

- tioning of many kinds of authority—religious, social, legal, familial.
- 24 'Modern Novelists—Great and Small', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (May 1855), 559. Easson prints excerpts, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 344-7.
- 25 Into the bargain, Welch moved on to a television series of *Jane Eyre*, in production in 2006. For 'North and South ... in serious struggle with Shirley', see Rosemarie Bodenheimer's discussion in *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988), pp. 53-68, *passim*. Note that one of the heroines of *Shirley* is Caroline Helstone, a name that perhaps lingered in Gaskell's mind when she chose to call the Hampshire village so dear to Margaret Hale 'Helstone'.
- 26 A particularly influential discussion of this scene is Barbara Leah Harman's 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies* 31 (1988), 351-74, and also her *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998), chapter 2, 'Women's Work in *North and South*'.
- 27 Some recent discussion has dwelt on the significance of Margaret's freedom on the streets of Milton: e.g. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), esp. chapter 5, 'Elbowed in the Streets: Exposure and Authority in Elizabeth Gaskell's Urban Fiction'. Uglow's emphasis on physicality in the novel is also relevant.
- 28 Sophie Cunningham, 'To the defence of Gaskell', *The Age*, 14 May 2005, 18.
- 29 For a comprehensive discussion of place in the novel, see W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Methuen, 1975), chapter 3, 'North and South'.
- 30 Various possible reflections here include the nice touch that Tim Pigott-Smith, Mr Hale in this production, played Hale's son Frederick, Margaret's brother, in a 1975 BBC television version—in which, incidentally, *Star Trek's* Patrick Stewart played John Thornton.

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## A View of *North & South*

DAVID KELLY

Has the mini-series become the novel of today? The home entertainment revolution has had a profound effect not only on our viewing but, perhaps surprisingly, on our reading habits. Indeed, I know people who curl up with a good mini-series in a way they once would have done with a good book, and the reason is the same: because, now, they can.

There is more to it than that, of course, and no doubt part of the attraction of the mini-series for readers is that it has certain affinities with the novel—especially the classic realist novel—which give it a number of advantages over the feature film when it comes to the adaptation of literary classics. Unlike watching a film, which might occupy about the same time as a long story or a shortish novella, viewing a mini-series might take about the same time as reading a decent sized novel. One lives with the story, so to speak, re-visiting it, experiencing its world, its style, its themes, to an extent unimaginable in conventional cinema, often over a period of weeks. The story is spun out in episodic units, a structural principle similar to that which presided over the production of the serialized novels of the past, which likewise appeared first in episodes and later in their entirety. In this it has a particular advantage over the feature film, for the mini-series has the length and the leisure to explore its fictive world with something akin to the depth of interest of the novelist. It has always been one of the major complaints about film adaptations of classic novels that the complexity, intricacy, and thematic expanse of the literary text are inevitably reduced and simplified by the time constraints, to say nothing of the commercial pressures, of the feature film. These are much less important factors in the mini-series and indeed their effect may even be reversed. With the sets and costumes made, the locations visited, the crew in place, it might make more financial sense to spin out an extra episode than to reduce the overall time of the show, thus encouraging the filmmakers to make greater use of novelistic devices such as minor characters, local colour, sub-plots, and the like. For the viewer,

there is all the more time to relish character and narrative; for the broadcaster, there is all the more air time occupied, and all the more revenue gained. At the same time, despite this relative looseness compared to the feature film, the mini-series nevertheless traces a circumscribed and symbolically purposeful narrative, giving it a coherence which ultimately escapes the even looser form of the television series proper and leaving the viewer with a sense of aesthetic complexity and completion.<sup>1</sup>

What's more, as the *cinéastes* have rightly complained, films should be viewed in cinemas, because that is where the full amplitude of their aesthetic effect is realised. Perhaps this imperative is breaking down under the technological advances of home theatre, but nevertheless the point remains: films are meant to be viewed in large scale and in public places. Productions made for television are much less pretentious, much more domestic: with these one can bathe in the cool glow of the television in the privacy of one's own home without compromising the aesthetic experience. And television has long lost its place as the new hearthstone of the modern home: families still occasionally gather around the lounge room television, no doubt, but family members are just as likely to seek out the privacy of their bedroom to indulge their own personal tastes unmarred by potential interruption or clashes of interest. These days one retires to a room, and a screen, of one's own.

Jorge Luis Borges once speculated on a modest but momentous event in the history of literary culture. He quotes St Augustine's account of observing St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in the act of reading silently, a practice previously unknown. Noting Augustine's disquiet at this experience ('Thirteen years later in Numidia he wrote his *Confessions* and that singular spectacle still troubled him: a man in a room, with a book, reading without articulating the words'), Borges offers the following view of the event's historical significance:

That man progressed directly from the written symbol to intuitive perception, omitting the mark of sonority; the strange art he initiated, the art of silent reading, was to lead to marvelous consequences. It would lead, many years later, to the concept of the

book as an end in itself, not as a means to an end.<sup>2</sup>

Such was the impact of converting the practice of reading from a public to a private art. It might be too much to say that a similar kind of event has occurred quietly in our own time, but it is at least diverting to muse upon the implications of the profound changes that overtook the viewing experience a little over twenty-five years ago with the arrival of the video age. The videotape altered forever the nature of one's relationship to the screen, big and little. It marked the true democratizing moment of the cinematic work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. It was the moment when the movie theatres and the television networks lost their 'aura', which, to be fair, consisted in little more than their authority over viewing habits, their power to determine the singularity of the experience.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it was the moment when viewers who had long been possessed by the productions of the dream factories could take possession of that dream—own it, watch it again, relish it. Crucially, like turning back the page, one could rewind it, watch it in bits, in fits and starts, or simply watch favourite scenes over and over till the tape wore out or the machine ate it. And now, in the age of digital reproduction, the viewer may do this with impunity: the fragile tapes have become durable discs that might continue to produce their exquisite images and their surround sounds under the gentle play of the laser until eternity.

So I am led to wonder whether a moment has come—technological and cultural—at which the peculiarly intimate relation that has long existed between reader and novel might now obtain between viewer and mini-series, whether the private world of the page into which one fondly retreats might not now be matched by the private theatre of the screen, itself virtually as portable as any book these days and, in the case of the three-decker Victorian variety, potentially smaller and easier to carry about. A screen is only as far away as your mobile phone, and earphones can quickly transport you into another, stereophonically absorbing world—a fact attested by the blank face of the iPod user travelling unheedingly down footpaths and across roads, adrift in an alternative universe of sound that never matches vision.

These thoughts are prompted by my having viewed *North & South*, but not having read *North and South*.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I find myself unwittingly taken up in a kind of socio-textual experiment which, for educators in English departments, addresses a number of increasingly pressing questions. First, is there a danger that the novel might be supplanted by the mini-series as the preferred medium for an extended sojourn in a richly imagined and artfully stylized fictive world? For teachers, evidence of this shift abounds, even if a hard core of novel readers will probably always find their pleasure in the written text. Second, if the shift gains momentum, as indeed appears to be the case, is one's concern over the loss of the novel, the textual origin, merely another case of a nostalgia which—along with so many other reversals in preference and prejudice—our recent cultural history has enjoined us to overcome? After Derrida and after Baudrillard, there is not much mileage in pining for lost origins. And so finally, still not having settled the first two queries, I am led to wonder: what is the meaning of literacy in a postmodern age?

Today literacy has little to do with the literal—that is, with the letter. The notion of text now goes well beyond the printed page and might not stop short of including any social phenomenon at all: such is the legacy of semiotics. Literacy certainly implies a culturally informed capacity to 'read', but, since 'reading' now goes beyond the letter, what distinguishes the two texts of *North and South* is not their medium but the nature of the informedness they invoke, the aesthetic frames in which they function and are read as text. That is, literacy might not require a literary knowledge to be brought to bear upon one's critical encounter with a filmic text such as *North & South*; in the long view perhaps that will be the job of the historicist, and perhaps criticism will become increasingly historicist to re-invest literacy with the literary. But for the moment an informed reading of *North & South* might concern itself essentially with those aesthetic frames—generic, stylistic, and figurative—in which it makes itself legible to its audience, while a critical reading might ask whether the filmmakers make use of those frames in order to convey and explore ideas and perspectives in their medium with the same kind of subtlety, complexity, and aesthetic polish as the novel has done in its long history.

And yet such an approach immediately foregrounds the dilemma of adaptation, even without a reading of the original text to prompt concern, for

one is aware that those frames have shifted significantly from medium to medium. While Elizabeth Gaskell wrote one of the most famous of all 'Condition of England' novels, at first glance *North & South* appears on the small screen as a period romance. To the contemporary viewer a 'Condition of England' mini-series is not a period piece and it does not feature a clearly distinguishable hero and heroine. It is, rather, set among the contemporary working class, it generally deals with an ensemble of characters and stories, and it metaphorizes their plight in the nature of their daily task—laying tarmac for the aimless travels of the wealthy in Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982), or collecting the other refuse of a society that ignores or disdains them in David Evans's and William Ivory's *Common As Muck* (1994). The title alone seems enough to alert the viewer to the kind of story it will unfold: like pride and prejudice, or sense and sensibility, we might expect north and south to be attributes embodied in the lead characters as impediments to the romance plot. We know the coded import of noun-conjunction-noun—a significance that has become more clearly defined in its recent formulation noun-ampersand-noun, as in *Pride & Prejudice* (Wright, 2005), the latest, apparently Brontës-inspired, version of the Jane Austen classic. But in *North & South* vaguely familiar figures appear to be rudely snatched out of the world in which we might expect to encounter them—a comfortable, semi-rural period setting, Regency perhaps—and are transplanted into a much more forbidding time and place to play out a kind of industrial love story. Little wonder Margaret Hale looks quizzically out of the railway carriage window in the opening shot as her train snakes its way through England's green and pleasant land, apparently wondering how she came to be on a journey that will take her to a charmless corner of that land, Milton, a place seemingly of dark Satanic mills—as the culturally informed reader might expect. (Although, in another shift, the culturally informed viewer is as likely to associate William Blake's images with the unlikely victory of England's cricket team over Australia in 2005, when 'Jerusalem', from Blake's *Milton*, was adopted as its anthem.)

If these adaptative frames are somewhat jarring, the problem is compounded by the narrative's duplicity at this point. By convention, flashbacks provide narrative motivation for the scene they interrupt: here, the viewer is encouraged by her wistful stare out the window to wonder with Margaret at

her situation, whereupon a flashback reveals a romantic motive—she is fleeing from an unwanted suitor. Tutored for many years by the BBC, the viewer is cued to recognize the romance narrative that now occupies the foreground against a nineteenth century which has taken shape within the genre as an essentially romantic locale providing decorous background for the entanglements of handsome young men and women. Margaret (Daniela Denby-Ashe) is handsome indeed and bears a likeness to Lydia in the celebrated BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), while a charismatic Thornton (Richard Armitage) is dangerously good looking and bears a considerable likeness to Colin Firth's Darcy in the same series, whom he out-scowls, which is no mean feat.

The text is not entirely duplicitous here: the flashback does explain in part Margaret's wistfulness, if not her physical relocation to Milton. But the narrative has encouraged us to view her circumstances from one angle—the romantic—so that we have not yet comprehended the full situation, and this opening narrative gambit becomes crucial, thematically and stylistically, as the text proceeds. With its emphasis on the gazing eye the text frequently alerts us to perspective, the partiality of one's view, and the play of the image in the eye of the beholder. Our first view of Margaret is of her staring wistfully out the window of the railway carriage on her way to Milton—looking out, we do not yet realise that she is in fact looking in. Hannah Thornton (Sinéad Cusack) first appears staring supervisorially out her window over the doings of the factory, her determined gaze reflecting a deep internal determination that overlooks the wants of the workers. Perhaps most poignantly of all, in the dramatic confrontation between workers and master at the factory in Episode 2, the strikers observe the blackleg Irish through the factory windows and see only the starving of their own children, while the Irish themselves looking out see nothing but terror. And if John Thornton initially stares masterfully about the factory floor detecting worker indiscretions, ultimately he too on a homeward trip from Helstone to Milton will gaze unseeingly through his carriage window, reflecting only on Margaret, who he believes is lost to him. And we, staring back, might initially take this to be a period romance, but we too might not yet have seen the full picture.



Thornton, scowling through the factory window.

It is the realization that there is another motive for the Hales' forced removal to Milton that begins to enlighten us as to the true nature of the text, and it is a rude awakening, for we experience it through Margaret's shocked over-hearing of northern businessmen who have no time for the manners and ideals of the south and who dismiss conscience—a prized virtue of the south and a sticking point for Mr Hale—as an unacceptable luxury. For north and south are viewpoints as much as compass points, and what is viewed is crucial to the nature of this film and plays a metaphorical role in its elaboration.

It is greatly to the credit of screenwriter Sandy Welch and director Brian Percival that this thematic device of the partial view (in all senses) is so carefully crafted into the texture of the film itself. Located within the perceptions and consciousness of Margaret from the opening shots, we never really leave her sense of things, an effect which is deeply underscored by the aesthetic insistence of palette, lighting, and *mise en scène*. This is signalled in particular by her sense of light in her perception of the north and her memory of the south. Thus our apprehension of Milton is initially charged with Margaret's sense of it. Grey, dark, shadowed, it seems at first a portrait of unalleviated misery reflecting not only the wretchedness of material impoverishment but a deeper and more shocking poverty of spirit. By contrast, the clouds that lower upon Milton are absent from all recollections of,

and indeed visits to, her beloved south. So dramatically insistent from the outset is this effect that we are eventually inclined to read the image not only with an awareness of its compliance with Margaret's sense of things, but to do so with a degree of ironic suspicion, as one should in a narrative that deals so thoughtfully in the partiality of views.

It is a theme that is picked up in both the narrative and style of the text. What is seen is not necessarily the reality of the case, a thematic principle which becomes a crucial plot device. When Margaret first sees John Thornton he is ruthlessly beating an employee—she doesn't realise that this shocking act is not caused by the apparent motive of malevolence but rather by the internal motive of trauma at having witnessed the deaths of scores of people, including women and children, through negligence of the kind that had just occurred on the factory floor. Nor in turn does John Thornton know that the solicitude and affection Margaret shows at the railway station and, later, in her mendacity when questioned by the constable, are for her brother, not for a rival suitor. These are complications of the romance plot that figure wider misapprehensions between people and cultures. Similarly, the theme of the partial view—in both its prejudicial and cognitive senses—is strongly at play in the intriguing aesthetic ambiguity of imagery which features throughout the first two episodes in particular. One moment the scene is from Hogarth, the next from Vermeer, and as this imagery is in part fashioned by Margaret's consciousness of it she must negotiate perspectives of understanding in regard to it—perspectives with which we may agree or disagree. So visually the text will counterpoint Margaret's own negative emotional response with suggestions of other kinds of apprehension: in the rhythmical sweep of the looms amid the peculiar enchantment of the white lint-filled air, the film evokes a kind of balletic charm to industry, just as, in the spare minimalist pathos of their lives and the delicate play of sidelight and shading in their figures, there is an aesthetic aspect to the poor—not a picturesque quality merely, but a beauty to them and to their humanity. The subtlety of the text is in putting these perceptions in play, inflecting the image momentarily one way, then another, to evoke a complex response. At the end of the first episode we see an extended shot of the looms at their stately work, like a dance in a crisp winter setting ('I thought it was like Christmas', one of the workers says of the factory floor), but whatever is

beguiling in this is immediately and abruptly qualified by Margaret's voiceover: 'I believe I have seen hell—it's white. It's snow white.' However, as time passes, Margaret will come to respond to those aspects of scene and people that are initially beyond her view, and this will be a measure of her maturing personality.



'I believe I have seen hell—it's white. It's snow white.'

As our sense of the scope of this film changes from period romance to something greater,<sup>5</sup> so too does Margaret's sense of the nature of the social reality she inhabits. At the same time our perceptions of the imagery shift, for they are necessarily correlated with Margaret's consciousness. What initially seemed dark and spiritless in Milton begins to appear complex, nuanced—the chiaroscuro of life suffering under conflicting social, moral, familial and practical imperatives. Recurrently, lives are sacrificed to the impossibility of reconciling these forces—most shockingly in the hideous spectacle of the dyed corpse of Boucher. But at the same time depths of character are revealed which offer glimmerings of such a reconciliation, and which thereby point to the possibility of human community in which fragile sensibilities are protected and nurtured and human effort—master and worker—is put to the service of humane ends rather than naked profit. We see this in the case of Thornton himself, whose egalitarian impulses separate him from the other masters and help him to build decent and mutually fulfilling relation-

ships with his workers; and we see it especially in the case of Bessy and Nicholas Higgins—in the pathos of the doomed Bessy with her fortitude and good humour, and in the determination of Nicholas to improve the lot of others, even if this aspiration shrinks from all workers to the bereft children of the tragic Bouchers. For all this, the Higginses are not idealized—Nicholas is brutal to Boucher after the strike is broken, and the issue of the tyranny of the union is rightly raised in comparison to the tyranny of the masters. Moreover, the northern workers are keenly aware of being only one step away from an even more miserable existence—that of the subjugated colonials, whose misery is an issue which the text is willing to put in play and, quite rightly, not resolve (for it was never resolved historically). Despite his own self-interest in the matter Thornton is right to put the case of the Irish to Nicholas, who is unable to view it with any kind of detachment:

**Higgins:** If it were warmer I'd take Paddy's work and never come back again, but come winter those children will starve. If you knew of any place, away from mills, I'd take any wage I thought it was worth for the sake of those children.

**Thornton:** Oh, you'd take wages less than others? They have no union, of course. Your union would be down like a ton of bricks on my Irish for trying to feed their families and yet you'd do the same for these children. I'll not give you work. You're wasting my time.

At this point Nicholas's social goodness is seen as relative and situational, fundamentally constrained within an imperialist and capitalist system whose graduated privileges deliver wealth at the top but ever greater degrees of fear and jealousy to those on the lower rungs of the social and industrial ladder, ultimately producing that naked hatred which erupts between Irish and workers in the strike.

On the other hand what initially seemed light and airy to Margaret, and to us, increasingly appears suffused by mere brilliancy, the overexposed illuminations of naivety. For paradoxically the light of the south does not enlighten but rather dazzles and obscures the vision. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of business and industry. For the south, as Henry

Lennox tells Margaret, 'money makes money'—the fundamentally exploitative process of production is hidden from them, nor do they wish to see it in any case. This theme reaches its metaphorical height in the scenes of the Great Exhibition in London where the glasshouse intensity of empire radiates light upon the achievements of its system of wealth without ever disclosing its truth. Under the great glass ceiling of the Crystal Palace sunlight floods down upon the products, not the process, blinding the onlookers to the exploitation of the resources of the world required to bring about the lifestyle they enjoy. For them, in a telling phrase, such a spectacle merely provides the lure for further 'speculation'. Unlike Thornton, the southerners see neither the human cost of production nor the terrible cost of failure, and lacking any sense even of British workers in the industrial process they certainly have no understanding of the indentured labour that underwrites empire. (The north is not immune from such imperialist myopia: Fanny and her speculator husband are among the first signs of its spreading there. Little wonder that Fanny is delighted by her visit to the Great Exhibition. 'I was hoping that you might visit my house,' she says to Margaret. 'I've finished it with Indian wallpaper from the Exhibition.') Like the New Labour agenda lurking within the tale of Thornton's and Higgins's enlightened approach to industrial relations, contemporary globalization gives this theme of the occluded mode of production a special relevance beyond the Victorian setting, and suggests that Percival's and Welch's designs in adapting this period piece were never simply decorous.

'It is not what it appears', says Margaret to Thornton when he calls on her during her brother's furtive stay in England, and indeed it is not. Against this background of the known and the unknown, the actual and the apparent, the narrative unfolds a romance plot inextricably implicated in and complicated by the politics of industrial relations and the clash of views between masters and workers and north and south. 'She's seen a great deal of sorrow since she's been here', Nicholas tells Thornton, implying that such sights have had their effect on Margaret. And indeed it is only by overcoming the narrowness of her view—that is, by looking beyond the shallow falsities of the apparent and seeing the true depths of the image—that Margaret comes to achieve a mature understanding of social conditions in Milton and, through this, a true understanding of Thornton's motives and actions, an

understanding that awakens her respect and affection. More than this, she seems to come to an understanding of something about human life, effort, relations, and aspirations which the south could never have provided. This understanding is brilliantly symbolized in the snow that falls on Milton in the last episode, an image which recalls the snow white hell of Margaret's earlier horrified response to the cotton factory, but which now generalizes that earlier imagery of the factory fluff and metaphorically reveals a truth of the human condition. The snow falls on all alike, as it does in Joyce's 'The Dead' (*Dubliners*, 1914), where the symbol of snow functions as it does here, binding everyone together—master and worker, northerner and southerner—and dispelling the false distinctions of rank, class, or cultural background that blind people to their true community of interests. In the mixed imagery of the fluff and the snow, the struggle of the factory floor is revealed as not unlike the struggle of existence, but this is a truth that remains hidden to the south and its sunny radiance. That is why it is so telling when Margaret warns Higgins off his planned trip there. It no longer holds any of its old attractions, for she has seen through its apparent brilliance: 'You mustn't leave Milton for the south', she tells him, 'you could not bear the dullness of life'.



Margaret walks through the Milton snow.

We could do much worse than curl up privately for four hours at a stretch with a series such as this. In the debate between viewpoints, managed art-

fully through romantic lead characters in a plot that threads its way through the lower and middle classes of English society, and that thoughtfully evokes the multitudes beyond England whose situation is yet more extreme than anything we have witnessed here, there is much to provoke and question our own ideas on the morality of wealth, the exploitative processes of industry, the place of the social ideal, and the plight of the wretched of the earth. The romance does not sentimentalize these themes; rather, in its difficulties, disappointments, and hesitant aspirations, it metaphorizes the problematic reconciliation of practical imperative and moral ideal. It's a strange courtship which flowers only at the last moment, because there is so much to threaten and confound such a union. The gaze and the handshake, insistent motifs throughout, become its means of achievement, just as they might be its cause of frustration when the gaze is unobservant and the offered hand is ungrasped through custom or prejudice. The hand and the eye, and through them the heart—these are the means of connection in a divided society: to look and to know, to reach and to grasp, to agree and to connect. 'Only connect', advised another observer of the Condition of England, which Margaret eventually will do by means of what she no doubt initially perceives as her and her family's fall from grace, but as always in Milton, the reader in me prompts, it is a fortunate fall.

#### NOTES

- 1 I am thinking here of those series with a strong claim to dramatic intensity and aesthetic sophistication, such as Jimmy McGovern's *Cracker* or David Chase's *The Sopranos*, which perhaps share some features of the *roman fleuve*.
- 2 Jorge Luis Borges, 'On the Cult of Books', in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 118.
- 3 I am probably stretching Benjamin's term excessively but, however small, there is still a degree of pertinence to its use here. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217-52.

- 4 I have used the form *North & South* to designate the 2004 BBC mini-series, dir. Brian Percival based on Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* (1855). The ampersand in the title may have been nothing more than a design feature, but it is retained for instance by the authoritative Internet Movie Database (imdb.com).
- 5 It is worth pointing out that, from the first word, Sandy Welch has indicated that in this film romance is implicated in a wider world than that of the traditional 'love story'. 'What a business this wedding has been', Margaret's aunt tells her in the opening moment—an apt epigraph for a tale that will end as much in a merger as a marriage. 'So you see, it is only a business matter', Margaret explains to Thornton after putting to him her proposal at the conclusion, 'You would not be obliged to me in any way. It is you who would be doing me the service'.

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## A Proximate Prince: The Goopy Business of *Hamlet* Criticism

L. E. SEMLER

Now could I drink hot goo,  
And do such goopy, goopy business as the day  
Would quake to look on.  
Soft, now to my blue goo.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine the opening scene of *Hamlet* as a metaphor for interpretation. The darkened battlement stands for the conceptual domain in which the reader, any reader, encounters a text: it is a hermeneutic space. The Ghost signifies the shimmering appearance of a text in this space of interpretation, which is to say, not an actual printed text itself, but a text as it is conceptually encountered by a reader. The sentries, then, resemble interpreters who feel compelled to force the majestic text to speak intelligibly to them and their context, but who in the end can only cry, 'Stay, illusion!' as the Ghost dissolves, invulnerable as air.<sup>2</sup>

Let's move among the sentries. They are abuzz with what they've seen. They agree the figure resembles the late King Hamlet, and suspect the encounter has a bearing on their present as much as anyone's past, but greater clarity is hard to resolve. Whatever their differences, the sentries agree that a single question requires urgent attention: what is the Ghost about? Soon this imperative transfers to Prince Hamlet and before long he finds himself circling around a cognate problem: what am *I* about? By the middle of the play, all his relatives and acquaintances have been drawn into a similarly persistent inquiry: what is Hamlet about? Little wonder then that from Shakespeare's time to ours readers and viewers of the play have been caught up in contentious agreement that the primary question to be resolved is, what is *Hamlet* about?, a question inseparable from the three questions I have just represented as preceding it.