"The past as prologue: Marxist historicism and the Globe reconstruction" by Gabriel Egan

The exhortation to 'always historicize', currently fashionable in Shakespeare studies, is usually accompanied by an unexamined belief that doing so will reveal how different the past was from the present. A good political reason to emphasize such a difference is to show that fundamental change in a society's practices, beliefs, and assumptions is entirely possible and can be traced in the difference between the early modern period and now. The past was quite unlike the present, the reasoning goes, so clearly the future can be too. Left-wing Shakespeare studies since the 1980s has chastised its forebears for representing the Elizabethan period as an idyll of social harmony and a universally agreed-upon order, and here E. M. W. Tillyard is the critical bogeyman for his model of Renaissance ideology (Tillyard 1943; Tillyard 1944). In fact Tillyardism was rejected by many in its own time and had no significant currency when British Cultural Materialism 'exposed' its conservative underpinnings, but more important than dating the rejection of Tillyard is the realization, which seems yet to occur, that with the rejection comes a freedom from the necessity to assert the unbridegable difference between Shakespeare's age and our own, since a belief that art is a site of ideological and political struggle can be identified then and now. Rather than a gulf of near-incomprehension we can posit a dialogue between the past and the present, a conversation in which a number of ideas are implicitly shared and many more are known to have subtly shifted, which is where Mikhail Bakhtin enters.

The essence of dialogism is that every utterance, artistic or quotidian, is definitely situated, inherently takes up a position regarding that situation, and presupposes a response to itself. In everyday talking, meaning is highly dependant on the situation of the utterance and without that situation the utterance may be unanalyzable. For Bakhtin the non-verbal context has three parts: a spatial purview common to the speakers, a common knowledge and understanding of the circumstances, and a common evaluation of these circumstances (Bakhtin 1983, 11). Poetic writing, Bakhtin argued, carries in itself the context that in everyday talking is provided by the shared social space where the utterance takes place, and yet this process can never achieve full self-sufficiency: there is no such thing as "the text itself" as imagined by the Formalists and the New Critics, "only texts that are more or less implicated in their environments" (Clark & Holquist 1984, 210). A reconstructed playhouse such as the Wanamaker Globe clearly provides only part of non-verbal context and without an Elizabethan audience (with its common knowledge, understanding of the circumstances, and common evaluation of the circumstances) there can be no simple return to the original conversation. But this is true of any attempt to understand the past, not merely those raised in wood and plaster. In "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics" (Bakhtin 1983, 5-30), Bakhtin argued that the aesthetic quality of a written work, its literariness, is inversely proportional to the degree to which is depends on its contexts: the less dependant it is the more free it is "to live and have meaning in other contexts, life and meaning being equivalent in Bakhtin's thought" (Clark & Holquist 1984, 210). Thus it is a mark of the Shakespeare works' artistic achievement that they are performed around the world centuries after their composition, free of the original time and place with which the Globe project is concerned. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin distinguished between two characteristics of an artefact: its aura and its trace. The aura is the irreducible distance an object keeps from its consumer, its quality of seeming out of reach, unassimilable, and strange. Mechanical reproduction can transform works of previous

eras: "To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (Benjamin 1992, 217). The opposite of aura is trace, the recoverable remnant still clinging to the fetishized object that shows its productive origin and what has happened to it since. Of course, objects are really trace all the way to their cores, since there are only the social relations that 'wrote' them. Benjamin's notion of the trace of an object is a resistance to constructivism, a refutation of the idea that things are whatever we choose to make of them. There is, rather, a hard reality which constructivism cannot wish away but must instead engage with in the struggle to make things from the past mean. I wish to illustrate the 'trace' of the open-air amphitheatres by the errors that have been made in naming them.

The first purpose-built London playhouse was the Red Lion, which E. K. Chambers thought was a converted inn but which new evidence shows that, despite the unlikely-sounding name, was a farm converted to a playhouse in 1567 (Loengard 1983). **[SLIDE 2]** The second playhouse was the Theatre built in 1576 by Burbage in the Shoreditch district just north-east of the city, and from 1964 and 1999 it was thought that a picture of the Theatre had survived, the so-called Utrecht engraving owned by Abram Booth. Herbert Berry has now shown that this is in fact the Curtain built in 1577 (Berry 2000). Thus was overturned Sidney Fisher's identification of the building as the Theatre (Fisher 1964) and Leslie Hotson's original identification restored (Hotson 1954). The Theatre was dismantled in the winter of 1598-9 and re-erected as the Globe on Bankside, where there were already two playhouses. The first was the Rose built by Philip Henslowe in 1587 and substantially altered in 1592. John Norden's engraved panorama <u>Civitas Londini</u> has an inset map which shows the Rose **[SLIDE 3]** and misnames it "the Stare" (Foakes 1985, 10-13). The other playhouse on Bankside was the Swan **[SLIDE 4]** built in 1595 by Francis Langley and clearly intended to compete with the Rose owned by Philip Henslowe; indeed to reach the Rose patrons who came south of the river by boat and alighted at Paris Garden stairs would have to pass Langley's playhouse first (Ingram 1978, 106). Johannes De Witt described the Swan as the largest of the London playhouses of its day and wrote that it was made out of an aggregate of flint stones ("ex coacervato lapide pyrritide"), a detail we must doubt given the construction practices of the day (Southern & Hodges 1952, 57). The large wooden columns supporting the stage cover were painted like marble so cleverly as "to deceive the most inquiring eye", and perhaps the external rendering too was deceptive. The described interior marbelization, the circular shape, and the use of classical columns with ornate bases and capitals put the Swan in a neo-classicist tradition of design emerging at the end of the sixteenth century, despite the apparent Tudor bareness of the sketch.

Only one more open-air amphitheatre was erected before the general theatre closure of 1642, the Hope of 1614 built near the site of the old Beargarden that the builder Gilbert Katherens was instructed by Henslowe to first demolish. As well as the construction contract for the Hope, several pictures of it survive in the form of preliminary sketches **[SLIDE 5] [SLIDE 6]** and a final engraving **[SLIDE 7]** by Wenceslaus Hollar made in 1641. Famously, the engraving has two of its label reversed **[SLIDE 8]**, so the the Hope is labelled the Globe and the Globe is labelled "the bearbaiting h[ouse]" (Foakes 1985, 29-31, 36-8). Other open-air theatres were built, including the Fortune and the Red Bull, but these were not round like the classical amphitheatres, and for some reason have not been subject to the same naming errors. To recapitulate those errors: Chambers guessed from its name that the Red Lion was an inn but it was a farm; Fisher named the playhouse in

the Utrecht drawing as the Theatre but it was the Curtain; Norden's map misnames the Rose the "Star"; and the Hope was doubly mistaken as the Globe and as a "bearbaiting h[ouse]" which would have been true of the old Beargarden but not its replacement, which was the first dual-purpose arena. It is still sometimes claimed that the early London amphitheatres showed animal baiting, and indeed that the amphitheatre design was a development of the baiting ring design, but Oscar Brownstein effectively demolished this idea (Brownstein 1979). Finally, the Globe was mistaken for the Hope. (Although properly an architectural rather than a nomenclatural slip, one is tempted to include in this list of errors E. K. Chambers's disarming admission that he ought not to have suggested "that the first Globe might have been rectangular" (Chambers 1923, 434n2)).

The recurrent naming errors in the evidence about the open-air amphitheatres of Shakespeare's time usefully exemplify what is wrong with excessive historical contextualization and right about deliberate historical 'quotation', by which I mean a form of collecting, wresting things from their originating place but also thereby calling them back to their origins by showing them in a new setting; it is reproduction rather than repetition. Concerning Shakespeare's use of Ovid, Charles Martindale argued that we perhaps overstate the importance of context when looking at literary borrowings (Martindale 2000). Modern scholars too easily assume that the context of a source passage alluded to or imitated is relevant to our understanding of the allusion or imitation, but given the Elizabethan fondness for commonplace books this concern may be misplaced. In a commonplace book would be recorded transferrable knowledge in the form of passages, sayings, and drawings, and it is into such a record ("My tables") that Hamlet sets it down that "one may smile and smile and be a villain" (Hamlet 1.5.108-9). Such books were frequently categorized thematically--so all 'passages about sleep' might occur together-- and necessarily this organization of knowledge decontextualized and recontextualized what it held. Martindale drew on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method to argue that "In interpreting Shakespeare the choice is not between historically responsible accounts and ahistoricism, but between competing forms of historicism" (Martindale 2000, 202). Gadamer's understanding of interpretation as a dialogue between the past and the present is appropriate for the Globe reconstruction since this is precisely the terms in which the project's participants (especially the exhibition and education departments) describe their work, and as such it is open to the accusation that it represents communication as a disinterested activity. Terry Eagleton memorably described Gadamer's Heideggerian book Truth and Method (Eagleton 1983, 66-74) as a work based on "a grossly complacent theory of history" because it does not recognize "that the unending 'dialogue' of human history is as often as not a monologue by the powerful to the powerless, or that if it is indeed a 'dialogue' then the partners--men and women, for example--hardly occupy equal positions" (Eagleton 1983, 73).

The principle of quotation is a way to avoid the complacency identified by Eagleton as the danger of treating historical and cultural interchange as dialogue: far from repeating the original Globe 'verbatim', the reconstruction can decontextualize it and so 'blast' the original Globe out of "the continuum of history" in order to offer it to the present as Benjamin advocated (Benjamin 1992, 253-54). A greater danger than overvaluing the Globe's aura is the extreme estrangement of the past which current academic historicism appears bent upon. As Kiernan Ryan observed, recent left-wing critical work is in danger of missing the utopianism of early modern literary texts precisely because it is only looking backwards and it collapses all into the past. Such work misses past works' ability to see into   their own futures and to aim for something quite unlike their present circumstances

(Ryan 2001, 227-29). Jazz pianist Art Tatum famously claimed that in his profession "There's no such thing as a wrong note, it all depends on how you resolve it" (Monk 1972), meaning that the correctness of a musical phrase was necessarily conditioned by what came next. This is a convenient image for Benjamin's insistence on historical retroactivity **[SLIDE 10]**:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (Benjamin 1992, 255)

Such a constellation can be formed between the Elizabethan theatre's incessant self-reflexity (drawing attention to the theatre fabric and the making of fictions as an activity shot through with power relations, from simple dissembling to the dramaturgy of a Prospero), and Bertolt Brecht's use of verfremdungseffekt. Indeed Brecht was particularly interested in the Elizabethan open-air amphitheatres because he imagined that an audience that can see itself and that cannot be ignored by the actors would impress the materiality of performance upon both parties, just as he attempted to do by violating the accumulated conventions of the twentieth-century theatrical tradition. Brecht considered the Elizabethan theatre to be anti-illusionist and full of alienating effects, just as he found the plays dialectically replete of productive contradiction (Brecht 1965, 57-64; Heinemann 1985).

   Benjamin's exhortation that we blast a moment from the past out of the historical continuum and place it in a constellation with the present is politically attractive but hard to imagine in concrete terms since it appears to suggest that the past can be changed by what we do with it in the present. That indeed is the point of Benjamin's expression Jetzteit which literally means 'present' but, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, Benjamin "clearly is thinking of the mystical nunc stans" (Benjamin 1992, 253). We do not have to share Benjamin's mysticism to realize that time is not quite the one-way cosmological stream that it generally seems, since in the renaming of things we can speak of the past as being adjusted by its own future, which is the point of Marx's concern with nomenclature. For what can one say of James Lusardi's phrase "the Theatre in the Utrecht engraving" (Lusardi 1993, 222) now that the picture is 'known' to represent not the Theatre but the Curtain? We can describe Lusardi's error in using this term, but of course our correction is provisional, just as Lusardi's view was in its adoption of Sidney Fisher's 'correction' (Fisher 1964) of Leslie Hotson's original identification of the building as the Curtain (Hotson 1954). All such corrections are provisional, and only within the nunc stans is there a singular right answer to such questions; those who do not believe in the nunc stans must make do with an endless alteration of the semi-official scholarly position engendered of debate and presentation of evidence. This alternation is an entity's trace that marks its journey through time and, pace Hawkes, certainly does not mock our attempts to reconstruct the past. Looking backward and altering the past, theatre historiography (like any other) rearranges the past in ways that irrevocably change it, for--working at the lowest possible level of cognition--a renamed object is a wholly different object. Benjamin's 'angel of history', on the other hand, signally fails to do this **[SLIDE 11]**:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1992, 249)

Benjamin's angel is not historiography but history, and it does not see linear time but "one single catastrophe". This appears to be the nunc stans, and yet the angel is moving in space that represents time: backwards into the future. Benjamin's angel faces backwards because Kabbalistic Judaism permits no speculation on the future, and there we must break with Benjamin. Rewriting the past is an activity bound to change the present and the future, and a politicized historicism that overstates the alterity of the past cannot imagine what the future could be like. There is, of course, a grave danger in the liberal reformers' conception of a future that is like the present only slightly less cut-throat and individualistic, but conversely an utterly transfigured future is only possible if it remains within the realm of the imaginable.

Notes

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