glass*' (G 77). Hamlet who will soon become a God, Christ perhaps, speaks about himself in the first person by naming his third person singular by its name, Hamlet. After he drinks the poisoned glass, Gertrude heaves her cry: '*again*' says the author's indication. The '*again*' works as some hidden link between the first love cry and murder '*KILLING GOD (... she heaves out her cry...Again her cry comes. She is doubled)*' (G 78). The cry is then somehow about gods and dogs. '*Claudius: IT [The cry] KILLS GOD*'

(G 22). So the inversions of god as a witness to dog as a hound, guard, give, so to speak, some two-sided coin bringing forth the energy streaming from the divine, the sublime, and that emanating from the abject and the unspeakable. God reincarnates again in Gertrude's nakedness for both Albert and Claudius (G 61). And when Claudius fights he fights Gertrude's nakedness as a God in the name of the dog: 'Claudius: ...it is God I am fighting when I fight in you/Gertrude: Yes' (G 44).

Lines of sight, lines of flight

By another elliptical jump, Barker brings together in his poem *I Dog Dog I* two poles: dog and gaze. Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Gertrude* is interwoven with a canvas of gazes, a choreography of sight, eyes, glare, gaze of eyes which meet, falter, see, look. All eyes, an eye eyes the play.⁸ The subtext is then the look. The look roots itself on the murderer's surface, in the eye of the eyewitness, when murder is about to occur or over some writhing murder victim. Claudius and Gertrude exchange a long look above the dying eyes of a man who was once a king and lover or a worshiper of Gertrude's nakedness, who murdered him. Gertrude foresees '*Gertrude: CLAUDIU, YOUR DEATH IS NEXT*' (G 82) but the event of his death, being a metonymy of murder is suspended by grief, grief of another murder to come (more than once), interrupted by the work of mourning, since mourning is an interruption of the cycle of death: grief, triumph of the living, Thanatos vanquished by Eros. The word 'grief' appears on Gertrude's shoulder (G 11), '*Today is grief ...*' (G 82) or truce day, a halt in the sequence of death as murder, which in this phase excludes Eros: she glares and dismisses Claudius out of her sight (G 82).

Howard Barker plays with ghosts, making them dance depending on how we look at them and how they look at each other, and always a third will come in between, trigger the catastrophe, or push the tragedy a bit further along, always in the name of love. God is love and god is a dog. God is love and love is the tragedy of God. Love is lost. Some death is always capering on its road. Who could know that the end of love is precisely nowhere? Gertrude does, and like Medea, she leaves to start a new tragedy, she sets her departure in motion not to restore order and conclude a tragedy, but to restart it. So Barker carefully dismantles the last scene of *Hamlet*. Ragusa in *Gertrude* is

like Horatio, except that she is not an innocent witness but guilty, and carries the guilt of her guilt. She will bear witness, but in order to do so she has to escape the dramaturgy, that is to say the play. So the play is not one play. The play lets Gertrude go away for a while, start a second nuptial. Fortenbras is maybe Albert and Norway slips its borders into Sweden. Who cares? The question lies north. The above, the north is above Denmark's head and she is heading north to survive.

Gertrude does not die of her love, she survives it, she makes her love die of her will to survive it. And she will murder because she will live on, such is the law of that gesture: try to enforce your survival and you are bound to murder. A natural gesture of being, because being is above the corpse of the deceased king and being will always be above the corpse of some other deceased being, of the other. What about the living dead? Choreography of the eye and the gaze and stare: most of author's indications make sight play on its seeing and avoiding sight. Eye can meet eye, or eye can be beside eye, or eye can be hanging from the suspension the other eye provides. One eye can be let down by another. As for the dog, he comes from beneath, from below, looks up, while god hovers above, he is all over, and eyes everybody as an eye witness, as a supreme cry.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play to be seen from above in front of an audience. Hamlet in *Gertrude* knows a secret, a secret which he carries from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, that secrets need a stage to unfold. Hamlet is killed by the secret he carries, greater than himself; his love is spoiled by the clandestine (G 84). His need for an audience leads Hamlet to commission architects to rebuild Elsinore in glass. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet in his mother's bedroom, he pulls down the curtains to unfold the hidden: '*Ragusa: ...Secrecy / Hamlet abhorred... / Isola: It started off with curtains (they look at each other) / Down came all the curtains*' (G 84). Shakespeare's Hamlet lifts up the arras to kill another man, just before his father's ghost commands him to speak to his mother. And Hamlet interrogates his mother the queen with the rhetoric of the ghost "have you eyes? ...Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes..." (3.4.60-80)."

Hamlet in *Gertrude* is an extra, and like extras in a film necessary and not necessary: '*Ragusa: ...unnecessary Hamlet*' (G 85). After Hamlet's death: '*Albert enters in mourning.... stares at the floor...Albert:*

THANK YOU DEATH (G 83). As if he is saying thank you dog. In the fight between dogs and Gods, death waits, he has won the round. Death plays in Albert's favour just now, as in Russian roulette. Gertrude '*doesn't remove her eyes from him*' [Albert] (G 86). Albert, alias Fortenbras, has gathered his troops on the frontier, an army whose troops are '*Albert: half way through some crime they cry*' (G 86). Again the cry.

Let us step back a little and look at thing and eye in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.¹⁰ Horatio talks about the ghost seen by his own eyes, and Marcellus assures it was twice there before at this dead hour (H 1.1.70). Horatio names the ghost '*Extorted treasure in the womb of the earth*' (H 1.1.40) and orders it to speak, not to cry, to make a sound, and wonders if he has a voice. The Queen, to relieve grief, exhorts Hamlet to his survival duties "*all that lives must die...*" (H 1.2.70) to which he replies that the fruitful river in the eye is but a decoration of grief. The king too reminds him of his survival duties as one the living, of the work of mourning, that his "*...father has lost a father;/ That father lost, lost his; and the survivor bound/ In filial obligation...*" (H 1.2.90/95) is to sorrow but not to carry this "*unmanly grief*", i.e. to grieve too much, to mourn and carry the remembrance of a ghost who once was a father and a king. Mourning and remembrance need and imply time, immediate time and passing time, but these will have to be discussed elsewhere. Nonetheless, the question '*Hamlet: what hour now?*' (H 1.4.10) invites Hamlet, just as Polonius says to his son '*Polonius: the time invites you...*' (H 1.3.80) to go. Go where? Maybe Barker's *Gertrude*, where the ghost enters and never exits. Hamlet, guest of time, will never read the ghost's language, he is out of time, and needs a scholar like Horatio to translate that time is timeless, that it is absolutely out of joint (H 1.5.190).

The use of ecstasy

In Shakespeare's play, Gertrude observes that the ghost can manipulate ecstasy: '*Queen: ...This bodiless creation ecstasy/ Is very cunning in.*' (H 3.4.140). Barker's Cascan, a servant who is intrinsically a witness of things and ecstasy, also knows the law that pushes ecstasy beyond itself, which points out the place where the cry of agony and the cry of voluptuousness meet, while ever escaping appropriation. Ecstasy need not be an abandoning of reason, it can even be '*very cunning*'.

manipulated and manipulative; a haunting mirage; ecstasy is a thing, or perhaps a ghost on the edge of life, the thing, the thing which haunts.¹¹ What is seen there on the land, on the earth, above the eyes and the ears of a prostrate king is ecstasy. The cry's being or the being of a cry, as a metonymy of such a receding thing: '*Cascan: ...what could give birth to such a cry a dying husband an impatient lover supremely beautiful*' (G 11); ecstasy is a faith, a religion sprouting from the instance of life on the edge of non-life, death is its religion (G 12). The non place is both for love and death. The non place can be a very hidden place (G 11). Love escapes its suppression by retreating into the non place where it comes from in the self, that same non place which gives love as the equivalent of murder (DM 169). The price of being alive, of living, surviving, is the death of the other and of the self in the other. The work of mourning kills the dead *again*, it declares the dead dead forever; it is a pause to make life even greater while bringing death a time nearer, 'today is grief day' in the sequence of joy days, love days, murder days. After the pause, the self can rejoice in being superior to the dead, triumphant in living over and standing above a prostrate body.

Freud states that a manic answer to grief consists of going through a phase of triumphal excitement, jubilation, exaltation, which can be a phase of erotic investment, some sort of discharge of affect (DM 163-164) because the self, faced with the question of whether it has to share the same destiny of death as the beloved, lets itself be determined by the satisfaction of staying in life and cuts all relation to the destroyed object (DM 166). Above all, if that object is destroyed precisely for the sake of grief in its manic form, in the wretched search for the elixir of ecstasy as living on, through becoming the eyewitness to the destruction of the cherished object.

Witnessing and being the third

'[Hamlet] (*senses the presence of a third party*)' (G 76). The third person is Claudius. Other than Gertrude speaking about herself in the third person and thus becoming a witness to her own self, the third person rides the play like a horse. '*It is the murderer who would like to identify death with nothingness*', nothingness as 'a sort of impossibility'. But in *Gertrude* murder is an enhanced death, a step further from death, murder is above death. An experience of death not as an '...annihila-

tion, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the “without response”.¹² The concrete act (death by murder) occurs in the play through the eye. We look at the dead, ‘who have been reduced to images “in us”’ (*WM* editors’ introduction 11), and we are looked at by them, but there is no symmetry between the gazes. For the Ghost, ecstasy is just a ‘...haunting mirage on the rim of life’ (*G* 10), and it has to be a servant who says so. The servant as the paradigm of witness locates ecstasy and watches over its occurrence or disappearance. He is God’s eye on the play. He is the third of any two. The third of Gertrude’s cry.

Albert refers to himself as a third.¹³ The kisses themselves with which he smothered Ragusa, which are already third, belong to another third party, i.e. Gertrude’s nakedness (*G* 48). The ghost is by definition a third (the Holy Ghost comes after Father and Son) everywhere in the play. ‘Neither life nor death, but the haunting of the one by the other...the other in the same...the completely other, dead, living in me’ (*WM* 41-42). It is in Hamlet’s head. When it starts the play, it tells the story. Ghost is a paradigm of the third person, both the absent and the present together. Ghost is also an embodiment of grief, specifically that unfulfilled grief, aborted grief. Gertrude in her tirade speaks one line about herself in the third person, and says in the first person that ‘*SHE HAS TO BE ALONE HER GRIEF COMPELS HER*’ or that she doesn’t know why ‘...a widow [should] stoop to grieve of course’ (*G* 18-19). And while both Isola and Cascan appear in mourning, Gertrude carries grief. Does she carry it in her womb? Another third in the form of a baby girl, soon to become a ghost?

In the topology of grief and ghost, ghost is located beneath. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: ‘Hamlet: Never make known what you have seen tonight. .../Ghost [beneath] Swear.’ (*H* Act I scene V/140/150). Thus Ghost commands from beneath. He commands three times: never speak of what is known, seen, or heard. The oath of this testimonial and engagement prohibits making known the witness of the ghost as the witnessing of what happened to him. The Ghost is first a witness, the first witness, and we only have his version of the story, while excluding him. Hamlet in *Gertrude* abhors secrets because they bury testimony.

When Albert comes back he is like Claudius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* expecting Hamlet to be the son of his father and to become

the father of his son. This generationality is refused to Barker's Hamlet, i.e. the survival of the son after a dead father to become the father of a son and die as such. This transmission of survival is precisely what Derrida calls the 'Eucharistic paradigm' (*WM* 169). If this survival thesis, this 'Eucharistic paradigm' moves up a step further from the christic figuration in Barker's *Gertrude*, it is because to the father there is also a mother and to the mother there is also a daughter, a tragic daughter according to the servant 'Cascan: ...Lend her a name if only to identify her grave' (*G* 68). 'Hamlet: ...We are a sacrifice' (*G* 55). The witness-servant Cascan¹⁴ knows the law of the name, as underlined by Derrida, that is, names survive beings and also survive things we understand or things we do not understand. Cascan is the play's pole, he is the absolute third to any two; he not only knows the law of names, but also of guilt and love. He is the witness, the *terstis*, and witnessing is by definition a trace which recalls what happened, which brings heterogeneous time to a presence in the name of archive, it is testimonial, and sacramental, I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The sacrament has a scene and the scene is (*WM* 159, 168, 169) visible through the rhetoric of the eye.¹⁵ *Gertrude* the play ends with the effacing of every third in the name of the two, and the systematic suppression of witnesses. As if time is not just out of joint but frozen and recessing to its point zero. The disappearance of witnesses starts with Cascan. So we die with the being, and survive as the third of the two whose second is dead. Philia says Derrida, begins with the possibility of survival. 'Surviving that is the name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited'.¹⁶ Anticipation of grief, the image conceived of disappearance of the dear one is grief before the hour, triumph over death to come. 'We prepare for the death of a friend; we anticipate it; we see ourselves already as survivors, or having already survived.' (*WM* 13) This is the law of the name: at some time, whoever bears a name will have to be absent from it, leave it behind, the name always survives.

Point zero of the cry

In his book *Aporias*, Derrida specifies there is no politics, or politics of love, without the Topos of the sepulchre, or an address for grief and mourning, without the anasemic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost'.¹⁷ The cry comes from inside; outside it is the anticipation of

mourning and the ecstasy of living on, of surviving. Inside and outside, orientation towards a homogenous time to come as an image void of any perspective (*WM* 159). Hate, says Freud, is more ancient than love. It comes from the primordial rejection that the narcissist self sets up against the outer world.¹⁸ 'The ambivalent identification of the self elects the object, incorporates that object through devouring'.¹⁹ Here the cry becomes like a crypt, the point zero of two absolutely aporetic instances, Eros and Thanatos. Both join and exchange places within it: Crypt or Cry. The typology of the beneath (swear, ghost, dead, death, earth, cry, dying eye, cry crypt), meets its opposite, the above (over, survive, love, copulation, north, celestas, breath, living eye, cry, crypt). The cry is earth and death, and love and breath. The living dead in the crypt launch the power of Eros, trigger the inversion of pleasure and suffering, of their mixing in an insoluble contradiction in desire and exquisite pleasure.²⁰ In *Fors*, Derrida brings light into this dark crypt of loss, grief and desire. For him this point zero designates 'The surge of the libido at the moment of loss' (*Fors* 50). The crypt is constructed by opposing forces of a similar level of pleasure and suffering, whose intensity becomes indistinguishable. Gertrude leaves Denmark to start again in Norway, the iterable imposes itself as a condition of her ecstasy, her womb should be filled once more by the contradiction between life and death. She has caught Mourning sickness, the 'illegitimate voluptuousness' which entices the world into an orgasmic hallucination (*Fors* 50). The cry is a thing, the thing is something of a cry. The cry is a word and a thing.

Hamlet in *Gertrude* recalls the same analogy as Horatio when he calls the ghost '*Extorted treasure in the womb of the earth.*' (*H* 1.1.140) 'Hamlet: ... fetid dungeon of my mother's womb, the thing...' (*G* 65). Dungeon or crypt, or womb or earth. '*Gertrude: // CRY/YOUR/CRIME*' (*G* 73) says she. For Isola, the king's mother, Gertrude is '*Isola: BAD IN THE WOMB*' (*G* 50). Gertrude kept Claudius stuff in her womb by the cry. For Claudius the cry is not kind, for it tears the earth with great hands and extracts from its womb both ecstasy and horror (*G* 21). At the point where they both meet is a religion that carries the law of faith, absolute faith, whatever the price is. Claudius will drag it out of Gertrude even if the price to pay is a thousand corpses, because while being a religion it precisely '*KILLS GOD*' (*G* 22).

The retranscription of the king's ghost narrative in Hamlet uses his words here and there, like an anasemy, out of which a dungeon is constructed (for example, milk, drink, look, eye, hour, orchard, Elsinore, THE THING, ear, poison, grief, blood, phial (vial) etc.). Words whose function perhaps is to direct the narrative to different a place, to another event, from Hamlet for example to Gertrude. According to Derrida these anasemic words induce the angle and the sepulchre (*Fors* 48). Or the angle of the sepulchre that is the crypt. They stem from the loss, and are the possibility of sepulchre where the dramaturgical space is redesigned. The Thing of the crypt as much as the thing being an effect of the crypt.²¹ The retranscription of the word 'Thing' as signifier in an anasemic procedure that carries the word through de-signification to the deployment of a new signification. The crypt is a place where death, ecstasy, and number fuse (*Fors* 11). For ecstasy and pleasure to occur, hiding is essential²² except that the cry announces the clandestine to the world as a secret of obscure origin. Gertrude cries in love, in giving birth, and from grief. The cry is almost the same. The incorporated third is kept in order to be suppressed, kept alive in order to be kept as dead.²³ Or vice versa. The dead is incorporated in the other; Gertrude is not just swallowing dogs she is swallowing the death of the dead²⁴ in that '... *unliveable contradiction of the moment zero*.'²⁵ Claudius, king of the cry, deprived of his virtual kingdom, cries for his life: '*Claudius: ...I HAVE TO HEAR THE CRY... IT IS THE CRY OF ALL AND EVERY MOVING THING AND ALL THAT DOES NOT MOVE BONE BLOOD AND MINERAL*' (*G* 32). *The cry is above kingdoms: 'Claudius: The cry is more than the woman... And men want/ kingdoms... Walled states... do I not possess the cry?' (G 33)*. That is, ascendancy over the dead brother; the privilege of carrying on the genealogy; the triumph over death; triumph even over Gertrude, because she is only the instrument of that cry; ecstasy; power over life and death; the ontological infinitisation of survival.

The *thanato-poetics* gaze at life, take in desire through the eyes and carry death in a pocket.²⁶

The secret is the thing which we know and never know. Desire is dark because desire is faith emanating from secret places (*G* 66). The cry's point zero where the absolute opposites meet is and can be the pleasure and the pain of the mortality Gertrude longs to shed (*G* 67).

Her cry, deprived of its starting point multiplies as the play goes on and becomes disseminated in the land. Claudius and Gertrude end their embrace after the cry becomes bigger than Gertrude's body. When the cry ends when it starts²⁷ Gertrude is twice widowed, widow of a husband and of her son because this is what Claudius calls her, Hamlet's widow. The cry/cry is not in her, it is to be called from the land through the agony of another corpse (G 87). When Gertrude supports the head of the dead Claudius, whose religion was the cry, the cry/God/dog is set free, it will henceforth emanate from the land (G 92).

Milk, blood, and the hour

The Cry is fed by milk. The Cry is fed by time. Milk feeds Claudius, and perverted to poison kills the king. Milk has fed all that lived and became dead. The pure liquid of life becomes the pure liquid of death. Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the question of the hour nags, Claudius resents his mother's face just as much as he resents time, her face is time itself: '*Claudius: ...I really do resent that face which ever since I was a child hung over me like the brass disc of some nagging clock*' (G 34). Mother is milk. Mother is time, she sets the time for a life, or life for a time, she gives the pervertable. Milk goes from pure to impure, from milk to un-milk, from love to death. It doesn't speak, it pours, just as milk is pervertable to poison, brother is to murderer, son to non son, daughter to nothingness, lover to corpse, kiss of life to poisonous embrace. '*Time was hissing for our accident milkless and moonless*'. (Dog) Eyes will not meet because death comes between them, obstacles to sight, obstacles on the milky way to the moon, and even the moon will be deprived of its moon, become out of itself, become moonless and hence the milk will be milkless. I dog, dog I.

When Gertrude has her daughter she gives her milk first to Claudius²⁸ because infants, says brother Hamlet, need blood, not milk (G 69). Infants like dogs, need milk: perverted they feed on blood. Their own blood. '*Hamlet: ...THE NEWLY AND THE AS YET UN?*' (G 70); the un- of anything unborn. The ghost appears upon the dead hour (always that nagging hour) and the infant Jane is just '*Isola: an hour old...TWICE DRENCHED IN BLOOD*' (G 70). Blood and poison as milk as blood. The living king in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* brings up the green memory of the deceased king (H 1.2.10).

When the Ghost says ‘*My hour is almost come*’ (H 1.5.10), the ex-king (alias nameless Ghost) will recount briefly (because his hour has come to return to the inferno) the story that opens Barker’s *Gertrude*, that he was sleeping in his orchard at a different hour, this time a secure one ‘upon my secure hour’ when Hamlet’s uncle poured the poison in his ears, this distilment whose effect was:

‘...swift as quicksilver, it courses through
 The natural gates and alleys of the body;
 And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
 And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
 The thin and wholesome blood : so did it mine;
 And a most instant tetter bark’d about,
 ...Adieu remember me.’ (H Act I scene V/60/90)

Milk clears the sight of mortality, of finite time. Horatio describes the modality of the Ghost’s absence as ‘*Vanished from our sight*’ (H 1.2. 220). This vanishing is the very curse Gertrude casts on Claudius: ‘*Get out of my sight*’ (G 82). Some lines later, he is dead. ‘Get out of my sight’ translates as clear up the space of my gaze and eye me as a ghost, this time to be forgotten. Love hangs on a wall but the wall slides back and the love falls wordless, less than a dog, it howls or cries, but who would listen, the king’s ear is full of poison, this milkless milk, which is the elementary originary liquid of birth and love, is contaminated by the reversal of its essence; milk of love becomes milk of death; white milk turns to black milk, milkless milk, like a moonless moon. Some death would caper.

Notes

- ¹ Howard Barker, *Gertrude (The Cry)* (London: Calder Publications, 2002), p. 9 (Hereafter G).
- ² See Jacques Derrida, ‘*Foi et savoir*’, in *La Religion*, (Paris : Seuil, 1996).
- ³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York : Routledge, 1994), p.10 (Hereafter *Spectres*).
- ⁴ Freud, *L’inquiétante étrangeté et autres récits* (Paris: Folio essai, Gallimard, 1985), p. 246.
- ⁵ See Derrida, ‘*Survivre*’ in *Parages*, (Paris: Galilée 1986) (Hereafter *Survivre*).

- ³ Freud, 'Deuil et Mélancolie, in *Métapsychologie*', (Paris: Folio Essai, Gallimard, 1896), p. 163 (Hereafter DM).
- ⁴ Howard Barker, a poem *I DOG DOG I* (unpublished, hereafter *Dog*).
- ⁵ Here are a few examples of how Barker builds his play around the eye and the variation of the act of seeing, of sight, of inner sight:
 'Isola: Adorable AND WITH MY EYES SO GERTRUDE SAYS' (*G* 66).
 'Isola: She falters as Gertrude walks.... Gertrude's tears cease ...she gazes at the floor' (*G* 79).
 'Hamlet enters wearing Cascan's clothes. /Hamlet: The world is full of things I don't understand...(his eyes meet hers[Gertrude]. She is adamant)' (*G* 75). On the sight of Gertrude nakedness: Hamlet's '(...gaze does not falter)' (*G* 76). 'Claudius: My eyes/ I was eyed' (*G* 80). Claudius accuses Cascan of watching. 'Claudius: THIS COLD WATCHING' (*G* 82).
- ⁶ *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, (London: Chancellor Press, 1984) (hereafter *H*).
- ⁷ The ear and the sight, time (minutes hours, night) appear at the very opening of Hamlet: 'Marcellus: ...Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us./With us watch the minutes of this night,/...He may approve our eyes...
 Horatio: ...And let us once again assail our ears,' (*H* Act 1 scene I/30).
- ⁸ 'Cascan: A haunting mirage at the rim of life'; '...this ever-receding quality in ecstasy makes it unpalatable...we run behind it limping staggering I saw it there I saw it there' (*G* 10).
- ⁹ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 203 (Hereafter *WM*)
- ¹⁰ While speaking about himself in the third person the author's indication says 'He[Albert] detects a third party' (*G* 47).
- ¹¹ Cascan watches '...the world from [his] frankly privileged position' (*G* 56).
- ¹² 'Gertrude: Your eyes/Claudius : My eyes Yes/Gertrude : I was Eyed/EYED WAS ENOUGH' (*G* 80).
- ¹³ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997) quoted in *WM* p.1.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 61-62.
- ¹⁵ 'La haine, en tant que relation à l'objet, est plus ancienne que l'amour ; elle provient du refus primordial que le moi narcissique oppose au monde extérieur...' (my translation) (*DM* 42).
- ¹⁶ 'La manière ambivalente selon lequel le moi élit un objet, s'incorporer cet objet, par la dévoration' (*DM* 157).

- ²⁰ Derrida *Fors*, introduction to *Le Verbier de l'homme aux loups*, Abraham and Torok, (Paris : Champs Flammarion, 1976), p. 51 (Hereafter *Fors*) (my translation).
- ²¹ I paraphrase this important passage from *Fors*,: ‘...*la Chose depuis la crypte, la Chose comme effet de crypte*’ (*Fors* 10).
- ²² ‘*La clandestinité est essentielle*’ (*Fors* 18).
- ²³ ‘...*le tiers incorporé est gardé pour être supprimé, tenu en vie afin d'être tenu pour mort...*’ (*Fors* 20).
- ²⁴ – “*un mort enterré dans l'autre*” –’ (*Fors* 42). Quoted by Derrida from Abraham and Torok.
- ²⁵ “*L'invivable contradiction du moment zero*”’ (*Fors* 58). Quoted by Derrida from Abraham and Torok.
- ²⁶ ‘*Le cryptophore s'engage envers la mort, il lui laisse, pour l'ouverture du crédit, une hypothèque en soi, un gage dans le corps, une poche kystique à la fois visible (effrontée) et secrète, lieu d'un plaisir thanatopoétique qui peut toujours reprendre feu. D'où le double désir, la contradiction mortelle assignée par toute crypte.*’ (*Fors* 57).
- ²⁷ ‘Gertrude: I DID NOT THINK/AT THE CRY'S END/I COULD BE STILL INTACT’ (*G* 80).
- ²⁸ ‘Gertrude: Drink me Claudius/Let my daughter queue’ (*G* 68).