

## Just ... Mimesis: Jack Hitt's Act V

Thomas Dutoit

► **To cite this version:**

Thomas Dutoit. Just ... Mimesis: Jack Hitt's Act V. Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines, Paris : Association Française d'études américaines, 2013, Mimesis in American Literature, 1 (135), pp.94-109. <hal-01131625>

**HAL Id: hal-01131625**

**<http://hal.univ-lille3.fr/hal-01131625>**

Submitted on 14 Mar 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Just ... Mimesis : Jack Hitt's *Act V*

Thomas Dutoit

Université de Lille

“Audience member: ‘I really liked this act’.

Inmate actor: ‘It was so complicated’” (Hitt 57' 10")

“Only if the earth always began its drama all over again after the conclusion of the fifth act, [...] could the powerful human being possibly desire monumental history in its absolute iconic *veracity*, that is, with every fact depicted in all its peculiarity and uniqueness. [...] Until then, monumental history will have no need for that absolute veracity: it will continue [...] to diminish the differences between motives and causes in order to present, to the detriment of the *causae*, the *effectus* as monumental – that is, as exemplary and worthy of imitation. (Nietzsche, 99)

“Pierrot est le frère de tous les Hamlet qui hantent le texte de Mallarmé.” (Derrida, 1970, 17)

"La question ici posée est celle de la mise en scène, c'est-à-dire de la *mimesis*." (Anker, 12)

Here, too: the question raised is that of radio piece *Act V* as a performance, itself *staged*, simultaneous to that of *Act V* as being about a staging of a play, *Hamlet*, in a prison. Chris Harris – one of the inmates acting in the play, and one of the four inmates playing the role of Hamlet – summarizes *Hamlet* by transposing it into the terms of contemporary America:

Let me put it in terms of the year 2000. So what we have is an upper middle class youngster-- 19, 20 years old-- who comes from a well-to-do family. They own quite a bit of land. The people in the small town respect him and love him. And his uncle murdered his father and is now married to his mother. So all kinds of serious issues there. All kinds.

Interpreting then, or miming, Chris Harris, let us cast Jack Hitt's *Act V* in terms of mimesis. So what we have is a writer – quite accomplished – who writes a radio piece for the program *This American Life* about a lady theatre director – talented, experienced – who stages a famous play about murder, revenge and ghosts in a maximum security State prison with convicts doing time for murder and other violent crimes as its cast of actors. So all kinds of mimesis there. All kinds.

Crimes, mimes, that rimes. In German "rime" (*reimen*) can mean both "sounds similar" and "is significant." What is the relation of criminality and mimesis? Why

would mimesis, like a criminal, be considered dangerous and be expelled from the *polis* in Plato's *Republic*, like the criminal is cast out of civil society when incarcerated? This paper is about the relation of crimes and mimes, elaborated throughout Jack Hitt's *Act V*, which analyzes a theatrical production of *Hamlet* -- a play about murder, violence, vengeance, retribution by violence and murder -- in a Missouri prison in which the cast of actors is constituted by inmates. These inmates, such as James Word, Danny Waller or Derek Hutchinson, play the roles of Laertes, Horatio or the ghost of Hamlet's father, respectively. This paper focuses on Derek Hutchinson, nicknamed "Big Hutch": he encapsulates a modern rethinking of the paradox of the comedian. Big Hutch plays the role of Horatio, the scholar in *Hamlet*. In Hitt's *Act V*, he also occupies the position of literary critic on *Hamlet*. His literary critical interpretation of *Hamlet* begins as an embodiment of one particular theory of mimesis, and undergoes in the course of his acting experience a considerable change that is at the core of (our argument about) mimesis. Through acting, he attains a deconstructed notion of identity that liberates him from the prison-house of conventional identity that had itself resulted in his criminal behavior. This paper is therefore an analysis of mimesis from the point of view of its place in and relation to imprisonment.

### **In Prison Mimesis ...**

“La mimésis théâtrale [...] donne le modèle de la mimésis générale.” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1986, 25)

At bottom, Jack Hitt's *Act V* endorses Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage." All the people spotlighted in the Jack Hitt's *Act V* are actors. However, if Agnes Wilcox, the director of *Hamlet* in the prison is, in the show, cast in the role of herself, as director, and if Jack Hitt himself, as author of *Act V*, is, as its own director, self-cast, all the prisoners are notable, not only for the roles of characters in *Hamlet* that they play, but, above all, for how their very identity in their lives in prison or before prison was already a role in a bigger play. *Act V* stages mimesis in prison "outside" society, but records how one is already imprisoned in mimesis, identified mimetically, inside society.

I shall argue that the inmates' particular mode of being, in prison, is their Being-imprisoned. Furthermore that their mode of Being (*Da-sein*), their status as subjects, is the result of the incarceration of mimesis. As Richard Anker and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have argued, ever since Plato mimesis has been conceived of as dangerous

because it threatens the ipseity -- the "properness" -- of subjectivity. A subject whose identity is based on mimesis has no proper identity; or rather, because mimesis is anterior to subjectivity, such subjectivity is always an *effect* of mimesis. Such an ungrounded form of subjectivity poses a threat to the stable order of society, which is why mimesis, as such, if it is not subordinated to a "logic" of the subject, represents a threat. Its ritual expulsion constitutes one of the "inaugural scenes" of the Western tradition (Anker 21). For mimesis resides at the core of *The Republic*, of Plato's theory of the political state: "La question de l'art est la question centrale de la République – ou de la république" (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 227). The question of art is also the central question of *Act V*, and, as will be argued in this part of the paper, of the American justice system, which incarcerates more people than any other country in the world, China included.

Focusing on the specificity of Big Hutch's criticism of his own character, Horatio, and on this prisoner's reading of *Hamlet*, the author of *Act V*, Jack Hitt, considers that the place (prison) from which Hutch delivers them confers upon the play its specificity, to wit, a new alertness to the status of the prison in *Hamlet*:

Have you ever heard anybody talk about Shakespeare's characters this way? Hutch was always doing this, talking tough, but then betraying a real gift for literary criticism [...]. In fact, he pointed out a weakness in the structure of the story I'd never heard before in all my experience with the play, that Hamlet's dilemma over killing Claudius isn't really much of a dilemma. (15'20"-15'36")

Hitt adds that Hutch's rewriting of *Hamlet* consists in literalizing metaphor:

"Denmark's a prison," Hamlet tells Rosencrantz in Act Two. And Hutch says you could do a version of the play that takes this central metaphor literally. All the characters in the play are types he sees in the [prison] yard every day. The Claudiuses, who'll do anything for the emblems of power-- money, drugs, high-end tennis shoes, Poloniuses who kiss up to the powerful, Rosencrantz and Guildensterns-- rats, he called them-- spies who run to the administration with information. (23'47"-24'14")

"Denmark's a prison," while of course the place in which "Denmark's a prison" is spoken is also a prison. Recognizing the *mise-en-abyme* in the play, *Hamlet*, where a "play within the play" tends to blur the distinction between theatre and reality, Big Hutch, literary critic-prisoner playing scholarly Horatio, extends this blurring to the distinction between theatre and prison, with the idea that while theatre in prison might be a way of suspending his prisoner's status, society is already imprisonment. All is already theatre (hence, prison equals theatre), and, second, all in the play is already

prison (i.e., Denmark equals prison). Thus, prison is not outside society, but society is inside the prison. There is thus a radical perturbation in the supposedly secure distinction which those of us not in prison blithely maintain between the outside that being inside prison is and the inside society that not being imprisoned is.

Without diminishing either the violence of their crimes or the suffering of their victims, the question is: how is prison for criminals similar to exclusion for mimes, actors, poets? Regarding the expulsion of mimesis, at stake in *The Republic* is mastering the rational part of the soul so that the dangerous mimetic impulses of desire and rivalry by which violence (injustice, *adikia*) is triggered and threatens community are controlled (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 231). Mimesis, intimately related to the rivalry of desire and the desire of rivalry, instigates and fuels violence. Mimesis is thus clearly a socio-political issue: it becomes violent and it perturbs social and political stability.

To understand the banishment of mimesis from the city relative to the banishment of criminals from civil society, it is necessary to understand the danger it "represents." The structure of representation necessarily triggers the uncontrollable proliferation of doubles; moreover, of doubles that ignore that they are such, being caught up as they are in representation. As in any world that slides into tragedy, there thus remains but anti-heroes (such as criminals) and the city-state. Everyone identifies with the latter each time a new antagonist appears. Thus is the breakdown of the *polis* announced in tragedy and in its philosophical double, the Platonic dialogue (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 235). In *The Republic*, the artist is therefore expelled *outside* the *polis* in the attempt to contain the uncontrollable proliferation of mimetic violence, *in* the *polis*, precisely outside it. The comparison with *Act V* consists in the fact that every prisoner depicted, *as prisoner*, is defined by the status of "actor"; each either calls himself or identifies others, insofar as criminals, by the term "actor." These "tough" guys, like the inmate-actor Derek "Big Hutch" Hutchinson, landed where they are, in prison, for playing the parts of the bad guys in really violent crimes. The prisoner-actors of Hitt's play all insist on this. There is not an actor in *Act V* who does not confess to have been playing a role when committing the crime -- the illegal act -- that landed him in prison.

Yet one forgets why mimes and mimesis -- the poet, the writer of theatre -- were expelled from society; and one fails to measure the disturbing adequacy (or mimesis) between the poet and the excluded, the hyphen-hiatus linking poet and

prisoner, actor and actor. If the poet is expelled, it is because the poet is the representative of mimeticism. Mimesis must be expelled because mimesis is the danger of the "originary absence" of subjective properness: the danger of being always external to a fixed secure place (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 245).

Of course *Act V* is not *The Republic*, and the criminal behaviour that got people like Big Hutch into prison cannot entirely be identified with Plato's actors. The latter are expelled because they are actors. The former are expelled from civil society -- and they come to realize this -- because of a piece of *bad* acting that doesn't recognize itself as such. "Bad acting" means unacknowledged (i.e., bad) role-playing that wrongs (i.e., is bad to) unwilling spectator-victims. In *The Republic*, the actor is expelled because the violence his mimesis is thought to be the origin of will undo the *polis*; in *Act V*, the criminal is expelled (into prison, i.e., from the *polis*) because of violent crime that has endangered society. Yet while the criminal is recognized by the criminals-turned-actors to have already been an actor when committing the crime, albeit a *bad* actor insofar as he was unaware of his acting, he is not recognized as actor by the State which, in accordance with Plato's logic, only identifies the criminal action ontologically: it will not base its eventual paroling of the prisoner on the idea that the prisoner is only *acting*. In *Act V*, inmates acting in *Hamlet* come, belatedly, to this recognition of their actions as acting. One of the prisoner-actors, James Word, defines the kind of acting that landed him in prison as a cowardly form of mimesis:

You know what I'm saying? And Laertes, he falls into the manipulation. And he becomes a bad guy for a little while because he's being deceitful now. You know, I never really looked at it and it's somewhat cowardly. And I can relate that to my past life as a criminal. To put a gun in somebody's face, that's an unfair advantage. And, you know, so that's a cowardly act. That's what criminals are. We're cowards. When we're criminals, we are cowards. (32'47"-33'15")

The "cowardly act" is an "act" (deed) of a coward, yet also, precisely, an "act": a mimetic performance, not avowed as such. Of the other actor already mentioned, Big Hutch, Hitt says that he is plagued by the "Jack Nicholson syndrome": "The actor's persona is bigger than any role he might play." This clinging to identity as ontological, this eschewing of mimesis, is what inhibits the imprisoned actors from becoming full-fledged actors: literally imprisoned still for the crimes they've committed but metaphorically unshackled, free of their anti-mimetic false identities. Like Hutch and Word, other prisoners evolve through their acting, realizing that they can become other, that a becoming-other can define them. Inmate-actor Brat Jones

defines himself as changed by the encounter with literature, and “not the person he was” when he committed his crime, i.e., he was a mask cast upon himself. All in prison is already acting (see inmate-actor Tim's remark about “personas,” relayed by Jack Hitt; and James Word's self-analysis as actor). Edgar, the inmate playing Claudius in the play, says he “consider[s]” himself “no great actor,” but he, like other perpetrators of violent crimes acting in the prison production, gives to his role a reality that actors in general -- without such criminal records -- may not be able to gain access to. This is a general point made by Ira Glass (the creator of *This American Life*) and by Jack Hitt: how does a play about the murder, the contemplation and enactment of its revenge by further murder, play, when its players *are* murderers and other violent criminals?

In *Act V*, as in maximum-security prisons throughout the United States, the prisoners are expelled from society: thrown in prison.<sup>1</sup> With the prison population in the US, quintupled in the past twenty years, representing one quarter of the world's prisoners today, with its greatly increased prison term times for smaller and smaller offenses, and with these sentences indisputably targeted at the impoverished population in the US (itself increasing since the late 1990s, tallying 46 million people by the estimates of the Census Bureau), it may not be an exaggeration to claim that Immanuel Kant's penal solution, exclusion -- i.e., “expulsion” [Kant 241]) outside all civil society (stranded islands in the middle of distant oceans) for criminals convicted of bestiality -- has an uncanny resemblance to the Platonic “geste d'expulsion,” as applied to the perpetrator of mimesis, shifted from the poet-conductor of mimesis, therefore criminal, to the criminal-actor, therefore mimetician. From a State in Plato that expels the mimetician, we come, in the United States, to a State that is a prison State, and where the state of the prisons is one of the defining characteristics of the American State, relative to other States in the world, even if its prison policies are unmistakably influencing those of States across the world.

If mimesis is what links *The Republic* and *Act V*, relative to expulsion from society, how does it, when located in prison, challenge the foundations of society, the legal system, and their ontologically based requirements of subjectivity?

---

<sup>1</sup> The penal system is “a theatre for the performance of society's founding political myths” (Haslam, 50); that theatre is a politico-economic management of poverty and of ethnic affiliation.

### Just Knowing

Lacoue-Labarthe fait apparaître en [la vérité d'adéquation ou l'*homoïôsis*] un abîme, une puissance perturbatrice et déstabilisante qu'elle tient d'une *mimesis* pré-originnaire. Du coup, cette "vérité" n'est plus simplement dérivée d'une autre, plus originnaire. Hantée par la *mimesis*, elle joue maintenant un rôle (Derrida, 1987-2003, 225).

Derrida places the "truth" of mimesis in quotation marks because it is a truth intrinsically divided, whereas a truth should be one: equal to itself. Mimetic "truth" is "pre-originary" because its "originality" is that of the *copy*, of representation. The presence of absence -- representation, mimesis -- "is" ghostliness. "Truth" is therefore haunted by mimesis (the irreducibility and pre-originarity of the ghost, of representation). Hence, "truth" is an actor, a performance of a role and not a stable fixed position outside representation. Mimesis is the ghost, making truth into an actor. This is what Plato's republic, and the legal system, will attempt to quarantine, *outside*. To appropriate mimesis is to sequester the ghost, elsewhere (but, unlike Kant's penal solution, inside national borders). Whence the making of the ghost the proper, the product, the production, in lieu of the ex-proper. The "subject" is less (de-)constituted by a split between absence and presence than it is fractured and is dispersed by the instability of the improper. That fractal dispersion accounts for the ghost of appropriation that both dominates every analysis of mimesis, of mimeticism, and is the plot of its economic, hence political, significance (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 259). The split is not between this or that (*Hamlet* and *Act V*, Hitt and Wilcox, prisoner and actor, being and becoming, etc.), which after all would only consolidate a society largely structured on an us versus them, an inside versus outside split (the not poor and the poor, the not incarcerated and the incarcerated, etc.); rather, the split is fractal. It exceeds dialectical re-appropriation; or such (re-)appropriation is but the ghost thereof.

To this aspect of mimesis as ghostliness, as disquieting instability of the improper, it must be added that Shakespeare played the Ghost, in the first productions of *Hamlet* of which he was both the writer and director. The ghost is, already, the author, the artist, the poet, the dramatic poet, the tragic poet. On an onto-typo-graphic level, the ghost in the play figures Shakespeare like Socrates in the dialogues figures Plato. In *The Republic*, the expulsion of the actor is ironic because the mimesis that enables *The Republic* is Plato plastically striking himself in the image of Socrates (the name "Plato" itself in Greek stems from *plattēin*, from which comes "plastic," and



means “to form, to mould” [Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 267]). What gives *Act V* some of its dramatic force is the fact that prisoners play the parts, including that of the ghost, written by the proto-chameleonic, thus improper, “Shakespeare” whose ghostly negative capability enabled him to “be” everyone and no one.

Prison mimesis (*Act V*) radicalizes artistic mimesis (*Hamlet*, but also *The Republic*), showing what is ultimately at stake with mimesis "itself." The mime is not an *on*, the Greek word for a "being," an *étant*. This non-being means that, in order to to (re)present everything, it is necessary for the mime to be *nothing* in itself, to have nothing *proper*, save an aptitude "equal" to all sorts of things, roles, characters. This paradox of the comedian formulates a *law of impropriety or non-property*, which is the very law of mimesis (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1986, 27). The lack of property is the natural state of the comedian, but *physis*, nature, are to be therefore understood as that which is always only thought through representation. The lack of proper identity is the fact of mimesis: originary supplement, art is what gives, what there is, since *physis* only is given by art (*poiesis, mimesis*). The artist is a subject without proper quality, yet this subject without subjectivity is multiple, indeed infinitely plural (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1986, 28-29). The artist thus is, by turns, everything and nothing.

Prisoners are ghosts. They are removed from social life. Yet they survive, in prison. They live beyond the end of their social life. They are (like) ghosts, surviving, living beyond.

In *Act V*, the relationships that inmate-actor-characters have with ghosts are spotlighted. Hutch/ Horatio grounds his entire critical and authorial project on his creed of ghosts. Hutch's critique and revision of *Hamlet* is based on his “if, then”: “if I am strong enough to believe in ghosts, then I am strong enough to believe what that ghost tells me.” This logic will be undone, in fact, by *Act V*, by Hitt's composition but also by Hutch's own ultimate performance, in many ways the philosophically deconstructive argument or purpose of *Act V*. Yet prior to airing out how Hutch-Horatio deconstructs Big Hutch-author, how Hutch is introduced merits attention.

It depends upon a certain *what?* On how a befuddled *what?* arrests common perception. A “Ho, what?” announces Hutch. A “Ho, what?” names the question and the stupefaction faced with the *ratio*, with what Hutch represents (refigured, in his self-introduction: "I play Ho[-]ratio, the scholar"), with what this play *Hamlet* represents in a prison, and with what *Act V* is doing generally relative to prison, punishment, revenge, rehabilitation, justice.

**Chris Harris**

On every Sunday after the noon meal, the four of us [the four prisoners who share Hamlet's role in four separate Hamlets] will assemble. We'll have our little gray *Hamlet* books and we'll proceed down to the track. And if you are simply walking by, what you'd probably hear is-- you'd hear this chatter of somebody giving their lines clearly, the rest of us with our heads down in the books walking in the line. Now, there are people, because there are benches that are all throughout the inside of the track. So there are people that actually watch us. So you'll hear this old, English style speech. You know, "Ho, Horatio," and these people are like, ho, what?

**Jack Hitt**

One of the problems of doing any play in prison is that being a good actor is the exact emotional opposite of what it takes to be a successful inmate. Rather than close off all feeling and look tough, you have to open your vulnerable self up and withstand often cruel laughter as you try to find some authentic emotion within you. In this way, a level four, high-security prison is no different from high school. And so, most of the inmates who audition for Agnes tend to be, actor-y people. The theater types of prison.

Back in 1999, they just had to put up with abuse from the bigger, meaner inmates. But that changed. In fact, a lot changed after Agnes cast the role of Hamlet's best friend.

**Big Hutch**

My name is Derek "Big Hutch" Hutchinson. I play Horatio, the scholar.

**Jack Hitt**

You might be surprised to learn that Derek "Big Hutch" Hutchinson is big. He has a smooth, bald skull and hooded, threatening eyes, the kind of guy that if you met him you might think, he's probably serving 120 years for armed robberies. And that would be correct. Hutch isn't like the rest of the cast. And he's the first person to tell you. (11'08"-13'15")

Hitt places this excerpt from Harris just before the introduction of Hutch because in fact Hutch plays the role of Horatio. "Ho, Horatio" as "ho, what?" not only forces us to pause (the meaning of the apostrophic, imperative verb "ho" is "stop, pause"), but introduces a new ratio: "Hutch is not like the rest of the cast" but he is *part* of the cast, and thus Hutch/ Horatio introduces a new *distribution* and *ratio*. Not only (as we'll see) because he introduces a logic of calculated risks and ratios, but also because he is (as we'll see) the *critic* among the cast, miming the drama critic Jack Hitt, not to mention the fact that he is, as Horatio, the *scholar*, versed in the language of the ghost. He is able speak to the ghost, who in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was played by the playwright, Shakespeare himself: Hutch can speak to the ghost, to the author, to the mimetician, and in *Act V*, this means that he mimes the writer, Jack Hitt. If the "rest of the cast" are the "theatre types of [the] prison," they are keys struck, typed (and cast) by the writer (and director). Hitt, whose name is related to *typein* (hit,

strike, type) remarks how Hutch is the exception in the cast (by his non theatre type persona), but the composition of *Act V* also lets one induce that he is exceptional, too, by his status as critic, by his closeness to the ghost (-/) writer, and by what turns out to be nothing less than his mimetic rivalry with Hitt.

Everything here, at bottom the difference between vengeance and justice, revolves around understanding what (a Ho-) ratio is.

When Big Hutch, analyzing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for Jack Hitt, says "I don't see the conflict" (15'37"), revealing that he does not understand why Hamlet, after the revelation by the ghost concerning how his father was killed, does not immediately kill Claudius, we observe that Hutch is still fully inscribed in the logic, or in the system, of justice (*Gerecht*) as vengeance (*Gerächte*), eye for eye. At the end of the radio piece, however, Big Hutch will have evolved, far from a simplistic eye-for-eye conception of justice.

The reading of *Hamlet* put forth at first by Big Hutch is a reading of vengeance. He reads the play according to the genre of the revenge play, proper to Jacobean revenge tragedy. Another reading, which Horatio teaches to Big Hutch at the end of Hitt's *Act V*, unveils the economic closure of the reading governed by vengeance initially proposed by Big Hutch. This other reading makes the economic closure and circular fatality appear: Big Hutch will never get out of prison if he is not submitted to or subjugated by what will in fact happen to him at the end of *Act V* when, on stage playing Horatio, he *becomes* Horatio, that is to say, this "chump" with whom "I don't normally would associate" (sic).

In other words, as *literary critic*, "Big Hutch" "thinks" that it is totally natural, automatic, to kill him who killed your father. In his literal transposition of the central metaphor of "Denmark is a prison" which Hamlet mentions to Rosencrantz, he imagines the scenario that he considers to be more realistic than that imagined by Shakespeare. If "Denmark's a prison," and if Hamlet is going to have what he considers a true dilemma, then Hutch's re-written scenario for *Hamlet* is this:

Here's how it would happen. Claudius killed this guy here because the guy had the biggest dope business in prison or something. Gertrude will be some sissy. You find them everywhere in prison. But the guy they kill will be Hamlet's brother [who is also in the same prison]. So now, being in the prison world, he *must* defend that honor. But he's got a girl talking about, you only got five years. You did your two. Do one more, they're going to parole you. Come on home because I love you and bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. He has another brother in business out there that he can get with to help raise his status. So he has

all these things to look forward to on the street. But if he let's that killing go, he's going to have the roughest three years of his entire life. He'll be the piss pot of the institution.

So he has this dilemma. Would he be strong enough to survive it and fly on out of there? Aaaahhhh, Hutch wouldn't. I aaaahhhh ain't going to lie. 18'20-19'

Releasing the true neurotic dilemma of Hamlet which he sees lacking from *Hamlet*, Hutch's scenario holds that nothing prevents Hamlet from immediately killing Claudius, just as, for Hutch, nothing prevents a father from taking revenge on the person who would have raped the father's daughter. Justice is expeditious vengeance. There is nothing to ponder; it is not even tragic, since tragedy is not the natural or automatic, but rather choosing the wrong action after having tried to choose the good.

When he first appears in *Act V*, totally unlike what Hitt calls the "actor-y" types, the "theatre types of prison," Big Hutch presents himself not as killer whale but as a blue whale so large as to control the entire ocean of writers, even swallowing the author of authors, Shakespeare. His hubris is what makes his transformation moving. Yet in his usurpation of author-position he is the character of *Act V* closest to its author, Jack Hitt. His writing of the "real" dilemma is, also, more an operation of calculation and profit margins than anything else. In his version, Hamlet in year 2000 must merely weigh probable future goods (his girlfriend; his brother who'll hire him [and having a job offer greatly speeds up being paroled]) against the probable present evils incumbent upon him if he avenges his brother's death instead of waiting the three years and being "the piss pot of the whole institution" (18'43"). His rewriting, if acute, reduces the "dilemma" to a calculation of pros and cons. Ho, ratio.

In *Hamlet*, the ghost's injunctions upon Hamlet to act (to avenge his father's death) incite Hamlet to act (to stage the play in the play) in order to determine the truth of the ghost's speech. Big Hutch's criticism of *Hamlet* is that there is no dilemma, because mimesis, for him, permits the establishment of truth:

I don't see the conflict. I don't see what Hamlet is dealing with, man. Aw, I should kill the king now. I shouldn't kill him now. No, you knew once your father said revenge him, you knew you were going to do this. So what's the hullabaloo about? Do it. I mean, that's the same way I couldn't see somebody raping my daughter or something and just sitting around. No, no, no, no, no. I got to do you, man. And that's just, [SMACKING SOUND], you done. (15'47"-16'17")

The five times repeated "No" suggests that the certainty of Big Hutch is his (unconscious?) miming of King Lear. Implicitly, Big Hutch endorses a decision by prison officials to keep him in prison, on the basis of the truth value of his acting. His

playing the role of the “blue whale,” his “persona” as Tim puts it, is representation, but the law would very probably not only deduce from it his utter disrespect for law, but also may establish the referent (his criminal inclination, his dangerousness) from the mimesis. Big Hutch’s position coincides with the law’s, sealing him in it: “c’est justement l’ontologique : la possibilité présumée d’un discours sur ce qui *est*, d’un logos décidant et décidable de ou sur l’on” (Derrida, 1970, 14). *Act V*, on the contrary, is about *not* being able to identify, to stabilize mimesis. *Act V* opens, puts into movement, unprisons. Hitt hints to Hutch another hatch, which consists in the idea that a representation is without such a referent, and that his future memories of his past might be thought otherwise than as a repetition (*effectus*) masquerading as logic (*causae*). As Derrida might put it: “mais c’est [...] une référence sans référent” (Derrida, 1970, 24). If Jack Hitt tempers Big Hutch’s certainty of the necessity of swift revenge (“Are there no reasons to delay taking swift action? Even if you're convinced that you've been wronged? I mean, that's why he stages the play within the play, right? To make sure that Claudius is the bad guy”), Big Hutch’s faith in representation makes him see no problem:

See, that's where we have to go back. Now, if I'm strong enough to believe in ghosts, then I'm strong enough to believe what that ghost tell [sic] me. If I'm strong enough to believe you're a ghost, then I'm sure you know what happened to you. (16'39"-16'57")

Turning mimesis into truth, Hutch misses Hamlet’s “real” (mimetic) dilemma, the dilemma of mimesis, sealing himself inside a mimetology that only the role of Horatio will release him from. Horatio, played by Hutch, dislodges Hutch from Hutch when, in a crucial moment at the end of the final act of *Hamlet*, Horatio, as Hitt says, “has Hutch under control and the audience in his hand, he [Horatio] has the one great line to deliver and, as Hutch might say, he [Horatio] nails it. ‘Now cracks a noble heart ... good night sweet Prince/ In flight the angels sing thee to thy rest’” (52’55”). Horatio, *acted character*, takes over from Hutch, and in this line about a certain “flight,” Hutch is divested of Hutch and Hutch’s vengeance-based reading, for, unlike earlier in the show when literary critic Hutch admits his inability to “fly on out” of *mimetic vengeance*, here *Horatio* releases Hutch from himself, delivering him of the mimetic “logic” which had imprisoned him in the first place.

Hutch-Horatio’s radical transformation, shifts the *dilemma* of mimesis onto those of us, some of whom might be judges, who do and can have a say about the question Jack Hitt raises at the end of *Act V*:

Are we forever the prisoner of our actions? It's a good question. It was Hamlet's question. And it's the unresolvable conflict in our penal system. Why do we put people in jail? To rehabilitate them and restore them to our company or to punish them, regardless of how much they might change? 55'10-55'25

### **Doubled Loyalty**

Jack Hitt's *Act V* is admirable because it resists attempts to recuperate mimesis into a process of truth. His radiophonic staging of *Act V* as theatre resists veridical collapse by hewing to the role of theatre in much the way that, for Derrida, Mallarmé advocated a certain *idea*. We quote Derrida from his unpublished 1967-68 course "Littérature et vérité: le concept de mimesis": "l'Idée n'est pas autre chose pour Mallarmé qu'un certain néant, je dirais même qu'elle n'est rien d'autre que la mise en scène -- le théâtre de rien. Mise en scène qui n'illustre rien, qui illustre le rien, l'espace ou l'espacement comme rien" (Derrida, 1967-68, 1:11). To make this theatre into an idea you could use as proof (as in, "theatre shows that the men have changed"), is to misunderstand that the very idea of it is the idea of theatre, is the theatre of the idea, the theatre of theatre and the idea of the idea as theatre. We may say of Hitt what Derrida writes of the French poet: "Mallarmé déplace l'interprétation classique ordonnant la mimesis à la vérité selon un geste [...] subtil, [...] discret, presque infime mais décisif lorsqu'il décrit la mimique sans qu'il soit jamais question d'imitation, de vraisemblance ou de vérité" (Derrida, 1967-68, 1:15). Akin to Mallarmé, Hitt's gesture is a "tout autre geste" the function of which is not to invert truth and falsehood, but "plutôt de faire de la vérité un moment ou une fonction d'un jeu qui en lui-même n'est ni vrai ni faux et échappe indécidablement à cette alternative. Il s'agit donc de mettre, de remettre la vérité en jeu et dans ce jeu de voir à quoi répond le désir de vérité" (Derrida, 1967-68, 3:7).

If one has not recognized this function of mimesis, then one risks interpreting *Act V* as the attempt to *know*, to derive knowledge from theatre for the sake of the tranquil decision-making of a legal court. This would be to give in to the gesture of eliminating from mimesis its tropical (or tropological) resistance to theory: "D'où le geste le plus ancien et le plus constant vis-à-vis d'elle [i.e., mimesis], et qui est de la circonscrire 'théoriquement', de la mettre en scène et de la théâtraliser pour tenter de la prendre au piège du (sa)voir" (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1976, 247). *Act V* precisely and steadfastly resists, desists from, such theoretical theatrical trapping of knowledge. It

dislocates critical, theoretical, assurance. In the example of the “critic” Big Hutch, his literary criticism of *Hamlet* is itself dislocated by both Horatio and Hitt's counter-readings.

If the actor-prisoner-character-person is to be let out early on parole, it must be able to be said of him (by warden, judge, or parole board) that he is no longer the same as he was going into prison but is now unified, a stable ipseity or sameness. Yet these inmates change (by) their acting. “Now,” as Hutch might put it, “in the prison world,” this subject is the site of circulation between, say, an insufficient resemblance to rehabilitated, proper citizen, and dis- and re-sembling deficiency “proper” to the untrustworthy criminal. In this way, the subject confounds the relation of memory (of who he was/is) and view (who he appears to be becoming). The mimetic constitution of the subject makes the play, that is requisite for access to truth, undecidable. Hutch learns thusly what acting “is” and that *Act V* itself amounts to a rethinking of mimesis.

However, if Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique of mimesis entails that truth itself, haunted by mimesis, is also a role play(ed), then Hutch “has this [new] dilemma”: for he now appears before a double law, before which he must *comparaître* in the juridical sense of the term. To wit:

Assujetti à une exigence de propriété, d’un côté, et astreint à une revenance mimétique dépropriante de l’autre, ne serait-ce que parce que cette dernière est la condition radicale de tout venir à soi, le sujet *comparaît* devant, sans s’harmoniser avec, sa condition mimétique lors du suspens. Le suspens accuse toujours l’incongruité des allégeances, et ainsi déconstruit d’une certaine manière l’hégémonie du propre. (Anker 401)

The law of mimesis, on the one hand, and the law of the judge or legal system, on the other, call forth a double allegiance in the subject that is mutually exclusive. If Big Hutch's loyalty is bestowed upon the law of mimesis, then he is an actor without any stable, reliable, identity. If his loyalty is bestowed upon the law of the judge, then he must renounce acting -- give up precisely that which enabled his change from the chain of identity -- in exchange for identity, i.e., for the “bad” acting he had learned in prison theatre to renounce. At stake here is how one understands “rehabilitation,” re-entering society across the threshold of expulsion and re-integration.

What makes the prisoners’ paradoxical knowledge of their “status” of actor tragic is not only that it came after incarceration, in the mode of regret at having caused terrible suffering and even sometimes death, but also the character of mimetic “consciousness itself,” a “consciousness” that is destabilized by the lack of foundation

of mimesis. These inmate-actors become aware of their mimetic quality – James Word, for example, realizing he could really act because as a criminal, or becoming a criminal, he was already acting – insofar as they repress mimesis, since this awareness, this “self-knowledge,” has to unknow itself as mimetic, in order to be consciousness. To be “conscious” of mimesis is either to deny mimesis or, paradoxically, consciousness. Either Big Hutch renounces that which made change possible (mimesis), in order to convince the judge that his identity is stable, or he renounces that (consciousness) which is an effect of mimesis. To do so would involve arguing the case to the judge that even he, the judge, is an actor, and that the legal system is based on the repression of mimesis just as Plato’s *Republic* was based on the expulsion of actors.

For us, the “spectators” of this “comedy,” Big Hutch and all inmates-become-actors embody the face-off of these two irreconcilable laws, and they are summoned to appear before these two contrary instances, the instance of juridical, ontological law and the “instance” of mimesis. When he overcomes what Hitt calls his “Jack Nicholson syndrome” and nails the role of Horatio, Big Hutch (synecdoche for all prisoner-actors having become full-fledged actors) “comprehends,” grasps, his mimetic identity but by the same token puts himself apart from, loses touch with, any grounding which would make comprehension, strictly speaking, possible. This is another way of stating the radical undecidability alluded to earlier. Insofar as a “decision” can be articulated here, it is an impossible one of doubled loyalty. As subject, he owes allegiance to two antithetical laws. Yet society, as embodied by the judicial system, will only (re-)integrate the criminal who will be able to claim that he has overcome mimetic “blindness,” and achieved the *truth* about mimesis.

Of course where Plato, in *The Republic*, wanted to exclude the actors from society, Hitt's prisoners in becoming actors are trying to get back into it. Still, the threshold negotiated is the same. The prisoner-actor has to conceal his awareness of the fundamentally mimetic character of his identity, or being, if he wants to get out of prison, and into our own world of either/or, either theatre or reality. A judge (in our Platonist tradition) wants to hear that the “reformed” inmate can “lucidly” or “consciously” decide between the two. Being in the world (*Da-sein*) depends on it. To phrase it otherwise: the prisoner-become-actor, implicitly at least, sees a ghostliness in things that his judges either refuse to *admit*, save in a purely theatrical context, or readily accept to *commit* into asylum or prison. Yet confronting the mimetic double



bind or double allegiance ("proper" selfhood and lack of proper identity) means that a prisoner become actor like Big Hutch is summoned to appear before the law of mimesis in a way that no judge, as judge, can ever know, or ever admit to knowing. A judge cannot know just mimesis. *Act V* however gives us to think just mimesis, only mimesis, as a just mimesis, a "consciousness" of this double allegiance, a "consciousness" that is not unified, and thus not consciousness, unless, masquerading as cause, it represses the mimesis of which it is the effect.

WORKS CITED

**ANKER**, Richard. *Henry James. Le principe spectral de la représentation*. Paris: Hermann, 2012.

**DERRIDA**, Jacques. *Littérature et vérité: le concept de mimesis*. 1967-68. Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine. Call number: DRR A1.2.

---, "Désistance." Jacques Derrida, *Psyché. Invention de l'autre*. Paris. Galilée, 1987-2003. 201-38.

---, *La double séance*. Paris: Seuil Tel Quel, 1970.

**HASLAM**, Jason. *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2005.

**HITT**, Jack. *Act V. This American Life*. Chicago: WBEZ, 2002.  
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/218/act-v>.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/218/transcript>

**KANT**, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Mary Gregor. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990.

**LACOUÉ-LABARTHE**, Philippe. *L'imitation des modernes. Typographie II*. Paris: Galilée, 1986.

---, "Typographie." *Mimésis désarticulations*, eds. Sylviane Agacinski et al. Paris: Flammarion, 1976. 167-270.

**NIETZSCHE**, Friedrich. *Unfashionable Observations*. Trans. Richard T. Gray. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999.