Contents

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In Hamlet's Path: Shakespearean Etchings in Laforgue and Tzara

Interpreting activity and myth in the crisis era

> Maintenant, sur une immense terrasse d'Elsinore, qui va de Bâle à Cologne, qui touche aux sables de Nieuport, aux marais de la Somme [...] – l'Hamlet européen regarde des millions de spectres. Mais il est un Hamlet intellectuel. Il médite sur la vie et la mort des vérités. Il a pour fantôme tous les objets de nos controverses [...]. Il est accablé sous le poids des découvertes, des connaissances, incapable de se reprendre à cette activité illimitée. Il songe à l'ennui de *recommencer le passé*, à la folie de vouloir *innover toujours*. Il chancelle entre les deux abîmes; car deux dangers ne cessent de menacer le monde: l'ordre et le désordre.
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> [Standing, now, on an immense sort of terrace of Elsinore that stretches from Basel to Cologne, bordered by the sands of Nieuport, the marshes of the Somme [...] our Hamlet of Europe is watching millions of ghosts. But he is an intellectual Hamlet, meditating on the life and death of truths; for ghosts, he has all the subjects of our controversies. He is bowed under the weight of all the discoveries and varieties of knowledge, incapable of resuming this endless activity; he broods on the tedium of *rehearsing the past* and the folly of always *trying to innovate*. He staggers between two abysses – for two dangers never cease threatening the world: order and disorder.][1]

1 I use the English translation, *The Crisis of the Mind* by Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews, published in *The Outlook for Intelligence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). See also Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres complètes* 1, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

Thus writes Paul Valéry in the first letter from *La Crise de l'esprit* [*The Crisis of the Mind*] (1919) (Valéry: 1957, p. 993), following the catastrophic denouement of the Great War. The mindful, bitter introduction to the same letter is well known : 'We, civilizations, now know that we are mortal' (p. 988). As the embodiment of civilization at its most crucial point of crisis, Valéry chooses precisely the figure of Hamlet. Valéry's Hamlet totters between the abysses of chaos and harmony that give way, as he writes a few lines later, to an era of 'creative rivalry' and the consumption of the 'desire for *radical experiment*' and '*cunning compounds*' (p. 994). The 'Hamlets' discussed here are situated on both ends of this slope: Jules Laforgue's *Hamlet, ou les suites de le piété filiale* [*Hamlet, or The Consequences of Filial Piety*] (1887), the product of a *fin de siècle* so burdened with words ('Words, words, words') that it covered the skies with ink in attempting to 'annihilate with words the sense of "chance" that still encumbers Shakespeare's poetry' (Bonnefoy: 1988, p. 176);[2] and Tristan Tzara's *Mouchoir de nuages* [*Handkerchief of Clouds*] (represented in 1924, that is to say at the very end of the Dadaist experience), a surprising theatrical device-machine that exhibits its mechanisms and blends texts and techniques, addressing the central question of truth (*vérité*) in poetic language from a relative perspective.

As an Italian philosopher recently stated in his essay *Da parte a parte: Apologia del relativo* (Sini: 2008), when faith is lost in the relationship to the Whole, the relation between the whole and its parts is put at stake once again, and it becomes apparent that each 'part' is not objective for its supposed relation to the whole 'in itself,' but precisely as a result of *interpretive activity* itself, and of its necessary and '*structural' connection to perspective* (Sini: 2008, p. 276. Emphasis mine). In other words, and transposing

2 These are Yves Bonnefoy's words. Bonnefoy observes how much Laforgue distances himself from the 'positive' reading (still present in Mallarmé, Delacroix and D. H. Lawrence), which assigns Hamlet the task of regaining the *absolu* of language: though he seems 'crazy on the outside', his eyes are still turned inward, upon an image of himself 'which he keeps intact' (Stéphane Mallarmé: 2003, p. 169). Baudelaire had little to say about Hamlet; yet in 'La Béatrice' he makes him the witness to and debunker of the illusory, if not mendacious quality of the entire Western poetic tradition. [When not otherwise indicated, all translations are mine].

these notions to our French authors, the utilization of Hamlet's myth and words in these years corresponds to the search for a relation (always relative) between modernity and tradition, that investigates the 'conformity between the old and the new' (Adorno: 2005, p. 218) and the modernist and Poundian injunction to 'make *it* new'.

But what is this *it* for our French authors? That is what I shall attempt to show here. The two works studied here turn their back on conventions and subvert traditional definitions of genre. In particular, what are the *Six Moral Tales* (*Moralités légendaires*), which include Laforgue's *Hamlet*: fantastic tales,[3] adaptations, revisitations or deconstructive and transgressive rewritings? And is *Mouchoir de nuages*, Tzara's *Hamlet*, an 'ironic tragedy or a tragic farce', according to Tzara's definition (Tzara: 1925, p. 7)? Or is it an instance of a *théâtre des opérations* of the *mise en scène* (Bernard: 2005, p. 175–85), a box, a trap, a *locus* of the disintegration of tragedy and of its re-actualization through comedy and 'pop-culture'? This is also due to the *Violettera* song (used a few years later by Charlie Chaplin in the film *City Lights*, 1931), which frames the action of *Mouchoir de nuages* (Tzara: 1975, p. 331)? In any case, both Tzara's and Laforgue's texts call literature into play and its ambition of being able to grasp reality.

Laforgue's Hamlet, or the inability to be a poet

Let us now consider the first work: *Hamlet, ou les suites de le piété filiale* by Laforgue. Laforgue, who was born in 1860 and died at the age of 27, has been classified by some critics as a typical exponent of the French *mal du siècle* and thus compared to Mallarmé; others instead judge Laforgue as someone who, despite his historical status as a son of Decadence, clearly

3 'Récit fabuleux': this is the definition proposed by Anne-Marie Perrin-Naffakh (1997: p. 85).

distances himself from that tradition, thus inaugurating modernity.[4] A poetics of detachment famously shared by T. S. Eliot. In any case, Laforgue's fascination with the *persona* of Hamlet is undeniable, a constantly recurring figure in his writing, and, above all, in his prose work *À propos de Hamlet*,[5] the literary travelogue of a journey Laforgue actually made to the 'Elsinore terrace' in 1885 (Laforgue: 1995, p. 812).

He begins the *Moralités légendaires* themselves with the novella of the same name, immediately setting the tone of an 'etcher's press irredeemably rusted by lazy untidiness' (Laforgue: 1995, p. 380). Thus, just as for the characters and the temporal dimension, so space, the castle of Elsinore and the objects contained therein become a site of decay and putrefaction, which soon seems to be 'le miroir de l'infortuné prince Hamlet' ['the mirror of unfortunate prince Hamlet']; p. 380 and the laboratory of etchings in black and white:

> Sur une table, dans le jour d'insomnie des vitres jaunes, un laboratoire d'aqua-fortiste irrémédiablement rongé de sales oisivetés. Un fumier de livres, un petit orgue, une glace en pied, une chaise longue, et un buffet à secret [...]. (p. 380)
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> [On a table, in the insomniatic light of the yellow windows, an etcher's press is hopelessly rusted by some one's lazy untidiness. A kitchen midden of books, a little organ, a pier-glass, a chaise-longue, and a secret cupboard.][6]

The intention to desecrate Hamlet's myth, though in a highly ambivalent way, is more than clear.

The first of these desecrations may be found in the full title of Laforgue's transposition. *The Consequences of Filial Piety* recalls moral qualities that are wholly absent in the target work. There is no *pietas*, in fact: none

4 On this debate, see Jean Pierrot, 'Laforgue, décadent', in J. A. Hiddleston (Paris: Corti, 1988), p. 25–49.

5 *Le Symboliste*, Ière année, vol. 7–14 Octobre 1884, reprinted in Laforgue, 1995, p. 497–9.

6 I use here Frances Newman's translation, *Hamlet or The Consequences of Filial Piety* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928).

indeed towards the father (immediately introduced, as Hamlet addresses the portrait of the king hanging on the decaying castle walls of Elsinore, as a debauched, 'faunlike' old man; p. 382); nor towards those who are (or are discovered to have been, or could have been) part of his lineage: first of all, Hamlet's brother, Yorick, the court jester, whose skull the prince will hold to his ear like an empty seashell to hear, instead of the 'roar of the ocean', 'vaguely immortal rumors' (p. 391); then, his fiancée Ophelia, who is already dead at the start of Laforgue's version, and definitely not mourned, since Hamlet had already witnessed her morbid attachment and 'bourgeois' propension to convenience and comfort (p. 381). The substance of each character is, in fact, rendered exclusively through the soliloquized consciousness of Hamlet alone: his words invade the entire tragedy, and nothing occurs without his intervention as director, narrator and, at the same time, actor and writer.

Another discordant element lies in the fact that the verses Laforgue added in the 'Mouse-trap', *The Murder of Gonzago*, which the actors must recite before the presumed usurper and the queen, amount to an astute ruse to discover the truth of patricide.[7] Laforgue's Hamlet (like Laforgue himself) crosses out the original script in red and blue pencil[8] and composes a wholly new text. Here Hamlet is first and foremost a Poet, and the most important aspect of this 'Mouse-trap' is the effect these words will

7 Walter L. Barker, in '"The Heart of my Mystery": Emblematic Revelation in the *Hamlet* Play Scene', *Upstart Crow* 15 (1995), pp. 75–98, p. 91, considers that the 'Mouse-trap' can be viewed in Shakespeare's play as a 'figurative mirror of macrocosmic principle and microcosmic human nature'.

8 'Maintenant, vous voyez, tout ce que j'ai marqué au crayon rouge-sang-de-bœuf devra être lancé et souligné; et tout ce qui est compris dans une accolade au crayon bleu, vous pouvez le supprimer comme trop épisodique, bien qu'au fond ... enfin, par exemple, tous ces couplets-ci [...]' [Now, look at the speeches I have marked with a bull's-blood-red pencil. All of them should be underlined, hurled at your audience. But some of the speeches have received the accolade of a blue pencil, and you can suppress all of them as somewhat too episodic – although in the end ... well, for example, all these couplets [...] (Laforgue: 1995, p. 384).

have not so much on the usurper, but on the audience and the reader.[9] This reader is actualized, in the first place, by the gypsy-like actress Kate (a wink at the saucy Kate of *The Taming of the Shrew*?), as well as by Laforgue's contemporary readers, and by us, today's readers, the first and last usurpers of the sense of tragedy: 'Alors, tu crois que, devant un public de capitale et aux lumières, l'effet serait renversant?' (p. 396) ['Do you think, then, that the effect would be overwhelming before a London audience and across footlights?']

Following the legacy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Hippolyte Taine (with whose determinism Laforgue was well-acquainted, having attended his lectures in Paris) and Friedrich Nietzsche, the writer (and the reader) at the turn of the nineteenth century knows how to tell (or listen to) the *story* of myth in a prosaic way, and knows how to be its most refined philological interpreter. Yet, precisely for this reason, myth has become both matter and material, ready to be manipulated as the writer/reader pleases. Its transmission, at this point, is mere representation:[10] here, *All the world's a stage* becomes not only a socio-psychological observation, but also a structural one.

If Laforgue's Hamlet does not act, it is not because of his excessive sensibility, nor because he fits the type described by Mallarmé in this same year, 1886: the 'seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir, juvénile ombre de tous, ainsi tenant du mythe' (Mallarmé: 2003, p. 167) ['latent lord that cannot come into being, the juvenile shadow of all, thus resembling myth']. His drama is not at all solitary, and the romantic act is already a parody in itself. Laforgue's interest in Eduard von Hartmann's theories on the 'freedom/

9 The first thing Hamlet does as he 'enters the scene' – turning his back to the window through which he observed the ruin of Elsinore, and moving towards his observers (and the reader, as well) – is to 'skim through two thin piles of manuscripts' and cite the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève of Paris, making an implicit reference to its famous public library (Laforgue: 1995, p. 382).

10 *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) is the title of the work by Schopenhauer whose main part is dedicated to tragedy.

determinism' dialectic (von Hartmann: 1869)[11] urges him towards this lucid, yet ambiguous, line of interior monologue, symbolized by an epigraph that reads: 'C'est plus fort que moi' (Laforgue: 1995, p. 379) ['I can't help it', literally 'It's stronger than I']. Laforgue will echo these words in *À propos de Hamlet*, adding, however, that he can't help but take Hamlet *lightly* ['*en gaîté*'].[12]

The self-solution (because 'it is stronger than I am') is thus close at hand, as is the resulting freedom to complete any action, cruel as it may be, when driven by inspiration and instinct. Once again, it is in the personal and psychological *history* of the individual that the penalties (*the consequences* of the subtitle) are suffered by each character, including Hamlet. The cruelty committed against a caged canary (and other innocent animals) is paroxystic; this episode, as critics have often observed, cannot but evoke the massacre contained in one of Gustave Flaubert's *Trois contes*, the one dedicated to *Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*,[13] of which Laforgue's text seems to be yet another predation.

Why such unrelenting cruelty? Perhaps because only before death (and murder) can the role reveal itself as such. Lightness, *gaîté*, is set aside for (no more than) a moment, and reality is, finally, *seen firsthand*. It is an inner necessity, a necessity of *reality*:

11 Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann, *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten*, Berlin, 1869. On the philosopher's connections with Laforgue, see Hiddleston: 1988, p. 66–72.

12 Laforgue: 1995, p. 498: 'À Paris, Altesse, vous le savez, il y a pour votre légende spéciale: Paul Bourget qui la cultive et l'aggrave, avec assez de correction cependant pour s'arrêter (feignant de se cabrer) devant le nihilisme; il y eut Arthur Rimbaud qui en est mort, après une série d'accès d'agonie dont on a recueilli les merveilleux délires; il y a moi qui vous prends en gaîté, Altesse, à la Yorick, "un garçon de beaucoup d'enjouement, d'une très excellente imagination", qui vous prends en gaîté parce que c'est plus fort que moi.' ['In Paris, your Highness, as you know, there is a special legend about you: Paul Bourget cultivates and aggravates it, with enough correctness nonetheless to stop (pretending to flare up) before nihilism; Arthur Rimbaud died of it, after a series of fits of agony from which he collected his marvelous delirium; I'm the only one who takes you lightly, your Highness, *à la* Yorick, "a very cheerful boy, with an excellent imagination", who takes you lightly because I can't help it.']

13 See Jackson : 2001, pp. 201–2.

> – Ah! c'était LE DÉMON DE LA RÉALITÉ! L'allégresse de constater que la Justice n'est qu'un mot, que tout est permis – et pour cause, nom de Dieu! – contre les êtres bornés et muets. (Laforgue: 1995, p. 387; Author's capitalization)

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> [– Ah, that was the DEMON OF REALITY! the happiness of proving that justice is only a word, that everything is allowed – and for a reason, in God's name! – against creatures who are not strong and who cannot speak.]

Here, the word 'demon' cannot but evoke Fyodor Dostoevsky and his maxim 'All is allowed.'[14] But what is reality in Laforgue's *Hamlet*?

Even if Ophelia is already dead at the start of Laforgue's play, she still remains the driving force behind Hamlet's final fatal action. Inexplicably (since he was leaving Elsinore for Paris happily, with Kate, yearning for a bright future as a successful playwright), Hamlet stops the carriage to pick a flower to lay on his father's grave – a *paper* flower: the literacy dimension prevails once again.

Hamlet goes straight to Ophelia's tomb, and there 'he waits, arms crossed.' (Laforgue: 1995, p. 399). Soon after, Laertes arrives; to avenge his father and sister, he seizes Hamlet's throat with one hand, using the other to stab him in the heart. Even Hamlet's death fails to comply with dramatic irony: 'Ah! Ah! *qualis ... artifex ... pereo*! Et rend son âme hamlétique à la nature inamovible' (p. 399) ['Ah! Ah! *Qualis ... artifex ... pereo*! And he gives up his Hamletic soul to irremovable nature']. Attributed to Nero, these last words have been worn out by the habits of one who – in part to defend himself, in part to fish for compliments – accentuates what he could have created if only time had allowed. They are uttered by a latent Hamlet, ever more the caricature of an artist who writes (or dreams about writing) instead of living.

This is the final and most significant difference between Shakespeare's Hamlet and Laforgue's: the French Hamlet is a writer and an artist. Characters, time, space, action – all the threads of the narrative fabric – indicate that Laforgue's Hamlet is most preoccupied with meta-literary

14 On this matter, see Lorant: 1995, p. 108.

reflection. For this reason, his image is characterized by duality: he is both a codified, renowned role, and the actor who plays the part; he is both text, Shakespeare's, and the figure born of this text, who returns to perform it, or rather to desecrate it.

Duality also affects the temporal dimension of the action: if Hamlet is, in fact, Shakespeare's contemporary – and this is declared perhaps too unequivocally, as we read 'C'est aujourd'hui le 14 juillet 1601' ['On this 14th July 1601'] (Laforgue: 1995, p. 380) – Hamlet is certainly Laforgue's contemporary as well, since, on the way to the cemetery, he encounters 'des troupeaux de prolétaires, vieux, femmes et enfants, revenant des bagnes capitalistes quotidiens, voûtés sous leur sordide destinée' (*Ibid*., p. 388) [troops of proletarians, old men, women and children [...] coming back from their daily capitalist prisons, [...] bent under their sordid destinies].

Behind the evidently comic effect, we find the underlying theme of our Hamlet: how can a tragic model retain its currency after the fall of the *ancien régime* (the fall of the Bastille) and the advent of industrialization?[15] It may be current by virtue of the deconstructive force of parody, which dismantles the *loci* of myth one by one, together with its narrative elements.

The dimension of myth (which, in the Western tradition, finds its most noble literary representation in drama) is degraded to the point of becoming a novella. The relativization of this model and its reprise in a minor tone through parody (actually already begun with Baudelaire when, in 'La Béatrice', he evoked 'a shadow of Hamlet imitating his posture') denounces the fact that poetic inspiration, separated from reality, has reached a level of saturation that paralyzes its creative power. The castle of Elsinore, becomes a site of decay, which soon turns into 'le miroir de l'infortuné prince Hamlet' (Laforgue: 1995, p. 380) of etchings in black and white.

Thus, one hundred years later, at the turn of the twentieth century, Yves Bonnefoy, the most famous contemporary French poet and essayist, translator of Shakespeare and Yeats, crucially develops Laforgue's Hamlet

15 This is the question posed by John E. Jackson (2001, p. 194).

into 'the most specific, intimate sign of the modern inability to be a poet.' (Bonnefoy: 1988, p. 183).

Tzara's *Hamlet*, or the *rêve* of 'pure' poetry

Performed in 1924, *Mouchoir de nuages* finds itself at a junction of Tristan Tzara's intellectual journey in which the first, extreme stances of Dadaism are beginning to wane. In April 1923, in an interview with Roger Vitrac, Tzara had admitted: 'What interests me is poetry' (Tzara: 1923). In the play, we no longer find direct provocations and aggressions towards the audience, even if humour and surprise remain at the structural heart of the work. The scenic box in which the 'play within the play' is performed (that is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* recast but enmeshed with remnants of the intertext of the same name by Laforgue), contains actors who perform, actors who make commentary (cast in the parts of both chorus and audience), actors who reapply their makeup and scenic devices, lights, directors and technical *équipes*. The audience is not directly invited (or provoked) to intervene in the 'trap' of the scenic box; the audience is actually represented and thus doubled. This is done with the first five letters of the alphabet (from A to E, like the combinatorial letters of rhymes)[16], while the actors on stage keep their own names.[17]

16 Bernard: 2005, p. 180.

17 These letters remind me of Laforgue's poem 'Sur une défunte', where we find an avatar of Ophelia: '[...] Si elle avait rencontré seulement/A, B, C ou D, au lieu de Moi,/Elle les eût aimés uniquement!/Je les vois, je les vois ... /Attendez ! Je la vois,/Avec les nobles A, B, C ou D./Elle était née pour chacun d'eux./C'est lui, Lui, quel qu'il soit,/Elle le reflète;/D'un air parfait, elle secoue la tête/Et dit que rien, rien ne peut lui déraciner/Cette étonnante destinée. [...]'. [[...] If she had only met/A, B, C or D, instead of Me,/She would have loved them uniquely! I see them, I see them ... /Wait! I see her,/With the noble A, B, C or D./She was born for each of them./It is he, He, the one whom he is,/She reflects him;/With a perfect look, she shakes her

In his collection of essays entitled *Les collages*,[18] Louis Aragon considers *Mouchoir de nuages* 'the most remarkable dramatic image of modern art' (Aragon: 1980, p. 152).[19] What is the reason for this statement? The 'plot' – which is anything but linear – of this 'tragic farce' in 15 short acts is divided by fifteen commentaries. Neglected by her husband (the Banker), Andrée admires the work of the Poet. She writes him a letter, the two meet and Andrée immediately falls in love. After having lost everything at the casino, the Banker changes his ways and attempts to rekindle his faith in family values. The Poet, who discovers his true feelings for Andrée during an exotic island voyage, will end up killing the Banker even if this is not revealed explicitly, a murder which occurs after he has seen the performance of *Hamlet* at the Paris Opéra in the company of the couple (Act XII). This act is a true *raccourci*, a *collage* of the lines taken from Shakespeare's work, borrowed from the official French translation by François-Victor Hugo. At the end of Act XII, we then leap twenty years forward to a library (perhaps a nod to Laforgue's 'midden of books'?) to encounter the woman and her children (the Banker's) discussing what really happened regarding the homicide. In the following, final scene, we see the Poet in an attic, alone, who receives a letter from the porter (who had played Ophelia in the Opéra *Hamlet*). Neither the sender nor the contents of this letter are revealed, and perhaps it will remain unopened. After having ironically commented that Ophelia couldn't have found a warmer refuge than a porter's lodge, the Poet recites his last words:

> Et que la noble fête à laquelle s'exerça l'esprit pendant les doux *combats de la rime et de l'amour*, prenne ce soir une fin aussi inédite que peu recommandable aux spectateurs par un éclat tragique et dont les *conséquences*, à jamais, frapperont les *nuages* de coups hardis de sabre et de *paroles de sang*.

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head/And says that nothing, nothing may uproot for her/This astonishing destiny. [...]] (Jules Laforgue, *Derniers vers*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 2, p. 332–3).

18 Published in 1965 by the Parisian company Hermann. The volume was reprinted by the same publisher in 1980, as part of the collection entitled 'Savoir.'

19 Aragon, 'Petite note sur les collages chez Tristan Tzara et ce qui s'en suit' (1980).

(*Il se tue et tombe. Obscurité complète*). (Tzara: 1975, p. 351)

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[And the great festival in which the spirit exerts itself during the sweet struggles of rhyme and of love, takes on this evening an ending as unprecedented as it is unpraiseworthy for the audience, by a tragic explosion; and of which the consequences will forever strike the clouds with daring blows of the sword and with words of blood.

(*He kills himself and falls. Complete darkness.*)][20]

The Poet thus ascends to heaven, on the screen placed at the back of the scenic box. The commentators (the letters A,B,C,D,E of the rhymes) emerge from the box and, in a deafening crescendo, as at an auction sale, announce the number values of the poet's soul, which rises to heaven. One commentator explains:

– Ils font monter aux enchères son âme dans le Ciel. Ils l'achètent par des chiffres au *nuage de l'oubli*. Ils font monter sur l'échelle des chiffres l'appréciation de son âme. *(Il jette le voile sur le Poète)*.

Chacun son goût.

(Le Poète monte avec le voile dans le ciel). (*Tzara: 1975*, p. 351)

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– [They put his soul up for auction in Heaven. They buy it by numbers from the cloud of forgetfulness. On the ladder of numbers, they raise the value of his soul.

(He throws the screen over the body of the Poet.)

Everyone is entitled to his own taste.

(*The Poet rises to Heaven with the screen.*)]

20 I use throughout the English translation by Aileen Robbins, published in *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 16, no. 4, Black Theatre Issue (Dec., 1972).

Here, the *costs* deriving from the oblivion of poetry and the conclusion about *the relativity* of taste and the centrality of the audience's appreciation of the *value of a piece of work* are to be underlined.

In *Mouchoir de nuages* as well, the realism of space and time is continually called into question. Scenes follow each other quickly, playing on a constant back-and-forth movement between exterior and interior, past, present and future. Paradoxically, what appears to be the most realistic element in this succession of disparate images, scenes, movements and dialogues, is precisely the play within the play, the *mise en abyme* of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Thanks to this 'abbreviation,' this 'summary' or *collage* of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, characters that until now had apparently had only a marginal role, being little more than alphabetical letters, gain depth. Louis Aragon reminds us that if the recourse to collage in painting is a recognition of the inimitable and the basis for 'an organization of painting, starting from that which the painter gives up imitating' (Aragon: 1980, p. 119),[21] the literary *collage* that Tzara enacts in *Mouchoir de nuages* aims to situate poetic creation outside the artist, recognizing its inimitability and abdicating before an obscure object, a sort of 'pure' Poetry, which it acknowledges it cannot reach through ordinary writing (Aragon: 1980, p. 151).[22] We may conclude that the novelty of this work, which breaks away from Tzara's previous *œuvre*, lies in its rehabilitation of the literariness, of Literature: of Poetry and of the Poet, whose desperation when he faces the comprehension of reality is highlighted here, as in Laforgue, through humour and through a sort of implicit invitation to an 'impure aesthetics', in the words used by Adorno in *Minima Moralia*.[23]

21 'Collages dans le roman et dans le film' (1965).

22 'Petite note sur les collages chez Tristan Tzara et ce qui s'en suit'.

23 It has been observed that a further intertext of *Mouchoir de nuages*, at the level of plot, may be formed, in the first place, by Alfred de Vigny's *Chatterton* (1835), where John Bell would be the Banker and Kitty Bell, the poet's lover, would be the Banker's wife (Bernard: 2005, p. 179); and, secondly, by Huysmans's *Là-bas* (Béhar: 1967, p. 164). It seems to me that this hypothesis could be corroborated by the line in Act X (p. 334), in which the Banker exclaims: 'Oh! How I would have liked to be there'.

The iconographic apparatus that accompanies *Mouchoir de nuages* is further evidence of (and a further key to) this fact. Let us take a look at the etchings present in copy number 0, available for consultation in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale (see Figure 4). First, however, a marginal note: that Juan Gris,[24] among all the techniques available to him, should opt for the same chalcographic technique cited in Laforgue's *Hamlet* to illustrate *Mouchoir de nuages*, seems to be a happy coincidence, at the very least.

The cover image, which depicts a sort of Cubist *vanitas* (featuring a guitar, bottle, fruit bowl and musical score), is followed by eight plates inserted in the text. The first, at the start of Act I, portrays a man seated on a *divan* in a bourgeois salon; he is holding an open book, of which he is attentively reading the lines on pages visible to us as well. At the end of the collage-Act (the twelfth), we see a seated man, resting his hand on a ship's deck. Behind him, a landscape of sea and mountains; an open sail, the sunset. The man is turned towards us, with eyes so stylized they look closed. Finally, at the end of the last act, a small etching depicts a table, atop which may be seen, in Cubist perspective, the pipe, a cut-off column, the word *rideau* [stage curtain] and an open book again.

If books do not figure centrally in the text of *Mouchoir de nuages*, where the only writing that appears is the letter – either alphabetical or in the form of missive[25] – they certainly do in the etchings that accompany it which feature two open volumes. If we stick to what the script tells us, we may certainly conclude that the seated man is a further *mise en abyme* of the reader; but the open book is a *mise en abyme* of the text as well, even more perhaps than of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (and/or all of its possible adaptations, including Laforgue's): paradoxically the only *effet de réel* ('effect of real') for the spectator to cling to. The book that is absent from

24 Born José Victoriano Gonzalez (1887–1927), the Spanish artist Juan Gris was one of the greatest representatives of Cubism, as well as an exceptional costume artist and set designer for the Russian Ballet, with which he began to collaborate in the 1920s.

25 This is the missive that the lady sends to the Poet, which is read in the opening lines of the *pièce*, and the one he receives just before taking his own life. Note, once again, the total reversal of traditional roles and functions.

the work is the work itself, which remains open on the table, among other everyday objects, available for all to read, or to use as often as they please.

In connection with this, it is interesting to reread Aragon's thoughts (written in 1965) on the *collage* technique in *Mouchoir de nuages*:

> Conscientes ou inconscientes, ces démarches sont propres à notre pièce et la question n'est pas de la valeur comparée de *Hamlet* et de *Juliette de mon cœur* [*The Heart of Juliet Jones*, a comic strip created by Stan Drake in 1953]: je n'en parle que pour ébaucher [...] le tableau de ce monde ouvert vers 1910 avec l'invention des collages, qui sans doute a ses précédents dans l'alchimie ancienne de l'art, tableau qui ne saurait être complet si on n'y laissait point place à des nouvelles conjectures [...] de l'esprit, comme par exemple le *pop-art*, [...] et qui, peut-être, [...] ne fait que révéler une fois de plus le désespoir du peintre devant la réalité. [...]
>
> L'histoire des collages sans doute n'est pas celle du réalisme: mais *l'histoire du réalisme ne pourra demain s'écrire sans celle des collages*. (Aragon: 1980, p. 157; my emphasis)

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> [Conscious or not, these procedures are unique to our century, and the point has nothing to do with the respective value of *Hamlet* and of *Juliette de mon cœur*: I do not discuss this except to sketch [...] a tableau of the world which opened around 1910 with the invention of the collage, which undoubtedly finds its precedents in the ancient alchemy of art; a tableau which wouldn't be complete if it did not leave space for new conjectures [...] of the mind, such as pop-art, for instance, [...] and which perhaps simply reveals once more the painter's desperation when he faces reality. [...] The history of the collage, undoubtedly, is not that of realism: but the *history of realism will never be written in the future without that of the collage*. (Trans. Julia Nelsen; my emphasis)]

The failure of the Poet who kills himself at the end of the play (Act XV) is also the failure of the competition that begins here between the writing of Shakespeare's tragedy and the writing of the drama by Tristan Tzara. As we said, time passes – twenty years – between the homicide of Act XIII and Act XIV. This temporal interval is not only the plot's, but it is also the time of literature. In the comment to Act XIV, we read, time passes :

> goutte par goutte/coule coule/remplit les poches de la raison/que le tailleur de Dieu laissa sans fond (quelle négligence)/avec les gouttes d'or, l'argent du temps/et nous

> met devant le problème d'ordre général que nous connaissons/la course infatigable du sang à la chasse/l'animal infatigable chassé par le sang la chasse au sang de l'animal infini qui passe. Voilà ce que nous pouvons souffler à la face des voiles déployées du temps parcourant *les mers inexprimables* sur le bateau à voiles déployées et durables comme l'eau et le temps qui passe sur le bateau à voiles déployées parcourant les eaux *inexprimables*. (Tzara: 1975, p. 157; emphasis mine)

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> [drop by drop/flows flows/fills the pockets of reason/which the tailor of God left without bottom/(what negligence)/with drops of gold, silver of time/and puts before us the problem of general order that we know/the refreshed course of blood in the hunt/the refreshed animal hunted by the blood, the hunt for blood of the infinite animal which runs. That is what we can blow in the face of the unfurled sails of time travelling over *inexpressible seas* on the boat with unfurled and everlasting sails like the water and the weather which pass over the boat with unfurled sails travelling over *inexpressible* waters.] (Trans. Julia Nelsen. Emphasis mine).

Faced with the *inexpressibility* of seas crossed by the open sails of time, for Tzara's Poet all that remains is the choice to disappear, voluntary or provoked, yet, in either case, a *mise en scène*. Not unlike Laforgue's Hamlet, who listens to the vaguely immortal sound of the ocean in his double's skull, after having played the card of appropriating the pieces of the most sacred and exhausted literary hero.

Looking for a new path in reality

Thus, with the perhaps cruel deconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laforgue and Tzara – the first thanks to parody, the second through collage – interpret the time of a writing which is still present. It is a writing contaminated by newsreel-worthy 'pop culture' (as demonstrated by the castle of Elsinore, left in ruins before being turned into a theme park, and the recourse to arts still considered trivial at the time, such as the cinema and the pop song). It is a writing that is experimental in its

constant juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, especially in Laforgue, who dares include a cheeky '… ta sœur', meant as an insult, just three lines from Hamlet's death (Laforgue: 1995, p. 399); it is an uneasy writing that reflects on its own devices and what it owes to the new industrial society; but is also indebted to imperialism ('à la manière du colonial,' we read in Act VIII, *Ibid*., p. 327), to popular literature (*à la* Capitaine Fracasse, in Act X),[26] to its borrowings and to our very own Laforgue, whose floral theme Tzara revisits in Act X, even more subtly than in the hypotext: recalling an episode in his memory in front of the couple, the Poet admits to having shot at a flower, mistaken for a wild beast during an exotic journey. And the chorus sneeringly comments: 'c'est ça la poésie … une fleur … ce n'est pas drôle' (Tzara: 1975, p. 335–6).

In an age in which, as Paul Valéry observes in the passage that introduced this essay, we begin to sense that *vérités* are no longer said, the rapport between *mensonge* (deceit) and reality is thematized with more urgency than ever, especially in literature. This explains the choice of the palimpsest of *Hamlet* and the inclusion of the play within the play; it also explains the search for a poetic language that is not simply a 'mundane form of madness' (Tzara: 1975, p. 348).

In his reading of *Hamlet, ou les suites de la piété filiale*, Yves Bonnefoy suggests that the work of abstraction carried out by Laforgue resolves itself in reminding us, negatively, that 'there is a world' (Bonnefoy: 1988, p. 179). Tzara adds that this world, for the writer, is not disjointed from the play and the ascertainment of its relativity:[27] 'Mettez-vous à sa place, *il a besoin* de prendre la poésie pour une réalité et la réalité pour un mirage' (Tzara: 1975, p. 332; emphasis in the original. The line belongs to Commentator A) [Put yourself in his place, *he needs* to take poetry as reality and reality as mirage].

As I noted at the outset, when faith in the relationship to the whole is lost, the relation between the whole and its parts is called into play once

26 See on this topic Bernard: 2005, p. 181.

27 Tzara: 1 April 1925, p. 7: '[This *pièce*] is a work of poetry; it represents the relativity of things, of feelings and of events.'

again, and it becomes apparent that each 'part' is not objective for its supposed relation to the whole 'in itself,' but precisely as a result of *interpretive activity* itself, and of its necessary and '*structural' connection to perspective* (Sini: 2008, p. 27).

If Cézanne throughout the destructuration of space meant looking for a new 'truth in painting'[28], in the same way, through Hamlet's figure, Laforgue and Tzara problematize and recast the relation between poetry and reality. This is why, as in an etching, they corrode the master plate, in order to extract new images from it. This is why both Laforgue and Tzara need to fit anew the pieces of the *collage*, relying, as in the famous tale, on some white pebbles dropped on Hamlet's path. In other words, it is necessary to retrace the thread and the fragments of a memory in order not to lose oneself and to continue to move forward, making it (Poetry and Reality) new. This is what Laforgue and Tzara did by recasting Shakespeare; it is what the Letters – Literature and the chorus' roles in *Mouchoir de nuages* – invite us to do at the very end of Tzara's play, illuminating the path that we are still following today.

Tzara's final dialogue offers the appropriate concluding words:

> C.– Où sont-ils, maintenant, le poète et celle qui découvrit comme une note claire de chanson sur le bord de la route? Ils sont en train d'égrener les histoires de leurs vies, comme un chapelet de cailloux qu'ils laissent tomber sur la route pour la retrouver à leur retour.
>
> B.– Mais alors il fera nuit et ils ne pourront plus retrouver le chemin qu'ils avaient indiqué au moyen de cailloux sur la route, car le lendemain les cailloux ressembleront aux autres et tout rentrera de nouveaux dans la confusion d'où chaque jour nous essayons de sortir.
>
> C.– Tu as raison, on ne peut jamais retourner sur le chemin de la mémoire. À bycicletta ou en auto on retourne au point de départ, mais sur un autre trajet que celui

28 Cézanne wrote to the French artist Émile Bernard in a letter dated October 23, 1905: 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you'. *Paul Cézanne: Correspondance*, ed. John Rewald (Paris: Grasset, 1995).

que la mémoire a parcouru. Ce chemin s'enfonce dans la terre lourde dont est pétri le pain quotidien du cerveau.

B.– Nous sommes tous parsemés de cailloux. (Tzara: 1975, p. 309)

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[C: Where are they now, the poet and the woman who discovered the clear note of a song on the edge of the road? They are in the process of dropping the stories of their lives like a rosary of pebbles that they let fall on the road in order to help them find their way back.

B: But soon it will be night and they will not be able to find the road that they marked with the pebbles, because the next day those pebbles will look just like all the others on the road, and everything will be thrown into confusion, the confusion which we try to escape from every day.

C: You are right, we can never turn back on the road of memory. On a bicycle or in an automobile, you can return to the point of departure, but always on another road than that on which memory has run. This road sinks into the heavy earth from which the daily bread of the mind is kneaded.

B: We are all sprinkled with pebbles (Trans. Julia Nelsen).]

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