Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club* (London:
Jonathan Cape, 2006; London: Vintage, 2007), 314 pp.

Reviewed by **Daniela Guardamagna**

The Dead Fathers Club by Matt Haig (the 34 year-old author of two children's books, *Shadow Forest* and *The Runaway Troll* and two novels for adults, *The Last Family in England* and *The Possession of Mr Cave*), is an interesting rewriting of *Hamlet*. Its eleven-year-old protagonist, Philip, suffers the same doubts and dislocations as his famous ancestor.

Philip is the son of a pub-owner in Newark, Nottinghamshire, who has recently died and whose ghost appears to him, stating that he has been killed by his brother Alan, a mechanic, to gain the love of his sister-in-law, and asking his son to avenge his death. The plot and range of characters follow the Shakespearean precedent with surprising symmetry, though not all the characters have a counterpart. The mother remarries with unwonted speed; the boy listens to the ghost with hardly a doubt; there is a girlfriend, Leah, who, though much less passive and obedient than the Prince of Denmark's fiancée, tries to commit suicide by throwing herself into a river; Leah has a brother, and a father who, like his Shakespearean predecessor Polonius, dies in place of the intended victim (here, in a fire caused by Philip aiming to kill his uncle). There are no proper Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though Philip is surrounded by his school friends; no proper Horatio, as Philip does not confide his visions and his plans to anybody. The boy's life is duly perturbed by his assigned task, and though he does not decide to play any antics, the people surrounding him are worried about his mental well-being, and suggest he needs the help of a psychologist.

The fairly straightforward plot describes Uncle Alan's marriage, which Philip hates; the changes in his mother; the attempts on the boy's part to kill his uncle; the accident in which Uncle Alan is hurt, and his subsequent death in hospital.

The main differences between this plot and Shakespeare's lie in the fact that, though Philip does not for a moment suspect his father's ghost of being a "goblin damned", the author seems to want the reader to suppose this, and to read malevolence and bad faith into his behaviour. The uncle's character is certainly unpleasant, but there is a final twist near the end: the son repents of the part he has taken in the accident which is endangering Uncle Alan's life, realizes that his uncle saved his, and tries to help him, but is in no condition to do so; the reader is even led to assume that the ghost, having learnt to act in the physical world, manages to manipulate the hospital instruments which keep his enemy alive, thus being able to kill him personally.

Though Haig knows his Shakespeare, as will soon be seen, the overall texture of Philip's language is anything but Shakespearean: we are presented with the stream of consciousness of an eleven-year-old boy: his sentences are paratactic and there is virtually no punctuation, no apostrophes (I cant, I dont, as in Shaw, but obviously without the Shavian polemical edge) and no subjunctives. There are a few unexpected images given in a matter-of-fact way, without emphasis. This is the opening of the novel:

> I walked down the hall and pushed the door and went into the smoke and all the voices went quiet like I was the ghost.
> Carla the Barmaid was wearing her hoop earrings and her tired eyes. She was pouring a pint and she smiled at me and she was going to say something but the beer spilt over the top.
> Uncle Alan who is Dads brother was there wearing his suit that was tight with his neck pouring over like the beer over the glass. His big hands … were over Mums hands and Mums head was low like it was sad and Uncle Alans head kept going down and he lifted Mums head up with his eyes. (1)

We are hardly surprised that the list of the favourite opening lines in Haig's website (<http://www.matthaig.com>, 12 May 2009) is:

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.

And, again from the site, the heading of the section "lists" is "List, list, O, list!", unacknowledged but of course taken from *Hamlet,* I.v.22.

The text, though generally simple in texture, presents some graphic devices: from a few empty lines to evoke a silence (51), to the sudden breaking of a prose sentence, interrupted, completed or repeated by words in the form of a poem (though the lines often consist of single words or parts of words: see, in quotations below, "this/harsh/world", or "fish/mon/ger"), to calligrammes (the letters of the words "downwards" and "upwards" disposed in a smile-like figure to represent the Nottinghamshire lilt, 54. Or the word "die" repeated in ten lines, diminishing from ten times to one, creating a regular geometrical image, 233).

But Shakespeare is there: the text is a curious pastiche where verbal Shakespearean references occasionally surface in the basic flow of the normal English, ranging from the apparently haphazard, like the mention of Hamlet cigars or a thriller called *Murder Most Foul* or a fish called Gertrude ("a funny name", 59) to actual though dislocated quotations.

At the beginning, the quotations are not apparent. For instance, as regards his school subjects, Philip takes some kind of interest in the ancient Romans and, like the good boy he is, he worries about their well-being:

> There were villages nearby and places where the soldiers could eat and drink
> but it still must have been very hard for them coming to this harsh world away
> from their families to start again.
> this
> harsh
> world. (30)

This quotation is lost in the Italian translation (*Il Club dei padri estinti*, trans. by Paola Novarese, Torino: Einaudi, 2008, 32) where Hamlet's "harsh world" becomes the modern and somewhat over-rational "un mondo così inospitale" (32), nor is it particularly obtrusive in the English text, so it may remain unnoticed by a fast reader.

A few pages later, Philip reflects on whether it is right to kill people ("Its like how in War soldiers are told to kill other men and then they are Heroes but if they killed the same men when they were not in War they are Murderers"). And he proceeds: "So it is not the thing that is bad or good it is what the thing is called" (108); again a rather subtle and not easily recognizable echo of " … for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (see *Hamlet* II.ii. 252-253).

Interspersed with these almost secret quotations, some occur which are much more recognizable, and they become more and more frequent. For instance: "Uncle Alan folded his arms still nose whistling and he said Stale flat unprofitable" (72). He is not speaking of existential anguish, he is speaking about beer, which may commonly be said to be stale or flat, and, though the word "unprofitable" is rather unusual for a mechanic, he is discussing the small profits to be derived from the sale of high quality beer, so again the echo may go unnoticed by the inattentive reader. Or, when Leah's father Mr Fairview appears for the first time, he brings a fish as a present to the family, adding with no incongruity that one "Couldn't get one that size from any fishmonger in town". Looking at the dead fish, Philip feels ill, and the stream of consciousness proceeds:

> I thought I saw the mouth of the fish move and say Fishmonger but I closed
> my eyes hard shut and opened them and I knew it was my imagination.
> fish
> mon
> ger. (74)

The quotation is apposite, as it obviously recalls the exchange in II.ii.173-176 between Hamlet and Polonius.

On pp. 66-67, three quotations occur in a row, including two very obvious ones:

> … Uncle Alan was talking non stop words words words. (66)
> See theres method in my madness. (66)
> Smiling damned villain. (67)

On p. 122, there is a list of the "Ways I can kill Uncle Alan", and the sixth item, with no introductory explanation as to how Philip has got hold of this quaint piece of information, is: "You can pour poison into someones ear when they sleep and it kills them".

The progression towards explicitness continues: the title of chapter 30 is "The Murder of Gonzago". Philip, dutifully though unconsciously, uses his predecessor's device of showing a performance to the culprit to examine his reaction, and the chosen performance is an improbable movie, advertised on the cover of the DVD, in screaming block capitals, as "A BROTHER'S MURDER. A SON'S REVENGE". The choice of the cast is a similar pastiche of the obvious and the ludicrous: Joaquin Phoenix (the obvious villain Emperor Commodus in Ridley Scott's *The Gladiator*) is Duke Fortimus, the evil brother; Queen Livia is the unlikely "ACADEMY AWARD WINNER" Charlize Thuron – Philip's spelling strikes again –, and an equally unlikely Tobey McGuire ("*SPIDERMAN, SEABISCUIT*") plays the orphan son; but when "ACADEMY AWARD WINNER MEL GIBSON" suddenly appears in the role of the King-victim, we are forcibly reminded of him in the title role of Zeffirelli's *Hamlet.*

After this, on the whole the plot faithfully follows the main events of the play: Uncle Alan reacts strongly to the performance; Mr Fairfax dies by accident in an awkward attempt by Philip to burn Alan alive in his garage (Mr Fairfax, suddenly "intruding rashly" and unwontedly on Alan's business, dies in his stead); the Father reproaches Philip for taking too long to revenge him and rather selfishly asks his son to ditch his girl-friend, who is proving an unwelcome distraction from The Task. She – in despair over her father's death, and certainly saddened by Philip's desertion – attempts suicide by throwing herself into a river.

Here there is a significant modification. Philip finds her hovering on the bridge ("nearly singing Dead and gone dead and gone", 274), then she plunges into the river, he plunges in after her, manages to save her with uncle Alan's help, and is in his turn saved by Alan. The deceptive appearance of a head surfacing and then disappearing underwater draws Alan back into the river: we could almost say with Macbeth "there's no such thing", because Haig's Ghost has become active and deceives his brother into risking his life again (causing him to end up in hospital, where he dies). Philip decides not to kill Uncle Alan after all, but his decision is thwarted.

This, I think, is the point of Haig's rewriting. Sympathy for the rather ineffectual ghost he created in the first chapters is slowly undermined in the second part of the novel, and finally destroyed. Selfish, opinionated, sometimes obviously lying, the Ghost uses his son's life for his own ends. In the last few pages, Philip analyses the known facts: Alan has saved Leah's life, and his own. But he cannot stop the stream of events.

As often happens, this rewriting also posits a stance critical of the source. We know of many re-interpretations of classics where rights and wrongs are reversed and the point of view of the antagonist becomes the key to the text: we read Jane Eyre's story through the eyes of Bertha Mason in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, those of the monster Grendal in John Gardner's rereading of *Beowulf*, those of the modern equivalents of Goneril and Regan in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. Here the uncle is not given the status of a protagonist: the figure with which the reader identifies is still the orphaned, would-be avenger. But we are led to suspect the Ghost's motives, his morals and insufficient, self-serving love for the living.

Haig does not directly imply that we take facts too much at face value when, in our reading of *Hamlet*, we interpret King Claudius straight-forwardly as a villain and the Ghost as a positive figure; what he does show is the destruction of the lives of the living through the manoeuvres of a dead man who refuses to die his own death. "Trust the living" (304), says kind Mrs Fell to Philip; we are presented with a conspiracy of the dead against the living, in order to trap the living in the past, to make a future impossible without the dead. Though this is certainly a free interpretation, it is not a wholly absurd reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.