

Disintegration of Time in Macbeth's Soliloquy "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow"

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DISINTEGRATION OF TIME IN  
MACBETH'S SOLILOQUY  
'TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW'

I

Macbeth's soliloquy in Act v, Scene 5, though one of the most famous of Shakespeare's 'purple' passages, still makes difficult reading for most students of the play. The second half of the monologue, beginning 'Out, out, brief candle', seems to be less puzzling than the first. Even without a special knowledge of the *theatrum mundi* and the play metaphor, a reader may be certain to grasp the central point of Macbeth's philosophy of despair in the second half of the soliloquy; and though readers of *Macbeth* are less likely nowadays than in Shakespeare's age to experience the traumatic situation of having to listen to the furious gabble of a madman encountered in the street, the 'tale told by an idiot', as a metaphor for the insignificance of life, is intelligible enough. The first half of the soliloquy, however, seems to defy closer analysis, although most commentators carefully avoid admitting this. We are told vaguely that the lines in question are about time, and that Macbeth's vision of one day meaninglessly and monotonously succeeding another is, apart from being superb poetry, just another way of uttering the same nihilism as in the 'poor player' metaphor. This is indubitably true, but what about details? What exactly is the idea of time expressed in these lines? What actually is the author doing when he makes the tomorrows creep in petty pace and the yesterdays light the way to death? What is the associative link between the time imagery of the first half and the *theatrum mundi* metaphor of the second?

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.<sup>1</sup>

A sensitive modern reader seems to *feel* very acutely indeed that this passage is a consummate expression of the very essence of despair and disillusionment, doubt and pessimism, the irrevocable hopelessness and solitude of man, which Renaissance individualism opposed to medieval optimism; but for most readers it is not at all clear by what means this vast idea is conveyed.

Time, then, is the keyword of the first half of Macbeth's soliloquy, and I shall attempt to say something about the particular nature and function of time in this monologue. I should like to argue that any reading of *Macbeth* should make use of the specific aesthetic sensibility pertaining to the age not of Shakespeare (as is often recommended by 'historical' critics), but of the individual reader or spectator concerned. The conception of time in Macbeth's soliloquy is a particularly good case, as literature in our own age is preoccupied with the idea of time, or absence of

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare quotations are from Peter Alexander's one-volume edition (London, 1951).

time. The contention of this paper is that some knowledge of our contemporary authors may help us to determine *our* specific reading of the Shakespeare passage in question. The susceptibility of modern writers to a nihilism very similar to that of Renaissance authors, and the particular expression of such a nihilism by a certain way of handling (among other things) the idea of time, may give us valuable clues as to what a non-antiquarian appreciation of Macbeth's famous lines may be like.<sup>1</sup> The historical difference between post-feudal and post-bourgeois pessimism is of course not supposed to be explained away by such an interpretation; the aim of this study is rather to emphasize the point that a work of art can only be experienced as a work of art if it is viewed principally in terms of the present, not of the past. The theoretical problems involved in such an approach will be discussed in due course. As an example of a modern writer whose conception of time may be paralleled with that of Macbeth, Samuel Beckett has been chosen, since this theme is omnipresent in his works, and since the disintegration of his characters and their environment seems to be quite comparable to Macbeth's final situation and state of mind. So — what becomes of Macbeth's soliloquy when read with a Beckettian sensibility? And, perhaps more important, is it legitimate to 'actualize' our reading of Shakespeare in this way?

## II

For Beckett, as novelist and playwright, the disintegration of time is a central theme as well as a fundamental principle of formal construction.<sup>2</sup> Instead of having a beginning, middle, and end, his plots tend to be repetitive and circular. There is virtually no action in his plays except for some specimens of deliberately silly stage business. Time is rigorously condensed, as in *Breath*, or reduced to the mechanical movement of a goad on wheels, as in *Act Without Words II*, or plainly excluded, as in the nightmarish interiors of *Imagination Dead Imagine* or *The Lost Ones*. Beckett's protagonists either exist 'in the future' (*Krapp's Last Tape*), or are grotesquely immortal, like Swift's Struldbrugs (mentioned in *More Pricks than Kicks*), or, paradoxically enough, already dead (as the narrator of *The Calmative*). Beckett's characters do not develop, do not change, do not move, except for a slow but steady progress towards the end. The texts describe either a standstill, dimly illuminated by a greyish light which might be that within a skull (or a womb), or they minutely report a deteriorating process of dying and decomposition, accompanied by incessant curses on birth and procreation. Time can be absent, as in *Play* or *Not I*, or it is present merely as an aimless and endless duration of incoherent and interchangeable moments, as in *Waiting for Godot* or *How It Is*. But no matter whether the structural plan of Beckett's plays and novels is the chain or the circle,<sup>3</sup> the spiral or the asymptote, or simply the dot (Hamm in *Endgame* speaks of being merely 'a speck in the void'), the effect is always that time as the essential principle of *order* is missing. Time (as it is understood in this context) is more than just a sequence of recognizable portions of duration following one another. Time means orientation, organization, co-ordination, purpose, coherence, wholeness; one moment is

<sup>1</sup> For a different treatment of the subject see Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time* (Oxford, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> The following paragraphs make free use of Chapters 6 and 18 of my *Samuel Beckett* (Munich, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See Konrad Schoell, 'The Chain and the Circle: A Structural Comparison of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*', *Modern Drama*, 11 (1968), 48-53.

meaningfully connected with other moments; there are causal relations and final intentions; the present is instructed by the past and encouraged by the future; and every instant, every 'syllable of recorded time' is governed by order, development, remembrance, progress, survey, expectation, confidence. The idea of time is the idea of control — the individual's control of his life, a nation's control of its history, the artist's control of his medium.

Now all this is lacking in Beckett's plays and novels, or, rather, it is not simply lacking but has been deliberately abolished. There is nothing by which, for example, the characters in *Act Without Words II* could possibly tell one day of their lives from another; Krapp, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, searching his past for a happiness he was stupid enough to let slip by, is nothing like the Goethian autobiographer who describes himself as living in and contributing to historical progress; and hardly any one of Beckett's characters has a firm grip on his past, hardly any one is able to recollect his former life. Time exists but as a 'Time cancer' (as Beckett puts it in his essay, 'Proust'), as a shapeless mass of meaninglessly multiplying moments, amorphous and incoherent like a heap of sand, or of millet grains, as in Zeno's paradox:

Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.

Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of . . . that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life. (*Endgame*<sup>1</sup>)

The moments never mount up to a life, nor the words to a story (for example *Embers*, or *Cascando*), nor the goings-on to an action (for example *Waiting for Godot*, or *Watt*). The sequence of events never mounts up to the coherence of time, because the mind that organizes and thereby controls these events does not exist in Beckett's works: the discontinuity of time reflects the disorganization of reason and remembrance, the disintegration of personality and stability, the dissolution of social responsibility, the alienation and reification of man in our age and society (but perhaps not only in ours). Interestingly enough, schizophrenics seem to experience insanity in a similar way; a typical statement is recorded in a monograph on depersonalization: 'I can't explain it, everything is timeless, unchangeable, hopeless. Time simply passes, I don't see a future.'<sup>2</sup> And a psychiatrist comments on the characteristically schizophrenic experience of time: 'Time is cut into fragments, does not flow any longer, is entirely blocked, as if countless incoherent "times present" had amassed without any order.'<sup>3</sup> Beckett has drawn so largely on psychiatry, and his works are so unmistakably a representation of our society and epoch as essentially alienated and insane, that it may not be unfair to elucidate his idea of time by these quotations.

It is, perhaps, in *The Unnamable* that Beckett presents this conception of time most uncompromisingly, and where it governs the structure of the text most successfully. The reduction of the props and settings, actions, and variety of characters common to the traditional novel, is here so rigorously maintained that the painful ritual of going through Beckett's text is an analogous reflection of the

<sup>1</sup> London, 1958, pp. 12 and 45 (stage direction omitted in quotation).

<sup>2</sup> *Depersonalisation*, edited by Joachim-Ernst Meyer (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 200 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, p. 384.

narrator's intense suffering. The absence of all exterior 'landmarks' of time (change of light, phases of sleep, change of seasons, social events, etc.) calls to mind certain modern experiments in isolation and deprivation of stimuli which, by the way, produce responses similar to those of Beckett's characters as far as sanity and time experience are concerned. The Unnamable encysts himself, as nearly all Beckett's characters do, in a room, in a vase, in his own skull, perhaps merely, with the least physical extension possible, in the incessantly active synapses and neurones of his confused mind ('I sometimes wonder if the two retinae [of his eyes] are not facing each other'<sup>1</sup>). The gloomy limbo of his skull is full of murmurs and voices, broodings and recollections; never-to-be-completed stories are told and retold, broken off and resumed again, commented on and parodied. Forgetfulness and obsessive remembrance: these are but two aspects of fundamentally the same state of mind in Beckett's works, in *The Unnamable* as well as in *Eh Joe* and *Play* and the *Texts for Nothing*.

It is obvious that the time scheme of *The Unnamable* and the time experience of its narrator-hero are conclusive evidence for the above-mentioned collapse of order and orientation. And again, this conception of time does not only pervade the form of the text, but is made a major point of reflection by the narrator, the central passage even mentioning Zeno's heap of millet grains, as in *Endgame*:

the question may be asked, off the record, why time doesn't pass, doesn't pass, from you, why it piles up all about you, instant on instant, on all sides, deeper and deeper, thicker and thicker, your time, other's time, the time of the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn, why it buries you grain by grain neither dead nor alive, with no memory of anything, no hope of anything, no knowledge of anything, no history and no prospects, buried under the seconds, saying any old thing, your mouth full of sand. (*The Unnamable*, p. 393)

This is what Winnie in *Happy Days*, immobile as the Unnamable, experiences: she is buried under the seconds, in a heap of sand, and the sand grains pile up incessantly (or shall we rather say that she shrinks in her sand hole?), but, despite her aimless rummaging in her past as well as in her handbag, they 'never mount up to a life'. In Beckett's works, time is, as it were, the system of co-ordinates providing orientation and control (referred to, as a matter of course, only *ex negativo*). When it breaks down, when memory becomes circular and faulty, duration amorphous, history meaningless, the past a heap of shattered fragments, when time becomes merely the distantly felt heartbeat or the sensation of a dripping in the head (*Endgame*), then this irreversible process of dissolution has almost reached its final stage of amnesia, immobility, silence. *Molloy*:

To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something! My mind swoons when I think of it. And mute into the bargain! And perhaps as deaf as a post! And who knows as blind as a bat! And as likely as not your memory a blank! And just enough brain intact to allow you to exult! And to dread death like a regeneration. (pp. 140-1)

And *The Unnamable*:

that's how it will end, in heart-rending cries, inarticulate murmurs, to be invented, as I go along, improvised, as I groan along, I'll laugh, that's how it will end, in a chuckle, chuck chuck, ow, ha, pa . . . , in the end, it's the end, the ending end, it's the silence, a few gurgles on the silence, the real silence. (p. 412)

<sup>1</sup> *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London, 1959), p. 303.

## III

Time as a factor of order is by no means a conception of modern writers alone; our contemporary authors are, on the contrary, in a position to represent insanity and sterility as the collapse of the normal time-sequence and time-experience only because they can use the traditional conception of time as a foil to their own inversion of the theme. Shakespeare's plays must be seen in a similar perspective since the optimistic view that reality is shaped in an inviolate pattern of order and wholeness, metaphorically represented by time, was already precarious by the end of Elizabeth's reign. The dissolution of the old system of values and the disintegration of time in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* cannot, therefore, be studied without first considering what E. M. W. Tillyard calls this 'background of order' and its metaphorical counterpart, time.

For medieval and Renaissance thinking, the idea of time was indissolubly connected with the movements of the stars and their spheres (according to Ptolemaic cosmology), and more especially of the sun, whose invariable course severed day from night and winter from summer. The moon and everything beneath its sphere was thought to be subject to mutability; but above it was the realm of order and reason and harmony. The absolute value of such a way of thinking was *truth*, in the meaning of constancy and faithfulness rather than veracity; the modern reader should never forget this, as our ideal is rather flexibility and adaptability. The age of Shakespeare still valued *stability* more highly than dynamic change, although Elizabethans gradually became aware that they had lost it irretrievably in the course of the dissolution of the medieval social structure. Time, in the medieval period, was a symbol of this stability. The life cycle was still dominated by the seven sacraments, the cycle of the four seasons by the ecclesiastical year, the cycle of the day by church bells indicating prime and Angelus and vespers. Time was a symbol for the spiritual order of Catholicism as well as for the inviolability and stability of medieval communal life, it was a symbol of the peasant's attachment to nature as well as of his allegiance to the feudal lord. The societal patterns of this tradition-directed way of life persisted, to a certain extent, in the Tudor and Stuart epoch. Living outside time was, in the Middle Ages as well as in the Renaissance, equal to living outside the society of men and outside the grace of God. Those who had to shun the eye of heaven, the sun, were 'thieves and robbers' who by night 'range abroad unseen, | In murders and in outrage' (*Richard II*, III. 2. 39); Falstaff, being one of them, ironically prefers to call them 'gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon', and goodnaturally ridicules the sun as 'Phoebus. . . that wand'ring knight so fair' (*I Henry IV*, I. 2. 25 and 14), that is, as a somewhat pathetic fossil left over from the Middle Ages.

The correspondence between God, king, sun, time, reason, music, and order has been shown to be ubiquitous in Shakespeare's works since Dr Tillyard and other scholars first opened up this specific perspective. *Macbeth* is the *locus classicus* for images of cosmic order and disorder, for here the superhuman plane is expressly introduced into the drama in the witches' scenes. The murder of Duncan is described as 'most sacrilegious murder', as the very disruption of the universe: 'Confusion now hath made his masterpiece', Macduff cries horror-stricken after having found Duncan in his blood, thus ascribing the deed to the Antichrist, personified as Chaos and Confusion. 'Then is doomsday near' (*Hamlet*, II. 2. 237). *Macbeth* is more than simply a murderer, and the play is more than just a study in

fear and guilty conscience, or in vaulting ambition overleaping itself (let alone a 'statement of evil', which implies a basically ahistorical idea of values). The conflict in *Macbeth* is represented on a cosmic scale because fundamentally it is the conflict between two warring conceptions of man and the universe. On the one hand there are the gradually declining standards of the feudal age: allegiance to the king, humble acceptance of one's place in society, chivalric honour, feudal hospitality, social responsibility, faithfulness to custom and tradition; and on the other hand there are historically progressive attitudes like individualism, atheism, doubt, aspiration, adventurous enterprise, marital love. Critics who conceive of Macbeth as an essentially bourgeois character obviously fall victim to an oversimplified kind of pigeonholing, for one has difficulty in finding much of an 'acquisitive spirit' in either Macbeth or his wife; but it is certainly safe to conceive of Macbeth as an anti-feudal character who, however, cannot step out of his traditional order without virtually losing his identity.

Strange as this may seem to readers unaccustomed to this kind of historical perspective, Macbeth's murder is an historically progressive act, an emancipation from feudalism and Catholicism, a violent plunge into the doubts and solitude of the New Age. Shakespeare, however, is clairvoyant enough to show that this liberation from medieval bondage may lead to an even more horrible kind of enslavement, namely to inhumanity and self-alienation. The New Age has forfeited the comforting safety of a life under the tutelage of God's holy church and the king's feudal lords, and spiritual loneliness and insecurity take the place of the old stability and humility. What a gigantic challenge is this new rapture of freedom and self-sufficiency and individualism; but, as in the case of Macbeth, what appalling hazards, too! Without the traditional shelter of indubitable standards, man is exposed, defenceless, to the terrible strain of his new self-reliance; and it is only too likely that an imaginative woman like Lady Macbeth would yield to this strain. Those who try to re-establish the traditional order at the end of the play, have, unlike Edgar in *King Lear*, never experienced the New Doubt of the New Age, and their triumph, therefore, cannot persuade us that the sleep which Macbeth has murdered can be restored. Time is out of joint, and there is no restitutory way of setting it right again: history cannot be reversed.

Shakespeare's favourite image for the disintegration of traditional stability is the eclipse of the sun, the sun being a symbol of time as well as of the king and of hierarchical 'degree' in general. In *Hamlet* — a play which, like *Macbeth*, represents the disruption of the old order as murder and usurpation — cosmic chaos is depicted as the sun glowing feverishly over man's disintegrating world:

Heaven's face does glow  
O'er this solidity and compound mass  
With heated visage, as against the doom —  
Is thought-sick at the act.

(III. 4. 48)

(These lines are textually corrupt.) In *Macbeth*, this cosmic image is intensified still further:

the heavens, as troubled with man's act,  
Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,  
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

(II. 4. 5)

Macbeth's deed causes time to stop for a moment, comparable to the hour of Christ's death; the sun does not rise (compare Macbeth's 'I gin to be aweary of the sun' in v. 5. 49); the heavens pause; man stands dazed by the terrible consequences of his unforeseen emancipation from his inherited system of values:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,  
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.

(ii. 3. 89)

Grace is dead, the blessed time of innocence and bondage is over: 'Eritis sicut dii scientes bonum et malum'. Like Faustus and Hamlet, Macbeth has overstepped the threshold between secure but maiming irresponsibility and self-sufficing but perilous freedom, and the play anticipates lucidly that the self-liberation of man may lead to enlightenment and humanism as well as to anarchy and destruction.

The strain of this newly-adopted self-reliance and solitude has a profound effect on Macbeth's mind; he does not break down, as his wife does, but he, too, undergoes a radical alteration of personality. Before his 'fall from grace', he was deeply imaginative and emotional, in some respects the *alter ego* of Hamlet (as Frank Harris was first to notice); but afterwards he becomes tense, rigid, numb, automaton-like, chilled with despair, bizarrely cold and unemotional: a fanatic of violence, a killer without a cause, 'a dying gladiator, a blinded lion at bay'.<sup>1</sup> If Lady Macbeth is insane in her way, so is Macbeth in his; the appalling vision of the huge vault of heaven being essentially empty, a mocking echo reverberating hollowly over this bank and shoal of time, has literally unhinged him. Macbeth is stunned by his new consciousness that man is a stranger in his world, that the universe does not provide a natural home for him, that there is no profound plan in the structure of society and in the life of the individual. Time is no longer a guarantee of order and coherence, the movements of the stars no longer obey the decree of a God whom man is about to discover to be a creation of his own mind.

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.  
And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
When in the planets and the firmament  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,  
All just supply, and all relation:  
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,  
For every man alone thinks he hath got  
To be a phoenix, and that then can be  
None of that kind of which he is but he.

These well-known lines from John Donne's *Anatomy of the World* ('The First Anniversary', 1611) sum up the predicament of Renaissance individualism: when

<sup>1</sup> George Santayana, 'Tragic philosophy', in *Works*, Triton Edition, 14 vols (New York, 1936-7), II, 278.



the old moulds of life were shattered, the security and orientation that they provided were obliterated too.

This, and not the message of his wife's death, is the background to Macbeth's soliloquy 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow'. Macbeth is no longer young in deed, he has waded in blood a long way since he last saw Pity astride the blast, or since he had need of blessing. He has cut off those parts of his being which still adhered to the old system of values, and with them those which were full of the milk of human kindness. Inside himself, he feels nothing but an infinite emptiness and coldness. Having supped full with horrors, he has almost forgotten the taste of fears. He is past remorse and past regret. Physically as well as spiritually, Macbeth is solitary, deserted, lost in the void of an indifferent universe:

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.

Time has become entropic for Macbeth. It is no longer governed by the medieval idea of order which appointed an appropriate place to every day and every action. Time is 'a nightmare succession of incidents without significance', a mere 'succession of meaningless days'<sup>1</sup> elapsing incessantly and never 'mounting up to a life'. The view into the future is hopeless; Macbeth sees nothing but a hideous procession of ant-like tomorrows creeping towards him, in an agonizingly 'petty pace'; and looking backwards he sees them, when their 'time present' is over, 'crawling wormlike' from him 'in the dust towards death'.<sup>2</sup> History, 'recorded time', is no longer the edifying volume capable of unravelling the muddle of man's life; it is the incoherent stutter of fragmentary syllables which will never again be compounded in a neat pattern of meaningful sentences. Macbeth, once he has jumped the life to come, discovers history to be a tale told by an idiot. Time is *logos*, in its symbolical meaning here emphasized; its disintegration, therefore, is consequently represented as a sequence of disconnected syllables, as the incoherent gabble of a madman. Samuel Beckett uses a similar device (in a formally different way, as may be expected) in Watt's demented search for a mathematically correct mode of utterance (*Watt*), or in Lucky's hopeless attempt to 'think' (*Waiting for Godot*). (Nor is Beckett, as everyone knows, the only modern author to express this essential lunacy of alienated life; William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), with its programmatic title and conspicuous narrative technique, is another obvious example.) Macbeth's and the Unnamable's vision of man's life are fundamentally the same: 'no memory of anything, no hope of anything, no knowledge of anything, no history and no prospects'. For Macbeth, nothing remains but his maniacal code of valour and violence which makes him fight his course bear-like to the very end. For Beckett's characters, who are quite unheroically passive (though not without a peculiarly infantile sadism), nothing remains but words: curses, jokes cynical or

<sup>1</sup> Roy Walker, *The Time is Free* (London, 1949), p. 190; Kenneth Muir, 'Image and Symbol in *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 19 (1966), 45-54 (p. 51).

<sup>2</sup> G. R. Elliott, *Dramatic Providence in 'Macbeth'* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1958), p. 206. Shakespeare frequently associates the movement of *creeping* and *crawling* with 'Time's thievish progress to eternity' (Sonnet 77): for example, *The Rape of Lucrece*, l. 1575; *Sonnets* 60. l. 6, and 115. l. 6; *King Lear*, I. I. 40; *As You Like It*, II. 7. 112; *King John*, III. 3. 31; *Henry VI*, IV. 1. 2; *Julius Caesar*, IV. 3. 224.

silly, incomplete stories, fragmentary recollections, jabberings and babblings, 'the old inanities' (*Texts for Nothing*, xii).

There is a slight shift in imagery when Macbeth speaks of the yesterdays lighting fools the way to dusty death. This is no longer the unnerving movement of the tomorrows creeping in a petty pace, like Beckett's millet grains pattering down and piling up incessantly. The yesterdays are now pictured as an endless procession of torch-bearers vanishing into the gloomy dark of the past, and their only function is, like that of Death in the morality plays summoning Everyman or Mankind, to guide to their death youths and old men who were foolish enough to cherish grand ideas like fame, or love, or religion, or immortality, and who were blind to their own essential fragility, insignificance, nothingness. Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. There is no consolation and no fond recollection in these yesterdays. They are like the skeletons of a grotesque allegorical pageant where the seven ages of man are reduced to virtually two: the uncanny creeping movement of the tomorrows, as of a horribly misshapen child, and the ghastly procession of the torch-bearing yesterdays ushering walking shadows towards their exits from this great stage of fools. The *theatrum mundi* metaphor here seems to merge with the time imagery, and the association of ideas runs quite naturally from the emblematical *memento mori* pageant to the shabbiness of man's performance and to the unintelligibility of his life and universe:

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.

The movement of the tomorrows is linked with the procession of the yesterdays; the torches of the yesterdays lead on to the brief candle of man's lamp of life; the candle suggests the deformed shadows cast by those who are flickeringly illuminated for a brief span of time; this again is expanded to the image of the ham actor gesticulating and raving like, for instance, Herod in the Coventry mystery play who is struck down by Death in the midst of his revellings (*in media vita in morte sumus*); and this finally culminates in the madman's babble, where *logos* is distorted to 'a rhapsody of words' (*Hamlet*, III. 4. 48). Life is a sham reality, a shadow, a dream, an insubstantial pageant, the poor imitation of an *imitatio naturae*. The best players, Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (v. 1. 210) tells us, are but shadows — how much more inauthentic is the poor player's 'life', then, when there is no longer an optimistic imagination to amend it!

Macbeth's vision of life is medieval in so far as it preserves (in the Hegelian meaning of *aufheben*) the *contemptus mundi* conception of the world; his vision is modern in so far as he has jumped the life to come. It is this dialectic of rejection and simultaneous preservation of the traditional values that makes *Macbeth* the play par excellence of an age in transition,<sup>1</sup> and it is the same dialectic which renders *Macbeth* comparable to Beckett's plays and novels. Both authors depict a nihilism

<sup>1</sup> The historical ambivalence of Macbeth's pessimism is rhetorically underlined by unmistakable echoes of biblical phrases and metaphors (candle, shadow, tale); see Roland M. Frye, "Out, out, brief candle" and the Jacobean Understanding', *N & Q*, 200 (1955), 143-5.

which is all the darker because it clings *ex negatione* to the former tradition of optimism, whether feudal or bourgeois, Catholic or Protestant, as the case may be. Both authors depict a vision of life which emphasizes man's nothingness (as the Christian tradition does), but cannot any longer relate this individual insignificance to a superindividual and transcendental meaning. Thence the fierceness and fury of this vision: it is the exasperation of disillusionment and disappointment. And both authors depict this nihilism as the rejection not only of a religious, but also of a social optimism: Macbeth's and the Unnamable's despair is an extreme form of individualism, man's estrangement and withdrawal from society ending literally in the annihilation of his identity. For Macbeth, as for the mad painter in *Endgame*, everything is dead, sterile; the whole world is nothing but ashes, a gigantic cemetery where fools make their ways towards their graves. 'The whole place stinks of corpses', says Hamm in *Endgame*, and Clov adds: 'The whole universe'. Macbeth's vision of life encompasses 'the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn' (*The Unnamable*), and man to him is as much a quintessence of dust as he is to Beckett a quintessence of mud and mucus.

#### IV

Reading Shakespeare in terms of Beckett is a hazardous task. One has to make one's way through a maze of pitfalls and caveats; and the example of what former 'actualizers' did to Shakespeare is rather discouraging. The above attempt to analyse Macbeth's soliloquy with reference to our modern experience of abandonment and alienation, individualism and nihilism, is, of course, not the first 'actualization' of Shakespeare. One of the most hackneyed assertions of Shakespeare critics is that every age has found its own problems and its own imagination in Shakespeare's plays. This is certainly true for the twentieth century, too, despite the intimidating increase in scholarship and historical knowledge. Among the more recent 'actualizing' attitudes towards Shakespeare have been the existentialist and absurdist approaches, indubitably producing at times rather unrewarding pieces of criticism.<sup>1</sup> This 'actualizing' method of interpretation, however insignificant it may be within our academic discussion, has become one of the major currents of twentieth-century Shakespeare interpretation as it rules utterly unchallenged in the province of theatrical production. Any theatre-goer has witnessed instances of this 'actualizing' representation of Shakespeare's plays: Macbeth as fascist dictator, Hamlet as *l'homme révolté*, Henry V as embodiment of *Realpolitik* and jingoism, Prospero as imperialist, Tybalt and Mercutio as hooligans, the post-Auschwitz Shylock and the Beckettian *King Lear*, Brecht's *Coriolanus* and Dürrenmatt's *Titus Andronicus* — the opportunities for modernization and adaptation seem to be unlimited. In my view, academic Shakespeare criticism has dealt too lightly with the methodological problems involved in the 'actualizing' method of interpretation. The gulf between actors and scholars, stage and reading-desk, practice and theory, although often enough deplored, is still unbridged. Practitioners of the theatre continue to wonder at the stubbornness and lack of realism of academic critics who tell them not to cut and alter Shakespeare's text and

<sup>1</sup> For example Robert G. Collmer, 'An Existentialist Approach to *Macbeth*', *Personalist*, 41 (1960), 484-91.

to enact it as if for an Elizabethan audience. And university scholars continue to condemn the sensationalism of producers and demand the 'authentic' Shakespeare. Basically, things are what they used to be in the days of Levin Ludwig Schücking who hurled execration at modern translations and adaptations and even modern-dress productions. Academic critics do not, of course, call outright for 'antiquarian' productions, but their notion of authenticity is still very much 'Read and enact Shakespeare's plays as Shakespeare wanted them to be read and enacted' — whatever that may mean.

There are some interesting methodological problems involved in this controversy. As this paper is about a 'Beckettian' interpretation of Shakespeare, the best way to clarify the issues may be to re-open the discussion about Jan Kott's notorious *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1961, English edition 1964). Kott's interpretation of some of Shakespeare's plays, notably the tragedies, is a model 'actualizing' approach; moreover, his book has been crucially influenced by theatrical practice and has in its turn greatly inspired the style of theatrical productions up to the present time, the best-known instance of this being, of course, Peter Brook's 'seminal' Stratford production of *King Lear* in 1962. Academic critics almost unanimously welcomed Kott's contribution to Shakespeare criticism for its stimulating freshness, but finally rejected it as basically inauthentic, because it read twentieth-century ideas into plays which must be read as seventeenth-century plays. Cautious praise for Kott's unquestioned dramatic sensibility was usually mingled with regret that such a dubious specimen of criticism should gain acclaim which would have been better bestowed on more deserving and academically orthodox interpretations. Most reviewers were happy to point out Kott's admittedly numerous scholarly errors and superficialities, and generally condemned his approach as subjective, existentialist, unhistorical, anachronistic. Shakespeare, they insisted, is *not* our contemporary, and no interpretation should try to make him so. Mr Kott, the *TLS* reviewer declared, 'is entitled to his reading of history; but he is not entitled to assume that Shakespeare read it so'. Norman Sanders asked 'Was Shakespeare *really* not concerned with the legitimacy of a king's right?' Normand Berlin reprimanded Kott for not being 'truthful to Shakespeare's intentions', and Patrick Cruttwell unabashedly owned the vantage point of his own criticism to be 'the viewpoint of the seventeenth century' or the perspective of 'Shakespeare's audience', and rebuked Kott's different approach. A. Alvarez even said that *Shakespeare our Contemporary* 'is hardly Shakespearean criticism at all', but rather a commentary on modern Polish intellectual and political life — which implies that for this reviewer the 'genuine' Shakespeare critic should rather try to stick to the *Elizabethan* intellectual and political life.<sup>1</sup>

The interesting point in this quarrel is the validity of a theoretical standard such as 'Shakespeare's intention' or 'Shakespeare's contemporaries' or similar concepts, especially when they are introduced quite casually and without reflection, as is

<sup>1</sup> *TLS*, 27 September 1963, p. 744; Norman Sanders in *Shakespeare Survey*, 18 (1965), 174; Normand Berlin, 'Beckett and Shakespeare', *French Review*, 40 (1967), 647–51 (p. 650) — Mr Berlin, however, is by no means insensitive to the modern note in Macbeth's soliloquy 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow', which he calls 'an anticipation of the moods and ideas presented by Beckett' (p. 651); Patrick Cruttwell, 'Shakespeare is not our Contemporary', *Yale Review*, 59 (1969): 33–49 (pp. 49 and 41); A. Alvarez, 'Poles apart', *Spectator*, 12 March 1965, 335–7 (p. 337).

very often the case.<sup>1</sup> Phrases hinting at Shakespeare and his audiences as providing the only objective critical perspective abound in modern Shakespeare criticism. Shakespeare's views and intentions; the ideas and beliefs of his contemporaries; the expectations of his audiences; or simply the 'plan' of a play, the 'suggestions' of a scene, the 'purpose' of a passage, the way 'we are meant to understand' a character — these are omnipresent formulas which seem to come in handy when a critic does not know what he is doing. They ultimately derive from certain tenets of such historical critics as E. E. Stoll and L. L. Schücking, although modern commentators using them may not consciously confess an antiquarian approach at all. Both Stoll and Schücking in turn are methodologically influenced by Ranke's and Dilthey's 'historicism'. The common critical premiss of such an 'historical realism' is that we should try to adopt Shakespeare's perspective when reading his plays, or at least the perspective of his age. 'Discover, if possible, something of the dramatist's intention', 'the Elizabethan point of view' (Stoll); 'the probable attitude of Shakespeare's contemporaries', 'the poet's purpose' (Schücking); 'Shakespeare's contemporaries' (Lily B. Campbell); 'discover how an Elizabethan would approach a tragedy' (M. C. Bradbrook); 'Shakespeare's satiric intention' (Oscar J. Campbell); 'see the play in its contemporary perspective', 'share the standpoint of the Elizabethan spectator', 'the kind of play Shakespeare probably intended to write' (J. Dover Wilson); 'see things as Shakespeare saw them' (G. I. Duthie) — this, time and again, is the critical credo of 'historical' critics, however dissenting their views may be on other issues.<sup>2</sup> What, then, are we to think of this methodological presupposition? Does this particular concept of 'the business of criticism' really offer the vantage point which obliterates all differing approaches such as Jan Kott's?

It need hardly be emphasized that a critique of the methods employed by Shakespeare critics can in no way 'undo' their interpretations, however fallacious their critical premisses may be. It seems that the specific achievement of an interpretation has to be assessed mainly by other than methodological criteria (excepting, of course, interpretations based on principles which are historically no longer productive). A critique of interpretative methods, however, can help us to see the various critical approaches against their respective historical backgrounds, and can give us a better understanding of the issues involved in the disputes between the differing 'schools'. A questioning of the methodological presuppositions of Professors Stoll and Schücking does not, therefore, imply a belittlement of their critical and scholarly merits. The impetus they have given to studies devoted to the historical, social, theatrical, and literary background of Shakespeare's plays has been one of the most important contributions to twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism. Their critical perspective, however, was a reaction

<sup>1</sup> The following paragraphs enlarge on arguments already propounded in my 'Zur Methodik der Hamlet-Deutung von Ernest Jones', *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch (West)*, 109 (1973), 144-71 (pp. 164-7).

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Stoll, *Hamlet: An Historical and Comparative Study* (Minneapolis, 1919), p. 1; E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* (New York, 1927), p. 262; L. L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1922), pp. 8, 192; Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, 1930; new edition, London, 1961), p. vii; M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1935; second edition, Cambridge, 1952), p. 1; Oscar J. Campbell, *Comical Satyre and Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida'* (San Marino, California, 1938; new edition, San Marino, 1959), p. viii; John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, third edition (Cambridge, 1951), pp. 26, 53; John Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1943), p. 36; George Ian Duthie, *Shakespeare* (London, 1951), p. 56.

to Romantic 'intuition' and Victorian character criticism (a very wholesome reaction, too), and can make no claims to eternal validity. If there is a lesson to be learnt from the history of Shakespeare criticism, it is the relativity and historicity of *any* critical perspective, not excluding the 'historical' critics themselves. In the light of our modern knowledge of the hermeneutic process, Stoll's and Schücking's conception of historical awareness is rather naive, and we should not hesitate to admit this, for all their scholarly erudition and methodological assurance. The basic assumption of their attempt to develop an 'objective' historical consciousness is that we should try to leave aside our modern standards and conceptions, and judge things of the past only from the viewpoint of the past. Is this assumption sound?

It has been argued that such an assumption does not work in practice. Information about Elizabethan thinking and attitudes is too scarce; or there are too many differing standards and beliefs in Shakespeare's age to be reduced to a neat 'Elizabethan world picture'; or a modern mind is too different from an Elizabethan mind to be able to think and feel as Elizabethans thought and felt. These objections to the 'viewpoint of the past' conception of historical criticism are doubtless valuable; they object, however, to this conception of historical criticism only as far as practical results are concerned. They do not question it as a theoretical standard. But this is exactly what should be done. I would like to argue, taking the view of modern hermeneutic theory, that the 'perspective of the past' conception is wrong in two of its crucial assumptions: first, that we actually *can* ignore our modern minds, and second, that in experiencing a work of art we should *try* to ignore them. My objection to this kind of critical perspective is that it treats standards and convictions as something separable from the scholar and critic. We simply *cannot* slip out of our modern minds. In trying to understand things of the past we always think of them in terms of our modern experiences, whether we are aware of this or not. When we confront things alien to us which we want to understand, we might, for instance, ask someone already familiar with them to explain them to us — which means simply that they would be translated into patterns of thinking which we already command. By this, these patterns of thinking would be replenished and broadened, and gradually altered and overcome. The astonishing progress in intellectual perception achievable despite this basic restriction to notions already familiar to us, is what is usually called the hermeneutic circle. All the 'historical' critic can do in his occupation with things past is try to *ignore* his modern mind — but this leads inevitably to the fallacy of objectivity: a critic doing so considers himself to be the most objective of all the evaluators of the past, and is thus only the more liable to be unaware of his own predispositions and preconceptions. Shakespeare may not be our contemporary. Very well; but *we* are not *his* contemporaries, either, nor should we strain to become so.

So the theoretical assumptions of Mr Kott's critics are themselves open to criticism; they do not provide the vantage point from which the actualizing method of interpretation can be refuted. But what about Mr Kott himself? What are his standards and preconceptions? Mr Kott, it need hardly be emphasized, does not fall victim to the fallacy of objectivity. He is content, as he repeatedly declares in his book, to present the mid twentieth-century Shakespeare, the post-war Richard III, the modern Cressida ('she is our contemporary', p. 71), the Beckettian *King Lear*, the Prospero of the atomic age, the Hamlet who has read Camus and

Malraux. Jan Kott does not claim objectivity, nor eternal validity; he knows that every age has to find its own reading of Shakespeare. He knows that the antiquarian Shakespeare of the 'historical' critics is a fallacy, and his book, as a reaction to this fallacy, tries to avoid the 'Elizabethan' perspective, to an extent which at times seems to justify the charge of scholarly slovenliness. 'Discovering in Shakespeare's plays problems that are relevant to our own time' (p. 3), this is Mr Kott's critical credo; and I think academic critics should think twice before repudiating it as unscholarly and anachronistic.

There is, however, a fallacy involved in the actualizing method of interpretation, too. 'Antiquarian' critics do not try to bridge the gap between the past and the present, they rather grope their way through the gulf towards the past, or what they believe to be the past; actualizing critics, in their turn, do not bridge the gulf, either, but rather try to drag into the present as many fragments of the past as they think fit for transportation. This is evidently bound to lead to ruptures and misunderstandings in their readings of the texts, as the past cannot be treated wholly in terms of the present (although, as we have seen, it is equally impossible to treat it wholly in terms of the past). The well-trodden path of established academic and theatrical interpretation seems to be blocked on either side. Antiquarian reconstruction will always be as incomplete and defective as bold actualization. Let us consider Ophelia's physical appearance as an example: the director can dress the actress playing her part in Elizabethan costume, but she will still have her 'modern face', as Jan Kott is absolutely right in insisting; or the director may dress her in denims, and tell her to wear her hair loose, in the Juliette Gréco fashion of the fifties, as Mr Kott in turn seems to suggest, but she would still be the dutiful and obedient daughter of Polonius, and not a self-assured, though nihilistically disconsolate, twentieth-century juvenile. Consistent actualization ends up in re-writing, and consistent re-writing ends up in an utterly new play: a play of the present, not of the past. Ultimately, Mr Kott's actualizing method of interpretation deprives Shakespeare's plays of their historicity, which is as bad a thing for a critic (and, for that matter, for a producer) to do as to deprive them of their relevance to our own time.

There is no easy way out of this critical dilemma. (I shall, of course, not make a suggestion myself as to how Ophelia could be costumed.) The only way of achieving a truly historical consciousness is to reflect the *change* which the ideas of the past undergo when construed by a modern mind. Historical awareness means understanding the *mediation* between things past on the one hand and our modern experience on the other.<sup>1</sup> A responsible critic has always to be cognizant of the fact that his own work is as much a constituent of history as the object of his studies is. In considering Shakespeare's plays he should likewise consider his own experience of them. In finding a 'plan' and a 'pattern' in Shakespeare's plays he should not blind himself to the fact that the structures he discovers have somehow to pass through his subjective and preformed mind, and that his mind cannot be turned into an objective recording instrument simply by denying its historicity. When we try to think in terms of the past, this will alter the notions of the past as well as our own understanding; critical awareness of this dynamism is the only safeguard

<sup>1</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, third edition (Tübingen, 1972), p. 374, and Emilio Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione* (Milan, 1955), pp. 314-17.

against either the antiquarian or the modernist fallacy, against either the museum Shakespeare or Shakespeare our contemporary. It should be kept in mind, however, that the historical sense here advocated is more than just a convenient compromise between the historicity and the actuality of a work of art. The critical difficulty is not simply evaded by trying to steer a middle course and consider both aspects of the matter simultaneously. The hermeneutically reflective historical critic knows that there is no access to the historicity of a work of art except *through* its actuality, and that, on the other hand, an actualizing interpretation will remain a superficial modernization as long as it is not based on precisely those historical issues which fundamentally link the past with the present. The relationship of historicity and actuality is a dialectical one; on a higher level of reflection both are inseparable.

Finally, this concept of historical awareness helps us to find an answer to the notorious question whether the nihilism in Macbeth's soliloquy 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' is Macbeth's or *Macbeth's*, whether it is the 'message' of the play, or only of its leading character. The answer depends on one's concept of nihilism. A critic professing an ahistorical view will understand Macbeth's despair as part of the universal strife between order and chaos, and thus read the play as victorious good triumphing over defeated evil. Macbeth, seen in this perspective, will, apart from being evil, become something like a fool and a dupe who would, similar to the Doctor Faustus of certain 'historical' critics, outwit providence, and who is, necessarily, beaten at his own game.<sup>1</sup> And the critic taking this line may, in order to make his view appear more 'authentic', try to persuade us that this was Shakespeare's view too. This paper, however, takes a different view of nihilism (and I am prepared to admit that the man Shakespeare — were he some kind of Rip Van Winkle, awaking after a sound three hundred-odd years' sleep — would probably be completely nonplussed by it). It holds that 'authenticity' means a mediation of past ideas and present consciousness, and that the concept of nihilism can only have a meaning for us if it can be experienced principally in terms of our own age. This contributes to an understanding of the relationship between nihilism and individualism, in its extremest form alienation, and, moreover, it provides a perspective for *Macbeth's* historical stature, Shakespeare's age being the dawn, Beckett's (perhaps) the zenith of individualism. If, then, *Macbeth* is supposed to embody 'the form and pressure' of its time — and I very strongly contend that it does — Macbeth's soliloquy is far more pivotal than Malcolm's and Macduff's triumph at the end, simply because the restoration of the traditional order falls considerably behind the doubt and individualism which turned out to be the historically advanced features of Renaissance thinking. If we read *Macbeth* as a document of historical progress, the soliloquy 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' is far more central than Macduff's 'The time is free'. And only reading the play as a document of historical progress can enable us to bridge the gulf between the past and the present, to understand art as anticipation, to read a play of three hundred and seventy years ago with an aesthetic thrill and personal

<sup>1</sup> See George Ian Duthie, 'Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Study in Tragic Absurdity', in *English Studies Today*, Second Series (International Association of University Professors of English), edited by G. A. Bonnard (Bern, 1961), pp. 121–8.



involvement alien to any antiquarian approach. Shakespeare, as Robert Weimann aptly put it, is “for all time” precisely because, as Jonson also said, he was the “soule of the Age”.<sup>1</sup>

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FREIBURG IM BREISGAU

<sup>1</sup> Robert Weimann, ‘Shakespeare on the Modern Stage: Past Significance and Present Meaning’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 20 (1967), 113–20 (p. 117). Compare the same author’s ‘The Soul of the Age: Towards a Historical Approach to Shakespeare’, in *Shakespear ein a Changing World*, edited by Arnold Kettle (London, 1964), pp. 17–42 (p. 42), and ‘Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History’, *New Literary History*, 1 (1969–70), 91–109 (p. 109).