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“The undiscovered country”: *Wittenberg Revisited* by Georgi Tenev and Ivan Dobchev, directed by Ivan Dobchev (2011)

“It is very difficult to tell people that their country is dead,” remarks the English Ambassador shortly after he makes an entry in *Wittenberg Revisited*, Georgi Tenev’s and Ivan Dobchev’s haunting sequel to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, written and produced for the Shakespeare 2010-11 Program of the experimental theater Sfumato.¹ Set for the entire duration of its action in the deepest dungeon of Denmark, the play features characters who survive the end of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to find themselves living a national catastrophe, which, according the playwright Georgi Tenev, has become “one of the central *topoi* of Bulgarian identity.”² Since the fall of communism in 1989, fourteen plus democratic parliamentary elections, overthrown governments, political strife, failed promises, lost hopes, and the pervasiveness of a chalga mentality, especially among the young generation, have left the majority of Bulgarians deeply pessimistic of their country’s future. As discussed in the opening article, apart from commodifying the body, chalga deifies money and power as the supreme life values. In political conditions of successive governments catering more or less openly to vested interests, chalga has come to denote attitudes of grabby, unprincipled behaviour, and collocations like “chalga politics” and “chalga justice” have acquired linguistic currency. The chalga mentality of the political class—namely, venerating personal-profit-at-all-costs and scoffing at the very idea of abiding by the law—coupled with prolonged economic stagnation has brought about a wide-spread resignation verging on moral turpitude, cynicism and alienation. The concomitant is that many of those with potential, knowledge and desire to improve the situation find themselves blocked from leadership in the political and economic life. Nearly two million people have emigrated to “countries new” in search of personal and professional realization. The crippled Bulgarian transition to democracy, hampered as it was by the continued power of the old state structures, was also a major failure of the intellectual elite, as it existed in the 1990s. Writer Vladimir Zarev thinks that it was unable to funnel the

¹*Wittenberg Revisited* premiered on 7 October, 2011. Directed by Ivan Dobchev; set and costumes, Daniela Oleg Liahova; music, Andrei Avramov; choreography, Mila Iskrenova. The English translation of the title from the Bulgarian is one chosen by Tenev and Dobchev; to us, a more precise rendition is *Return to Wittenberg*. Some of the ideas developed in this article were first presented in a review by Boika Sokolova, in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 86 (2014): 115-18.

² Sfumato press conference with Georgi Tenev and Ivan Dobchev, *Teatralnow*, 7 October, 2011.

positive social energies of the early transition and define “a forward-looking national model which would unite society around a spiritual horizon, create a perspective, a feeling of meaningfulness and hope for the future.”³

Within the context of a socio-political, spiritual and moral crisis in the new millennium, Tenev and Dobchev’s play combines a brilliant reimagining of the causes of the events in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with a trenchant analysis of the state of Bulgaria and the toll that a dysfunctional polity takes on the individual. Yet for all its darkness, the play culminates in a deeply moving effort, on the part of the protagonist, to claim an identity unadulterated by political demagoguery. And while this scene unfolds in a private space and leaves no witnesses, it hands down richly symbolic tokens of a leap into a new state that requires courage, reflection and imagination.

Embrace Your Syndrome

The multi-level crisis at the end of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the fulcrum on which *Wittenberg Revisited* turns in its reflection on what Tenev defines as a “syndrome” of hopelessness. This, he suggests, is a life, “which denies any idea that something good might happen,” and which is “something . . . we are currently . . . living in.”⁴ Critic Georgi Lozanov has noted that, along with other recent Bulgarian dramatic texts, the play achieves its effect by abandoning both direct political topicality and folkloristic nineteenth-century notions of national identity and by positioning itself instead in a wider, European tradition of writing. Identity, which is so central to it, is not seen as a given, “but as something that requires cultural and psychological effort.”⁵ Literary critic Mitko Novkov has noted similarities with Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) in the way the re-working of a classical plot “find[s] fissures through which the meaning of the current epoch is made visible.”⁶ We might add, however, that while Stoppard’s characters do not make sense of

³ Vladimir Zarev, “2014 g.–mezhdú nedosegáemata politicheska klasa i greha na inteligentziyata [2014: Between the Untouchable Political Class and the Sin of the Intelligentsia],” *Pogled.info*, 02 January 2015, <http://pogled.info/bulgarski/2014-g-mezhdú-nedosegáemata-politicheska-klasa-i-greha-na-inteligentsiyata.61225>.

⁴ Sfumato press conference.

⁵ Georgi Lozanov, “Purvi red e za mladite [Front Row for the Young],” *Dramaturgia ASKEER, 2012: Nominatsii za savremenna bulgarska dramaturgia [Playwriting ASKEER, 2012: Nominations for Contemporary Bulgarian Plays* (Sofia: Fondatsia ASKEER, 2012), 30-31.

⁶ Mitko Novkov, “Klasicheskiyat teatur i negovite drugi [Classical Theater and Its Others],” *Playwriting ASKEER, 2012*, 14. Stoppard’s play, translated into Bulgarian by Svetla Maneva, was first performed on the stage of the Ivan Vazov National Theater in 1996 by the Royal National Theater. In Bulgarian translation, it was staged to much acclaim at the regional theaters of Vratsa (1998-99, director Elena Tsikova) and Burgas (2005-07, director Borislav Chakrinov).

their place in a menacing absurdist world which is also parodic, meta-theatrical and funny, those trapped in Bulgarian Elsinore's politico-psychic dystopia are aware of their entrapment as a *consequence* of collapse. Their action/inaction is thus defined by differing degrees of knowledge of the full truth of events preceding the play, a territory of dark secrets and lies not unlike those that shaped the Bulgarian political transition of the 1990s. The question at the core of the play is whether the Danes/Bulgarians can meaningfully alter their history, and if so, what the choices before them are. One by one, various possibilities are suggested—intellectual monasticism in the rarefied bubble of Wittenberg, armed resistance, escape to a New Eden—then questioned in view of a mysteriously transcendental resolution.

Premiered in October 2011, *Wittenberg Revisited* preceded by a year Javor Gardev's production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the National Theater in Sofia.⁷ This is worth mentioning because Tenev and Gardev are long-time friends and collaborators, who feel and think passionately about the world they inhabit.⁸ At the core of Tenev and Dobchev's transformation of Shakespeare's play, as well as in Gardev's *Hamlet*, lie similar ideas, perhaps best summed up by Giorgio Agamben's statement: "At the moment you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent."⁹ Agamben's notion of the irreparable entails irreverence to worldly affairs and institutions, to naturalized and sacralized thinking, to prescribed social roles. In *Wittenberg Revisited*, such are the state of Denmark and the identities of the avenging son, the patriotic Dane, the self-exiled scholar, the cynic. Formally, Agamben's irreverence is rendered through the rhetorical strategies of the paradox, the hyperbole, the dire provocation, strategies embraced in the plays and in their productions.¹⁰ Contemplating an irreparable world, "the definitive profanity of the profane," Agamben argues, "is the only passage outside the world," and the precondition for addressing situations that need our action.¹¹

⁷*Wittenberg Revisited* was awarded the Bulgarian Actors' Union prizes for a new play and for set design (ASKEER 2012), and another national prize for set design (Ikar 2012). Gardev's production of *Hamlet* is analysed in the next article, "Shall we be, or not?", or *Hamlet* as an Axiom for Cultural Survival."

⁸ In 1994, Tenev and Gardev created the Triumviratus Art Group, a collective whose activities focus on theater, performance, literature, video art and radio.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105. This statement was chosen as epigraph to the theater program for Gardev's production of *Hamlet*.

¹⁰ Agamben introduces the notion of the *irreparable* in chapter X of *The Coming Community* and develops it further in the Appendix. For a discussion of this notion, see Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben, A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 197-99; for his fondness of provocative rhetoric—most controversially, the figure of the concentration camp as the biopolitical paradigm of the West—*ibid.*, 212-14.

¹¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 101.

A Chorus and a Maker of History

On the Sfumato stage Denmark is a prison where the sounds of dripping water, clanking metal doors and the distant barking of dogs are the signs of the world in and outside. In the “darkness visible” of Daniela Oleg Liahova’s minimalist set, consisting of an upstage walkway over a black floor submerged under a sheet of water, Horr(atio) (Penko Gospodinov) pores over a trunk full of books, burns papers, handles a cup, the very one which Hamlet prevented him from drinking so that he could “tell [his] story” (*Hamlet*, 5.2.291). Though rooted in the structures, language, and significantly, in the silences of Shakespeare’s text, Tenev and Dobchev challenge the audience’s knowledge of *Hamlet*. The suggestive analogies, evasiveness, hints, mirroring, dualities, and an enigmatic negotiation between the here-and-now and the other-worldly slowly chisel out new explanations to the events in Shakespeare’s play and insights into “Denmark,” both as a one-time setting for a famous tragedy and a place recognizable to the audience as their own experience of the collapse of a system. At the centre of a narrative permeated with a Beckettian resistance to forward movement is the figure of Horr–Hor-atio, the chorus turned protagonist (in Bulgarian, “hor” means “chorus”)—a strangely taciturn and unwilling narrator, who, instead of *telling* Hamlet’s story, is packing to return to Wittenberg after the Prince’s death. As various friends come to say good-bye, each pushes fractionally forward a narrative blocked by his monosyllabic answers.

The rattling of dungeon grilles accompanied by the familiar “Who’s there?” from the beginning of *Hamlet* marks the start of the action. The answer—“A Dane! Long live Denmark!”—is not quite the same as in Shakespeare’s play. It slyly reformulates the political situation, by stressing a change in ideology: from loyalty to a king to loyalty to country. In comes Berndt (Javor Baharov) to take his leave and inquire whether Hamlet indeed willed the Danish crown to Fortinbras the Norwegian. Horr confirms it and offers the soldier one of Hamlet’s books as a parting gift, which Berndt accepts, not in order to read, but as a token his children would proudly show off as one of their father’s possessions. Another gift, a map of Wittenberg, is to be passed on to young Marcel(lus) who wanted to know where that place was. Along with the dungeon, the coffin-like trunk, and the cup, the map is a focal symbol whose value subtly shifts in the course of the action (fig. 1). By re-working the memory of Hamlet into a book and Wittenberg into a map, the play dramatizes its own re-writing of *Hamlet* as an act of appropriation, a dynamic cultural legacy (memory) operating in a new imaginative economy. In it, the “gifts” that *Hamlet*’s tragic characters—Hamlet,

Hor(atio), and, later, Ophelia—bequeath to the audience are provocations to see the old profane world anew and re-make it.



Fig. 1. Horr and Berndt with map. Performance photo by Simon Varsano.

Combining Act 1, Scene 4 and Act 5, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play, Berndt soon brings in Marcel (Antonio Dimitrievski) and the Gravedigger (Yordan Bikov) who report a strange discovery—Ophelia's grave is empty, but without any traces of being vandalized; it seems to have been flung open from within. As proof, the old man shows one of her shoes, another property that extends the emotional and semiotic territory of the play. By bringing in a group of preoccupied and disorientated lower-class characters, Tenev and Dobchev not only reprise the events in *Hamlet*, but also enable a quick review of the political situation in Denmark and of Ophelia's case through the Gravedigger's testimony. The latter, with his experience of death, in his slightly woolly way, also opens up the play to mysterious stories about the dead, the transcendent at the limit of the profane Danish world.

At this point the action remains focused on the contingencies of history. All characters are struggling to make sense of the loss of their country to a foreign ruler without losing a war, of the will of their own prince, and of the disappearance of Ophelia's body from her grave. The latter event defines the time of the action as the third day after her funeral. In this new context the decay in Denmark is paralleled by and even attributed to Ophelia's mangled rights, her funeral marred by Hamlet's and Laertes's blows and the laying of her maiden body over the remains of the old drunk Yorick. As further details of her story unfold, her narrative begins to resonate more clearly with that of Christ's resurrection: the empty grave flung open from within, its discovery on the third day by three characters, the manifestation of portentous natural phenomena. The Gravedigger's haphazard chatter would relate these events to other legends of women alive in death, while Berndt would report sightings of her, accompanied by a miracle in a nearby village. Thus, the intertextuality of the Ophelia

narrative creates potential for transcendence—a choice whose gender factor is worth noting, especially in comparison with the transcendent qualities ascribed to Hamlet in Gardev’s production, discussed in the next article.

Before this idea is pursued any further, a startling version of the Danish history of collapse and loss of national identity is put forth by Reyn(aldo) (Hristo Petkov). Once Polonius’ spy, now a self-appointed organiser of armed resistance, he emerges—significantly—from a secret underground passage to urge Horr to head a rebellion against the foreigners. After all, Denmark is not without an heir?! Though proposing a way out of the situation unlike the puzzled uncertainties of the other characters, Reyn’s military and political plans are also deeply disconcerting. His passionate speeches envisage a “new Denmark,” freed from the baggage of Claudius and Polonius: “of poisoners, sickly courtiers ... of Hamlet’s Denmark, if you wish.” For him, victory over the foreigner as well as the sweeping away of the legacy of Claudius’s rotten regime will only happen through cleansing acts of violence, culminating in the hanging of Fortinbras on a meat hook and cutting him to pieces.¹² “If you want to part with something, you must burn it first” becomes a refrain to his attempts to convince Horr to act.¹³

Reyn’s patriotic fervor, justified as it seems by the political circumstances, confronts the audience with difficult questions about historical memory and the nation’s future. Is Reyn’s zeal to save Denmark an attempt to cover up or make up for his own work in Polonius’ secret service? How far will he go in his scorched-earth ambitions? (It seems he also envisages incursions into Sweden to restore former territories.) How can killing Fortinbras, the recipient of the crown by Hamlet’s will, be “right”? And not least, will Reyn’s xenophobic utopia of “Denmark for the Danes” be a better place than the defunct kingdom of Old Hamlet and Claudius? If the price of freedom is turning the country into a heap of ashes, what does it mean to be free?¹⁴ Is it the pleasure of sadistically cutting your enemy to pieces, the thrill of destroying everything built before you, or the delusion that, if left to their own devices, the Danes will deliver a new and better Denmark? The latter is indeed the question which the largely silent Horr asks Reyn, a question that resounds loudly as one directed to the audience. As Reyn revels in visions of violence supposed to secure an identity tied to the nation-state, Horr reacts to them with a painful cynicism which debunks a political definition

¹² Tenev and Dobchev, *Wittenberg Revisited*, 124. The quotes from the play are from an unpublished translation by Angela Rodel.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124, 134, 166.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

of the self. If he is to be believed, Hamlet himself never wanted this “crown, throne . . . this brothel . . . this prison . . . all this Denmark.”¹⁵

Jostled between Reyn’s bloodthirsty chauvinism and Horr’s nihilism, the spectators are also puzzled by the build-up of information sitting oddly with the received knowledge of Horatio’s character from *Hamlet*: why is everyone so intent on having him lead the rebellion, why do his friends call him Vagabond (or the Wanderer),¹⁶ what do Reyn’s memories of former battles suggest, why is setting all on fire something that Horr himself used to say, how come Denmark is not without an heir? Why did Reyn imitate the putting a crown on Horr’s head as he was trying to persuade him to lead the Danish rebellion?

The mystery deepens with the appearance of the English Ambassador (Malin Krastev), an aging man suffering from the consequences of the “heavy-headed revel” (*Hamlet*, 1. 4.18) in honor of Fortinbras and from an old war wound. The Englishman has descended into the dungeon to offer Horr to escape to England because he believes that under the new rule, Horr—the friend of Hamlet who was himself the Ambassador’s friend—is in danger of his life. Nor is Wittenberg, where he seems to be heading for, a place to return to, “as you are known there as someone else . . . Hamlet.”¹⁷ Sidestepping Horr’s silence with diplomatic skilfulness, the Englishman then changes the subject to his war wounds and the visible scar on the young man’s chest. It transpires that both have been in fierce battles in the service of their countries and have had near-death experiences, a move by means of which *Wittenberg Revisited* gestures again to the porous boundary between life and death explored in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Symbolically, the wound on Horr’s chest is a *topos* of trauma, a site of identity crisis between his past military/patriotic/national identity and his obvious disgust with violent Danishness.

The English Ambassador uncovers yet another aspect of Horr’s identity. Prompted by the physical likeness between him and Hamlet and some gossip overheard at the royal feast upstairs, he puts two and two together and fathoms out the circumstances in which Old Fortinbras lost half his lands to Old Hamlet. It seems that during a state visit, the Norwegian insulted the Dane for using his bastard son, Horr, as his arms bearer. Without a word, Old Hamlet pulled him off his mount and smashed his skull with an axe. An audience stunner this revelation may be, but it, too, leaves Horr unresponsive. Nor does the Englishman’s suggestion that he should escape with him, like Reyn’s earlier call to lead the Danish

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

rebellion, provoke a response. Paternal bonds, academic learning, and the need to protect the nation-state against Others all seem to be inadequate as identities which Horr can embrace in the current state of Denmark's rot. Nor is he interested in re-starting history in a New World supposedly unburdened by a past. Political decay, the English Ambassador says, extends far beyond Denmark: "Europe itself is not what . . . it used to be. Nor will it ever be the same." He sounds the mortal danger of "the new Huns, the sickle-sharp crescent" which the cross is incapable to challenge on moral grounds. Instead of fighting for this old and exhausted place, like a cynical Gonzalo, he proposes an escape to a New Eden—vast, mostly uninhabited, where natives are yet uncorrupted by the European God. "For them our religious disputes are unfathomable, our wars suicidal, our treaties deceptive, our gold incomprehensible, our clothes unnecessary . . . Europe cannot be saved. Europe has to be abandoned . . . New people, new territories. New blood, new race, with new features," dreams the Englishman. Still, Horr declines an escape to Utopia.¹⁸

Each scene adds further complications to Horr's history: as a soldier, he has burnt and pillaged, led men and defended his country, but has also touched "the bourn" from where "no traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.81-82). As a substitute/ghost to "truant" Hamlet, who, according to the Ambassador spent his time in the London theaters, he was the one who inhabited the Wittenberg republic of letters and pondered Luther's theology (1.2.168). As a mouthpiece for the dead prince he has passed on his will regarding the Danish crown; as an illegitimate son to a king, he is also the ghost-heir to that crown. The old Gravedigger believes him to be an orphan—Vagabond, the Wanderer, a name given to parentless boys. His status suspended between chorus and hero, Horr is racked by disparate tensions, none of which fully captures his current sense of self. The parallel with anxieties over Bulgarian identity in the second decade of the new millennium is striking.

Ophelia the Redeemer

As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is a Ghost that pushes the protagonist into a new state. However, unlike Hamlet, who is commanded by an irate patriarch to embrace the identity of the Old Testament executor of divine justice, Horr is gently coaxed out of his emotional torpor by Ophelia's return. In an interview, Ivan Dobchev speaks of how the Ghost prompted a point of contact with Shakespeare's play, the otherworldly, and as a spiritual standard for the characters in *Wittenberg Revisited*.¹⁹ Her first appearance at the structural centre of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁹ Sfumato press conference.

play—a “To be, or not to be” (*Hamlet* 3.1. 58) moment—is a piece of quietly brilliant staging, involving not one, but two ghostly presences. From the trapdoor downstage (where Reyn first appeared and doubled by the same actor) springs up a cloaked male figure. This is the Ghost of Wittenberg, come to chide, like Shakespeare’s Ghost, a “tardy son” (*Hamlet*, 3.4.97). He spurts out references, chapter and verse, to great men’s suicides, daring Horr to be done with his Hamlet-like procrastination and drink up the cup, be the “antique Roman” (5.2.283) his name denotes. As he speaks, a pale shadow emerges in crepuscular lighting upstage, setting Horr in a field of ghostly attractions. Ophelia’s un-“quietly enured” body (1.4.30), wreathed with faded flowers that look like a crown of thorns, both horrible and vulnerable, comes back from the dead, and the Ghost of Wittenberg vanishes. She is finally reunited with the man who wrote to her poetic love letters in Hamlet’s name. As the lovers passionately embrace a hauntingly beautiful song fills the darkness. Andrei Avramov’s music creates theater magic of echoing Virgilian rhymes, “Amore, more, ore, re”—“by love, by manner, by word and deed”—a vow of love that breaches the divide between life and death.²⁰

Ophelia’s appearance is as pivotal to *Wittenberg* as is the Ghost’s to *Hamlet*. For the Gravedigger she is a portent of the approaching Judgement Day; for the Danes, who hear rumors of her return, she is a miracle sparking the hopes of victory; for the political pragmatist Reyn, she is expediently useful. But Ophelia (Elena Dimitrova) is also a Redeemer figure: she is attacked, yet never calls for revenge; she is palpably material (tired and cold), but not subject to the laws of nature; she is both present in the here-and-now and transcendent. Her “questionable shape” (*Hamlet*, 1.4.24) puts to the test the ideas that drive the rest of the characters in the play. It challenges the rationalism of scholarly Wittenberg, the value of intellectual utopias, and disguises of political self-interest. Unlike the Ghost of Old Hamlet, she does not come from Purgatory, but some other, undiscovered country. Critic Georgi Kapriev understands her character as pointing a path beyond the false alternatives of destruction and utopia, to an “actual life” whose “territory is love.”²¹

Ophelia also challenges Horr’s cynical passivity by making him leave the dungeon to look for her after she disappears again. He discovers her on the shore, dragged by two Norwegian soldiers, which prompts his violent action. Not without a touch of dark irony, the murder of the foreign soldiers becomes a signal for the rebellion, thus linking Horr to his

²⁰ The scene is part of from the promotional video for *Wittenberg Revisited* by Lyubomir Mladenov, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPY_11eatGs.

²¹ Georgi Kapriev, “Mezhdu razruhata i utopyata. Otvud tyah.[Between Collapse and Utopia. And Beyond],” *Kultura*, 39, 18 November, 2011, <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/19017>.

rejected patriotic Danishness and Ophelia's return—to the political strand of the plot. Horr's new involvement in the irreparably corrupted world generates, as he had feared all along, a scenario straight out of Agamben.

Wittenberg Reclaimed?

However, once Horr is back in the dungeon with Ophelia in the final movement of the play, his language undergoes a symptomatic change—an alienation from self, signalled by the referencing of his own actions in the third person. This act of shedding his previous identity is much more consistent than Hamlet's words to Laertes in the final scene of Shakespeare's play (5.2.170-79). Yet something of the soldier has remained: the courage to stand against death itself and the deadening world of Denmark, the determination to take the battle to their own territory of fear: to “go to the enemy,” to the point where “the clash destroys the horror ... the fear of you, the unknown, the mistrust of ...”²² The prison of Denmark, Hamlet's fear of “the undiscovered country,” philosophical and religious dogma are challenged by the individual in a different, subjective way. As Reyn, Marcel and Berndt leave to fight the Norwegians to restore the political entity of Denmark, Horr locks the dungeon gate, drinks the cup and embraces Ophelia under the map of Wittenberg. The symbolic spectacle of the lovers disappearing under it denaturalizes history as given through myth, religion, ideology, and literary canon. The Wittenberg they put forward to is in the uncharted waters of subjectivity. Vagabond the Wanderer has finally set onto his own course—no more the self-effacing Friend of the Prince, nor a soldiering Dane, nor a Stoic Philosopher, nor the avenging Son, but as an individual who dares to fulfill his desire and reach his core self in a cathartic re-imagining of potentialities. Horr's traumas, caused by the irreparable world, are thus healed by the love of Ophelia, who this time is allowed to tell her own story.²³

Ophelia: *Horr ... I had a strange dream. We were arguing about something really trivial, puny. I told you, 'Then take back your letters! Take your scribbled words! You said: I wrote you nothing. And then, I threw them in the river. But afterwards, I wept. And went into the water, looked for them. And swam all night. And saw where your*

²² Tenev and Dobchev, *Wittenberg Revisited*, 165.

²³ In *The Coming Community*, 2, Agamben relates the core “being such” of the individual to his or her lovability: “Love is never directed to this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one with *all of its predicates*, its being such as it is.”

little neck cross had fallen, under the waves, I saw it glitter on the bottom.

Horr: At Vellinge?

Ophelia: No, Horr, no, you've forgotten. Perhaps that's why we argued—about the name.

Horr: At ... Roskilde?

Ophelia: No, Horr, no. You are so funny. You are so sweet ... when ...

Horr: (Looking at her and the map) Wittenberg ...

Ophelia: I'm cold, Horr, tired. Come, embrace me, I'm cold.

(Horr lies next to Ophelia, covers them with the map of Wittenberg; both become invisible under it).²⁴

The argument over the place of the lost cross—lost faith?—renders insignificant the patriotic battles at Vellinge and Roskilde, in light of the relationship of the lovers. Visually, audiences are presented with a shift in the meaning of “Wittenberg” by the re-contextualised stage signs. Lying down next to each other in the lid of the travelling trunk with the map of the university city as their cover, Horr and Ophelia set off for their undiscovered country. The poisoned chalice has morphed into a sign of a new beginning of shared love; the symbolism of a Christian afterlife is compounded by the physicality of immediate human presence; the Chorus has become the agent of a radically appropriated *Hamlet* narrative.

Dramaturgically, the ending is teasingly ambiguous. Is Horr a “metaphor for the person of today ... who only acts, if pushed by some/thing/body from the outside,” as some have suggested?²⁵ Or can his transformation be seen as a radical and bold act of discarding received social identities? “The readiness [that] is all” (*Hamlet*, 5. 2.160), paradoxically turns radical despair into a mysterious form of hope. The result is a mesmerizing, if passive, visionary expansion of the horizons of individual existence, a fulfilment of an identity freed from received matrices of selfhood.

Though transcendentally and ambiguously resolved, *Wittenberg Revisited* enjoins viewers to consider important questions arising from their here-and-now. What is to be of a nation? What happens when those who are supposed to lead it choose to inhabit “Wittenberg”? Or London? Or a New World? Can Denmark be saved? Will a “Denmark for the Danes” envisaged by Reyn, the old spy turned new nationalist, be a place for the Hamlets,

²⁴ Tenev and Dobchev, *Wittenberg Revisited*, 168.

²⁵ Mitko Novkov, “Klasicheskiyat izbor in negovite drugi [The Choice of a Classic and Its Others],” in *Playwriting ASKEER*, 2012, 16.

Horr's and Ophelias of this world? Or should they all, as the English Ambassador suggests, leave rotting old Europe for countries new? Is national catastrophe a state of the political body, or of the conscience of its citizens? If Denmark is dead and Wittenberg an illusion, what is that keeps the individual whole in a profane world?

One final question concerns the extent to which the event of a play, shown in a small theater over a couple of seasons, offers resistance to an intellectually numbing environment. Undoubtedly, *Wittenberg Revisited* captures a sense of social trauma. On the other hand, it twists the existential suicide cliché by transforming Horr's life-in-death choice into a cathartic act of moral transcendence. It is not an easy play, nor does it offer easy answers. Rather, in a post-modern manner, it recalls, plays with, and re-shuffles Shakespearean narrative fragments, found and created: a past shrouded in silence, Hamlet's book, a map, Ophelia's shoe, Reyn the spy, myths of history. Though a poetic action might be "no stronger than a flower" (Sonnet 65, line 4) and dark though the play is, *Wittenberg Revisited* intellectually and emotionally engages the viewer to seek higher horizons, step beyond fear and the familiar, and thus be part of saving—perhaps!—the state of "Denmark" as an almost inadvertent (maybe even impossible) side effect of rescuing Ophelia.