

Mihai Măniuțiu

'The Golden Round':

Essays on the Politics of Power in Shakespeare

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FOREWORD

Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre remains unclassifiable in the sense of being continuously in the making, a making process in which those who stage his work and reflect on it play a part. Verging on the unmatched, its global esteem is grounded in the fact that, more than in the case of any other work, Shakespeare's theatre transfers onto its interpreters, whether on the stage or on the page, the beneficial and precious feeling that each and every play is necessary and indispensable to its ongoing process of coming into being.

Years of directing practice have taught me that a key distinguishing trait of Shakespeare's work is its intensity. It always demands complete lucidity of approach, which when free from paralysing Bardolatry, can expand one's own inner freedom and generously feed one's imagination. Nothing that burdens or drains the spirit belongs in Shakespeare's plays. So the lesson to take home from their intensity is that one must not desire beyond one's own limit (after all, knowing your limitations strengthens you from within). Yet in order to discover who you are and what you are capable of achieving, you must desire the impossible (the temptation to overcome our limitations is in our human nature). Therefore, to know and to live Shakespeare means never to let go of this continuous urge for (self-) searching.

THE MOUSETRAP

*I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck, so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;*

(Hamlet, 2.2)¹

There is a crowdedness akin to the world's beginning in *Titus Andronicus*. Dozens, hundreds of characters are trying to cut it, stepping over one another other, suffocating one another. They cut one another off, busy just being and rushing to speak out at least a fraction of their truth; they stutter, grind their teeth, compete in grimacing, lacking sufficient breath and enough words to either curse or sing praises. It is as if in this play

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York; London: W. W. Norton, 1997) and will be referenced parenthetically in the text. (*Translators' note.*)

Shakespeare has not yet divided the light from the darkness, the earth from the waters; its universe is governed by Saturn, the god of conflict and tearing apart, and is moving in a cycle of one rebellion followed by another.

The high count of bloody deeds within the tragedy may strike, half way through the play, as over the top and absurd, though not any one of the horrors that abound in the play, when seen in isolation, seems exaggerated or lacks verisimilitude. If anything, the playwright appears almost “reserved” – not in terms of sheer numbers, but in terms of depth and intensity of suffering – compared to what he exposes us to in *Macbeth*, in *King Lear*, in *Richard III*. It is as if he is impatient, jumps from one conclusion to the next, from one climax to the next, rushing through denouements and wanting to say everything in one breath. In a sense, when presenting this sequence of extraordinary events, he almost resembles a news reporter who somewhat neglects changing the names of the persons (personages?) involved in the string of misfortunes, calamities and wrongdoings.

Undeniably, too many things happen in the tragedy of *Titus*; yet not a single one exceeds what a human being can do or what it can be done to them by other human beings. The first sons of this world, still empty and coming out of the fog of original creation, seem to know their curse and their lot: they will be

either victims or executioners, cast in one of the two parts, until something more powerful than all of them will recast the parts. They seem born yesterday and yet a hundred years old, childlike and beast-like at once, having no knowledge of anything yet having committed, in full knowledge, every conceivable evil – whose most prevalent manifestation is the crave for power.

Titus Andronicus begins with a human sacrifice. The first cry in the play is that of a sacrificial victim. Simultaneously, two distinct voices echo each other: one merciless (Titus's) and the other begging for mercy (Tamora's). The tension between the two gives birth to the emotion that will define, once and for all, and reign supreme over human destiny in Shakespeare's plays: fear. In the convulsing events of this play we often encounter the fear of sudden, brutal death – the fear of blades, the horror at being stabbed, mutilated, raped. While in later plays, especially in the tragedies, we get to experience various mutations and "tamings" of this fear, in *Titus Andronicus* the emphasis falls, blade-like, clearly on the primal fear of the hunted being who feels *and* knows what is about to happen.

Death follows death in Shakespeare's plays and almost always death is horrific because it makes wo/man beast like naked in front of wo/man. Fear makes one recognize oneself and one recognizes the other through the fear one experiences oneself or inflicts on someone else. The array of tortures and

manners in which death can be inflicted on someone could easily lead us to think that humans have been created for nothing else. The value of human life decreases with the increase in and the refinement of the ways in which one can be destroyed.

The first victim in the play is sacrificed to appease the dead: Titus brings a ritual sacrifice to the spirit of his sons lost in the long war against the Goths the Andronici have won. The dead rule the living and govern their destinies, turning the world of the living into nothing more than a realm annexed to the great empire of the shadows: 'the hollow prison of [...] flesh' (*Titus Andronicus* 3.2) cries blood and feasts on it tirelessly. In the same first scene of the tragedy, there is a eulogy to the tomb as *the* locus of absolute safety, unique refuge where no evil can befall one anymore. This is the first panegyric to it and this haunting trope will return to trouble us again and again in Shakespeare's later plays:

In peace and honour rest you here, my sons;
.....
Secure from worldly chances and mishaps!
Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,
Here grow no damned grudges; here are no storms,
No noise, but silence and eternal sleep: (1.1)

With 'cruel, irreligious piety' (1.1), mankind has consented to this peace in death alone; in life one will never taste a moment of rest, of calm, of reconciliation.

Whilst alive, one would be led by passion; passion would be mankind's food and curse.² Almost immediately after this stage entrance, Titus-the-hero with a noble character himself is guilty of this and commits a gratuitous murder: falling prey to his anger and hot-bloodedness, he kills his own son Mutius – moments after he mourned and buried twenty-one sons he lost in the war. Mutius's assassination by Titus follows swiftly the ritualistic sacrifice of his enemy's firstborn, Alarbus; other crimes would follow – rapes, torture, mutilations as hands and heads would fall. Evil, in *Titus Andronicus*, has no variations; we appear to witness the same horror scene, with minor edits: the executioners become the victims, the victims become executioners in an unending cycle.

In a tragedy in which violence reigns, there is, comparatively, little talk about violence. The one

² There are only two characters whose culpability is less emphasised: Lavinia and Lucius. It is hard to see the dramatic identity of Titus's daughter which amounts to the misfortunes that she endures at the hand of others: as such, she is the archetypal victim. Lucius, on the other hand, as a precursor of the rightful heirs who after a period of misrule and chaos reinstate the law and peace, represents a curious mixture of Fortinbras and Malcolm: his triumph is more the result of serendipity than warranted by the personal virtues he displays. In Shakespeare's plays, the victors appear only when the world has been exhausted physically and morally; they are not heroes who instate the reign of justice, but more the symptoms of a *caesura* of history, of a short and necessary breath before diving into the next cycle of disasters.

exception is Aaron, the “theorist of evil”, who talks at length about the delights of his conscious, planned evil doing; the other characters commit and delight in their evil deeds without many words. Words and witty lines serve only the mocked and the sacrificed who beg for mercy, but even they are quickly gagged.

When read against Shakespeare’s entire dramatic work, *Titus Andronicus* gains a metatheatrical function: it is to his dramatic oeuvre what *The Mousetrap* is to *Hamlet*. ‘The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king’ (*Hamlet* 3.1) says the Danish Prince. In a similar way, Shakespeare constructs *Titus Andronicus* as the play of all possibilities, of all horrors, and looking his audience in the eye, he challenges and lures them, echoing his characters’ lines:

TAMORA: Come down, and welcome me to this world's light;
Confer with me of murder and of death: (5.2)

Let us talk of murders, yes, first and foremost of murders. Why should we avoid the mirrors that don’t lie? At the end of the night perhaps all that awaits us is the darkness within us. How can we face it if we have not learnt to stifle or at least to swindle our fear? Murder is often a small matter compared to what one can feel or think in a single day, a single moment...

Before writing *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*. This, however, is not a play as such, but a 'set-up'³ – a *mousetrap* for the audience. In which of its many traps would we fall? Which one would catch *our* conscience?

We need to tread carefully as every reaction carries a risk: we are exposed to danger and vulnerable; after all, it is our vulnerability that makes us responsible for all that happens around us – and we cannot escape by looking away or closing our eyes. We can, of course, refuse to see the conglomerate of horrors *Titus Andronicus* shoves in our faces, but even so we risk falling into a trap: this refusal defines ourselves through its quality and meaning. Either way, we unwittingly take sides. We grow numb and apathetic; our extreme alertness dwindles and our gaze becomes blinded by indifference. Immune to cruel, brutal, bloody scenes, we are suddenly awoken by the whip of a barely uttered line: 'TITUS ANDRONICUS: When will this fearful slumber have an end?' (3.1) Or, bewildered by the unbearable monstrosities, we can only burst into laughter, like Titus. The Messenger says to him: 'Thy griefs their sports, thy resolution mock'd' (3.1); like Titus, we are "caught", surrounded,

³ In Romanian, the word "însenare" means both "setting a scene" and "setting up someone". (*Translators' note.*)

overwhelmed. Stupefaction, revolt and even indifference point their unforgiving finger at us.

The audiences' responses to this tragedy, very successful in its own times, must have surprised and delighted Shakespeare in the same way the play's events surprised and delighted his audiences. The Elizabethan audiences must have offered a fertile and fascinating learning experience: learning about his spectators, Shakespeare learned about mankind.

Titus Andronicus is not a summary of Shakespeare's entire dramatic work, but, in my opinion, the sum total of all the spectators' virtual responses to his plays. *Titus Andronicus*, seen as project and waiting chamber, is a compendium of all possible spectatorly responses by Shakespeare's audiences.

When planning the *Mousetrap* to expose the king, Hamlet tells Horatio: 'Give him heedful note; / For I mine eyes will rivet to his face'. (3.2) Like Hamlet, Shakespeare himself must have 'rivetted' his eye on his spectators, jotting down every little detail, to learn and see better what was hidden under their masks. Like Hamlet, he must have played, more than once, with the suspicion of the innocent—guilty in his audience, retorting — tacitly — with the same lines Hamlet retorts King Claudius:

KING CLAUDIUS: What do you call the play?

HAMLET: The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the duke's name; his wife, Baptista: you shall see anon; 'tis a knavish piece of work: but what o' that? your majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not: let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung. (3.2)

Then he, too, must have rejoiced that the spectators fell straight into this theatrical trap.

THE SPACE BETWEEN MIRRORS

If you break, even for a split second, the illusion of the game you are playing, you risk losing everything. Especially if the game in question is called struggle for power. This is the case of Richard II. He had questioned himself, experienced a sense of doubt in himself, and was stripped of his crown. Fate manifested itself in his distrust of the absolute power that he had himself embodied. His subjects abandoned him, because he had already betrayed himself by seeing through this illusion. As long as Richard II assumes his role and fully identifies with the mask of the divinely “anointed” sovereign, he seems to enjoy unquestionable prerogatives and his throne is secure.

KING RICHARD II: Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord (3.2)

But the very moment he steps out of his role, his royal veneer fades away and thereby allows us to perceive the traces of his human, in fact all too human weakness. Panic pushes him towards risk-taking problematizations; Richard II relativizes his own person, and thus, the very basis of his majesty.

KING RICHARD II: [...] throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king? (3.2)

Doubt dispels the protective circle of self-delusion and, as a result, the latter's magic ceases to exist; the ruses that the illusionist, absorbed by his own power until recently, wasn't even aware of come to the fore and give him away. So then he rightly asks, like Richard II, whether he is not or has not actually always been only a mere "charlatan". Yet this very question is a trap and a condemnation. But since he had allowed it to be uttered, Richard II has to carry on until the bitter end, irrespective of the price he has to pay when he finally receives the answer, because he is unable to rule as a 'charlatan' would, in other words devoid of the illusions that grant him super-human qualities. As a man, he considers himself too insignificant in relation to the idol he had imagined himself to be. Questioning

himself, he had fallen from far too high. Bolingbroke, on the other hand, ascends with large steps; and what destroys the legitimate king only makes his usurper stronger. Bolingbroke will be able to hold on to the crown precisely because he had never harbored any illusions that surpassed him or conditioned his power. He will have no difficulty with mimicry, even though he is aware of the absence of actual content, and will only be concerned with form. Consequently, he will be adamant to maintain the manners, props and conventions of kingship, but he will not attempt to identify with these in essence – far from him such an illusion! For him it suffices to hold on to power; he does not have the ambition to be power itself. For Richard II, such a distinction between privilege and person is inconceivable; and he loses status once he had lost faith in his own idol-like station. Bolingbroke observes the rules of the game, feigns royalty, and whether his essence corresponds to the appearance he exhibits is none of his concerns. The spectacle of royalty continues, but this is not the same game anymore.

Richard II, therefore, no longer values the majesty of Richard II. He feels lost and abandoned, in a world in which there are no certainties left. Yet this does not mean that he is prepared to offer the crown to the first pretender. The battle for the throne will move from the realm of legitimacy and confrontation of principles to a psychological terrain involving

conflicting egos. All pretenders are equally unworthy of the crown, so in order to make Richard II renounce it, Richard himself has to be shown that he is beneath them all, and that once the first, has now become the least. The victors do not hesitate to act in this respect: they will walk all over him, will debase and ridicule him, and seek to transform him into penitent king. They will ultimately demand that he publicly abdicates from his public standing.

The events taking place in Richard II's mind or within a tight circle of devoted allies are re-enacted with bells and whistles in Parliament, too. Richard II is made to openly and "willingly" acknowledge that he is a charlatan. There are no feelings that are not political in some way, or that cannot be politicized if need be. The intimate experience of someone who doubted himself is vulgarized and amplified by his opponents into a large-scale set-up. Any method goes as long as it eases the passage to the throne.

Richard II will kneel down in front of the strongest. The loss of power has anonymized him: he is already a nobody. He asks for a mirror, looks at himself and proclaims that he is a nonentity. The image in the mirror is a simulacrum of the void; its double has no substance, just as the original is also insubstantial. He whose grand illusions had once made him feel that he could not fit into the world because he himself had left no further space therein, now is a void filled by the

echoes and shadows of what has vanished forever. Disillusioned, the great historical figure suddenly realizes that he is but a wretched, senile actor, whose incompetence has resulted in his throne being taken away. He will leave the stage booed in equal measure by those sat in the stalls, the circle and the gallery. He deceived himself and therefore managed to deceive the others. Exhausted, he would like to drop out of the game, and shed all masks and disguises. He would like to lose himself among the nameless, forgetting though that, no matter what, he cannot escape the doom inherent in his role:

KING RICHARD II: Then give me leave to go.

HENRY BOLINGBROKE: Whither?

KING RICHARD II: Whither you will, so I were from your sights.

HENRY BOLINGBROKE: Go, some of you convey him to the Tower.
(4.1)

On his way to prison, Richard II meets the Queen. He tells her that she should take solace in the thought that all their bygone glory was nothing but a dream, and that grandeur, for them, only entailed getting to experience sleep:

KING RICHARD II: [...] learn, good soul,
To think our former state a happy dream; [...] Think I am dead and that even here thou takest, As from my death-bed, thy last living leave. (5.1)

His lines are not rooted in a metaphysical doubt in the realities of the world. On the contrary, freshly anointed with the chrism of anonymity and imbued with the humbleness of his new condition, Richard II experiences an epiphany that surpasses this “escapist” doubt (and he succeeds precisely because he loathes his knowledge and does not dabble with it). Shame fuels his understanding and teaches him that the world is excessively real. Richard II reaches the conclusion that it is not the universe but mankind that does not possess the dimension necessary to last forever. He seems to suggest that no-one exists for real, although everything exists, consequently no-one listens to the deep call of their own (mortal) nature unless they are on the brink of non-existence:

KING RICHARD II: [...] but whate'er I be,
 Nor I nor any man that but man is
 With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
 With being nothing. (5.5)

We are all syllables of time. Only a handful of us will cobble ourselves together into a word, and even that will be incomprehensible. The loss of illusions annihilates Richard II; his growing understanding cannot ignore the fascination with death; moreso, it constitutes the initial phase of his dying. The dethroned king dies slowly and in agony, but he wants to face the darkness. And his eyes fill up with darkness. He

refuses to lie to himself, or to hope. Once his grand illusion is shattered, he makes tremendous efforts to dispel the last remnants of disappointment that could tempt his mind. His thoughts, however, are haunted by spectres and apparitions that perturb his slow agony:

KING RICHARD II: Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented: sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am: then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king'd again: and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing: (5.5)

At this point, as if bringing him back to reality, or, rather, to whatever is still left of it, but interrupting the most dangerous Apparition, a visitor appears in Richard II's prison: the Groom. He is the former groom of the former king. The Groom does not have a face or name, but carries within his being something much more precious: the memory of Richard-as-king in all his greatness and splendour. He brings along the *mirror of memory*, a mirror that restores Richard II to himself, to the illusion of the king's absolute power, in the same way in which the initial mirror, held out by Bolingbroke-the-usurper, distanced him from and emptied him of his own self, and of the illusions that had glorified him. Richard II left his double, king-body in the mirror he had smashed into pieces in the throne

room, said goodbye to it and rejected it. He then left the stage as no-body. Now, this nameless figure is ready to take on the call and seduction of the Illusion that promises the restitution of his royal identity. Yet he is trying to resist it. To start with, he banishes the messenger who tempts him: 'If thou love me, 'tis time thou wert away.' (5.5)

Anyway, it is too late: Richard II has had another taste of the aphrodisiac of power that imbues him through and through, rousing him yet again. He thought of himself as a speck of dust and now feels clad, once more, in majestic purple. He has no choice but yield in to the temptation of the game and resume the role he had abandoned. He is prepared to give his life for a small but memorable gesture. A life for a memory – his broken heart seems to pound – a memory to redeem the fallen image of him that the Groom would hold on to. At this point Exton, the killer enters, just in time. Rather than beg for mercy or draw attention to his hopeless state in order to appeal to their compassion, Richard II experiences a moment of supreme exaltation. He is again the rightful king anointed by God, and who cannot be touched or defiled by the hand of ordinary mortals. He kills two of the soldiers that bring him to bay. He strikes them down, as if in a trance, feeling exalted and happy:

BISHOP OF CARLISLE: And fight and die is death destroying
death;
Where fearing dying pays death servile breath. (3.2)

The advice of the fanatical Carlisle has in the end been listened to. A short moment, and the illusion is complete. The actor identifies with the role he has always been dreaming of, and in order for this identification to be perfect, it is sealed with death. The wretched actor dies a hero's death, shrouded in a halo of glory:

KING RICHARD II: That hand shall burn in never-quenching
fire
That staggers thus my person. Exton, thy fierce hand
Hath with the king's blood stain'd the king's own land.
Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high;
Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.
(5.5)

The Groom was the messenger of the Illusion that transfigures and transforms life according to its own image and likeness, namely of an illusion that wipes out and shapes empires. Valuing the memory of a groom, Richard II became one with the Illusion: this act ensures that his shame cannot survive him.

TIMON - 'A HUNGER ARTIST'

*Try to explain the art of fasting to anyone!
If someone doesn't feel it,
then he cannot be made to understand it.*

Franz Kafka

The noble Timon was the first and foremost Athens had, a worthy scion of golden age giants, a man-god, an idol. He spent, boundlessly, himself and all his for the benefit of others and offered everyone whatever they needed. He did so out of a strong conviction that he was not sharing out material and perishable goods, which could run out in time, but spiritual wealth that emanates from the very core of this inexhaustible substance. The only emotion Timon was familiar with was the joy of his bountifulness; his generosity repeatedly brought the city to life and his

lavishness became an orgiastic form of love for his fellow human beings:

FLAVIUS: O my good lord, the world is but a word:
Were it all yours to give it in a breath,
How quickly were it gone! (2.2)

Overwhelmed by the quasi-mystical splendor of his richness, those in his entourage keep reassuring him that nothing could be even imagined or contemplated beyond him:

FIRST LORD: The noblest mind he carries
That ever govern'd man. (1.1)

Listening to them, Timon, in turn, never missed an opportunity to exalt himself in this conviction. Mimicking the image he thought his friends had of him, Timon tried to perfect himself and to turn into a life-giving spring. Like a sensuous and passionate neo-Platonist, he initiated a cult of loving friendship and celebrated as its grand priest, too. He continuously educated his "devotees", offering himself as an example and symbol of love that guides human destiny. He also endeavored to prepare them for the watershed moment when he would require their response and act of devotion in order to obtain ultimate perfection. Wanting to attain perfection by perfecting

others, Timon always found himself waiting, inviting and tempting this watershed moment:

TIMON: O, no doubt, my good friends, but the gods themselves have provided that I shall have much help from you: how had you been my friends else? why have you that charitable title from thousands, did not you chiefly belong to my heart? I have told more of you to myself than you can with modesty speak in your own behalf; and thus far I confirm you. O you gods, think I, what need we have any friends, if we should ne'er have need of 'em? they were the most needless creatures living, should we ne'er have use for 'em [...]. Why, I have often wished myself poorer, that I might come nearer to you. (1.2)

His discourse is permeated by a mystical aura, in which the voices of Christ Jesus and Plato are braided in the Renaissance synthesis of a certain Marsilio Ficino.⁴

In order to form a tight circle around their Teacher and to graduate to radiating the latter's doctrine from their own pores, the community has to be tested in order to confirm its constitution and status. The "devotees" are asked to experience the same

⁴ A fifteenth-century Italian scholar and Catholic priest, Marsilio Ficino earned his claim to fame as one of the most influential humanist philosophers of the early Italian Renaissance. He was an astrologer, a reviver of Neoplatonism and the first translator of Plato's complete extant works into Latin. In an attempt to revive Plato's Academy, Ficino founded the Florentine Academy which influenced the Italian Renaissance and later, the direction of European philosophy. (*Translators' note.*)

burning fever and the same boundless longing as their master, in whose being the sacred fire burns. He himself points out indirectly, condemning the ingrate senators: 'Tis lack of kindly warmth they are not kind.' (2.2)

In the Painter's portrait, Timon displays features of supreme purity and simplicity:

POET: [...] what a mental power
This eye shoots forth! how big imagination
Moves in this lip! to the dumbness of the gesture
One might interpret. (1.1)

Yet, is this the portrait of someone spoiled by fate, or of a mystic who knows no sense of self? One can sense in him a tension akin to that of the bowstring that has not yet shot its arrow and vibrates while being stretched to breaking point. The Painter knows his craft, he saw what he needed to see, just like the Poet who comments on the painted figure: Timon is waiting – he is the embodiment of waiting for the epiphany that will designate him as the flawless incarnation of universal eros.

As Timon comes down in the world and his star is about to fall, there comes a moment when he, being in love and the source of love, will ask his fellow human beings, mirrors of the universe that they are, to hand back the additional splendor he once bestowed on them. Not a penny to his name, as he had in fact always wanted, Timon appeals to spiritual values –

especially those of Platonic love and friendship – to demonstrate his power.

Losing everything he had ever owned, he does not lose faith and does not allow himself to doubt the virtue of his “devotees”:

TIMON: And, in some sort, these wants of mine are crown'd,
That I account them blessings; for by these
Shall I try friends: you shall perceive how you
Mistake my fortunes; I am wealthy in my friends. (2.2)

Convinced that Timon-the-work-of-art, the one all members of the cult led by Eros had been zealously crafting, will not be abandoned and will not perish, but, on the contrary, will be consecrated in its full glory by such trials and tribulations, Timon-the-man experiences moments of intense emotions. Let us now compare the two fundamental moments when the “masterpiece” that had thus manifested itself through him is offered *in an act of completion* to his group of “devotees”.

The first moment takes place prior to Timon’s bankruptcy – the idol continues to be surrounded by the halo of ornaments that fetishize him and identifies himself with the image that his flatterers project upon him. Apemantus, the cynic, observes:

APEMANTUS: O you gods, what a number of
men eat Timon, and he sees 'em not! It grieves me
to see so many dip their meat in one man's blood;
and all the madness is, he cheers them up too. (1.2)

These words (reproachful and full of bile) describe an act of symbolic theophagy. The God communes with everyone; he is in all and all are in him. By way of this sublimitous moment, Timon ends up feasting on his own self; and his “devotees” tear off bits of him, or at least this seems to be the case. What is actually happening, though? This “God” is in fact only robbed of his all too worldly ornaments and nobody has a clue as to the delights of the love he believes he is sharing out. In fact, Timon’s priesthood is undermined by a shadow of infantilism; the artist feels, for a moment, as if he were a mere amateur. How come he is unable to spot the lie he has fallen victim to? Confusion drives him to imagine himself as a thaumaturge. An initiated and a founder of religions – what an amateur! It is painful to recall this scene from the perspective of its counterpart in Act 2, Scene 1.

The second “offertory” moment no longer takes place in the presence of the “devotees”. They disappear and send their servants to snatch the last rags covering the martyred body of their idol, transformed overnight into a piece of clay everyone can turn to dust. (The mere appearance of servants leads to a degradation of the ritual.) Timon can no longer deceive himself: his disciples have not actually abandoned him altogether: they simply proved themselves to be despicable and bloodthirsty creditors. And lo and behold, Timon is

offering himself up one last time. Does he do this only to drink the chalice of bitterness to the last drop? Is he partaking of the ultimate lesson in humility? Either way, his mortification is orgiastic.⁵ The genuine thaumaturge is about to emerge from within, and, as his act of birth, whips himself with fiery debasement.

We are now witnessing an inferior version of the “mystery” celebrated earlier with so much pomp. Timon understands that he is worth nothing in the eyes of others; all they want is his sacerdotal insignia because these can be sold on for cash:

TITUS' SERVANT: My lord, here is my bill.

LUCILIUS' SERVANT: Here's mine.

HORTENSIUS' SERVANT: And mine, my lord.

VARRO'S FIRST *and* SECOND SERVANTS: And ours, my lord.

PHILOTUS' SERVANT: All our bills.

TIMON: Knock me down with 'em: cleave me to the girdle.

LUCILIUS' SERVANT: Alas, my lord,-

⁵ His self-giving was also orgiastic. His unworthy disciples have often perceived this as a form of aggression, as a mode of possession carried out by the means of abandon. The senators, the most hypocritical of pharisees, were the first to be scandalized by this paradox-man:

It cannot hold; it will not.

If I want gold, steal but a beggar's dog,

And give it Timon, why, the dog coins gold.

If I would sell my horse, and buy twenty more

Better than he, why, give my horse to Timon,

Ask nothing, give it him, it foals me, straight,

And able horses. No porter at his gate,

But rather one that smiles and still invites

All that pass by. It cannot hold. (2.1)

TIMON: Cut my heart in sums.
TITUS' SERVANT: Mine fifty talents.
TIMON: Tell out my blood.
LUCILIUS' SERVANT: Five thousand crowns, my lord.
TIMON: Five thousand drops pays that.
What yours?--and yours?
[...] Tear me, take me [...]! (3.4)

And before making his exit, he proclaims:

TIMON: Burn, house! Sink, Athens! Henceforth hated be
Of Timon man and all humanity! (3.7)

Timon goes into exile and what the noble Athenian experiences is reminiscent of Kafka's 'hunger artist'.⁶ Both Timon and Kafka's character suffer from "amateurism" as long as they are triumphant, worshipped and have disciples or impresarios that limit their experience and coordinate their cult from behind the scenes; they seemingly inhabit unusual realms, being two rare, if not exceptional, figures. Their extraordinary nature, however, only manifests itself when everyone abandons them; and in both cases the extraordinary consists of their ability to pursue their unique destiny until the bitter end and to turn into perfect works of art.

They are both artists and in a sense also thaumaturges, because they insist on carving their

⁶ Citations from 'A Hunger Artist' are taken from: Franz Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Vintage Classics, 1999).

perfect masterpiece out of their very own flesh. They both approach their work in a predominantly negative way, by means of total deprivation, one opting for a physical variant, the other for a spiritual one. They “starve” themselves voluntarily, zealously, voluptuously and with total abandon, depriving themselves of the nourishment necessary for either the body or the soul. They are both accomplished technicians of “starvation”, but they transcend this immediate condition by rendering it absolute: the orgy of mortification can turn a mere maniac into a praiseworthy thaumaturge.

How long will the body survive – and where will it end up – when exalted by its own diminution alone? How long will the spirit prevail – and what will its destiny be – if only vivified by the act of its endless purging? Both Timon and Kafka’s artist crave perfection, and they are both apotheoses that destroy their own glory every step of the way – because “starvation”, like any *via negativa*, knows no limit and cannot be satisfied.

‘[D]uring his fast’ – Kafka writes – ‘the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food; the honor of his profession forbade it.’⁷ Honor does not allow Timon the slightest deviation from the masterpiece that is himself; Timon, the man-scourge,

⁷ Kafka, pp. 268-69.

discovers his own truth by way of negating the world. In the process of exposing the flaws of mankind, he finds that the absurd is grounded in the gratuitousness of evil – the latter being committed, from the beginning till the end of time, only by virtue of its own energies. Evil has no finality. It will be Timon who it would give it. Evil needs to be targeted and intensified, and human nature needs to follow its course until the final consequences and then to vanish.

TIMON: What is amiss plague and infection mend!
Graves only be men's works and death their gain! (5.1)

It is appropriate for the human seed to perish, so that the Spirit can regain its initial status:

TIMON: [...] all is oblique;
There's nothing level in our cursed natures,
But direct villany. Therefore, be abhorr'd
All feasts, societies, and throngs of men!
His semblable, yea, himself, Timon disdains:
Destruction fang mankind! (4.3)

Only the void is reminiscent of purity: 'my long sickness/ Of health and living now begins to mend,/ And nothing brings me all things' (5.2), Timon observes. And, indeed, soon he turns into the perfect masterpiece, beyond the realms of evil, desecration and wickedness.

Realizing that others cannot accede to nothingness following the dire path of “starvation”, he ironically recommends suicide as a shortcut:

TIMON: I have a tree, which grows here in my close,
[...] Tell my friends,
Tell Athens, in the sequence of degree
From high to low throughout, that who so please
To stop affliction, let him take his haste,
Come hither, ere my tree hath felt the axe,
And hang himself. I pray you, do my greeting. (5.2)

Of course, he is aware that no-one will take his advice, but being free from everyone and everything, he can take the liberty to play. Indeed, Timon is finally engaged in play; and for the first time in his life, he rises above the anxieties that torment him and even above his own freedom – since the game he is playing is the active contemplation of freedom. Prior to dissolving into nothingness, Timon arrives at a state of pure playfulness in which one is saved from one’s very self by fortuity.

The Kafkaesque hunger artist accomplishes himself by means of non-accomplishment, and Timon accomplishes himself by non-accomplishing the universe. This world, in which everything good is also useless, and where even statues have bad breath, must be hastened to embrace chaos. At first, the exterminator found refuge in the wilderness, aiming to behold the

world in a single glance and then strike at its core once,
and one time only, with no hesitation:

TIMON: Matrons, turn incontinent!

Obedience fail in children! slaves and fools,
Pluck the grave wrinkled senate from the bench,
And minister in their steads! to general filths
Convert o' the instant, green virginity,
Do 't in your parents' eyes! bankrupts, hold fast;
Rather than render back, out with your knives,
And cut your trusters' throats! bound servants, steal!
Large-handed robbers your grave masters are,
And pill by law. Maid, to thy master's bed;
Thy mistress is o' the brothel! Son of sixteen,
Pluck the lined crutch from thy old limping sire,
With it beat out his brains! (4.1)

Yet what is the point of exterminating people as long as they are but an abject fauna in the land of death? For the ritual of destruction to arrive at its unavoidable end, it suffices to simply let them be: the whore to remain a whore forever, the warrior a warrior, and the bandit a bandit.

Alcibiades, who did not devote himself to his own self as to a perfect work of art, can potentially attempt to 'swear against objects' (4.3) and to fulfil his oath by way of armed intervention. But can he possibly have a clue about the price true exterminators such as Timon, who had interiorised their destiny, have to pay? Timon tells him: 'Make large confusion; and, thy fury spent, / Confounded be thyself!' (4.3)

As in medieval morality plays, around Timon's cave a crowd of tempters start gathering: Banditti, a

Poet, a Painter, Senators, Apemantus, Flavius, Alcibiades. They keep enticing and urging him, each in their own way, with more or less goodwill, to bite from the forbidden fruit of deception, tolerance, love, forgiveness, etc. When it comes to his endeavors, Kafka's artist is encumbered in similar ways:

Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting? His public pretended to admire him so much, why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn't the public endure it?⁸

People no longer want to allow Timon to starve himself because they are afraid of his "starvation". Timon, however, is able to slip through these temptations and does not let himself coerced, not even when in Flavius he recognizes a just and loving man, a true "devotee" in accordance with his former wishes and aspirations.

Kafka's artist will deprive himself of the fruit of the earth until his body will no longer be any different from the bits of straw in his cage. Timon will relinquish all values of the spirit until his soul will inaugurate the empire of total deprivation. His paradise is emptiness itself. Used to always being the first and foremost, to

⁸ Kafka, p. 271.

being adored by the crowds, Timon will not resign himself to an inferior condition and will not be prepared to disappear in some wilderness. He settles in a cave in the woods near Athens, far enough for Timon-the-man not be inconvenienced by all sorts of uninvited guests, yet close enough for Timon-the-work-of-art to remain in the ongoing attention of Athenians.

Alcibiades will be his first messenger, as the thaumaturge produces his sword and has it sent to Athens:

TIMON: Be as a planetary plague, when Jove
Will o'er some high-vised city hang his poison
In the sick air: let not thy sword skip one. (4.3)

Timon's ambassadors to Athens will also include Phrynia and Timandra, carriers of the plague:

TIMON: Consumptions sow
 In hollow bones of man, [...]
 [...]There's more gold:
 Do you damn others, and let this damn you;
 And ditches grave you all! (4.3)

It will be Apemantus's turn to be tasked with the next mission:

APEMANTUS: What wouldst thou have to Athens?

TIMON: Thee thither in a whirlwind. If thou wilt,
 Tell them there I have gold. Look, so I have. [...]

APEMANTUS: [...] I'll say thou'st gold.
 Thou wilt be throng'd to shortly.
TIMON: Throng'd to!
APEMANTUS: Ay.
TIMON: Thy back, I prithee. (4.3)

In other words, Timon consents to be “surrounded”, and to give up the peace and quiet of his cave. Whereas the advertising placards hanging in the artist’s cage in Kafka’s short story gradually lose their impact, the news about Timon draws in more and more “visitors”. The three bandits appear, and Timon gives them gold together with this mandate:

TIMON: [...] to Athens go,
 Break open shops; nothing can you steal
 But thieves do lose it. Steal no less for this I give you,
 And gold confound you howsoe'er. Amen. (4.3)

Timon then instructs the Senators as follows: ‘thither come, / And let my grave-stone be your oracle.’ (5.1) Timon-the-man is ready to decline, whilst Timon-the-embodiment-of-truth does not admit oblivion.

In his agony, Kafka’s artist is troubled by the thought that his performance could lose its importance due to the inattention of others:

The fine placards grew dirty and illegible, they were torn down; the little notice board showing the number of fast days achieved, which at first was changed carefully every day, had long stayed at the same figure, for after the first few weeks even this small task

seemed pointless to the staff; and so the artist simply fasted on and on, as he had once dreamed of doing, and it was no trouble to him, just as he had always foretold, but no one counted the days, no one, not even the artist himself, knew what records he was already breaking, and his heart grew heavy.⁹

Timon, in turn, has his “notice board” for potential posthumous visitors: his epitaph carved into stone for eternity. Shakespeare intended that the first person to be aware of Timon’s testament should be illiterate, and this is far from being an ironic turn. On the contrary, the soldier unable to read will print the message received on the sepulchral rock in wax. In this way, by way of *multiplication*, the traces of the great masterpiece that was Timon begins to spread throughout the world.

Yet in death, the two hunger artists part ways: the body is helpless but the spirit is unshakeable. Kafka’s character admits to a deficiency at the root of his starvation: the absence of taste as far as food he could have consumed is concerned. Yet the problem is not only the food but also himself; he starved himself because he was unable to find food to his liking: ‘If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.’¹⁰ He did not appreciate or like anything of what he had rejected; his perfection constitutes, ultimately, another facet of failure.

Timon, on the other hand, deprived himself of everything he had liked too much, because it was only

⁹ Kafka, p. 276.

¹⁰ Kafka, p. 277.

THE FACES OF RICHARD III

For Richard III, exile begins in exile – the former being inscribed into his very birth; his physical form carries the mark of exclusion to such an extent that the illusion of emerging into a world that resembles him is not possible. His first observation is in fact about his dissimilarity with everyone and everything around him:

GLOUCESTER: But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, [...]
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity. (1.1)

As long as ‘the winter of [...] discontent’, the ‘clouds’, the ‘bruised arms’, ‘stern alarms’ and ‘dreadful marches’ ruled the place, he was immersed in an inner torpor, as if he had not actually been aware of his difference from others. The ‘glorious summer’ of peace and the mild harp chords heralding peaceful delights to come, however, have awoken his genuine state and revealed his condition of *outsider*.

As Gloucester will enjoy an undeniable advantage over being Richard, the king, in the battle against the world, but his resentful conscience as an exile makes him study – *in other ways* and with an exceptional rigor – the laws of the land he considers himself flung to despite his will. He finds himself forced to study causes and effects like a newcomer would study the grammar of an unknown language, despite its native speakers ignoring it and letting intruders like himself partake in the privilege of scrutinizing its mechanisms and then intervening, like to barbarian knowers, at its core.

In order to allow his extraordinary spontaneity to unfold in a “borrowed language”, he understands that he must first become a flawless “grammarian”: Gloucester will get this far in realizing his plans only because he had benefitted from this initial lesson in rigor. He will ultimately renounce it, both due to the boredom triggered by his own successes, and a deeper and subtler desire to put the imposed rule to the test

and proclaim the supremacy of spontaneity over the system (in this case, Power). In this way, he will distance himself from Buckingham, the main accomplice in his rapid ascension to the throne. He will betray him and pit himself against him, yet not kill him as one might have expected — this being for him neither a weakness nor a mistake, but a deliberate challenge of an unwritten “law” (of scheming and conspiracy), which he had observed so far but now wants to balance with the wreckless exercise of his free will. In Richard III’s acts of power, method and anti-method are intertwined, *the same* imbalance being both their strength and weakness, elevating and destroying him in equal measure.

It suffices for those who come into contact with Richard, to simply consent — in a moment of fear, inattention or confusion — and thus be affected by him. As a result, they find themselves unable to prevent their own downfall; they sink into the mire of their own darkness and reach the final threshold of self-destruction. Lady Anne represents the most violent and spectacular case of caving in, but neither Buckingham, nor Hastings nor Elisabeth is spared this terrible downward spiral. Gloucester creates much havoc because he is simultaneously contaminated from within and without: Richard limits himself to only help the Richard-seed sprout in others and then watches the repulsive crop appear at an astonishing speed. The

malady spreads at the same time to both the edges and foundations of the beings it attacks, ruling out even the slightest glimmer of hope. Richard III's hatred of others appears under the paradoxical guise of a need to fashion everyone into his own image! Consequently, his powers of seduction, penetration and, ultimately annulment of any individual alterity are fuelled by a secret compulsion. He turns into everyone's bad conscience, parasitizing everyone; he feels "at home" only in these devastated worlds, surrendered to exile and dissimilarity, doomed to nothingness. His country is made up by those who conform to his model of "deformity", basically those who are ill with the same illness that is him. He settles at the epicenter of power, wherefrom his pariah and alien energies cultivate the frightening and efficient force of calamity.

The innate dictator (Richard III amply demonstrates the potential existence of such a specimen) is characterized by the fact that he always starts the battle for power with horrors and excesses typical for those who had long exercised it already. Beginning with the end, systematically overturning the natural order of things, compressing time to the maximum and possessed by a genuine reductive demiurgy, the dictator wants to appear surrounded by the halo of fate's violent prestige and seem as implacable as destiny:

KING RICHARD III: All unavoids is the doom of destiny.
QUEEN ELIZABETH: True, when avoided grace makes destiny.
(4.4)

This tyrant initially dominates utilizing the means others readily make available to him; their instinct for conservation – triggered by their delirious fear of suffering – becomes his most precious ally. What follows is a sort of bizarre collective amnesia, accompanied by a radical weakening of critical faculties (as the impact of tyranny is extremely sudden, if not always longlasting), facilitates the identification of an aura of – subsequently imposed – legitimacy as an agent of his ascension.

The sole instance of “ingenuity” this tyrant displays is the lack of distinct qualities prior to the act of assuming power. Not having inner resources to evolve according to his new rank, he will discover instead how easy it is to diminish others, and then unavoidably turn to monomania: he will diminish, abbreviate, limit, shrink, restrain and decrease, shorten and restrict, circumscribe and resume with a rare passion. Being an accomplished social miniaturist, he will only tolerate by his side those thus reduced to this *debilitated* state.

Therefore, it is sufficient for Richard III to despise people and to foreground this contempt by way of reductive actions, in order to make of them

what he pleases. Those who forbid themselves to carry out evil see in others a sort of limit they seek to observe; those already committed to the path of evil tend to see an invitation to transgress this very limit.

Gloucester acts in a ferocious yet non-chaotic way. He is impulsive and spontaneous, but not capricious or disorganized, and in any event, acts without the fierceness of the fanatic or the unbalanced. The calm and relentless virulence of his deeds derives from the detachment of their planning and execution. While hatching the plan for his filthy exploits, he is already savouring their impact and anticipating their consequences, in order to thus defuse their potential shock effect and to retain his total freedom once realizing these plans.

On the scene of his inner theatre, Richard III is always a step ahead of the others. Thus, he passes through the bloodbath of reality (which he has caused, more so than anyone else) as if through a second, mimetic reality, as if through the quasi-fictitious and ancillary reflection of distant dreams, conceived and lived out on the initial and secret stage of his imagination. Conjured up by Richard, the image of Clarence-already-dead is superimposed upon Clarence-still-alive, and the former seems to enslave the latter: this is at least the way we are likely to perceive this turn, and Gloucester does not see it otherwise, either. It is only a matter of time until the

original gets diffused into a duplicate, and their features swap places.

For the duration of the plot, the *character* of Richard III makes us identify with his gaze, despite failing to establish, however, any empathy between him and us as spectators.

As an avid spectator of his own self, Richard III finds plenty of opportunities to applaud himself, and the less others enthuse him, the more he takes pleasure in reacting to his own deeds. People are all of the same kidney, a bunch of noddies fooled by fear of which they get their mandatory daily allowance without ever showing dissent and which transforms them into the most pathetic and boring creatures imaginable. Standing out as Gloucester, he appears to remain his own person who is able to trigger a degree of wonder and curiosity. One could argue that he is in an ongoing and close competition with his ability to marvel at himself, and that many of his criminal excesses were carried out with the sole aim of stimulating his triumphal joy. When, as Richard III, he finds that he is no longer capable to stir the interest of Richard III, he realizes that only defeat and death are lying in wait for him. Fear, of an all too human and unifying sort, takes possession of him as soon as the spectator in him ceases to be passionate about the actor that once used to be Gloucester. The famous line: 'A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!' (5.4), heralds the end of play on the inner stage of this king-jester and, implicitly, on the stage of history, too. It

is damaging for Richard to think about himself in ways different from an eternal he-as-other. Being a high class “prostitute”, who does not shy away from any role that could forward his cause or that could simply tempt him by way of its unusual nature, he feels lost when the perfect simulations he had been indulging in suddenly fail to attract him. Since he is by nature disinterested in everything that he can already do, and hence pushed far beyond his practical interests, it is only the impossible that can emerge as the sole suitable alternative. Gloucester gets fairly quickly to a point where he faces his limitations: free of everyone else, because he does not like anyone, he unexpectedly falls into the nightmarish captivity of a sentimental intimacy with his own self. Deep inside, a muffled voice whispers to him that if he wants to survive and endure, he has to embrace not merely difference (that he had idolized, including the initial bad luck wherefrom he had carved his destiny), but also – or, rather, *especially* – his poor, barren and feeble ego. This was the very emblem of a generic humanity that he had almost instantly turned his back on, considering it imposed upon him and temporary in comparison to himself, the great master and exile. His terrible and disgusting grandeur, which had voluptuously nurtured his vanity up until he was caught in the irreducible trap of the human (animal) within himself, is suddenly reduced to disgust. It is the disgust at being unable to find anything, under layers of so many perfect disguises and at the very core of his

being (that he imagined to be *different* and indefinable), except for the initial speck of dust and saliva, common with everyone, that he would have never acknowledged to be stemming from. Fallen from the heights of his *outsider's* conscience, that does not have to account for anything and to anyone since it has no peers and equals, here he is, finding himself in horror as an offspring crouching under the burden of his inheritance that amounts to nothing. Here he is, recognising himself, in frozen stupefaction, as a lost soul in this universal anonymity, and yelping bitterly, like everyone else, after a drop of love that could elevate him above his miserable condition:

KING RICHARD III: I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
And if I die, no soul shall pity me.
Nay, wherefore should they? -- Since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself? (5.5)

Richard's fall brings no redemption, it does not open up a pathway to an external light by carving through its own live flesh; anything that he discovers while looking beyond his simulations only traps him further. Naturally, he should love himself more in order to hold out and manage to carry on with his battle for the throne, like his enemies do. But he is no longer capable of feeling what he still feels he should feel in order to stand a chance at salvation. For him, feelings have always been agents of de-cerebration.

Now that he is being alerted by his own whining that they are hovering about attempting to break through his carcass of emptiness, as Gloucester, he seals himself off from any potential assault of affect once and for all. Reacting in any other way would be beyond his means; the limitations constraining him make him feel ashamed only of having the need for feelings, but not having the feelings as such. What he can hold on to, until the bitter end, is lucidity. He who is hated with vengeance by everyone is protected and defended by illusion, and the repulsion he is all too aware that he inspires, acts on his occasionally faltering mind like a tough agent of non-delusion:

KING RICHARD III: Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack. I love myself. Wherefore? for any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O, no! alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself!
I am a villain: yet I lie. I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter. (5.5)

He can live with the doom but not the repentance, surrounded by its halo and cortege of expiatory feelings:

KING RICHARD III: My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.

Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree
Murder, stem murder, in the direst degree;
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! guilty! (5.5)

Richard III acknowledges his 'guilt', but his trembling is cold, devoid of affective resonance, an empty delirium. The vision showed him what he actually is when it comes to origins: that he is made of clay and all the atrocities he had committed are in fact grotesque affectations and bloody mystifications of someone eager to conceal an essential aspect of truth. This vision, of a spectral and premonitory night, is contested with one last effort, bordering on the desperate rhetoric of the defeated and thrown over board like any old ruse: 'Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe.' (5.6)

Disgusted with being only what it is, villaneous conscience opts rather to be nothing. For fear of not lying to itself, it lies, and for fear of not being wrong, it gets it wrong every time. Having missed his moment to be humble, to learn anew and to accept his humility, Richard III excludes himself from the last – abject yet still alive – refuge of his existence. Hopping about like a clown and awkwardly parading up and down just as the blade is about to cut his throat, he is already crushed into non-differentiation.

MACBETH – THE FAILED CONDOTTIERE

We must not mistake Macbeth for the stereotypical usurper of regicide plays. The murder of Duncan – at his hands – is not just a bloody deed in the long line of struggle for royal power. Macbeth commits a ritual murder: in the sacred realm of this murder scene, Duncan embodies divinely legitimized power while Macbeth embodies power legitimized by destroying a divinely anointed king. On the one hand, we see the functions of power as manifestations of the divine (the anointed king is the instrument of God's will on earth); on the other, we recognize the power that results from exercising power devoid of transcendence, but manifesting itself as the transcendence for those under its pressure. We witness, therefore, the fall of power from its sacred heights into the steppes of the profane haunted by restlessness.

By eliminating Duncan, the Scottish Thane shakes the very foundations of this world and strikes

the constancy at the heart of it. He pours 'the sweet milk of concord into hell' and 'confounds all unity on earth' (4.3); to pursue his mad dream, HECATE predicts: 'He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear/ He hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear' (3.5). He reverses the moral order: 'all things foul would wear the brows of grace' (4.3); he destroys the last trace of stability when he claims the throne by sheer force: 'none can call our power to account' (5.1). He breaks up "the banquet" and banishes happiness from the face of the earth: both for him and for everyone else, life becomes, henceforth, just a bitter survival.

Macbeth does not have the passion for power, but the instinct for it. He wants it without desiring it and he craves for it with a craving that knows neither delight nor desire. The temptation of the crown, in his eyes, turns having it into a necessity. Governed by temptation, every moment of his life appears like another door shut on him; giving in to temptation reduces his fate to a never-ending line of forbidden possibilities:

MACBETH: I had else been perfect,
Whole as the marble [...]
As broad and general as the casing air:
But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears. (3.4)

In leaping straight to the top level of power, Macbeth's means of getting there refute the validity of every previous step he climbed lawfully. His final step is a jump into the abyss, into the impossible. In order to reach the top of the edifice he desires, but which remains otherwise inaccessible, he resorts to destroying it. Despite the fact that it was precisely its glory and majesty that fuelled him in the first place! Torn apart, Macbeth carries the cross of a double punishment.

Once dead, the anointed king acquires, in the eyes of the murderer, more divine and rare qualities. His figure retreats further into the realm of the ideal and inaccessible: what in life earned Duncan a high place, in death earns him undisturbed peace. Every aspect of his existence is exemplary. It is this model — of man and king — that finally crushes Macbeth: he envies his victim, fully aware that he will never inherit Duncan's divinely anointed right to power. His lineage is regicide, and he is heir to murder. In this sense, he understands his own flaw: stealing the divinely bestowed crown did not lend divinity to his claim to power, but cancelled it. The divine grace of the sacrificed king cannot be transferred onto his executioner, and the graces that made Duncan's glory cannot be reaffirmed in his assassin heir.

As a result, Macbeth becomes the very embodiment of (this) trauma. The murder of the divinely ordained king stigmatises Macbeth and banishes him

from the realm of humanity, condemning him to never sleep and never forget. Henceforth, Macbeth will live haunted by the ghost of his former self:

Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast,-- [...]
'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.' (2.2)

We enter thus into the manic, neverending guilt of the one who takes upon himself history's guilt, becoming its name and face. The bed in which Duncan is murdered becomes the stone on which ministers of a new world order conduct their sacrifice. Its historical emergence appears to be located in the critical transition from the Dark Ages into the dawn of the Renaissance.¹¹ Seen through the filter of this epoch, Macbeth – the man who is not so much the exponent but the instrument of this new world order – announces it and opens the way for it, embodies “the barbarian”. Under a guise or another, “the barbarian” always appears to play a role in history overthrows, both as ferment of the crisis and human vehicle for the transition from the old to the new world order. His role

¹¹ My reading focuses on Shakespeare's character Macbeth not on the historical Macbeth, of *Holinshed's Chronicles* that inspired him, who reigned between 1056 and 1057.

is not to bear the meanings of the world order he portends, but he is the fertile soil for the catastrophic germinations he unleashes; he is neither the sower nor the seed, but the wild wind that scatters 'the seeds of [the] Time' (1.3) to come. In this sense, Macbeth only partially resembles the people of the new world order. His instinct is that of the Renaissance – for his instinct is above personal necessity – but his heart is stuck in the dark Middle Ages.

By being too close to the model of divinely anointed right to power, he realizes the enormity of his transgression:

There 's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of. (2.3)

It is these 'lees' that contain the seeds of the time about to be born. Macbeth's crime gains ritualistic value simply because the collapse of the old world and its order coincided with his dagger strike. The Thane seized the opportunity, lived through the crisis, and served it. This does not mean, however, that he is the one who caused the collapse. However, he takes upon himself this epoque-making collapse. He fashions himself as its maker. In reality, he was only the "actor" chosen to carry out the rites of the collapse: 'a poor

player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage /
And then is heard no more.' (5.5)

We see him robing himself in the fate that ruled him (without him assuming his flaw, the play would not be a tragedy; instead, it would amount to a panegyric to the modern tyrant). We see him identifying himself with this need when everything in him opposes it. Macbeth is a shy condottiere, a failed Renaissance man. Only a "barbarian" would make a full claim over his spirit. His soul is too "reactionary": it yearns too much for what it destroyed. He possesses the haughtiness for destruction and when his victory, one exclusively negative, tears him apart, he is not able to save himself.

Is a condottiere torn by passeistic nostalgia even imaginable? The new *homo politicus* of the Renaissance would not recognize himself in Macbeth and for good reasons, too. The cruel Thane does not truly know how to be what he has become. He becomes a prisoner of the world order he destroys and desires precisely what condemns him: the legitimacy of the divinely ordained power. His entire being is impregnated with the scent of this dying world order and dizzy with its incense. Macbeth-the-destroyer is in fact the most faithful believer in the world order he wrestles with and which he eventually brings to destruction. Its sacredness is smashed into smithereens and its destroyer regrets its loss, he mourns it; he continues, obstinately, to look at

himself in the pieces of this broken looking-glass and to crave its now lost magic.

Indeed, Macbeth is 'yet but young in deed' (3.4). Despite their historical proximity, there is an astounding difference between him and Ezzelino Dá Romano, the precursor of the condottieres who, Jacob Burckhardt writes, earned his fame during the thirteenth century for being 'a usurper of the most peculiar kind'.¹² He is, by no means, the first usurper ruler. While 'the conquests and usurpations which had hitherto taken place in the Middle Ages rested on real or pretended inheritance and other such claims, or else were effected against unbelievers and excommunicated persons', in the case of Ezzelino, Burckhardt argues, 'for the first time the attempt was openly made to found a throne by wholesale murder and endless barbarities, by the adoption, in short, of any means with a view to nothing but the end pursued.'¹³

Though usurping tyrants abounded in thirteenth-century Italy, none lived up to Ezzelino Dá Romano and Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor several times excommunicated, who ruled as if having usurped himself, thus exposing the degradation from within of doctrine of the absolute power of the divinely

¹² Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 3.

¹³ Jacob Burckhardt, pp. 3-4.

anointed king. The circumstances in which the usurpations occurred were so varied, Burckhardt comments, that it is impossible not to see in all these events the strong hand of predestination.¹⁴ In Shakespeare's words, 'the time is out of joint' (1.5). The line belongs to Hamlet. It is important to note that the tragedy of the Danish Prince, too, starts with power being usurped from its sacred, high state (as held by Hamlet's father) and dragged down to a base, profane state (as held by Claudius, Hamlet's uncle). This, too, was a process which began with murder. Its ending? Fortinbras, a man firmly grounded in his time, the absolute warrior, the *condottiere* sui-generis and the "good cousin" of Machiavelli's Prince has the final word after Hamlet's 'the rest is silence' (5.2).

The world is out of joint and these displacements and mutations anticipate the modern age. As Burckhardt puts it, it is in the tyrannies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that 'for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe [...]. The foundation of the system was and remained illegitimate, and nothing could remove the curse which rested upon it.'¹⁵

Macbeth lives this curse with unimaginably high intensity. It is hardgoing when he finds himself

¹⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, pp. 2, 9.

¹⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, pp. 2, 10.

fatherless and a child belonging to no age: he is neither a Medieval man, as I previously argued, because of his Renaissance instinct, nor a Renaissance man, because his desire and beliefs remain quintessentially medieval. Once he has taken the step, that is, committed the murder, there is no way back.

In *Macbeth* we encounter either idealism at its zenith or the harshest power praxis. The genius of Shakespeare is to transcend a simplistic interpretation of this dichotomy: it is not the confrontation between two types of rule that we are invited to experience. Instead, when he juxtaposes the quasi-mythical and exhausting maturity of one and the other's embryonic state, and compresses them into one destiny, we experience their extremities to breaking point. The consequence of a history cycle running its full course during a human lifetime, thus circumscribed by its temporal limitations, instead of gradually unfolding and developing over several generations, is the sudden fall from prim(ev)al vitality and exuberance to decadence and doubt within the short span of a day, an hour, a moment. Macbeth's life is, essentially, such a moment.

Macbeth is set during these early hours when destinies strive to assert their absolute individuality and independence, playing their superindividuality. Macbeth (and by extension, via others like him, the whole of humanity) conquers through violence the boundless realm of freedom. He discovers, overnight,

that there is no limit to what man is allowed to do – by virtue of the fact that he exercises his free will. Like any action that is boundary free, it eventually meets the boundless infinite. The freedom that Macbeth assumes is the freedom of the void. The Thane is the ignorant, unconscious instrument of free will and its potent destructiveness. As a consequence, he pays for the historic transgression he commits with his own decline as a human being: from titanic impulse (he is reduced) to stuntedness: To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.' (2.2)

The same inner-voice that spurred Macbeth to murder:

MACBETH: Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4)

implores later, in an absurd plea, the resurrection of the murdered king: 'Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!' (2.2)

Macbeth knows not how to be whole by himself; he still needs an ideal, a model, a Father. Hasn't Duncan "adopted" him when saying: 'I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing'? (1.4) In this sense, Macbeth's regicide may be perceived as a parricide (as he himself may feel it) but a pointless one at that given that the deed cuts all links

between the murder and the murderer. Striking down Duncan, his Father figure, makes Macbeth all the more aware that he has and will have – in terms of power inheritance – no Father. His tragedy becomes thus his inadaptability to the consequences of the transgression whose instrument he is. As a result, when Macbeth claims the crown, instead of exulting in its power, he is profoundly shaken by the realization of the extent of his culpability; the world itself becomes a gigantic mirror that reflects his guilt:

MACBETH: Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (2.2)

Once a murderer, always a murderer is the burden Macbeth has to bear. Murder, too, has its own inner laws that govern it: there is no deed whose memory can be erased and no action that does not cause a reaction. Before plunging the dagger, Macbeth appears ready to accept the ultimate consequence of murder – hell – but not the chain of determinant consequences that leads to it:

MACBETH: [...] that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (1.7)

To an extent, Macbeth is afraid by the trap he sets himself. In his initial hesitation we can foresee how Macbeth will be destroyed by fear by the end of the play:

MACBETH: [...] that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. (1.7)

It is, indeed, the 'blow' which Macbeth feared that contained both the beginning and the end – but not in the way he hoped for. Once the murder committed, time changes course: Macbeth's inner existential time and the world's time, where external events belong, part ways for good. Macbeth's time is stopped, locked within; the world's time, on the other hand, continues its course unperturbed and indifferent. Becoming dies for and in Macbeth: there is a sense that the entire play, for him, is nothing but the vortex of the moment of his murder dilated to universal dimensions. This dilation is both parodic and nightmarish because Macbeth does not move in life beyond this moment of rupture – the only movement is the growth in the intensity of his negative ecstasy, that is, the enormity of his crime. The murders that follow are exasperating variations of his primal murder: one and the same murder in perpetual, delirious expansion. The fast paced sequence of events

in the play does not contradict the fact that all are locked in this unique moment in time, quite the opposite. In this sense, they are not individual stages of evolution but mark different degrees of intensity and as such only mimic the logic of plot progression. The dice have been thrown and there is no way back, as the line reminds us: 'what's done is done' (3.2); no surprises in store. The play has practically finished with the murder of Duncan. What follows is the bacchanale of the irreversible.

When Macbeth challenges fate 'come fate into the list. / And champion me to the utterance!' (3.1), he knows that there is no choice, that he is a prisoner, with no possibility of escape, of his own destiny: 'They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, / But, bear-like, I must fight the course' (5.7). All there is left to him is the illusion of progress, one which only translates into the reality of his inner devastation, the negative ecstasy that devours him: 'Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts / Cannot once start me.' (5.5)

Murder seemed to be, at first, the necessary rite to access power. Afterwards, it was the only means to avoid conflict: 'We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it: / She'll close and be herself [...]' (3.2) This is his first step into his fixist trance. Inaugurating the reign in which conflict rules, the failed condottiere longs for unattainable peace: 'To be thus is nothing; / But to be safely thus.' (3.1)

Trully desiring something means desiring it against all and all odds. Macbeth bears the curse of *to have* which poisons *to be*. He exists only to the extent to which he fights against the others. Murder in order to avoid conflict (as in the case of Banquo's murder) becomes an inevitable casualty in the extermination of Macduff's clan: 'I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er'. (3.4)

'Even till destruction sicken' (4.1), Macbeth seems to be overcome by *furor teutonicus*: the primal, ritual murder is followed by generalised murder. A person killed by your hand or by your order can haunt your mind and darken your days. What about thousands of murders? Macbeth shares with us the advantages of statistics in conscience affairs. The murderer hopes to anonymise his crime through abuse and universalising it: what name and face bears the murder of ten, fifteen, twenty thousands? The one who feared ghosts invokes the darkness of eternal night:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! (3.2)

Macbeth can only be placated by solitude: he has to be the last earthling; for him, dying like anyone else is

insufficient, not to mention, uncertain. It could mean – perhaps not to die at all! First and foremost, he has to make sure that people’s memories disappear, and he does that by eliminating all witnesses: ‘Send out more horses; skirr the country round; / Hang those that talk of fear.’ (5.3)

At the utmost limit of negative ecstasy, Macbeth’s desire for death (to be precise, for annihilation) manifests itself as a desire to take the entire world down with him: ‘I gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish the estate o’ the world were now undone.’ (5.5) There is no longer a difference between the obsession with universal crime and the fascination with self-erasure. In order for the tyrant to be able to succumb, he has to kill himself in each and every other human being; such an “ambition” infallibly points to the passion for nothingness as the origin of the instinct for power.

Smashing the religious framework of life and eliminating divine intent from the passage of time, led at the dawn of the Renaissance to the emergence of a new “divinity” on the horizon of history: terror, as the entelechy of power. In *Macbeth* (where the spirit of the Middle Ages is still quite clearly felt), terror is imbued with the subjectivity of the individual and one can sense the inner confusion and contradictions of the individual. At this juncture, it has markedly personal

psychological undertones, depending on the tyrant's mood and impulses at a given moment in time.

As we have seen above, the divine overdetermination of the possessor of power was followed by his self-determination (this is a symptom of crisis, conveyed in detail by the Thane). This precarious self-determination appears as a first, misleading, stage of another overdetermination in which the divine is replaced with some code or other pertaining to the operation of domination. The code outstrips the individual and is objectified by way of the "system". "Post-Renaissance" tyrants can only hold on to power on condition that they observe and never contradict the imperatives of the code. Ultimately, Macbeth has a destiny of his own; soon, however, only the system will be left with a destiny.

An essential difference between these two models of overdetermination lies in the relationship between power and its privileges. Medieval-Macbeth insists on gaining power for the sake of the wealth he can thereby access; he wants "something" for "something else". Renaissance-Macbeth should crave power for its own sake, and to find absolute satisfaction in the very fact of holding it. Macbeth-the-Barbarian intertwines these two tendencies; he feels attracted to them yet he also despises them one by one. He is the man of crisis and of transition.

His power de-moralizes the world, without consciously preparing it for the a-moralism of another age though. He asserts his conduct as an illegitimate sovereign as follows: 'For mine own good, / All causes shall give way.' (3.4) Macbeth guides us towards the era of mistrust: 'There's not a one of them but in his house / I keep a servant feed.' (3.4) His eyes see everything. His hand can fall on anyone. Because he fails to be a demiurge, he compensates by being the exterminator: 'It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood.' (3.4)

Yet the prospect of living in a country where no-one else lives, appears to be disconcerting for this shy condottiere. He committed so many horrific deeds and ended up trampling over everything only to delight himself with the halo of everyone's veneration... What he obtained is nowhere near what he had initially desired. Contemplating the desolation of his vast dominions, Macbeth realizes that there is no space for him *there*, either. The time has not yet come for the custodian of power to want to (jubilantly) become the sole inhabitant of his empire, despite the presence of a suitable landscape and despite the scene being set for this purpose:

ROSS: Alas, poor country!

Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave; where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;

Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy; the dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who; and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken. (4.3)

II

Like her husband, Lady Macbeth is a split personality; however, unlike him, she does not rejoice in this duality and deliberately refuses to acknowledge it. Yielding to it in some way or other, appears to her as a form of weakness and an unforgivable carelessness. In her actions, thoughts and feelings, she takes pleasure in the firmness and abstraction of the straight and narrow path that helps her to avoid her own convolutions. Thus, she does not really endorse the Witches (these creatures hailing from an ambiguous, frontier-zone, and hence two-faced), or while away the time thinking about them; she only takes their prophecies into account as and when they confirm her own secret urges. Lady Macbeth only needs herself and what lies within her in order to become who she really wants to become. Her invocation addressed to the spirits of evil reflects her intention to eliminate

ambivalence from her mind, as well as the decision to overcome any inner conflict (especially the fundamental clash between one's temper and anti-temper) by a violent amputation of one of its components:

LADY MACBETH: Come, come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! (1.5)

Inner divide is "solved" through the means of a "violation", of an artifice that, rather than suppressing once and for all the beneficial leanings of her character, represses them into a seemingly inaccessible zone, whilst bringing them to the surface in a state heightened by harmful accents to which she subordinates them. The perpetuation of this state of self-inflicting violence and "negative moral purism" is conditioned upon ongoing *wakefulness*; this fierce lady will not allow herself a single moment of respite, not even a passing evasion or compensatory digression without running the risk of being swallowed by the

very forces (such as pity, remorse, kindness) that she is so adamant to disregard. She will remain unassailable as long as she subjects herself to her own autobiographical fiction. Those who want to mess up her configuration have to slip in a parenthesis, a curve or an ellipsis into her intentionally straight existence; they have to introduce dreaming! Lady Macbeth does not dream at all, she is steadfast in her extreme wakefulness, and she does not want to even know about what it might mean to come back, from wherever one would be coming back at a given point. Each step is final, and cancels out any form of return.

Entirely different in this respect from his wife, Macbeth finds enough resources, even in the midst of the greatest horror, to dream – if about nothing else, then, in Jan Kott's words – about an ultimate crime that could put an end to all crimes ever committed. Lady Macbeth, who is familiar with the danger inherent in the comforting caresses or fantasies that people tend to offer themselves, rejects the temptation of salvation like a futile illusion. She concludes that the only thing that exists – for now and for all eternity – is the perfect crime, and that nothing can remove this from the mind of either killers or chroniclers. To her, the idea of comfortless living comes as natural as breathing while being alive. The assassin's wife wants to appear unperturbed at all times, and makes use of all the means within her power to invest these horrific acts

with a degree of "placidity". She prepares the drink that will put the pages to sleep as if she was brewing a cup of tea, and then rings the bell (in a manner parodistically reminiscent of the enthronement) to let Macbeth know that it is time to act. She acts in a sort of *paroxysmal monotony*, owing to the fact that she hopes to obtain in this way an additional stability and boldness that her partner obviously lacks. Each and every one of her lines could be preceded by an imperative yet neutral "must!" Lady Macbeth separates the wheat from the chaff, and things are either back of white. In this matter she is, in a psychological sense, a Manichaeian. There are two and only two colors, and one "has to" get imbued with the one that suits. She rejects nostalgia, together with any other state of "chiaroscuro", whereas Macbeth, the "reactionary", besotted with everything he himself had destroyed, the hopeless dreamer who craves the bygone prestige of divine power, is constantly drunk with nostalgia! What can possibly unite these two people? He is in a constant contradiction with the situation he finds himself in; she is always immersed in the situation itself. He is wandering about a world devoid of a solid core. She is the very center of an intensely arid world. He oscillates between peak and abyss; she erects bridges over the abyss without ever looking into it. He is in a constant state of shaking; she is mocking his fears yet also assuming them at the same time! This is the situation

where the two partners most probably find one another. Lady Macbeth, attempting to cure her husband's fear, joins in his game. She adopts his fears and attempts to point out how unfounded they are. In case he is too afraid to grab the dagger, she will do so for him, in case he has no courage to smear the grooms' faces with blood, so the responsibility of the crime befalls them, she will do so herself:

LADY MACBETH: Infirm of purpose!

Give me the daggers. The sleeping, and the dead,
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood,
That fears a painted devil. (2.2)

In order to save 'the helpless child' from his bad dreams, the good "mother" wrestles with the phantoms brought to life by his deranged imagination. Lady Macbeth plays the game of being Macbeth, so that she can later insist that he plays being Lady Macbeth in order to thus become, one again, 'whole as the marble' (3.4):

LADY MACBETH: He that's coming

Must be provided for; and you shall put
This night's great business into my despatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come,
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

MACBETH: We will speak further.

LADY MACBETH: Only look up clear;

To alter favor ever is to fear.
Leave all the rest to me. (1.5)

Were Macbeth afraid of death, she'd immediately pierce through her own chest, only to be able to tell him, while dying: "It doesn't hurt". But Macbeth is afraid of something else: madness. This fanatic of the irreversible loses himself whenever the spectre of dementia comes near him. Yet the Thane is no coward: 'What man dare, I dare'. (3.4)

In his being, he can sustain a destructible body and a destructive consciousness: in this sense, predestination suits him. His negative ecstasy makes the total annihilation of his body possible; moreover, it beseeches such a treatment. Yet madness is only seemingly a form of total destruction. It retains the pattern of what it destroys and, feeding itself from the latter's substance, actually turns it into something eternal. Thus, it takes the image of a deadly and dreadful immortality, because in its tight circle the irreparable stays irreparable, torture consisting of the illusion that repair is possible: the illusion of reversibility concealing both a trap and a punishment. Macbeth is afraid of Macbeth-the-Madman, who will try for a million times to step back, to return to the moment prior to the killing of Duncan, and who will then kill the latter over and over again until the bitter end. Madness for him means the eternal return of the moment that sealed his destiny in such a cursed way. Madness is a perpetual fall into madness - the eternity

of the moment that triggers and justifies it. This is the reason why it constitutes the visible reflection of a doomed immortality, of an unavoidable torment, of torture by way of “the original sin” continuously repeated and reconstituted as if it were the actual *first time*. Macbeth hopes to grow in his negative ecstasy until his dis-solution, until the chalice of his life will blow to smithereens and he will be annihilated for good. In dementia, however, one continues to exist as if being locked away in a horrible eternity cell. Macbeth’s fear of madness is above all an abhorrence of immortality. As Lichtenberg observed: ‘To *live* when you do not want to is *dreadful*, but it would be even more *terrible* to be *immortal* when you did not want to be’.¹⁶ More than two centuries earlier, Macbeth let out this strangled cry:

If charnel-houses and our graves must send
Those that we bury back, our monuments
Shall be the maws of kites. (3.4)

Or, earlier:

better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy (3.2)

¹⁶ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1990).

Lady Macbeth does not ignore the threats concerning her husband. We hear her warn him repeatedly that there are 'deeds' that 'must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad.' (2.2) In keeping with her role, however, she deepens these in his stead. In secret and without witnesses, she experiences Macbeth's madness in order to then point out to him (like she did in the case of the crime), the futility of any fear. "Straight" Lady Macbeth will never return from this daring expedition into the realm of dementia: for the first time ever, the demonstration surpasses her.

We note that Macbeth has learned – by way of a prolonged exercise of his "illness" – to find his way back along his footprints and to orientate by following the blood drops with which he had painted the earth red. The inconsolable Lady Macbeth does not leave traces. When she sees the trail of blood, she herself will be nothing more than that trail of blood. Nothing will lead her out of her own self. Lady Macbeth goes mad with Macbeth's madness. The only thing that transpires in her delirium is the fear of madness typical for her husband. There is nothing personal in anything that happens to her. The game has turned into farce, and the actor has forgotten that both the games and the demons have risen from within, claiming their dues. The queen's remarks, prior to her suicide, reflect her

identification with the dementia that up until then had been spying on Macbeth:

Fie, my
lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? [...]
No more o'
that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with
this starting. [...] Wash your hands, put on your
nightgown; look not so
pale.--I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot
come out on's grave. [...] To bed, to bed! there's
knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me
your hand. (5.1)

The Thane, on the other hand, has always flirted with madness: 'How now, my lord! why do you keep alone,
/ Of sorriest fancies your companions making.' (3.2);
'What, quite unmanned in folly?' (3.4) He throws
himself blindly into the net of hallucination and of
forces 'beyond nature' (1.5) 'for now I am bent to know,
/ By the worst means, the worst.' (3.4)

Yet it is due to the very fact that he is familiar
with the "magical" opium of the "witches" that he
avoids its narcosis. He haunts forbidden paths but
knows how to end his wanderings on time. Still
stunned by visions, he curses the "soothsaying sisters":
'And damned all those that trust them!' (4.1)

His inconsistency protects him, whereas Lady
Macbeth is eventually destroyed by her consistency.
She has always stayed wide awake, refrained from the

luxury of sleeping, dreaming or loosening up, and at the first glance into the abyss she merged with the vortex. Shakespeare did not facilitate our witnessing of this glance. He has shown, however, its gradual process of preparation. In Scene 2 and towards the end of Scene 4 in Act III, the transfer of madness between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth takes place; the former unloads his fear, and the latter gets ready, like in so many instances before, to *enact* it for him. On this occasion the “psychodrama” leads to the alienation of the actor-doctor, yet it nevertheless fulfils its duty insofar as freeing the diseased is concerned. These scenes take place under the sign of chiaroscuro (and therefore, of Macbeth). The first scene is heralded by the watershed moment of dusk:

MACBETH: Light thickens; and the crow
 Makes wing to the rooky wood:
 Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;
 While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (3.4)

The next takes place just before daybreak:

MACBETH: What is the night?

LADY MACBETH: Almost at odds with morning, which is which.
(3.4)

She who was once afraid of the seduction of the “curve”, is now enclosed into a vicious circle. Lady Macbeth will come back to face us in a state of

delirium, joined with the chiaroscuro she has once hated so passionately. Macbeth, on the other hand, will be freed from his ghosts: 'But no more sights!' (4.1); he calls: 'Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back.' (5.5)

He suddenly finds himself "freely" moving towards the ultimate star of his death, of his negative ecstasy that promises total annihilation. It happened only once that Macbeth tried to spare his wife, and did not involve her in one of his conspiracies (the killing of Banquo):

MACBETH: Then be thou jocund: ere the bat hath flown
His cloister'd flight, ere to black Hecate's summons
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.

LADY MACBETH: What's to be done?

MACBETH: Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. (3.2)

This gesture of tenderness was sufficient for Lady Macbeth — being of a markedly *agonistic* disposition — to no longer manage to curb her desire to respond to it tenfold. This urge is far beyond her power, no matter what direction it pushes her. Her whispers turn into screams, and embers flame up in blaze in her. Her dedication is competitive. Under no circumstances does Lady Macbeth want to be in anyone's debt: her "passionate" drama is an apogee of

vanity and not of love, whilst her sacrifice has something militant and lame about it, being prefaced by failure. Her frustration (the children she might have had but couldn't keep?) makes her respond with an utter lack of moderation to any thrill, any gesture, and any "tantrum" displayed by her partner. She is far from being cold, yet we tend to see her being tempted by doubt: will she or will she not be felt or perceived cold by Macbeth? Consequently, her reactions have a touch of licentiousness and repugnance about them. Concerned about the atrophy of a particular "organ", she lapses into its hypertrophic "function". Her remarks in the first act of the tragedy are already kicking off on a note of utter frenzy:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal. (1.5)

And later in the same scene:

MACBETH: My dearest love,

Duncan comes here to-night.

LADY MACBETH: And when goes hence?

MACBETH: To-morrow, as he purposes.

LADY MACBETH: O, never

Shall sun that morrow see! (I, 5)

By the time we reach the final scene in which she still appears in a lucid state, Lady Macbeth's interventions become really brief. Macbeth, on the other hand, talks a lot. The doctor ends up being succinct, and the patient entangled and torrential. The transfer of dementia between these two parties operates seamlessly, although the curtness is already syncopated: 'You lack the season of all natures, sleep' (3.4), Lady Macbeth mutters. Her words sound sweetly-imperative and incantatory; yet the spell turns out to be none other than a pact in this case. Lady Macbeth will immerse into Macbeth's night, staying wide awake in the face of his somnambulism and being lucid in the midst of the illusions of her partner spooked by hallucinations. On this ambivalent threshold of sacrifice, her lucidity resembles a reverse madness. And since opposites attract, it will be easy to turn Lady Macbeth inside out, like a glove, while the lunacy that had once enveloped from within will suddenly become her external, almost skin-like, shroud. What had initially looked like common sense, poise, frostiness or inwardness now gains a troubling transparency. One can foresee perhaps, somewhere deep below, the grain of madness that Macbeth's fiery breath managed to sprout and multiply its force of radiation. Lady Macbeth put her own self at stake in her bet with Macbeth, and lost. By accepting to play the

game of his lunacy, at the risk of her own lunacy, she offered herself up as sacrifice. Yet this sacrifice of hers, paradoxically resulting from the combination of mistakes and monstrous sins, appears to somehow exonerate her in the end... Death – what muddled prestige it confers to our errors!

III

Macbeth gains knowledge solely on the basis of death, and when there is nothing left to die in him, he reaches the utmost threshold of his negative ecstasy and faces up to its ultimate revelation:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5)

Being the mercenary of a defunct dream, he crossed all boundaries; in order to violently assert his ego, to which everything, an entire world in fact, presented opposition, the Thane dared to shatter this very world. And he took the risk of denying totality for the sake of his identity. From that moment onwards, it was just a matter of time for him to reach the totalitarianism of negation.

On this paradoxical route of the political, Macbeth discovered that identity is the opposite of the absolute, and that it is mortification and pointless suffering. When Macbeth dies, no-one will in fact die; when everyone dies, no-one will have actually lived. The vision of universal death comes to terms with that of non-birth: once dead, he, Macbeth, has not even been born. Therein lies ultimate voluptuousness! Death is non-identity. Death is non-birth.

KING LEAR OR THE APOCALYPSE OF POWER

The Winter of the Patriarch

The picture of Lear's reign in Act 1 Scene 2 is absolutely terrifying:

GLOUCESTER: Love cools,
friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in
countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd
'twixt son and father. [...] We have seen the best
of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all
ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. (1.2)

One would not talk in any different terms about Macbeth's rule or Richard III's. In his fear-induced description, Gloucester insists most of all on the symptom of rupture: everything is falling apart, is

unravelling and disjointed; unity and harmony are no longer possible.

As in a restrained apocalypse, Lear's power consumed everything all round, severing one by one every link that has held people together. The milk of fraternity has gone down the drain, while error and evil have, almost imperceptibly, reached calamitous proportions. The whole of Britain seems to have turned into a vast asylum, in which the strong and the weak alike can only survive if they abdicate, to a greater or lesser extent, from their humanity.

Under such circumstances, is it possible to proclaim the old king not guilty or to consider him unaware of the disaster? Even if we were tempted to do so, the opening scene of the tragedy tells us otherwise. Lear's first words contain the acknowledgement of a politically sinister situation, albeit in a camouflaged fashion. The great autarch is trying to get away from the consequences of the catastrophe he himself had generated and to save his skin by spectacularly reversing the situation in his favor. This manoeuvre of his demonstrates both genius and recklessness:

KING LEAR: Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know we have divided
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death. (1.1)

Under the guise of establishing the succession to the throne, Lear's attempt is to purify his power and to dematerialize it. He has no intention, therefore, to renounce its aura. 'Only we still retain / The name, and all th' additions to a king' (1.1), he declares, thus re-asserting his claim over the privileges he appears keen to abandon. As he is in the process of sublimating his personality in the very moment of crisis, at a time when all fingers point at him, he is in fact after obtaining a status of absolute impunity. In other words, Lear will continue to act with supreme authority but he will cease to take responsibility for his own actions. The patriarch does not retire for good, only goes on a mystical vacation from power. When 'divesting' himself of rule, / Interest of territory, cares of state' (1.1), he also renounces the immediate and burdensome consequences of his reign. The 'King' is far from 'gone to-night', neither has he 'subscrib'd his pow'r' nor 'Confin'd to exhibition', 'all [...] done / Upon the gad' (1.2) as Gloucester fears. In fact the sovereign craves the delights and luxury of a power free from the misery and determination of the contingent. The apotheosis he desires is that of irresponsibility. Released from the yoke of day-to-day governance, yet at the same time still omnipotent, all he dreams about is the taste of the cherry on his power-cake. This is the 'darker purpose' that guides Lear when he decides to divide his

kingdom. Death and recollection represent no temptation for him. From his point of view, he had always been just a transparent and monolithic exteriority. Asceticism and remorse have no place in him. He seems attracted by the voluptuosness and excitement of a state already sensed yet not experienced before. Lear has in mind a sort of “state of grace” that could keep him away from any external challenge. His asylum is intended to mimic the divine, therefore, it seems natural that he should start by posing as God-the-father. On his right, there is light, on his left, darkness. And so he reigns...

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night; (1.1)

He will be in no need of lucid subjects, such as Kent, or honest beings with a strong common sense, such as Cordelia. As a general rule, he will not need *fellow beings* who could remind him of the fact that he is just another human himself, one who has erred and continues to err. On the contrary, he wants to see everyone in a servile position, entirely dedicated to his cult. Moreover, Lear adopts the conventions of this “game” even before he has confirmation that others had done so by accepting its rules.

Animated by a rudimentary psychological Manicheism, the great autarch divides people into two

categories: those who adore him and those who do not. He makes no allowance for nuance or half measures; nuances are always anarchic and libertarian, and Lear cannot tolerate dissent. Opposing him at this stage, at the point of his *mythification*, is as if one tried to prevent him from breathing or feeding. It would simply mean that one tried to annihilate one of his vital functions.

The old king intertwines the ceremony of leaving the throne with that of his glorification. The (perfect) illusion of abdication reverberates positively with the other (imperfect) illusion of his quasi-divine ascension, also strengthening the latter by way of increased plausibility. What looks like a competition in adoration and flattery at the beginning of the play is in fact a battle of hymns within the context of the cult of personality this patriarch of power has commissioned for himself. Despite its parodic undertones – especially in the light of subsequent plot developments – the adoration of the sovereign observes a rigorous pattern. Goneril is the first to recite the catechism of this cult. She starts by stating her own insignificance in relation to the object of her veneration. She then makes reference to ‘eye-sight, space, and liberty’, all that is ‘rich or rare’, ‘grace, health, beauty, honour’, before ending her praise with the exclamation: ‘A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.’ (1.1)

How could words possibly suffice when the glorified one is so high above you? Awe-struck Regan,

the king's middle daughter, keeps repeating her sister's words, but in the eleventh hour she demonstrates her true vocation as a panegyrist by striking the right register and incantatory tone:

Myself an enemy to all other joys
Which the most precious square of sense possesses;
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear Highness' love. (1.1)

Regan stresses that one has to detach oneself from everything that is human and impure in order to pay due homage to Lear. For her, adoring him has the potential to fill a lifetime with utmost delights.

In this way, Goneril's sacerdotal prostration leads to her sister's mystical transportation. What could or should poor and silly Cordelia do or say in order to avoid infringing the protocol of veneration? The logic of discourse deployed in a continuous crescendo demands without a fail that the youngest sibling should offer herself as ritual sacrifice and initial victim on the altar of her father. An impatient Lear prompts her: 'what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.' (1.1)

But Cordelia defies this logic. She ignores ceremony, loves without adoration and introduces the notion of measure into her offering. Arguments that belong exclusively to the realm of the heart (and which will propel her to her sacrifice at the end of the

tragedy) dictate a response that sounds like blasphemy within the framework of the apotheosis. Cordelia contaminates her father with her humanity. Her seemingly measured love makes the latter impure, dragging him back to earth from the ethereal sky of his glory. Thus, Lear is forced to sever any links with her, and send her away as far as possible, into exile. He will anathemize and disinherit her, putting an end to 'all [his] paternal care, / Propinquity and property of blood':

Hence and avoid my sight!
So be my grave my peace as here I give
Her father's heart from her! (1.1)

The liturgy of autarchic power is suddenly disrupted. Following Cordelia's lead, another dissonant voice is heard. Kent honored him as 'Royal Lear', 'Lov'd as [his] father' and followed him everywhere 'as my master follow'd, / As my great patron thought on in my prayers'; yet he also insists that 'To plainness honour's bound' (1.1). Consequently, Lear is not the absolute. Kent takes the liberty to scold the sovereign in a manner that will soon be embraced by everyone else: 'What wouldst thou do, old man?' (1.1)

Feeling cornered, Lear issues his second ruling: exile for Kent, another one who stood in his way. Believers find themselves thrown out of his tight community one by one:

KING LEAR: Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow-
Which we durst never yet- and with strain'd pride
To come between our sentence and our power,-
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,-
Our potency made good, take thy reward. (1.1)

Lear demonstrates his prowess by gagging Kent. Soon enough the odious Cornwall will do the same – after all he had a great role model to follow... Lear acts as if he had lost his mind: those who are unable to adore him are renegades and need to be aborted: 'Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t' have pleas'd me better' (1.1), he yells at his youngest daughter. The hymn-like solemnity of the scene ends on a parodic note – that of grinding insult. Lear fails to achieve glorification. The final act of his authority of some efficiency was that of dishing out curses, disgrace and suffering – but even these will not make him see the error of his ways. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Lear is in denial of this obvious fact, and continues to remain enslaved to his delusions of apotheosis.

His heirs, on the other hand, will not be chasing daydreams. They will be content with a pastiche of his (actual) style of rule, ignoring his utopic dreams and not adding anything to this style other than gratuitous and boundless cruelty. Only the most servile minions will engage, in the play, in such “master-games”.

The Heirs

From the very beginning, the most striking feature of Lear's heirs is the morbid febrility with which they carry out their act. They have been dreaming about and longing for power for so long that the very moment they actually end up possessing it, it turns into vice. The hardships they had endured for so long had perverted them; their desires, senses and imagination are irredeemably poisoned. Regan, Goneril and Cornwall appear monstrous because, unlike Lear whose circumstances had always allowed him to pour out his humour and compulsions, and hence to periodically cleanse himself of his own self, the former have been forbidden to carry out such an act and had ended up gradually infecting themselves. In a bizarre fashion, their abstinence leads them towards forms of behavior rooted in oversaturation and decrepitude. Despite being at the very start of their reign, all three show crepuscular symptoms. Just like Lear, who

appears at times childish in the winter of his power, his heirs manifest obvious signs of senility from the very start of their ascension.

The ascension of Edmund, Gloucester's out of wedlock scion, to whom nature is 'goddess' and 'mother' (1.2), can be explained by the very fact that he brings the instinctive impetuosity of his fresh and vigorous blood into the core of the perverted and fordone Regan-Cornwall-Goneril triad. He will infuse them with energy and life, while they grant him the kind of honors that laws and customs refuse him. This osmosis, however, will lead to an utter artificialization as far as Edmund is concerned. The disease of power is stronger than any remedy.

King Lear gifted his kingdom to Cornwall, Regan and Goneril (Albany has to be classed in a separate category), yet the former adopt the attitude of usurpers, no matter how absurd such an insinuation might appear. Despite being legitimate heirs, they simulate illegitimacy - and adopt their behavior to such imperatives - so that they can truly experience being in full possession of their power. Nowhere else in Shakespeare's plays do we encounter such a consistently aberrant inversion of human instinct and passion.

Lear's "deposition" takes place in two stages, the first in the shape of a palace revolution (undertaken by Goneril) and the second, a moral torture of a king-

prisoner (mainly at the hands of Goneril and Regan) that aims at the former's desacralization and debasement.

Goneril acts in a systematic and measured fashion, fully aware that Lear's retinue includes a hundred knights and an armed guard still taking their orders from her father, which is why she does not want to be rash and allow the latter time to react. She has to overpower and destroy him in a single move. She incites the servants against him, keeping herself away, in a state of expectation, and when she is asked to deal with the insolence of henchmen such as Oswald, she pretends to be profoundly outraged and hurt in her dignity. She starts by protesting at the Fool's brazen jokes before widening the circle and claiming that all the knights in the king's retinue are mere jesters that offend her. Her father has no reasons to complain; after all, she is the target of all this mockery and general disregard. As Goneril keeps insisting on a mundane and domestic aspect, she slips further and further into vulgarity. Lear is disconcerted. He could of course hold out against his daughter, were she utilizing a high and pathetic register, and making reference to light and darkness, or any of the major principles and feelings. Goneril, however, acts in an entirely different manner, she scolds him and shouts at him akin to a grumpy fishwife. Her father's retinue is a bunch of profligates that eat too much, make too much noise, generate an awful lot of rubbish, while their time away by drinking

in taverns and having their dirty ways with the maids. What has become of her house, is it a respectable home or a brothel? Ignoring the contract she signed with her father (a contract that included providing for this retinue), Goneril manages to avoid perjury and locate herself in the innocuous position of a diligent and honest housekeeper-cum-landlady, that can barely cope with domestic labour due to the squalor and chaos that surrounds her. Thus, she steers clear of any situation whereby Lear could send in his guards to take over the castle. The palace revolution was a success – Lear’s will was paralyzed by the very simple act of addressing him (for the first time in his life) as if he were a mere lackey. Had Lear’s indictment been formulated in solemn terms, his anger would have no doubt erupted, and he would not have found himself limited to muttering but a handful of random phrases:

KING LEAR: Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied -- Ha! waking? 'Tis not so!
Who is it that can tell me who I am? (1.4)

To this, the Fool’s responds: ‘Lear’s shadow’ (1.4). We are indeed talking of his shadow, but not as a result of Lear being harmed or hurt in his royal prestige. This is a shadow because Lear cannot feel the mortal startling of his majesty within. There is no blood

Can Lear be possibly aware of the meaning of his words? Is it really necessary that *someone else* should retribute his tarnished prestige? Is it really necessary that the daughter he had bribed with a kingdom should reinstate him as king?

The conspiracy against him starts to flourish. As he is wasting his time with pointless diatribes, Regan and Cornwall have already been alerted, and it is their turn now to show what they can do. Their haste and voluptuous restlessness is sufficient for us to understand that we are on the eve of Lear's "deposition". The means they are planning to utilize to carry out their plan are also made public: with a view to the forthcoming confrontation with the king who is about to be "usurped", Regan and Cornwall engage in a "training session" whereby they compete against one another in terms of condemnations and cruelty. The fugitive Edgar is sentenced to death for contumacy. Kent, on the other hand, will directly experience the vindicative passion of the pair:

DUKE OF CORNWALL: Fetch forth the stocks! As I have life and honour,

There shall he sit till noon.

REGAN: Till noon? Till night, my lord, and all night too! (2.2)

For Regan and Cornwall the world is divided into two categories: masters and slaves, those who can

do anything and those to whom anything can be done. Unlike Goneril, Cornwall and Regan do not conceal their intentions; they carry out their deeds in an open fashion. They will indeed address Lear in the language and tone he is familiar with, but they will also always make him stand a few steps beneath them. They will not accuse him of pretending to be a jester, but they will make him behave like one. Their aim with this is to clearly demarcate the roles and relationships between the various ranks. They will follow cunning plans when attacking Lear, constructing a model sequence of moral torture. It is not Lear who will be slow in making sense of what is happening to him, but his executioners will not allow him to understand everything in order to thus prolong their pleasure in torturing him. They will distract him in any number of ways, alternating light flicks with lashings that cut deep into his flesh, and disorientate him, either with double-talk or brutal accusations, for the sheer satisfaction of watching his mind gradually fall apart. They will keep reminding him that, as of now, his existence is already posthumous: 'REGAN: Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine.' (2.4) They will also tell him off, as if he were a mere laughable comic: 'Good sir, no more! These are unsightly tricks.' They will ask him to carry out acts of penitence in exchange for his daily bread: 'Therefore I pray you / That to our sister you do make return; / Say you have wrong'd her, sir.' (2.4) They will always insist

on pointing out the pettiness and insignificance of his feelings: 'GONERIL: How have I offended? / All's not offence that indiscretion finds / And dotage terms so.' (2.4) Moreover, they will openly threaten him: 'REGAN: I pray you, father, being weak, seem so.' (2.4)

This moral torture will ultimately lead to the expected result. King Lear will run away from his torturers, whining: 'O fool, I shall go mad!' (2.4) The idea of his sacredness has been finally erased from his mind, and his purple royal blood drained to the last drop.

In the wake of this spiritual deposition, the exclusive sphere of power is fragmented, and Lear's world is taken over by the worlds of Cornwall, Regan, Goneril and Edmund. This process of fragmentation and disintegration is characterised by an obvious yet at the same time surprising element: the more someone's area of authority is limited, the more the intensity of terror will gain in virulence and inhumanity. The scene of Gloucester's blinding (not to mention that of Cordelia's subsequent assassination, in prison) says it all:

CORNWALL: Though well we may not pass upon his life
Without the form of justice, yet our power
Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men
May blame, but not control. (3.7)

Power is desired viciously, more so for the means it makes available to those who have it, than for

the reasons it should primarily entail. In Regan, Cornwall and Goneril this malady reaches unimaginable levels. The exasperation of their desire to rule and dominate does not appease even after their craving has been satisfied, and they are unable to relish success unless the latter is accompanied by abnormal extravagance and sophistication. Akin to the lotus eaters with dulled senses, they have to increasingly offer themselves newer and newer outlandish stimuli in order to be able to experience a sensation of their own selves. Their voluptuousness can only overcome its wear and tear at the cost of the most varied violations. What is the point of glory if not rooted in sacrilege, or of privileges that do not facilitate violence? Vice can never be pleased with mediocre inventions; it forces the imagination to offer it everything that natural pithiness cannot provide as a matter of course.

Tortious practices are “justified”, separately as far as each and every individual is concerned, by way of the very impetus that causes them. In the universe of terror, only those beyond censorship have a grip on power, and to dominate signifies to eliminate any moral reservation.

All will put up a fierce fight against all others, and their actions will only have in common the same savage and sanguinary methods. While torturing Gloucester, Regan and Cornwall act at the same time as judges, executioners and royalty, their sadism

intertwined with reasons of state. Their enjoyment of cruelty and the need to obtain information on the invading troops are indistinguishable from one another:

ALBANY: It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2)

Lear perhaps was not actually better than them; however, we should give him credit for the fact that in his time, even when central power (that he embodied) emanated disorder and irrationality, the impact of these was far from conveying such rudeness and bestiality. The reason for this was that these “emanations”, no matter how incoherent and damaging, would lose their harmfulness as they distanced themselves from their origin, and, at the same, would get filtered through the lens of reason owing to the special group of executors in the king’s entourage. These executors had the role of adjusting the position of the “center”; and as we can easily gather from Kent and Gloucester’s initial behavior, their main quality was to bring about moderation.

Now, on the other hand, the gap between center and periphery, between command and execution has become insignificant. There is hardly any distance between impulse and act. At the top of the social pyramid, events are taking place in the basement, and,

in effect, there are only basements to be found everywhere.

In this way in *King Lear*, the dissolution of autarchic power has led to a paradoxical form of “concentrationary anarchy”.

The Survivors

The tragedy ends with a burial, and not a triumphal coronation. It is impossible to find any firm suggestion for renewal in this outcome as the wailing and funeral assonances darken the horizon of a doomed world even further.

The survivors seem to be afraid of their own selves, of their own humanity. They were mercilessly drawn into the Catherine wheel of history, despite having tried to get out of the way (Albany), run away (Edgar), or conceal their actual identity (Kent). They are all mutilated, and suffer fatal wounds. As they rise from the ashes that surrounds them, they are not holding up, in hope, a new and vain tablet of the law. The Decalogue of power – the only one they needed in order to hold out – still keeps their moral being secured

in the vice of its two Commandments: you shall not allow to get killed and 'kill, kill, kill!' (4.6).

Under the now eternally leaden skies, a kin is gathering reluctantly, one that has no other memory than that of its fall. A long spell on the gory world scene, the spectacle has been prolonged by virtue of inertia, life vehemently clenching to life, and bodies clinging on to bodies in violence and hate – this general and mutually orgasmic flagellation of some at the hands of others, leading in the end to universal mortification. History, and, together with it, everyone's destiny, has been deployed in a failure devoid of glory. This is not only a shameful but also an odious failure.

In *King Lear* there are basically no winners. Albany, Edgar and Kent pass the crown from one to the other without coveting it, and their restraint is entirely free from hypocrisy. They have contemplated too often 'packs and sects of great ones / That ebb and flow' (5.3) in order to be tempted by grandeur. Their alliance for the throne is a triumvirate and a conspiracy against the dangers and evils of power. It would not be surprising in the least to hear them talk about their authority in the exact same terms used by Lear after his fall:

KING LEAR: Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

GLOUCESTER: Ay, sir.

LEAR: And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst
behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.
(4.6)

Those who at the end of Lear's tragedy will share the royal sceptre have the mindset of the vanquished. They are no longer capable (or willing) to embody the mythology of power. Lear had only started to doubt himself at the very end, but this lot experiences self-doubt from the beginning. When he loses everything, Lear focuses on the same few discouraging pieces of "fact", from where we see this lot starting off at the moment they are offered everything. They ascend the throne with the shaken consciousness of those who are *descending*.

In this play, the good are good because they follow the path of denial and self-negation. The bad are bad because they adopt a "devouring" and self-affirming behavior.

As if a minimal intensity of feeling would yield good, and maximal intensity evil. What can we possibly expect from such a choice? Existence comes across in this context as an imperfection of non-existence, as its deficiency of sorts. Failure, having reached its final stage, has left its distinctive mark on everything:

KENT: Is this the promis'd end

EDGAR: Or image of that horror? (5.3)

We are unable to save ourselves, even if we respond to all the violence we are subject to with the

utmost intensity of our hate. The reason for this is that our hate is a false exorcism that entertains a dubious complicity with the disease that it should in fact eradicate. Thus, rebellion is braided with doom, and the verdict is the world and existence itself.

EDGAR: [...] World, world, O world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age. (4.1)

Old Lear utters this status quo, declaring everyone not guilty, in his trademark style of formulating his belated revelations and insights as ironic and self-ironic *admissions* of the obvious:

KING LEAR: None does offend, none – I say none! I'll able 'em.
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
To seal th' accuser's lips. (4.6)

Lear sounds like a “holy” nihilist in this case. His forgiveness is fundamentally negative. In the absence of a guilty party, a strange and incomprehensible innocence overwhelms and shrouds everyone. We are all condemned without fail, and the forgiveness Lear grants us is identical with that of nothingness into which we ultimately dissolve.

Production History

Shakespeare Plays Directed by Mihai Măniuțiu

Macbeth. Cluj National Theatre. *Opening night:* 28 April 1982.

The Taming of the Shrew Cluj National Theatre. *Opening night:* 30 October 1986.

Antony and Cleopatra. Cluj National Theatre. *Opening night:* 26 November 1988.

Richard III. Odeon Theatre, Bucharest. *Opening night:* 28 February 1993.

- Winner of the Best Production of the Year – UNITER Award
- Nominated Best Touring Production at the Theatre Managers' Association Awards, UK, 1994.

The Taming of the Shrew. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, UK. *Opening night:* 21 April 1995.

Richard II. A SMART and Bucharest National Theatre Coproduction. *Opening night:* 30 April 1998.

- Winner of the Best Director of the Year - UNITER Award
- Best Director of the Year - "Flacăra" (weekly magazine) Award

Timon of Athens. Craiova National Theatre. *Opening night:* 28 October 1998.

- Best Production of the Year - Shakespeare Festival, Gdansk, Poland, 1999.

The Taming of the Shrew. A SMART and Bulandra Theatre Coproduction, Bucharest. *Opening night:* 25 May 2000.

Macbeth. Iași National Theatre. *Opening night:* 21 October 2007.

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