

# Divine (with) Shakespeare: Two Postmodern Case Studies of Divination

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This essay focuses neither on modernist allusions to the “classics” of western culture, as Joyce’s *Ulysses* does, nor on postmodernist rewritings of Shakespeare in parodically minimalist or subaltern key, as Stoppard’s *Dogg’s Hamlet, Caboot’s Macbeth* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* do, but on half-sounded allusions in two works, Jaco Van Dormael’s *Mr. Nobody* and chapter 10 of Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Both the film (2009) and the novel (1989) engage in a light-hearted dialogue with *Hamlet*. The former does so, via *Hamlet*’s sparrow’s fall motif, to revisit the classic *fortuna labilis* motif in jocular low-key. Barnes’s chapter creates, in Shakespearean vein, a dream-like illusion of consumerist heaven, which answers ironically *Hamlet*’s “For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come” (3.1.66). Such Shakespearean references immerse the two postmodernist works in a universe governed by the principles of chaos theory; yet the immersion also enables them to refute the implicit promise of teleology (the search for final causes, or purpose) to predict the future. By conceiving the future as causally intelligible teleology powers discourses which can motivate individuals into action. Contrariwise, chaos theory shows how “their currents turn awry” (*Hamlet* 3.1.87) into iterative (non-)action.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; *Mr. Nobody*; *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*; chaos theory; teleology.

A young scientist driving home from a film studio: he has recorded a documentary on reproduction modes. Two sparrows on a desert road: one flies away and smashes into the windshield of our scientist’s racing Land Rover; the car skids and plunges into the river as the other sparrow flies away. How uncanny is it to see here *Hamlet*’s sparrow parable of destiny? Just as uncanny as to hear “*Casta diva*” in the soundtrack? Let’s rewind, as in the recording studio: Struggling for his life in the sinking car, Nemo stares death in the face – and a fish; with a supreme effort, he emerges out of the murky depths into the silence of his hotel bathroom: a man shoots him dead. Let’s rewind again: Two newlyweds, Elise and Nemo, embrace in their car stopped in traffic behind a tanker; the tanker explodes: the bride dies. Let’s shuffle the cards, as the scientist says in his documentary on reproduction: Nemo soothes his depressive wife, Elise. Fast forward: old Nemo dies in hospital calling “Anna” (not Elise); all clocks stop working, then they start to reverse-work; so does the resurrected Nemo, who leaves the hospital walking “in reverse gear”, like everyone else. Science fiction? Is it as sci-fi as hearing The Chordettes’ song “Mr Sandman” during this epochal reversal: “Mr Sandman, bring me a dream”? A dream is all Jaco Van Dormael’s *Mr. Nobody* may be about: a dream of life, invincible, bendable, plastic. In a consumerist key, so is chapter 10 of Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*: a dream about life in the hereafter, expunged from *Hamlet*’s Christian apprehensions. Shakespeare’s sparrow would be superfluous here, but not his magic in conjuring a world of simulacra.

This essay investigates half-sounded Shakespearean allusions in two postmodernist works, Van Dormael's *Mr. Nobody* and chapter 10 of Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Both the film (2009) and the novel (1989), I submit, engage in a light-hearted dialogue with *Hamlet*, which immerses them in a universe governed by the principles of chaos theory.<sup>1</sup> The immersion also enables them to refute the promise of teleology to know the future, even as Van Dormael's sparrows should portend grander than a literal fall and death the very next minute.

*Mr. Nobody* may seem unexpectedly difficult to watch, for it depicts 117-year-old Nemo Nobody narrating his life story as a loose series of stories of choices and their effects, subsequently replaced by the contrary stories. At first sight, there is nothing special about the film's narrative looseness and open-endedness, recalling as they do the chapter shuffling technique of the French *nouveau roman* of the 1960s and the time-honoured device of entangling "real" and "imaginary" events in the account. Nor is Van Dormael's generic collage novel; yet the Belgian director-writer splices documentaries into the feature film to frame its events scientifically and thereby enable the viewers to manage them. The science-fiction setting in a future world of quasi-immortality, aligned with the dream, in adolescent Nemo's story, of Martian voyages, may account for the uncanniness of the events, which repeat themselves with a difference.

Nemo pictures himself at various ages by switching deliberately between several possible life paths, each contradicted, even annulled, by the next one. Which one is the *real* life?<sup>2</sup> the confused reporter wonders, as conceivably do most spectators. Van Dormael's film matches the *ontological* indeterminacy inherent in positing a plurality of possible worlds, as Nemo argues in the documentary inserts, with the narrator's – hence *epistemic* – unreliability resulting from the multiple fragmentation of voices (Nemo at various ages), cognitive capacity (Nemo can predict the future) and narratives (conflicting life stories; different genres), whose collision may allow a partial replay purportedly to remediate an early course.

Rather than proclaim the capricious might of goddess Fortuna, in another variation on the classical *fortuna labilis* topos, the film draws on chaos theory to generate a chaotic systems plot. Like other films before<sup>2</sup>, *Mr. Nobody* thematises one postulate of chaos theory, *sensitivity to initial conditions*: every seemingly inconsequential act will have unforeseen effects. This is the "butterfly effect" explicitly mentioned by Nemo's father before the child's birth. In scientific jargon, Van Dormael depicts the consequences of choice at bifurcation points, with their subsequent *bifurcation points*, and follows their *path dependency*.

Before I examine the film's Shakespearean allusion, which relates it to Barnes's chapter, another unexpected commonality between the two works begs attention: their dependence on simulacra. Though dear to postmodern theory, the simulacrum, I submit, has a Shakespearean lustre, which I will examine in the analysis of Barnes.

In a utopian world like Nemo's, the death of "the last mortal" is expected with a frisson elicited visually through televised live broadcasts from New New York hospital. Huge plasma screens configure the space of the year 2092; billboards with electronic lettering beam messages to young Nemo from high-riser cornices. This is the dream of hypermediacy<sup>3</sup> come true (on screen). However, it is mimetic of the turn-of-the-millennium techno-metropolises worldwide,

<sup>1</sup> As John Van Eenwykit (1997: 45-46) warns, our ordinary notion of chaos – *entropic chaos*, i.e. pure randomness – differs from the chaos of mathematical chaos theory; the latter notion names "order disguised as disorder" (Robert Pool as cited in Van Eenwykit, 1997: 46), a *deterministic chaos* within which patterns periodically appear and disappear. See James Gleick (1987: 9-31) and Katherine Hayles (1990: 146-163) for an outline of chaos theory and the butterfly effect, and Hayles (1990: 163-174) on the change in perspective entailed in the chaotic systems paradigm shift.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. *The Butterfly Effect* (2004, dir. Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber) and *Chaos Theory* (2008, dir. Marcos Siega).

<sup>3</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define hypermediacy as the representational opacity or self-reflexiveness of any medium, which highlights its mediation work and thereby reveals the medium's inherent heterogeneity. Alternatively, hypermediacy underpins "the creation of multimedia spaces in the physical world, such as theme parks or video arcades" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 34).

themselves a simulacrum modelled on sci-fi films influenced by modernist architecture, itself inspired by Tower-of-Babel stories. The representational self-reflexiveness of Van Dormael's medium owes dually to contemporary cinematographic options, whose IT technologies the film and advertising industries share with high-tech design industries, and to the very nature of illusion, which fiction and the arts have exploited sometimes self-referentially. In both cases, a mental model will be used to generate the illusion of a possible (even better) world. However, especially in the sci-fi case, such a model departs from reality, only to return to proclaim it can replace the latter.

Can postmodernist works blur the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, yet invest in “high culture” through their subtle citational mode beyond the purview of average audiences? *Mr. Nobody* cites *Metropolis*-like images of the city, now the staple of sci-fi films and dystopias alike (e.g. *Equilibrium*, 2002); it cites the 1984 (book and film) leitmotif of the omnipresent screen (also central to *Equilibrium*), with a ludic twist. Through such quotations from early films *Mr. Nobody* “remediates” or “refashions” the very medium (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 49) by interrogating one of its central coordinates, intelligibility through conformity to “real life” natural laws.

One real life “natural law” concerns causality, which *Mr. Nobody* challenges systematically. The “butterfly effect” constitutes one of the principal motor forces of the engine of chance<sup>4</sup>, alias fortune, shown to operate through individual choices and arbitrary occurrences alike, rather than being the distant goddess Fortuna who spins the wheel randomly. In true postmodern fashion, chance, as opposed to design (*telos*), is thematised in the scene of the crash inadvertently caused by two sparrows in the road (replayed in pop key as a leaf causing the motorbike crash). The scene alludes to Hamlet's metaphor for destiny, “there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (*Hamlet* 5.2.192-193), which itself draws on a Matthean parable<sup>5</sup>. Hamlet teaches Horatio: “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes? Let be” (*Hamlet* 5.2.192-196).

Hamlet speaks thus to argue against divination. In Van Dormael's film, the protagonist cannot even notice the augury, for the sparrows' portentous role overlaps with the omen proper.

Hilariously, in *Mr. Nobody*, Hamlet's sparrows reappear where least expected: on the wallpaper of adult Nemo's bedroom when his memories switch from one life strand to another. Seemingly a stable landmark amidst chaos, the sparrows' constant presence on the wallpaper fails, nevertheless, to keep its portentous promise, for the wife, Elise, is finally replaced by Jean. Though shown several times, the *pattern* receives thematic focus when Nemo looks out of the window after an argument with Elise. He realises that his car looks undamaged by the early fire, as if time had reversed, while six workers are replacing the asphalt strip before his house with a lawn strip, like stage workers changing the film set in a studio. With this self-reflexive detail, Van Dormael depicts the confusing, endless chain of possibilities *qua* choices as but arbitrary-looking film set shifts: if choosing one female partner rather than another is not to happen now, it will come in another life version; if it be now, then it will not be in the future – or not in the same terms. “Each of these lives is the right one! Every path is the right path. Everything could have been anything else and it would have just as much meaning”, Nemo illuminates his bemused inter-viewer. Nemo recycles the time-honoured metaphysical belief in chance/fortune/destiny, overlaid cinematographically with allusions to destiny via Shakespeare's fallen sparrows, to buttress the film's anti-teleological argument.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the name of the railway station from which young Nemo's mother leaves. The station scene presents the first bifurcation point: whether Nemo should choose to live with his mother or with his father after the parents' separation.

<sup>5</sup> “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt 10.29-31).

How shall we construe the film's Shakespearean allusion? First, is it readily apparent to the viewers? Unfamiliarity with Shakespeare's play does not render the sparrow scenes unintelligible or less enjoyable, but only less thought-provoking than they are for avid *Hamlet* readers. This is the paradox of postmodernist *double coding*, not so much in Linda Hutcheon's as in architect Charles Jencks's sense<sup>6</sup>: an elitist/pop hybrid idiom speaks democratically, though not similarly, to everyone. No one can miss the delightfully unlikely sparrows in the road which re-emerge re-mediated on the wallpaper and motifically recoded as the leaf in the road, itself a recoding of the butterfly.

Second, Hamlet's Matthean parable appropriated in a postmodern film about capital-letter Nobody may give the latter the glitz of celebrity. Nevertheless, is any individual's history, due to the butterfly effect and portended by sparrows, indeed *history*, capital-H or not, like that of Prince Hamlet? Mr. Nobody's may be a dream vision, according to dying old Nemo, or a disvelled autobiography comprised of intersecting life stories. But who says History is different? Did we not traditionally study history at school as a train of micro-histories of great men? Why not look, as the French *annalistes* did, at micro-histories to pursue community (hi)stories punctually, yet also to investigate them over the *longue durée* rather than merely over an individual's lifetime? Why not remember historian Hayden White's (1973: ix-xii, 1-38) argument that historiography relies on the narratological conventions which shape fiction and generally myth? *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* reminds us as much in its thematically and numerically arbitrary intermezzo (Barnes, 1989: 242).

Whose destiny is teleologically predictable, sparrows available or not: Nemo's or the dystopian sci-fi cyborgs' in a technology-modelled age of simulacra? Nemo's in *Mr. Nobody* or the fairy-tale characters' when the newlyweds reportedly live happily ever after? Why, moreover, should divining the future and teleology matter at all? The future and causality cannot be tamed and mastered other than illusorily.

Let's pursue our relentless drive to identify progress(ion). Whether strict Aristotelian beginning–body–end narrative structure, Christian eschatology (i.e. either redemption or damnation) or Darwinist evolutionism, teleology is the be-all and end-all of our worldview.<sup>7</sup> What if progress(ion) to a rational end reveals, not a teleological universe, but our teleological orientation, which humans have evolved and then internalised as natural law in order to make sense of the world?<sup>8</sup> What if the world is not (about) "growth" from cause to effect within an intelligible framework? Coastlines have "grown" through the protracted influence of multiple factors; yet, fractal, not Euclidian, geometry can model coastlines mathematically, and chance alone governs how erosion factors mould them (Mandelbrot *apud* Hayles, 1990: 167-168). Causality and growth rarely entail exclusively linear trajectories.

Nonetheless, grand narratives proclaim order amidst chaos: moral and intelligible principles govern life and make it meaningful. Witnessing birth and death also teaches that at least a beginning and an end do exist. What about multiple beginnings and ends? What about bifurcation points and sensitivity to initial conditions? Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* may arguably extend a bridge between our precarious certainties and our intuition that the chaos studied by chaos theory cannot be adequately contained in mathematical formulae.

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<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon (2000) discusses postmodernism in terms of intertextual parodic double coding. For Jencks speaking about postmodern architecture, double coding entails that the postmodern building is "part Modern and part something else: vernacular, revivalist, local, commercial, metaphorical, or contextual.... It is also double coded in the sense that it seeks to speak on two levels at once: to a concerned minority of architects, an elite who recognize the subtle distinctions of a fast-changing language, and to the inhabitants, users, or passers-by, who want only to understand to enjoy it" (*apud* Călinescu, 1987: 283).

<sup>7</sup> The idiomatic *be-all and end-all* originates with Shakespeare. Macbeth muses on how to commit regicide, including the choice of the moment to deal the death blow ("the end-all"): "... that but this blow / Might be the *be-all and the end-all* – here" (*Macbeth* 1.7.4-5).

<sup>8</sup> See Simon Oliver (2013) for a useful review of the teleological controversy.

Barnes has structured his novel as a series of ten disconnected micro-histories of average individuals, the ten chapters announced in the title, whose numerical perfection the half-chapter challenges. Inserted between chapters 8 and 9, this Derridean supplement lectures on love, which it relates to the very issues the novel thematises: “Love and truth, that’s the vital connection, love and truth” (1989: 240). However, history’s quest for truth is thwarted by literary/logical “fabulation” (242). Thus, the intermezzo exposes the very practice of postmodernist “historiographic metafiction” (in Hutcheon’s terms): “[W]e fabulate. We make up a story to cover the facts we don’t know or can’t accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history” (242). As the final chapter demonstrates, we also call such fabulation religion, and it has had just as soothing an effect; we might perhaps call the practice itself *dogmatic metafiction*.

Not so much love inspires Barnes’s micro-histories as decidedly other stories, the fabulations of the great books of (mostly white) (Judeo-)Christian humankind: the Bible and biblically inflected texts. Barnes’s historiographic/religious metafiction becomes most apparent in the chapters which frame religiously the entire narrative enterprise in comprehensive teleological terms – with a twist: the religious stories enshrined in the most revered book of one third of the world are no longer granted the deferential treatment they used to receive.

A parodic palimpsest of the Genesis episode of Noah’s Flood, the first chapter foregrounds the Bakhtinian grotesque body whose needs, pleasures, and their fulfilment challenge notions of the elect’s righteousness *qua* asceticism. At the other end of the spectrum (and book), chapter 10 derives its premise from Christian eschatology. To the inverted version, in chapter 1, of the Genesis Flood originally sent to punish and eradicate sin, chapter 10 matches an afterlife of bountiful reward and fulfilment of every wish. Thus, the opening and closing chapters structure the novel in general alpha/Genesis and omega/Revelation terms. Teleological schema fully operational! Or is it? In Barnes’s novel, the origins of iniquity, purportedly swept clean by the Flood, and the ending of iniquity through death, allow nevertheless an astonishing revelation: that religious dogma aims to discipline people, not to reveal the truth. Progression from (one) beginning to (one) end and purpose? The biblical and novelistic Flood story *iterates* the originary Genesis in human key and through the very carnal Noahs. The Revelation depicts an end followed by a new beginning, which in Barnes affords quasi-eternal, if crudely material and carnal, reward – irrespective of one’s deeds. Ethical chaos! Mathematical chaos too, once chapter 10 implicates *insensitivity* to initial conditions.

At this point, an outline of chapter 10 becomes necessary. Barnes’s parodic story of the afterlife of an anonymous man plays up the postmodernist reevaluation of the body in terms of putting forth new *lifestyles* that construct *desire* as the driving force of consumerism. In the New Heaven, the pampered “customer” (1989: 306) gorges on food and does gargantuan shopping; his sexual “achievement” (291) parallels his sports performance. Notwithstanding, he learns that eventually everyone succumbs to boredom and opts to die off (304-305): the end itself becomes an exercise of “free will” (304), as Margaret, the corporatist hostess he has been assigned to during his second afterlife stage, informs the protagonist (305).

How does the protagonist spend his millennia? He debuts eating the breakfast provided through uncalled-for room service, then goes shopping; eventually, he establishes a pleasurable routine: playing golf, napping, browsing the newspapers, having sex. Culturally (and implicitly class) self-conscious, the narrator rebuffs any potentially snobbish narratee *qua* implied reader vis-à-vis his choice to go shopping first (288); nevertheless, he concedes that the latter might choose to meet famous people first (288). Yet the pull of tradition, or perhaps habitus aspirations, remains strong, although it is mystified as limited choices: during the very first week in heaven, even “people like me” (288) will include in their routine meeting famous people (290).

Notwithstanding the cancellation of both teleology and dogmatic eschatology, the protagonist occasionally waxes apprehensive about his health (295). Suddenly turned righteous, he – like scores before – wishes to be judged (293-294); however, in articulating his dream as “I wanted

my life looked at” (293), he merely craves for attention to his life. The benign judge’s verdict disappoints the protagonist: reassuringly assessed as “OK” (294), he is implicitly confirmed as but an ordinary chap. The assessment scene moulds the subsequent economy of chapter 10: it renders the meeting of famous people *routine* (294) and it also makes him start nurturing *self-doubts*. I will address first the latter aspect.

“What had I done to deserve it?” (295)<sup>9</sup>, the narrator-protagonist candidly wonders. The pronoun refers anaphorically to “the amount of credit I seemed to be given” (295), where “credit” only superficially names the bank credit for his shopping. Speaking in terms of deserts, however, is hardly unique in chapter 10, let alone in the culture that has nourished Barnes. Margaret explains to the protagonist:

... that’s the principle of Heaven, that you get what you want, what you expect. I know some people imagine it’s different, that you get what you deserve, but that’s never been the case. We have to disabuse them.  
Are they annoyed?  
Mostly not. People prefer to get what they want rather than what they deserve. Though some of them did get a little irritated that others weren’t sufficiently maltreated. Part of their expectation of Heaven seemed to be that other people would go to Hell. Not very Christian. (303)

Margaret assesses the traditional belief in retribution (*cf.* Rom 6:23) as “necessary propaganda” (Barnes, 1989: 301) out of which now people must be “disabuse[d]” (303). Yet such belief permeates idiomatic language and, more generally, thought. Think of Hamlet welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore:

HAMLET What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?  
GUILDENSTERN Prison, my lord?  
HAMLET Denmark’s a prison.  
ROSENCRANTZ Then is the world one.  
HAMLET A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons; Denmark being one o’th’worst.  
ROSENCRANTZ We think not so my lord.  
HAMLET Why then ’tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison. (2.2.230-240)

One reaches prison-like Denmark, Hamlet argues, only if one *deserves* punishment and will serve one’s sentence here. On the contrary, chapter 10 pictures an otherworld whose “amenities” (Barnes, 1989: 296) cater for everyone’s needs (300-303). As Hamlet explained to his guests about Denmark, in Barnes’s heaven thinking alone makes experience either good or bad. Traditional-minded Christians request an afterlife of prayer and thanksgiving. The protagonist wishes for an improved *continuation* of his life (301) and identity (285) in consumerist terms – and epistemically in the foundationalist terms of Newtonian physics, “infused with assumptions about the integrity and autonomy of the individual” (Hayles, 1990: 170).

On the other hand, it is not the material dimension proper that structures Barnes’s concluding chapter, but *hyper*-reality. Apart from the traditional high location of heaven in the imagined *l’au-delà*, the *hyper*(-)-reality of chapter 10 is one of simulacra in Baudrillard’s sense (1994: 1-7). It is the consumerist “reality” of free-floating signifiers which always already entice desire as a sense of lack that will never be fully satisfied, and which mirror endlessly prior signifiers to model

<sup>9</sup> “What did I do to deserve this?” is also what the male voice-over seemingly ascribes to the conditioned pigeon shown in the “documentary” which opens *Mr. Nobody*, only to repeat it with the first frame of the “feature film” that shows 34-year-old Nemo’s face – dead.

lifestyles (Featherstone, 2007: 50-77, 81-92). In Barnes, heaven and hell alike are hyperreal. To answer people's wishes (302), hell appears now "more like a theme park" with "skeletons popping out and frightening you", "[j]ust to give you a good scare" (301). The otherworldly hyper-reality, which has erased ethical boundaries between heaven and hell, is managed by a consortium comprised, the protagonist learns, of individuals interchangeable with himself: "Who exactly are you? 'Us? Oh, we're remarkably like you. We could be you, in fact. Perhaps we are you'" (307) – pure self-reflexive simulacrum.

Not only consumerist simulacra but also intertextuality can generate hyperreality, for Barnes's text draws on literary and religious models which are but figments of imagination. Such are the picture of a *dream*-like, ineffable, reality of afterlife in a customised, consumerist heaven and the leitmotif of waking up from a dream. Such is also the nearly surrealist presence of literary topoi like the procession of the (illustrious) dead in a text that mimics pop culture.

In Barnes's hyper-/sur-real otherworld, meeting famous people – emblematic of *descents* into the *underworld*<sup>10</sup> – does not originally appeal to the protagonist (294). Yet, by the end of his otherworldly life, he will have become more than intimate with the dead celebs: "I tried combining pleasures and started having sex with famous people" (307). But we only have his word for it: thin air. His newly acquired routine becomes symptomatic of the postmodernist endeavour to efface hierarchies and boundaries at the same time as it cannot repel insidious irruptions of the canonical past within the everyday.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the procession of simulacra – the ghosts of the historical or literary past – should give us pause. This procession occurs textually at two points, the second of which concerns exclusively footballers (299):

It was about this time that I took to meeting famous people. At first I was a bit shy and only asked for film stars and sportsmen I admired. I met Steve McQueen, for instance, and Judy Garland; John Wayne, Maureen O'Sullivan, Humphrey Bogart, Gene Tierney (I always had this thing about Gene Tierney) and Bing Crosby. I met Duncan Edwards and the rest of the Man Utd players from the Munich air-crash. I met quite a few Leicester City lads from the early days, most of whose names would probably be unfamiliar to you.

After a while I realized I could meet anyone I liked. I met John F. Kennedy and Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, President Eisenhower, Pope John XXIII, Winston Churchill, Rommel, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Roosevelt, General de Gaulle, Lindbergh, Shakespeare, Buddy Holly, Patsy Cline, Karl Marx, John Lennon and Queen Victoria. Most of them were very nice, on the whole, sort of natural, not at all grand or condescending. They were just like real people. I asked to meet Jesus Christ but they said they weren't sure about that so I didn't push it. I met Noah, but not surprisingly there was a bit of a language problem. Some people I just wanted to look at. (294-295)

I met famous people all the way to the edges of my memory. For instance, I met every footballer there ever was. (299)

For the protagonist, footballers are the be-all and end-all of both living memory and personal interest (299). Nonetheless, they are but members of "the best of..." class, again in consumerist

<sup>10</sup> In the *Odyssey* (XI), Odysseus descends to Hades to meet, among the spirits of the dead, the blind prophet Tiresias and learn about his odds of returning to Ithaca; later, Odysseus speaks to princesses and mythical heroes. In the *Aeneid* (VI), Aeneas descends into the underworld, where he meets his former beloved, Dido, and a host of Trojan warriors. Magic helps Christopher Marlowe's Faustus to enter another world, later embodied by Helen of Troy; whereas her sexual appeal would comfort Faustus (*Dr Faustus* 12.75-77, 12.93), on her second appearance (12.80 s.d.) "Helen" is a devil who entraps Faustus.

<sup>11</sup> Such are idiomatic expressions like "thin air," which owes to Prospero's description of the magical vanishing of his spirit-actors (*Tempest* 4.1.150).

fashion, who proceed anonymously to brush shoulders, in the account, with the towering and/or iconic figures of myth, history and contemporary life. The shuffling of value *hierarchies* nevertheless leaves intact the *principle* of value. Notwithstanding, the simulacrum reigns supreme in this world of the famous: in describing the non-condescending attitude of certain outstanding public figures, Barnes's narrator finds these people "sort of natural, ... just like real people" (295) – *real*, not *ordinary*.

Just as hyper/sur-real sound echoes from *Hamlet* in a chapter whose narrator prefers pop culture to reading and disputation. Barnes offers, arguably, a parodic answer to Hamlet's "For in that sleep of death *what dreams may come*" (3.1.66):

HAMLET ... To die, to sleep –  
 No more; ...  
 ... To die, to sleep –  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause.... (3.1.60-61, 64-68)

Thanatos and Hypnos, as Shakespeare knew, were look-alike brothers in ancient Greek myth; Hamlet's twice sounded equation of *to die* and *to sleep* should, therefore, raise no exegete's brows. Even before Freud, sleeping-*cum*-dreaming should have sounded commonsensical for those unaware of Morpheus, Hypnos's son. Yet Barnes blows up Shakespeare's two metaphorical sets into a three-fold metaphorical chain that frames the consumerist paradise beyond Hamlet's apprehensive contemplation of "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (5.1.79-80).

Notwithstanding Hamlet's afterlife dream puzzle, Barnes's *History* leaves intact the outlook, criteria and practices of androcentrism: women act as sexual service providers on call; men's – never women's – dreams come true. Parody, Hutcheon has argued, may often be guilty of complicitous critique (1989: 2-4), for it becomes "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity", which "paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity" (1986-1987: 185). As in this life, so in the afterlife of chapter 10, Barnes's protagonist demonstrates a male's inflated ego. He assesses his first breakfast in heaven with a phrase, "like an emperor" (284), which conceivably echoes Hamlet's "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself *a king of infinite space*" (2.2.243-244). Shakespeare sandwiches the line between Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's observations about ambition – traditionally (powerful) men's driving force:

ROSENCRANTZ Why then your ambition makes it [Denmark] one [a prison];  
 'tis too narrow for your mind.  
 HAMLET O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king  
 of infinite space, were it not that I have had dreams.  
 GUILDENSTERN Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance  
 of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream. (2.2.241-246)

In Barnes's chapter, the resurrected dead are as much afflicted by ambition, however trivial (298) or unwarranted (300), as the living are. Paradoxically, their confinement to the New Heaven lifestyle can feel simultaneously liberating, by giving free rein to their wildest dreams, and boring, by operating in the logic of predictability, for here everyone's dreams fulfil instantly. The only bad dream in this customised heaven may be to learn about religion's punitive *fictions* (301) and about God's conditional existence (300). Otherwise, unlike in *Hamlet*, in Barnes the protagonist's dreams are good – and self-fulfilling: they feel fulfilling for the man ambitious to excel in trivia, and they fulfil themselves *ex nihilo*. Quite appositely, the entire "substance" of chapter 10 is "merely the shadow of a dream", as Guildenstern so aptly put it: "I dreamt that I woke up. It's



the oldest dream of all, and I've just had it", Barnes's chapter starts (283) – and ends (309).

Barnes's *final* chapter echoes Shakespeare not just structurally, answering Hamlet's query through mockery of afterlife dogma, but also conceptually. The dream-like quality of the characters/simulacra in Barnes's heaven is one they share with other self-conscious characters, Shakespeare's two magicians of sorts, as articulated in their deliberate *disenchantment speeches*. Both speeches reveal the illusory/artificial nature of the entertainment just provided, the simulacrum modelled on aristocratic revels modelled on dreams of social transcendence. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" (*Tempest* 4.1.156-157), Prospero explains to Ferdinand and Miranda after abruptly ending the revels which he had engineered through magic. Unsurprisingly by Hamlet's standards, Prospero also uses the death/sleep metaphor:

... We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.... (4.1.156-158)

The same self-conscious explication of illusion is offered at the end of other revels, in the famous parting speech of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck pleads metatheatrically:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream,  
Gentles, do not reprehend. (5.1.411-417)

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the erstwhile individual, if magically induced, dream of the lovers becomes one shared, willy-nilly, by the audience at the same Puck's hands. Unlike in both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* or in Barnes's final chapter, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* dreaming follows (pretended) slumbering (5.1.413), not death. It is as reassuring a fiction as any in Barnes's novel, especially in the closing chapter.

"What did you hope for?" (Barnes, 1989: 299), Margaret enquires, somewhat irritated by the "perverse" (299) protagonist of chapter 10. Metadramatically/-theatrically and metafictionally, "What did you hope for?" is what every text and discourse asks its audiences. It may be the Mechanicals' unvoiced query to their sophisticated aristocratic intra-dramatic audience, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the play's to its spectators in the Globe (even around the globe). It may be *Hamlet's* to Hamlet before "the rest is silence" (5.2.337). It may be Prospero's to Ferdinand and Miranda, in *The Tempest*, for the benefit of the audience. It may be *Mr. Nobody's* to those spectators but faintly amused by the sparrows "trick" if they have no eyes for Shakespeare. It may be history's, religion's, science's, or science-fiction's.

"What did you hope for?" can trigger a train of questions. Which one is the nobler or more acceptable choice in life?, Hamlet broods in his soliloquy of act 3, scene 1. Which life strand of the many recounted is true, the reporter asks Nemo, in *Mr. Nobody*. Which afterlife imaginary is truer and more desirable?, Barnes's chapter 10 queries: Each one their own choice, the protagonist is answered.

Hamlet's alternative in the soliloquy of act 3, scene 1 – either to suffer or to evade life – indicates the impossibility of "improv[ing] the condition of the world or the condition of its victims" (Edwards, 2003: 48). Nothing, "except by disappearing from the world oneself", can end the "continuous, permanent condition of misfortune" configuring the world (48). Nemo's life stories emphasise even more than Hamlet's soliloquy the inadvisability of worrying about choice in life: so do the sparrows confirm. Barnes's chapter shows that any ethical choice of how to act will still reward one in a utopian dream of desire fulfilment. Hamlet's is philosophically and reli-

giously well-reasoned procrastination in choosing how to act, and implicitly disbelief in teleology. Nemo's is an empirically supported refusal to choose, when Elise can die by chance on her wedding day and young Nemo on his way to unfaithful Elise. Only the anonymous protagonist of Barnes's chapter enjoys a demonstration of the inadequacy of the very issue of ethical choice. When teleology is overruled by chaos principles, divining the future is a no-win game of fortune.

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