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The Birth of a Tragic Hero(ine)

On tragic excess in contemporary theatre

Presentata da: Vanja Baltić

Coordinatore Dottorato

Prof. Daniele Benati

Supervisor

Prof. Gerardo Guccini

Prof. Timmy De Laet

Co-supervisor

Prof. Marco De Marinis

Prof. Luk Van den Dries

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Abstract (English)

The idea of the tragic is unthinkable. It is precisely within the moment in which an ordinary human being, a heroine or a hero – incapable of scrutinizing fully their own position within the whole – is invited to respond, to accept or refuse it all, that the tragic unfolds, changing their life irremediably. What are the causes and the consequences of *god's arrival*, as in case of Dionysus who visits Pentheus' home in Euripides' *The Bacchae*? Through episodes in the stories of characters from Ancient Greek dramas – such as Oedipus, Antigone, Ajax, Io, through Dostoevsky's or Kafka's imagery, in Prince Myshkin's, the Ridiculous Man's or Gregor Samsa's experiences, this doctoral research proposes to examine the aspects which compete in the creation of a tragic hero. Theatrical performances – such as Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, a 24-Hour Performance*, immersed in a cycle of life, death and re-birth; Oliver Frljić's *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu*, in its careful analysis of the wounds of a heritage of war; and Cristian Ceresoli's and Silvia Gallerano's tragic testimony of an estranged, almost *soulless* body in *La Merda* – open up the dialogue on our contemporary idea of the tragic. This doctoral work chooses excess as its privileged channel through which to approach the concept of the tragic – by its nature elusive, hostile to any definition, strictly personal and, thus, visible only through one's own lens. In an excess of pain, devotion, desire, rage, arrogance or beauty, opposites collide, time concentrates into a moment and the hero is invited to choose, to live or die, to transform.

Abstract (Italian)

L'idea del tragico è impensabile. È proprio in quel momento in cui un ordinario essere umano, un'eroina o un eroe – incapace di scrutare pienamente la propria posizione e dovendo ciononostante rispondere, accettare o rifiutare il tutto, quando il tragico si dispiega, cambiando questa vita per sempre. Quali sono le cause e le conseguenze dell'arrivo di dio, come nel caso della visita di Dioniso a casa di Penteo nelle *Baccanti* di Euripide? Attraverso gli episodi nelle storie dei personaggi del dramma antico greco, come Edipo, Antigone, Aiace, Io, oppure attraverso l'immaginazione di Dostoevskij e Kafka, nelle esperienze del principe Myškin, l'Uomo ridicolo o Gregor Samsa, questa ricerca dottorale si propone di esaminare gli aspetti che contribuiscono alla creazione dell'eroe tragico. Gli spettacoli teatrali, come *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, a 24-Hour Performance* di Jan Fabre, immerso in un ciclo di vita, morte e rinascita, *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu* di Oliver Frlić, nella sua attenta analisi delle ferite di un'eredità di guerra e *La merda* di Cristian Ceresoli e Silvia Gallerano, tragica testimonianza di un corpo estraniato, aprono il dialogo sul tragico contemporaneo. Questo lavoro dottorale sceglie l'eccesso in quanto canale privilegiato attraverso cui approcciare il concetto del tragico – per sua natura sfuggente, ostile a qualsiasi definizione, strettamente personale e, dunque, visibile soltanto attraverso un proprio sguardo. Nell'eccesso di dolore, desiderio, rabbia, arroganza, bellezza, gli opposti si scontrano, il tempo si concentra in un momento e l'eroe è invitato a scegliere, vivere o morire, trasformarsi.

Abstract (Dutch)

De idee van het tragische is ondenkbaar. Precies op het moment waarop een gewoon mens, een heldin of een held - niet in staat om diens eigen positie volledig te onderzoeken - wordt uitgenodigd om te reageren, om alles te accepteren of te weigeren, ontvouwt het tragische zich en verandert zijn of haar leven onherroepelijk. Wat zijn de oorzaken en de gevolgen van de komst van een god, zoals in het geval van Dionysus wanneer hij het huis van Pentheus in Euripides' *Bakchai* bezoekt? Aan de hand van fragmenten in de verhalen van personages uit oude Griekse drama's - zoals Oedipus, Antigone, Ajax, Io, via de beeldtaal van Dostojevski of Kafka, in de ervaringen van prins Myshkin, de Ridiculous Man of Gregor Samsa, stelt dit doctoraatsonderzoek voor om de aspecten te onderzoeken die meespelen in de creatie van een tragische held. Theatervoorstellingen – zoals Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*, een 24-uur durende performance die het publiek onderdompelt in een cyclus van leven, dood en wedergeboorte; Oliver Frlić's *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu*, dat zorgvuldig de wonden van een oorlogserfenis analyseert; en Cristian Ceresoli's en Silvia Gallerano's tragische getuigenis van een vervreemd, bijna zielloos lichaam in *La Merda* - openen de dialoog over ons hedendaagse begrip van het tragische. Dit doctoraatswerk kiest 'exces' als het bevoorrechte kanaal om het concept van het tragische te benaderen – dat door zijn aard ongrijpbaar, vijandig aan elke definitie en strikt persoonlijk is en dus alleen zichtbaar is door een individuele lens. In een overdaad aan pijn, toewijding, verlangen, woede, arrogantie of schoonheid botsen tegenstellingen, concentreert de tijd zich tot een moment en wordt de held uitgenodigd om te kiezen, te leven of te sterven, te transformeren.

To my brother, Miloš

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Introduction

Those who fought firmly believed that science and wisdom and the instinct of self-preservation would finally force man to unite in a harmonious, reasonable society. And, in the meantime, these wise ones were in a hurry to exterminate the unwise who couldn't grasp their Idea, and thus prevent them from hindering its triumph.¹

In this passage from Dostoevsky's *Сон смешного человека*, there is a fissure, a hidden excess – unfortunately completely lost in (not only) the English translation of the writing – which could provide a way into the premises of this doctoral research.

The meaning of the words “the wise” and “the unwise”, as reported in the above-quoted passage of Dostoevsky's does not necessarily correspond fully to the original *премудрые* and *непремудрые* in Russian – since *премудрые*, as it might be important to point out here, does not necessarily mean just *the wise*, but it is *the overly wise*, while *непремудрые* does not mean just *the unwise*, but *the not-overly-wise*. This apparently slight difference,

¹ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Сон смешного человека*, 1877, Eng. trans. *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, in *Notes from Underground, White Nights, the Dream of a Ridiculous Man, and selection from The House of the Dead*, New York, The New American Library, 1961, pp. 222–223.

completely neglected in different translations of Dostoevsky's story, casts light on the image of this specific kind of *the wise*, who would, led by uncontrollable *hubris*, not only disregard the unfolding of life in all of its natural contradictions, but become themselves the instigators of additional conflicts and suffering. As might be deduced from *A Dream*, these detainers of truths, despite or maybe thanks to their intellectual insensibility, contribute to the laying out of new tragedies, proposing to scientifically regulate the *defects* of human nature by forcing onto the less-wise their own visions of harmonious life. To act as the overly-wise means to try to suppress the tragic principle of being, entering, in that manner – differently from what is potentially desired – the very heart of tragic unfolding.

This subtle nuance in the word *премудрые*, indubitably carefully selected by the great writer, is able to frame the aspects of the concept of the tragic, which provoked reluctance in philosophers, who studied the idea from Schelling onwards, as Peter Szondi writes.² That is to say that there is some kind of distortion, a mismatch between the tragic and the idea of it, since the tragic treats as *overly-wise* anyone who would try to get closer to it *scientifically*, risking thus – as the philosophers, who preferred to avoid dedicating themselves to this subject (by including it among their “privileged topics” as Szondi points out³), knew – the possibility of turning out rather to be *not-overly-wise*.

It is precisely the term *overly*, in Dostoevsky's *премудрые*, which conflicts with the term *wise*, almost ridiculing it – a movement analysed by Szondi, through his *tragic dialectics*:⁴ pointing out the exchange of places of opposites with an almost carnivalesque nonchalance – to offer the key to the idea of the tragic as a philosophical idea. There is, in that slightly mocking *overly* of Dostoevsky's, the weight of the elusiveness of the idea of the tragic, which would, at the same moment when it seems grasped in its profound all-encompassing nature, transform into something else, rather obvious, annoying, unworthy of further thought. There is an inherent excess, a permanent displacement of the idea of the tragic from its very subject,

² Cf. P. Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische*, 1961, It. trans. *Saggio sul tragico*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1996, cf. C. Gentili, G. Garelli, *Il tragico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010, p. 201.

³ Cf. Szondi, *Saggio sul tragico*, cit.

⁴ C. Gentili, G. Garelli, *Il tragico*, cit., p. 201.

a negation implicated in every one of its affirmations; as if that very concept could be seized only intuitively, as if it could be only perceived spiritually.

The *overly* is a hint at human's impossibility to be a human, a hint at some kind of disease which compels him to destroy, and thus, consequentially, to suffer the fruits of his destruction, as Dostoevsky writes in his *Записки из подполья*,⁵ to prove to be *more than* a human, to prove to be entitled to choose, to create and destroy, to resemble his god. This tragic *surplus* is positioned on the verge of chaos, in Dionysus' curls, in a treacherous deal which night and day stipulate against their fathers, Erebus and Helios. It disavows science, it despises common sense, and the only force which it admits is freedom – the most supreme of all, above good and bad. The *overly* is the symbol of excess, a sign of imperfection which gives a chance for the process of perfecting, which gives birth to life. It is the place of a wound which exists to heal. It is a promise to a human to have the capacity to attain *more* (if this *more* is a synonym for different) than he currently does, a vague memory of his noble spiritual origins, of the immaculate conception preceding the Fall, the necessary proof for a human to be a human, not a *piano key*.⁶

The concept of the tragic is an oxymoron, while the attempt to study it is an almost impossible endeavour, similar to Icarus' flight – as Szondi writes: “the closer thought gets to a general concept, the further away the substantial element to which it owes the impulse becomes”.⁷ To approach this rather challenging topic, it was necessary to proceed in this doctoral dissertation with immense caution – without ever losing sight of the subject's playful fervour,

⁵ F. M. Dostoyevsky, *Записки изъ подполья*, 1864, Eng. trans. *Notes from the Underground*, Waiheke Island, Floating, 2009. Web.

⁶ “That is not all; then, you say, science itself will teach man (though to my mind it's a superfluous luxury) that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ, and that there are, besides, things called the laws of nature; so that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature”, *ibid*, pp. 38–39.

⁷ “Infatti, quanto più il pensiero si approssima al concetto generale, tanto meno gli aderisce l'elemento sostanziale a cui deve lo slancio”, S. Givone, foreword to P. Szondi, *Il saggio sul tragico*, cit. p. XIII (trans. by V. Baltić).

of its propensity to deceive, of its total refusal of definition – leaving enough space for its uninterrupted movement to be displayed throughout different conceptual fields. In this sense, in an attempt to come closer to the core aspects of the idea of tragic, assuming the responsibility of positioning oneself in the role of either *overly-wise* or *not-overly-wise*, both inherently *un-wise* and tragic, this doctoral dissertation proposes to formally emulate the multiform, fragmentary and almost allegorical language of its subject. The decision to approach the tragic by taking side-paths, using the didactic power of recount, the lucidity of mythological imagery and the multiplicity of divergent cultural sources, is based on the profound conviction that it is the most appropriate way to proceed in the study of a subject that is reluctant to be studied. This dissertation, thus, avoids entering the matter of this research with a magnifying glass, with the aggression inherent to the scientific method *stricto sensu* (which not only discovers, but also adapts the discovered to its own language), preferring, on the contrary, to create the conditions for the concept to reveal itself.

The matter, the meat of the idea of the tragic, is, thus, approached through images, through examples; it is weighted, tasted in the mouth with the risk of a sour flavour, held in the hands with the risk of becoming stained with blood, in an attempt to preserve the scientific integrity of a subject, internally fractured by its very nature. In order to be able to remedy this site of injury and, thus, to mend those most divergent parts of the concept of the tragic into a whole which is able to *un-break* itself at its very breaking point, this dissertation decides to focus on the fracture, on the exception, on the wound. It is interested in the *despite*, in the condition of disadvantage which requires *more than* to be able to reassess itself, to be able to exist. In other words, in this luxation, in the impossibility of the tragic to display its totality, in the inability of human perception to grasp its vastness, excess inserts itself as a solution. Excess shows the way, here, for the tragic to reveal itself. It materialises the immaterial through its mocking pretension to *go beyond*, as if any human would ever really know the right measure when trespassing it, as if the *beyond* was ever available for us

In a series of visual frames which want to suggest, to announce, to disclose many potential definitions, conceptualisations, interpretations and onto a central (lacking) answer around the nature of man as a tragic being, the reader of this dissertation is invited to lend to the writing

his own humanity, his own vision of the tragic, to *re-discover* a vision of the tragic. As with Roland Barthes' *La chambre claire*,⁸ which is searching for a key to connect with the art of photography, or better, to connect with death itself, as its *eidos*,⁹ it is the detail that covers the revelatory function, here, as well. Just as the most personal detail, noticed by the spectator who observes the scene depicted in the photographs, i.e. the *punctum*, addresses Barthes directly, so the tragic speaks to the one who tries to listen to it. In other words, it is impossible to understand the tragic as someone else's tragic. That is to say that it does not allow any critical distance between the thinking subject and itself. There is only: *it is as it is*,¹⁰ Barthes writes. "And even more: *it is for me!* 'For me' is not subjective, nor existential, but Nietzschean ('after all, it is always the same question: What is it *for me?*...')." ¹¹ In other words, the tragic is always filtered through the self, in both the writer's gaze and the reader's. The only way to treat the idea of the tragic is to give it a body, one's own body, one's own pair of eyes, one's own heart. That being said, the necessity of this dissertation to locate some of the main conceptual points inside its own methodological apparatus, looking for elements of the tragic unfolding firstly in-between its own lines, in its own imagery, as well as the propensity not to define the undefinable, denotes the inherent difficulty of isolating the subject so that it may be analysed *in vitro*, put on paper. Only through an internal look at the tragic, only by disguising oneself before going to Mt. Cithaeron to see the wild bacchantes, can the tragic be seen.

⁸ Cf. R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 1980, It. trans. *La camera chiara. Nota sulla fotografia*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ "Se accetto di giudicare un testo secondo il piacere non posso lasciarmi andare a dire: questo è buono, questo è cattivo. Niente graduatoria, niente critica, giacché questa implica sempre una mira tattica, un uso sociale e molto spesso una copertura immaginaria. Non posso dosare, immaginare che il testo sia perfettibile, pronto a entrare in un gioco di predicati normativi: è troppo *questo*, non è abbastanza *quello*; il testo (lo stesso accade per la voce che canta) può solo strapparmi questo giudizio, per nulla oggettivo: è *così!*", R. Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, 1973, It. trans. *Il piacere del testo. Contro le indifferenze della scienza e il puritanesimo dell'analisi ideologica*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1975, p. 13. (Italics are the author's, trans. by V. Baltić).

¹¹ "E ancor più: è *questo per me!* Il "per me" non è né soggettivo, né esistenziale, ma nietzscheiano ('...in fondo, è sempre la stessa domanda: Che cos'è *per me?* ...')", *ibid.* (Italics are the author's, trans. by V. Baltić).

For Nietzsche – as Carlo Gentili writes¹² – tragedy teaches the unity of all, its thought proceeds “by visible and sensible facts”, not “by concepts”, it thinks *mythically*. In this sense, the thought of the tragic, which could not be thought through, should be – as this dissertation aims to prove – thought many times anew from different angulations. It is a thought that is able to surprise continuously, that renews accordingly interest in itself, but also that, simultaneously – since it is always on the verge of the unknowable – reduces the chances of actually *finding out*. The thought of the tragic is hostile in regards to words; it is “not a conceptual thought, but it is real, it is expressed in a real consciousness, in a ‘mute’ consciousness”¹³ – Luigi Pareyson writes, referring to myth. “It is revelatory by itself”¹⁴ – the philosopher proceeds. In this sense, the tragic, first and foremost, *is*. In order to sense it, to understand it – the only way it allows itself to be understood – intuitively, through the soul’s agency, one has *to be*. In order to be, really be, it is necessary *to be more than*.

This thesis is divided into four chapters, following, through four stages, the dynamics of the unfolding of the tragic hero’s story. The development of the tragedy of a human – maybe Oedipus, or his daughter Antigone, Ajax or Prometheus, or Kafka’s or Dostoevsky’s characters – is analysed closely with the intent to delineate the circumstances which compete

¹² “L’elemento poetico’ dell’arte di Wagner, scrive Nietzsche, consiste nella capacità di pensare ‘non per concetti’ bensì ‘per fatti visibili e sensibili’; e dunque ‘egli pensa miticamente, così come ha sempre pensato il popolo’, dato che il mito non ha un pensiero a suo fondamento, ‘bensì è esso stesso un pensare’, ‘una concezione del mondo’”, C. Gentili, G. Garelli, *Il tragico*, cit., pp. 26–27.

¹³ “Naturalmente per “mito”, come dicevo, intendo quel livello profondo del rapporto ontologico, quell’interpretazione originaria della realtà, quel contatto con l’inoggettivabile, il quale non deve considerarsi come contrapposto a “realtà”, perché il mito è esso stesso un’esperienza esistenziale della realtà; non contrapposto a “storia”, perché il mito è esso stesso un racconto, una narrazione, una storia delle epoche dell’eternità, delle epoche della storia umana, della storia temporale; né contrapposto a “verità”, perché esso stesso è la verità in quanto esistenzialmente interpretata e posseduta; non contrapposto a “ragione”, perché esso stesso contiene un pensiero, sia pure un pensiero originario, oppure diciamo un pensiero non concettuale, ma reale, quale si esprime in una coscienza reale, in una coscienza “muta”; né tanto meno come contrapposto a “rivelazione”, perché esso stesso è non solamente invenzione o espressione, non solamente funzione fabulatrice o mitopoetica, ma è esso stesso rivelativo”, L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà: il male e la sofferenza*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995, p. 25 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

in the birth of a tragic *hero*,¹⁵ with the task of connecting the dots in the constellation of this fate. From the very first steps on a pair of pierced feet – the burdensome inheritance from his father – to the moment in which he finds himself at a crossroads, to making a bad choice of the way to go; from a subsequent understanding of his difficult position, of his shortcomings and his sins, to suffering, lifelong suffering, an unpaved road to salvation. The hero's story is permeated with decisions to take, since he incessantly needs to position himself in relation to the rest, he is continuously called upon to respond to the rest, to himself, to his god. Every one of his choices, forced choices, necessities, murders committed for love, from rage, in madness, an entire life lived in blindness, a destruction rooted in fear of the other, in fear of the other within himself, compete in the construction of a tragic character.

This doctoral work goes through the stages of the progress of the *hero(ine)*'s story, looking into those crucial aspects which compel a human to become tragic, that is, which compel a human to become human. What interests this research is the hero's background, his original environment. For Oedipus, for instance, that is the decision of his father to kill him, as well as the mercy of his adopters; it is his limping walk and a vague prophecy of an unfortunate life. For a man, any man, such as Oedipus, it could be a Fall into history, it could be the long-lost memory of paradise. An individual enters the world with the presumption of being autonomous, unconscious of his roots, unaware that these roots have already, even before his first steps, grabbed and will hold him resolutely, until they drag him back into the soil. In this sense, the thesis focuses on different aspects of the hero's environment, which exert a significant influence on his decisions and thus on the development of his story. Moreover, it

¹⁵ Here, as in many others cases in this text, the terms *hero* or *hero(ine)* have the same meaning, referring to a heroic human being/character or just a human being as such. The term *hero(ine)* is used with the intent to avoid conveying any gender specificity of a figure in question, and highlight, instead, the core aspect here, which is the humanity of the hero(ine). Yet, because of linguistic incongruences which this term provokes, and to avoid the excessive burdening of the text, the term *hero* would be referring to both, hero and heroine, i.e. human being, in the other places, in which the context justifies the use. The term *man*, as well as the pronouns *he/him/his* referring to a *hero*, to a human being, are used here – even though bearers of important semantic limitations – as gender-nonspecific terms. Reasons for this choice are of philosophical nature: it seemed that a term *man*, as well as the singular pronouns *he/him/his*, (instead of politically correct neutral plural pronouns *they/them/their*) enclose an implicit idea of the individuality of a human being, his tragic divorce from the rest of the nature. A *man* is a civilized being, a being within culture, not just a (human) being, just a member of a species, but a member of a species of individuals. In this sense, every human being has the power to change the entirety of that same species, the destiny of all the species on the Earth. The use of singular pronouns, thus, seemed as more appropriate in this context.

is also the temperament of the hero, of a human, whoever he might be, maybe Ajax, the proudest of all, to whom an ordinary life means very little, that determines the tragic unfolding of the events within tragedy. A man who cannot allow himself to be reduced to any divine law or *scientific equation*¹⁶ is himself the creator of his own demise. There is the one, supreme law *for him* – his freedom to be the most despicable being out there on planet Earth, to be *the strangest wonder*,¹⁷ as Sophocles wrote. His conflict with god, based on an intrinsic desire to emancipate, on a dream to overthrow any rule outside of himself, opens up many opportunities for examination of the idea of the tragic. There must be some kind of deal with god, as in Antigone's *romance* with the ghosts of the hereafter, some kind of (even if false) promise which permits the most irrational actions to be excused, to find their place in the human order, to obtain meaning.

Chapter I, thus, collocates the tragic hero inside the world he knows. It is the inherited world of clear contours, marked by the already defined borders of the possible, insufficiencies and occasions. It is a world stricken by plague, in need of a hero to search for the source of the scourge, firstly within the walls of his own home. Moreover, it is a condition, an accidental disposition of strengths and weaknesses, of fortunes and calamities, the only pair of hands that catches a sinner, stops his freefall. Chapter II examines the wrong path, the deep pit chosen by the hero out of countless better opportunities. His blind eyes are asked to decide on a favourite colour of the dawn of his life, but only black can be chosen by those who cannot see. It is a moment in which the hero commits a mistake, a necessary mistake, which will lead to the unravelling of the bandage under which his original wound has been festering for his entire life. Chapter III analyses the moment of announcement, the moment in which a god knocks down the door of Pentheus' palace to remind him of the necessary consequences of his deeds. Once god is present, the entire world of the hero collapses in the present, it is concluded in the present; the past is lost forever, the future is unliveable, the world is stopped

¹⁶ "Merciful Heavens! but what do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it if I really have not the strength to knock it down, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength", F. M. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁷ Sophocles, *Antigone*, in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek Tragedies I*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2013, 335–375.

in the moment of revelation. The hero witnesses his world, the one he knew, the one he suffered in, exchanged forever for an entirely new reality, one he does not belong to, one he cannot accept as his. Chapter IV examines suffering. It is the suffering of a new human being, of a human who has seen himself dying before his own eyes; who has seen his own world breaking apart in many irretrievable pieces. On the other side of the hero's infinite suffering, it is a new transformation which awaits him, the second opportunity. It could be death, it could be new life – both of them being, maybe, the same thing.

In the works of artists such as the writer Cristian Ceresoli and the actress Silvia Gallerano, the director Oliver Frljić and the Troubleyn theatrical company, approached here through the voices of performers Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon, longstanding collaborators of the director and visual artist Jan Fabre, this dissertation finds its unique interlocutors, who examine the concept of the tragic, creating occasions for it to take form in the contemporary cultural context. Coming from different personal, professional and even geographical backgrounds, these three theatrical realities, each one in its own peculiar manner – shaped through a careful study of performing arts, supported by a multiplicity of elaborate philosophical and poetic premises – open up a view onto several aspects of the idea of the tragic, offering their own most specific visions of it. In order to approach the *theatres* – whose smart gaze portrays and thus, informs about, many details which compete in the forming of the contemporary idea of the tragic – it was necessary to examine the beliefs, images, maybe the, at times still undefined intuitions, the artists' experiences of the theatrical environment they know, their aspirations within it, and their critique of it; it was important to talk about the artists' own heroes, the crucial readings and films which inspired their works, their first steps in the development of their performances, difficulties and successes. The questions emerging in the dialogues with the artists concern their theatrical works, such as *La Merda*, *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu* and *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, a 24-Hour Performance*, their perspectives on today's cultural environment, on the role of the theatre in the societal and political currents of the last decade of the new millennium, and their detection of the *vulnera* through which the tragic permeates the present moment.

Chapter I, entitled *Original sin or, On who I am* opens with Antigone's utterly curious affirmation of the reasons which drove her to go against Creon's laws, directly incurring the death penalty. The heroine, who is more than often considered to be the bravest defender of unwritten laws protecting the dignity of human life as the most sacred value, insists in her monologue on the special ethics of sisterhood, in the absence of which her sacrifice would not have any meaning. That is to say that Antigone explicitly admits that protecting the integrity and sacredness of the body of her brother was a highly exclusive act, and nobody else but siblings, not even the other family members (such as a husband or a child) would ever get the same treatment from her. While professing this view, the heroine also connects the whole of the unfortunate sequence of events with her own self ("no brother *for me*, ever, could be born"),¹⁸ giving the opportunity for many of her admirers in the centuries of tragic thought to be reminded that she had never died *for them*.

This, it could be said, almost scandalous claim is analysed starting from the question: "In regards to what does Antigone's claim (always present in Sophocles' tragedy, even though maybe not taken enough into consideration) shock?" The hypothesis which seems most relevant here focuses on the inattentive or generally biased perspective of a culture which wants an Antigone different from the one she expressed herself to be. In other words, the fearless protector of *oikos*, of a new chance for life in the underworld, seems, when observed through this interesting statement, profoundly uninterested in this grandiose spectral figure that Western culture has made her become in many years of re-readings.

This doubt concerning the nature of one of the most beautiful symbols of resistance, leads not only to the dynamics of a *overly-wise* world – which prefers to adapt its heroes to itself, instead of confronting them with humility and truthfulness – but also onto the very aspect inside which the humanity of this tragic character is secluded. It is precisely this detail, the claim around the replaceability of certain lives, so *disrespectfully* divergent from the rest of

¹⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit., 905–915.

Antigone's story, as Goethe notices in shock,¹⁹ which functions as a tragic excess: a gateway to the heroine's humanity.

The analysis of this particularity of Antigone's story aims to delineate here the world we know, one which disregards the most peculiar trait of human, to make it conform to a spectrum of idealised principles, making it lose its own voice, as had happened with Chryssippus, whose story is directly correlated with Antigone's.²⁰ The disregard of Antigone's fundamental distortion, of her unwillingness to be sacrificed for anyone but herself – which not only separates her from the others outside of the laws of her *polis*, but at the same time connects her with an authentic life – is viewed in this work as a violation, not only of Antigone's story, but also of the identity of a man, whoever he might be, any contemporary man as well, who disowns the truth of his heroine, disowning himself. This *for me* of Antigone's, in Barthes' aforementioned sense of the term, articulated through *for my brother*, is the key to the heroine's humanity, buried under centuries of interpretations.

To be able to elaborate on this idea, the part of the chapter dedicated to Antigone is integrated into the subchapter entitled *My name is Chryssippus*, whereas, the tragic destiny of the heroine finds its double in the story of Chryssippus, from Euripides' lost tragedy or Jan Fabre's monologue of a ghost in his *Mount Olympus*. What is tackled here is the intergenerational chain of guilt and atonement, the idea of immortality and the tragedy of oblivion. In a dialogue with the performers of Troubleyn theatre company, Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon, the profile of the concept of tragic this Fabre's gigantic artwork entails, is sketched out through a reflection on the pluridimensional agency of time. In other words, it is time that is imposed here, as the main engine of the tragic. On one hand, its absence from Chryssippus' petrified world of dead, points to the cause of the origin of the tragedies of Labdacides; on the other, the *unusual* durations of Jan Fabre's theatrical acts, as well as the extreme duration

¹⁹ Goethe finds Antigone's *reasons* to bury the brother "quite unworthy", J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, 1848, Eng. trans., *Conversations of Goethe*, J. Oxenford (trans.), 2010, (conversation from 21 March 1827). Web. It. trans. *Colloqui con Goethe*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1947, p. 539.

²⁰ Chryssippus' tragic ending was provoked by Lausis', Antigone's grandfather's, violent deeds, K. Kerényi, *Die Mythologie der Griechen, (Die Götter-und Menschenheitsgeschichten; Die Heroen-Geschichten)*, 1951, It. trans. *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia. Il racconto del mito, la nascita della civiltà*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 2015, pp. 309–311.

of his performance itself, offer the occasion for the spectator to become participant in a collective rite rediscovering birth, death and rebirth of a human as a tragic being.

It takes very little for the truth to get corrupted. Sometimes it is only an act of thinking, of interpreting, only the slightest misunderstanding in a translation process, that will bring the plague to humanity, Sergio Givone claims,²¹ commenting on Dostoevsky's *Сон смешного человека*, a short story dealing with the subject analysed in the second part of Chapter I. It is enough to be a human, it is enough to be Oedipus, who could not avoid falling into the grip of the horrible prophecy assigned to him even before his birth, to corrupt the possibility of utopia. This is the original sin, an *Ur*-mistake made even before being able to choose; the guilt of being born, of being human.

In the utter impossibility to separate from those parts of oneself which prefer pillage, conflict and destruction, which are able to deceive, wrest and kill, those parts which, as in Antigone's case, would not bury their own child because of the chance of having another one, a human being profiles himself as a tragic being. His propensity to care, love and do good is maybe equally present inside his heart as is the potential for senseless mayhem. These *inconvenient* and, more than often, inadmissible parts of human nature, which inspire the Dostoevskian *overly-wise* to actively search for a cure, are the aspects of tragic excess which bring a subject into the situations of loss and suffering, to also, maybe paradoxically, compete in his full development as a human being.

Western culture *in toto* – part of which is the same theatre Antonin Artaud aspired to reform – shows in itself some inherently tragic aspects, as Szondi wrote²² while developing the history of the philosophy of the tragic. It could be claimed that contemporary Western culture is prone to masking the Dionysian terror lurking inside every, even the most *reasonable* person, to dissimulate the important questions behind easy answers, to distract from the core, albeit unpleasant, facets of humanity, substituting them with false promises of (infinite) progress. Death is censored, it is excluded from open cultural or societal dialogue, to reappear in some kind of vague angst merging with unexpressed aggressiveness, fear and

²¹ Cf. S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste. Colpa e destino*, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 78.

²² Cf. P. Szondi, *Il saggio sul tragico*, cit.

dissatisfaction, or in over-compensatory psychological strategies. The plague which took over the Earth in 2020, with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, found its place in the lungs – it is important to recall as well that it was precisely *the lungs of the planet* which were burning in the premonitory summer of 2019 – while pneumonia, as one of the most significant complications of the virus, could have been maybe prevented with dedication to *pneumatology*, the science of the human soul, (*pneuma* (Gr.) breath, spirit) as Nikolai Berdyaev claimed Dostoevsky himself was: a great *pneumatologist*.²³ In other words, the plague, as in *Oedipus Rex*, arrives from the inside, from unhealed wounds, from the indelible memory of injustices, of substantial violations of the sacred in many of their forms.

In Chapter I of this doctoral work, the hero, a human, whoever he might be, maybe contemporary man, is positioned inside the world he knows, the world which surrounds him at the initial station of his tragic journey. His is a confusing position, marked by a lack of future perspective, by an unstable, still malleable identity. In this sense, to better understand the unclear guilt which afflicts him for the sins of his ancestors – as in Oedipus’ case, whose father was a violent man, maybe a rapist, or in Antigone’s, whose father was a spreader of plague – a hero turns to god, trying to find someone to blame for all the inexplicable defects of the world. Could the *father of all* alleviate Antigone’s father’s guilt, and spare his innocent children the burden of a tainted name? Could the *father of all* make Chryssipus’ father Pelops forgive Laius and save his son Oedipus? The answer to both questions is probably “no”, since the Sphinx’s riddle would come from Hera, or even Apollo, the protector of the youth, to claim their revenge.²⁴ The chain of tragic calamities coming from the past looks for its victims to expiate their guilt. The prophecy is clear: there is only one road to death, and it leads through suffering.

Death – nothing is so overtly present and, at the same time, actively absent: “everyone lives as if no one ‘knew’”.²⁵ This chapter closes with an elaboration on the mortality of a man,

²³ Cf. N. Berdyaev, *Мирозерцание Достоевского*, 1923, It. trans. *La concezione di Dostoevskij*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002.

²⁴ K. Kerényi, *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia*, cit., pp. 309–311.

²⁵ A. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942, Eng. trans. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1975, p. 21.

considering his knowledge, his awareness of death, to determine his *living*. In other words, to be condemned to die is a condition *sine qua non* for a human life to unfold fully, in all of its tragic particularities. The *unimaginable*, death, casts its veil of uncertainty onto every single moment of one's life, making it all priceless precious, infinitely malleable and fertile with every possible *lucid* idea, which could give birth to life – one of many, incredibly many, new realities. The theatre, especially the tragic theatre, as Jean-Pierre Vernant writes,²⁶ participates in this deal with Dionysus, the god who was born twice, to create from nothing, out of the darkest places of humanity, to touch the void, and return from it, through suffering, to catharsis.

A tragic hero, a human, whoever, is condemned to death. His awareness of the sentence seems the only path which permits him to continue living, to continue writing, as Victor Hugo's *Condemned Man*²⁷ does – remaining the only owner of his *abducted* life, even at the gallows. A subject's knowledge of his own position allows him to keep on living within his own actions, maybe gestures of goodwill, after sickness will take his young life, as in the case of Dostoevsky's Ippolit.²⁸

When death is confronted directly while still alive, when being condemned to death is viewed as an inevitable fact which will come one day to reap its harvest, as an intrinsic condition of a human being, the tragic assumes life's features. When, on the other hand, the eyes of a hero, of a man, are closed in front of his imminent demise, when he avoids admitting his own finiteness, a fatal mistake will explode in his reality to re-equilibrate forces and make him start anew. In Chapter II, entitled *Making a mistake, or On evil*, the hero's story goes terribly wrong, marking the final defeat of an old version of him.

The chapter opens by offering an image of a man who, similar to Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky's *Iduom*,²⁹ approaches a terrible mistake – the murder of a loved one committed

²⁶ J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie II*, 1986, It. trans. *Mito e tragedia due. Da Edipo a Dioniso*, Torino, Einaudi, 1991.

²⁷ V. Hugo, *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*, 1829, Eng. trans. *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, New York, Dover Publications, 2009, (ch. III). Web.

²⁸ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Iduom*, 1868–1869, *The Idiot*, London-Toronto, Dutton, 1927.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

by a man, maybe his opposite, nonetheless, in every way similar to him, his equal – caressing it with his forgiveness. This extraordinary Christological figure is taken here as an example of a man who – unlike another hero who follows blindly his animal instincts, whose *hubris* makes him disregard a vow to god, i.e. the sacred as an entrance to a community of men – knows *good measure*, displays *pure humanness*.³⁰ The Christian ideal of *meekness* is analysed through Tertullian’s famous *credo quia absurdum*, whereas human knowledge, by its nature partial, does not prevent a person of faith from seeing the whole, from seeing meaning in God’s plan, from offering his forgiveness to even the most horrible actions by his neighbour, or by himself. To trust Creation, in this sense, entails the possibility of positioning oneself within it, and not against it.

Aristotle’s *man of good measure*, from *The Nicomachean Ethics*, on the other hand, taken here as another example of a doctrine which proposes ways to approach and contrast evil, is based, contrary to the Christian idea, on the faith of man in his own reasonable agency: “the activity of the soul exhibiting virtue”.³¹ Aristotle’s hero of temperance’s soul could be and become only when incarnated, since, for the philosopher, the general exists only by virtue of the particular. In this sense, a soul, developing through the active agency of *entelecheia*, finds its home inside a body, within a human position, which could be cherished and improved, while being, simultaneously, complete and sufficient exactly as it is. As in the case of Jacob Bernoulli’s *spira mirabilis*’ fascinating self-origination, Aristotle’s man, in love with the imminence of *this life*, trusts in his own good practice and capability to find within his soul a solution to the tragic aspects of reality.

Nonetheless, Beckett’s³² body-less Winnie, progressively sinking inside the womb of the desert, could refer only to her mind and her voice to keep her alive in the midst of the absurd. In a world in which god allows evil, as Sergio Givone comments on Leibnitz, so that freedom could exist, a human, whoever, a tragic *hero(ine)* could only choose, as Winnie does, to

³⁰ M. Bakhtin, *Проблемы поэтики Достоевского*, 1963, Eng. trans. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 173.

³¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, L. Brown (ed.), New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, 1098a 15.

³² S. Beckett, *Happy Days*, New York, Grove Press Inc., 1961.

resolve the absurd – Camus writes³³ – bringing the gun closer to her face, or to sing, to continue singing, ever so foolishly, alone in the desert.

Ajax, one of the greatest warriors, for instance, almost as if he was a member of *Nicomachean* Aristotelian tradition, believed that he could win in battle all by himself, without a god's aid. This *arrogant*³⁴ standpoint, the excess inherent to the claim of a mortal who presupposes that he knows, and thus, sees from a god's perspective, entailed punishment from Athena, who blinded the hero, making him be the best, this time, in doing the worst.

In Chapter II, Ajax's tragedy informs the analysis of a man's mistake, a hero's mistake, whose repercussions, when seen as god's punishment, function towards establishing a dialogue, almost an agreement, between the human and the divine. What is proposed here is the idea that Ajax punished himself to protect the sacred distinction between good and bad (safeguarded by Athena), to preserve his own good name – guaranteed by the goddess' caprice, the main excuse for the hero's lack of reasoning and for his abrupt attack of irascible fury in which he killed many innocent (and was ready to kill even his own friends). The best among warriors would be cursed with the chance to recognise his tragic failure, would have his eyes open while still alive, would be given the opportunity to redeem himself, by choosing his own death. Ajax's Barthesian *for me* is the homage of a hero to the order which made him become one of the greatest, which honoured him with Achilles' armour; it is a symbol of a deal between a great man and a god, to never leave space for a *non-meaning*, for the absurd, for the gratuitous slaughter of the innocent; to never leave the world without Winnie's song, even when no one hears it, even in the middle of the desert.

It is the same desert where Io, Inachus' daughter, wandered in terrible restless pain after being exiled from her home. The girl's beauty provoked desire in Zeus, as well as jealousy in Hera, who decided to condemn her to a futureless life of misery. A beautiful woman, a goddess like Aphrodite, who could not forgive Hippolytus, "no man more pure or temperate",³⁵ for renouncing love and pleasure; a woman – maybe the symbol of chaos, as for this hero of

³³ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cit., p. 53.

³⁴ Sophocles, *Aias*, in *Sophocles: Four Tragedies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 760–770.

³⁵ Euripides, *Hippolytus*, in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek tragedies I*, cit., 1095–1100.

Euripides', or another word for enigma, in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Al di là delle nuvole*³⁶ – was left at the mercy of the wild, to wither. Io's destiny poses the question of whether excessive virtue as well, and not only weakness, fragility and exaggeration could *catch the eye of the mighty*. The injustice reserved for her opens up an examination of the (in)compatibility of the expression of human freedom in relation to a god's freedom, creating a tragic scenario for the weaker one. Seen here through the choosing, i.e. possessing, or, better, *taming* in the Little Prince's³⁷ sense of the term, of a *loved one*, as in the case of Io who was *chosen* by Zeus, or as in the case of the female protagonist in Antonioni's film who *chooses* God by entering a convent, the question is posed around the possibility of a man being beyond god. Could a man love a woman, or a rose, as the Little Prince does; could he or she love chaos, or the complete absence of it, as in Hippolytus' case, beyond god's knowledge and judgment? Could he, thus, make mistakes, fail in his duty and turn to good or bad, beyond god?

Chapter II closes with the analysis of a context in which a mistake assumes enormous dimensions to absorb the whole world inside itself. It is transformed into a black hole, into a gigantic wound in the tissue of societal being, to provoke a phenomenon as profoundly detrimental and devastating as war. The last part of Chapter II elaborates, thus, on the dynamics of civil war, citing Giorgio Agamben's *Stasis*³⁸ and recalling the context of the Yugoslav wars of the 'nineties, through Oliver Frlić's artistic work, with the intent to philosophically approach the image of Gorgon, as a place in which horror resides.

The question posed here regards the lowest point which a human could touch, the deepest sea into which he could dive without drowning the heart of humanity within him, the worst of the worst... The inconceivable realities ruled over by Erebus should not be seen, Nietzsche believed; a briefest look at it could blind forever every human, and maybe even god. The examination, thus, looks at an implicit contract between the great Perseus and Medusa, who,

³⁶ *Al di là delle nuvole*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Cecchi Gori Distribuzione, 1995.

³⁷ Cf. A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, 1943, Eng. trans. *The Little Prince*, New York, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943.

³⁸ Cf. G. Agamben, *Stasis. La guerra civile come paradigma politico*, 2015, Eng. trans. *Stasis. Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015.

as in Benvenuto Cellini's famous sculpture³⁹ and in Nietzsche's darkest fears, seem to have an agreement around something unknown to humankind. In other words, what is asked here is why Perseus is looking downwards if he has actually been liberated from this ferocious monster, as Cellini's masterpiece shows? It seems that the Gorgon, the headless woman, as in Courbet's, *L'Origine du monde*,⁴⁰ still stands at the gate of this world.

A girl with a rabbit-ear hat and a machine gun, as a subchapter, integrating the fourth part of Chapter II, pauses on Oliver Frlić's theatrical reading of the tragic, collocated inside the narrative of war ideology which invested the World War II animosities in the Western Balkans to re-present itself within the tragic unfolding of the Yugoslav wars of the 'nineties. Even though the director states that he does not believe in documentary theatre, the stories of the characters in his works are based on stories which really occurred and urge to be recounted. The conversation with Frlić reflects on multiple still-active tensions and conflicts in the societal and cultural context in which he lived and worked during the creation of the performance *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu* which, even though circumscribable to a particular territory known for its political instabilities, sheds light not only on the general problem of the tragic, but also on the wounds and blind spots of today's Europe. Frlić's theatre is a politically engaged, antifascist artistic stance defending the voices of those unjustly buried under multiple layers of long-serving historical revisionism, temporary propagandistic agendas and ideologies which threaten to activate new, maybe even more horrifying tragedies.

As the tragic hero *errs* on his path of avoiding his destiny, one morning he finds himself so far from who he was, so different, so as not to be able to recognise himself any more. Chapter III, entitled "*Good morning, Gregor!*", or *On contingency*, elaborates on the moment of transformation, of the irreconcilable divide which marks the hero's story as tragic.

Nothing will ever be the same for him. His world will change irrevocably, while his soul, lost and bewildered, will still be searching for the reason for this circumstance, will still be trying

³⁹ B. Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, (1545–1554, Loggia dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria, Florence), cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 3., p. 169.

⁴⁰ G. Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*, (Musée d'Orsay, 1866).

to keep alive the dying parts of its reality, will be trying to get used to its new body, as in Gregor Samsa's case.⁴¹ While going through a terrible mistake, a human, a tragic hero, is still at this point unaware of the reasons which have put him in this new position, his eyes are still closed; he feels the change but cannot name the order of causalities which have led him to this unknown land. A man trapped inside the body of an insect, unable to communicate with his family, with any human, progressively disowning his reality and his voice, still stays intact in his essence. He still hurts as a man, he listens and understands that his transformation has brought discomfort and difficulty to his family, he observes as his life, the life he knew, leaves his room, never to return. This coincidence of old and new, the beginning permeated by the end, the moment of transformation, occupies the space in between the realms; it is Žižek's "third space between phenomena and the noumenon itself",⁴² it occupies the body of an *un-human*.

This thesis proposes Žižek's reading of Kant's *indefinite judgement* as a theoretical example of this extraordinary state, in which a man is simultaneously negated and reaffirmed in his essence. Even amid a complete shipwreck, after losing everything valuable to him, a man, as in Givone's example of Stavrogin's green leaf in the middle of the winter,⁴³ cannot be deprived of those perfect moments which defined him in his *greenness*. In other words, while negated in his identity, through his becoming utterly different from who he was before, secluded in a moment which negates him, his traits, his truths, his habits and his certainties, a man is also affirmed in the timelessness of a similar, brief, indifferent, elusive instant – his memory, the memory of a world, or of Jan Fabre's *unknown computers*,⁴⁴ conserved for eternity.

⁴¹ F. Kafka, *Die Verwandlung*, 1915, *The Metamorphosis and other stories*, R. Robertson (ed.), Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 29.

⁴² S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London, England, MIT Press, 2006, pp. 21–22.

⁴³ S. Givone, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2006, pp. 93–94. It is the memory of a green leaf, in Stavrogin's recount – Givone analyses – which cannot be erased no matter what present and future conditions of who remembers are.

⁴⁴ The reference here is to Jan Fabre's installation *The Grave of the Unknown Computer* (1994–1995). The insects, as Fabre states, conserve the memory of the world.

It takes only an instant for everything to change. It happens quietly, with only a tablespoon of blood spilled, as in the case of Nastasya Filippovna's death. *Non in commotione Dominus.*⁴⁵

When god arrives, it is to un-mask. In this sense, Dionysus, who visits Pentheus at the latter's court, arrives abruptly, without invitation and demands immediate recognition. The Dionysian mask – which is referred to here, in Walter Otto's study⁴⁶ – stares back; it reflects the spectator's reality through enormous eyes, which mirror everything they see – the good and the bad. In this sense, god's arrival – maybe the arrival of Dionysus, who in Euripides' *The Bacchae*⁴⁷ would severely punish Pentheus, bringing destruction and death to his home, among the people of his kingdom – is seen here as a moment of change, a moment in which the conflict comes to its culmination point; it is the moment in the midst of an explosion, in which for a fraction of a second, everything is illuminated, it catches grimaces on every face, it fills up every angle of the room, right before all falls apart.

The arrival of god, which means death – analysed here through, among other things, the extraordinary closing scene of Dostoevsky's *Идуом* – is maybe the most explicatory image of the tragic. The horror, as the one Ivan Karamazov advocated for⁴⁸ (as for the supreme truth), is not reducible to the testimony of death (as horrendous as this could be – the death of oneself, or others, maybe one's loved ones), but even more strikingly it is the silent void which death leaves behind to point out with great precision the tragedy of being human. As in the case of the aforementioned Ajax – where the hero killed himself to save the very idea of god within the world he did not want to renounce, a change he did not want to comply with – it is god's absence, his silence, that terrifies the most. It is, in Ivan's words, *his inexistence* that shocks – as is the case with Prince Myshkin, who finally lost his mind after seeing the fly buzzing near Nastasya's deathbed. It is chaos, non-meaning, injustice, contingency, arbitrariness which installs tragic prophecy deep inside a human. “Ecce homo!”

⁴⁵ 1 Kings, 19:11, “[...] the Lord was not in the earthquake”.

⁴⁶ W. F. Otto, *Dionysos. Mythos und Kultus*, 1933, Eng. trans. *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, Bloomington-London, Indiana University Press, 1965.

⁴⁷ Cf. Euripides, *The Bacchae*, in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek tragedies III*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

⁴⁸ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Братья Карамазовы*, 1880, It. trans. *I fratelli Karamazov*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014.

– Sergio Givone reads⁴⁹ in Nastasya’s words to Myshkin; the man whose consciousness breaks apart before god’s arrival is a man of tragedy, one who cannot, does not want to leave his god, the same way the Almighty has left him.

Nonetheless, it is not within history that the answers should be searched for, the philosopher Massimo Cacciari claims.⁵⁰ This “realm of nothing”,⁵¹ as Givone sees history, the time of the Fall – torn between the past, which can never be retrieved, and the future, which is permanently absent – has only one chance to redeem itself. It is a moment; every moment is a potential chance for transformation. In every moment an individual has a chance to win in a chess game against death, as in the one the knight Antonius Block⁵² arranged in hope of obtaining some urgent answers about the nature of God and thus, implicitly about his own nature. Every moment has the potential to stop time, to exit time and to “touch eternity”,⁵³ thus maybe even the knight could have won against death, if he had not been doomed to stay within history. Every moment has the potential to leave history behind and become *kairos*, a perfect moment, like that of the aforementioned Stavrogin’s *greenness*: untouchable, supreme, even after the leaf has withered. As everything could fall apart, just as even the baby Saviour could be eaten by a dragon with seven heads, as *The Book of Revelation* narrates – so everything could change for good and humanity could be saved.

Chapter III closes with the image of *kairos* which is collocated beyond time, in its act of embracing past, present and future. The moment of tragic contingency is thus regarded here as the moment of revelation. In this sense, as one world is disappearing, another is coming to life; the truth is hidden in the midst of these two opposites.

Chapter IV, entitled *Anamnesis, or On suffering*, pauses on the succeeding moment in the hero’s story, in which new knowledge that had previously occupied the body and transformed

⁴⁹ S. Givone, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, cit., p. 89.

⁵⁰ M. Cacciari, *Apocalisse*, lecture in the occasion of Biennale Democrazia, Torino, 1 April 2017, available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q09G37lSkQ4&ab_channel=BiennaleDemocrazia (Accessed: 5 November 2021).

⁵¹ S. Givone, *Kronos e kairos*, lecture in the occasion of Festival delle religioni, Florence, 26 April 2019, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBX5zGV8DKo> (Accessed: 5 November 2021). (Transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

⁵² *Det sjunde inseglet*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1957.

⁵³ S. Givone, *Kronos e kairos*, cit.

it, as it had transformed its environment, now enters the mind. It was the response of the external world that disoriented the hero before – the voices of Gregor’s family members, their insensibility toward his new situation – but now, change is perceived as coming from inside. A human, a tragic hero, sees for the first time. He sees all of his shortcomings, his defects and wrongdoings. He recognises himself as the murderer of his own father, who married his own mother. He sees himself as a stranger. This man, a great warrior, now gets to know himself anew as another man, one who was covered in innocent blood for the sake of his own irascible caprice. What opens the gates to suffering is the new knowledge that the hero acquires, maybe precisely through suffering, in an attempt to escape suffering, to give it meaning and thus make it more bearable. As the abyss offers to be his only home, a man needs to know, he needs to see the way out. This is the moment of *anamnesis*, in which the undreamed-of becomes reality and hurt nests inside man’s heart.

This chapter elaborates on the function of suffering within the tragic unfolding, whereas the image of *sparagmos* is chosen as the most eloquent and suitable one to approach this subject. The tragic entails conflict, which is shown in the dynamics of separation of one part from the rest. On one hand there is Rabelais’ story⁵⁴ of great medlars which make human body parts grow to extreme proportions, as Mikhail Bakhtin notices, and on the other, the fasting of Kafka’s Hunger Artist,⁵⁵ who dies when his organs fail at the unattainable task of functioning beyond the whole. The dismemberment of the body is the last, failing attempt of a hero to keep death at bay, to reconfigure his identity in hope of being able to preserve it; the final attempt of a human being to assure his immortality, through aspiring to be, and thus acting as *more*, as different than a set of organs.

The subchapter, titled *On what you might need to do to be permitted to sit at the “winners’ table”*, elaborates on the performance *La Merda* by Cristian Ceresoli and Sivia Gallerano, which presents the body of the opposites lacerating on the theatrical stage, directly in front of the audience. In conversation with the artists, the 10-year-long life of the performance is

⁵⁴ Cf. F. Rabelais, *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*, 1532, Eng. trans. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Chicago, Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952, pp. 67–71.

⁵⁵ F. Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler*, 1922, in *Gesammelte Erzählungen*, n.d., Srb. trans. *Franc Kafka: celokupne pripovetke*, Beograd-Podgorica, Kosmos izdavaštvo-Nova knjiga, 2018.

retraced through the story of its beginnings, initial inspirations and difficulties, in a delineation of the political and societal context in which the theatrical work took place; it examines the personal experiences, doubts and aspirations of the artists, their ideas on the tragic within the contemporary world. The chapter poses questions around the tragic shortcomings that the world of performing arts, and thus, the big world which it inhabits, give life to, nourish and perpetrate in the constant ideology of a merciless, Machiavellian fight for success. Maybe the most natural position of an individual who would want to have dignity, to love and be loved, to be respected and valued first and foremost for being human, is exchanged, as *La Merda* shows, for the promise of a position (even the most doubtful one) inside a profoundly corrupted societal being. In this highly dramatic and unfortunately still current panorama, the tragic aspects of contemporaneity show their horrible face, asking to be confronted directly, critically, urgently.

Suffering, nonetheless, is not reserved only for humans, since Christ himself also bore the heavy cross on his appointment with death. In this sense, the suffering individuated here to be at the very “heart of reality”,⁵⁶ as Luigi Pareyson points out, reaches its culmination in the hopeless plea of a son in front of his father’s abandonment. The enormous pain, *God’s pain*, as Alyosha from Dostoevsky’s *Братья Карамазовы*⁵⁷ views Christ’s Passion – the most scandalous pain, even more than a child’s cry or the hurt of any other being, analysed here through Pareyson’s philosophical commentary – reveals important theoretical connotations in the elaboration of the idea of the tragic. That is to say that, by moving the nucleus of suffering from man to God, the conflict itself, as a crucial part of the mechanism of the tragic, moves, individuating in God himself an internal scission, known in its entirety until that moment only to human experience. It is the image of *the atheist god*, in which Pareyson sees not only the biggest drama of the divine which negates itself, but also the possibility of going beyond (human) atheism.

⁵⁶ L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij. Filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa*, Torino, Einaudi, 1993, p. 211 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁵⁷ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Братья Карамазовы*, 1880, It. trans. *I fratelli Karamazov*, cit.

If “suffering means doubt, negation”,⁵⁸ as Dostoevsky wrote, Christ’s suffering reaches its peak in the moment in which he questions his own faith. The subversive potential inherent to the opportunity of being subjected and thus destroyed by negation, or of reaffirming the self in a victorious act of minimum resistance – which, in the moment of suffering on the cross, happened even to God himself – reappears under a different form in another image of conflict, masterfully represented in one of Fra Angelico’s fresco paintings.⁵⁹

At the centre of this masterpiece is the mockery of the multitude at the image of a defeated god. Laughter is the attempt to corrupt the object of the laughter; it tests the validity and the coherence of what it puts on trial; it assails the order, the given truth, as Umberto Eco writes in his *Elogio di Franti*.⁶⁰ It is a Negation, Eco proceeds, with an intrinsic transformative power. Before being condemned to death, Christ was ridiculed, as Angelico’s painting specifies, so that his tainted name would devalue his message.

A man, a hero, would laugh at his god, would try to break free from any order, any certainty, would refuse a promise of love, of salvation, would disdain a utopia; a man would choose his freedom over the dictatorship of good, as Leibnitz claimed that god, his *absurd god* himself did; a man would destroy, so as to be able to build again, never to stop building, as Dostoevsky’s Underground Man believed. He needs, as in the myth of Tantalus, to be distant from the object of his desire and yet close enough to be assured of its existence. It is the place of a sufferer, who knows his limits, who knows that death will come; that he, himself is fragile, scared; that he is an orphan. It is the position of an individual who remembered once and, from that moment, will forever remember that hurting instant in which his ending met his first walk on this Earth, but still chooses to say: “Yes, I am. I am responsible for it all. I am tragically free.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, cit., p. 54.

⁵⁹ Fra Angelico, *The Mocking of Christ*, (1438–1445, San Marco’s Convent, Florence), cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 5., p. 171.

⁶⁰ Cf. U. Eco, *Diario minimo*, Milano, Mondadori, 1975.

⁶¹ Cf. S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., p. 18.

I Original sin, or On who I am

1.1. *The known world*

While being brought in chains, “alive to the place of corpses”,⁶² Antigone makes her difficult position clear. She does not spare any words in explaining the whole uniqueness of her truth. As if that were not enough, she also looks up and speaks directly to us today – in our language – pausing on the calculations over some losses and gains she had to take into account before making that sacred and self-sufficient act. Sophocles reports:

Were I a mother, with children and husband dead,
I'd let them molder. I should not have chosen
in such a case to cross the state's decree.
What is the law that lies behind these words?
One husband gone, I might have found another,
or a child from a new man in the first child's place;
but with my parents covered up in death,

⁶² Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit., 850–855.

no brother for me, ever, could be born.⁶³

Eternally beautiful – caught in the *here-after* of Western tragic thought – Antigone, in a kind of a post-traumatic confusion, justifies herself. Why ever would this unforgettable *virago*, this *meta-sister*, dwell on this unnecessary – to say the least – line of reasoning, while falling into a deadly grip enforced by Creon, the tyrant king? Goethe claims as follows:

After the heroine has, in the course of the piece, explained the noble motives for her action, and displayed the elevated purity of her soul, she at last, when she is led to death, brings forward a motive which is quite unworthy, and almost borders upon the comic.⁶⁴

She had already done what she intended to do and, from that point on, is not the rock rolling down the hill simply following its natural course? Why then would she display not only legitimate and coherent (although maybe, for some, tautological) recognition of the tragic nature of her young life approaching its end – making for herself, who was unable to lament,⁶⁵ that missing requiem – but also some kind of almost entirely explicit *apologia* of her opponent's views? Her reasoning cannot be attributed exclusively to the power of love for a brother, as Hegel insisted upon when portraying the indubitable uniqueness of the bond.⁶⁶ Thus, even though her gesture might have been appreciated by a brother, it would not surely be the same with the love itself, which might even prefer the inconsolable “I’d die for anybody”, as uttered by Jim Morrison in the movie *The Doors*,⁶⁷ to the weak “I’d die just for you, but that may not be the case if you were not the unique one for me”. In Adlerian terms the question would be: “What does she gain then from acting as she does?” Why would a

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 905–915.

⁶⁴ J. P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, cit., (conversation from 21 March 1827). Web. It. trans. *Colloqui con Goethe*, cit., p. 539.

⁶⁵ Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit., 875–880.

⁶⁶ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807, Eng. trans. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018; A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 1947, Eng. trans. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1980. Cf. also: It is important to consider that Goethe, as well, celebrated Antigone as a sister *par excellence* in *Euphrosyne Hymn* from 1799.

⁶⁷ *The Doors*, directed by O. Stone, TriStar Pictures Inc., 1991, transcription available online at: http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/d/doors-script-transcript-jim-morrison.html (Accessed: 15 January 2021).

Theban princess, a symbol of resistance, bravery and wholeheartedness, bury her brother, but not her child? Is there any human who should not be buried?

Between the 18th and 19th centuries, Antigone became an obsession for philosophers, idealists and romanticists, abridged in Hegel's words as "the heavenly Antigone, that noblest of figures that ever appeared on earth"⁶⁸ – as Georg Steiner reports in his *Antigones*. Her story was a model, around whose interpretation some new post-1789 worlds were ready to be built.⁶⁹ For decades and centuries, poets, philosophers, painters, theatre and film directors, and others, imagined the life and death of this poor girl, a fearless descendant of the house of Labdacids, creating some marvellous artworks out of her tragedy. Antigone, as a paradigm of "the superlative of the human spirit",⁷⁰ has remained, up until the present day, a firm, irremovable point to which to refer when trying to tackle the meaning of inviolable human rights. Nevertheless, if the heroine were to live to have a future, husband and children, she would show them ever so fiercely that she *had not died* for them. In 2020, she would let them moulder.

"When you have a virtue, a real, whole virtue (and not merely a mini-instinct for some virtue), you are its *victim*. But your neighbor praises your virtue precisely on that account."⁷¹ – Nietzsche writes.

It could be argued that Antigone – as *Bartleby*⁷² likes to posit – might *prefer not to* see her story being read and reread continuously, in an attempt to capture her *psyche*⁷³ and to put it in a jar. Maybe, if asked, she would rather refuse all these appellatives given to her – Brecht's

⁶⁸ G. Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

⁷⁰ „[...] jer čovekovo držanje, između ostalog, počiva i na superlativu ljudskog duha u herojske virtuoznosti.“ F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, n.d., Srb. trans., J. Aćin (ed.), *Uvod u tragedije*, Novi Sad, Svetovi, 1991, p. 39 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁷¹ F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1887, Eng. trans. *The Gay Science*, New York, Vintage Books, 1974, p. 92.

⁷² Cf. H. Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, 1856, available online at: <http://moglen.law.columbia.edu/LCS/bartleby.pdf> (Accessed: 18 November 2021).

⁷³ Cf. E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and the Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1925, cf. also: *ψυχή* (Gr.) meaning soul, often represented in the image of the butterfly.

reading⁷⁴ and Milo Rau's⁷⁵ too. What if this young woman did not really care about human rights, nor the wrongness of Creon's decree, nor the cultural legacy left to us by her courageous and outrageous fight against... whom? In different circumstances – as she herself considers it important to point out – she might have acted in exactly the opposite way. Does this fact not change everything we knew about her? Does it not make her less heroic? It might seem that these questions, posed around the image conveyed through the centuries of a magical Dragon's heir, this rare union – as interpreted more than often from Antiquity until today – of women's gracefulness and man's strength, all have the same answer. If an honest observer, unafraid to let go of an ideal, were to think through this image, he might find himself making the following reply: “Yes, this unfortunate fact about our heroine changes everything. It even changes some things we thought about ourselves”; potentially followed by an expression of disgust and contempt and an irascible exclamation: “How could she have done this to us!?”

In his essay *Il fratello di Antigone. Dilemmi parentali, survivals e regole del lutto*,⁷⁶ the anthropologist Maurizio Bettini looks into the “law that lies behind”⁷⁷ the princess's words, into the *nómos* she is referring to when she utters the passage that Goethe would “always look upon as a blemish”.⁷⁸ He recalls one specific event which occurred on the occasion of a presentation in Rome of an audio-visual artwork entitled *Le ragioni di Antigone*, created by the director Giuseppe De Maria and the classicist Giuseppina Norcia. At the end of the projection, one lady – who originated from Crotona, Calabria – approached the director and, visibly touched – Bettini writes – recounted to him the story of her family. She told him that she was finally able to profoundly understand the grief of her grandmother, who had repeated for years a proverb, very well known in Calabria: “*Mariti mi n'abbrazzu, figghi mi ni fazzu*,

⁷⁴ B. Brecht, *Die Antigone des Sophokles*, 1948, Eng. trans. T. Kuhn, D. Constantine (eds.), *The Antigone of Sophocles*, in *Brecht. Collected Plays: Eight*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2012.

⁷⁵ *Antigone in the Amazon*, direction and concept by M. Rau, NTGent in collaboration with MST and IIPM, 2020.

⁷⁶ M. Bettini, *Il fratello di Antigone. Dilemmi parentali, survivals e regole del lutto*, available online at: <https://www.yumpu.com/it/document/read/32509113/il-fratello-di-antigone-dilemmi-parentali-survivals-e-regole-del-lutto> (Accessed: 15 January 2021).

⁷⁷ Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit., 905–910.

⁷⁸ J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, cit., (conversation from 21 March 1827). It. trans. *Colloqui con Goethe*, cit., p. 539.

frati e soru comu fazzu?”⁷⁹ which, when translated, would sound something like: “Husbands I can hug (i.e. can have more than one of), children I can give birth to, but what will I do if I lose brothers and sisters?” It seems, Bettini analyses, that this kind of inheritance – called in anthropological terms *survivals*,⁸⁰ meaning the remains of past cultures still preserved in the process of historical evolution – refers to a scheme of traditional reasoning, rather than to a *hic et nunc* invention by that lady’s grandmother, Antigone or the wife of Intaphrenes, another character whose story is often recalled in connection to the former’s controversial claim. This kind of opinion – Bettini continues – has its root reasons in the idea of the replaceability of kinship. To affirm this theory, Bettini cites *the rules of grief* by Roman grammarian Sextus Pompeius Festus.⁸¹ His work clearly asserts – the anthropologist writes – a kind of cultural prescription by which grief should stop when the conditions for another life to be joined to the family nucleus are satisfied; by this he meant an imminent marriage, a homecoming from war, or an actual new-born, to whom the name of the deceased would be given – not such a rare occurrence in the Mediterranean.

Looking at this young lady as from the perspective of painters of the Ottonian dynasty, who imagined their sovereigns with disproportionately larger bodies than those of the rest of their troops – like in the marvellous *Gospels of Otto the Third*⁸² – might lead us astray, directly into the Goethean paradox; into the earlier mentioned scandal of “how could she have done that to us?”

Looking at her, so lonely in this world, with the Kierkegaardian thought in her heart: “Whether you laugh at the world’s follies or weep over them, you will regret both”,⁸³ what do we see? Defeated to her core, beside the body of her dead brother, what does she tell us? What she did is not *exercices de style*, she is not only truthful, but real. Could it be said that she looks as if she comes from another world? What do we see?

⁷⁹ M. Bettini, *Il fratello di Antigone*, cit., p. 119.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 118–120.

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 120–122.

⁸² *Gospels of Otto the Third*, manuscript, (998-1001, conserved in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München).

⁸³ S. Kierkegaard, *Enten-Eller*, 1843, Eng. trans. *Either/Or. An ecstatic lecture*, in *Either/Or*, H. A. Johnson, (ed.), New York, Anchor Books, 1959, p. 58.

On account of the attribute of His providence, as true among the Hebrews as it was imagined among the gentiles, all humankind gave to the nature of God the name “divinity” by one common idea, which the Latins expressed in *divinari*, “to foretell the future”[...].⁸⁴

In order to see her, we would have to look for her in the future, in the time to come, in the *ad-venire* (Lat.), as Giambattista Vico proposes as the desirable destiny for human beings in his *Principj di scienza nuova*.⁸⁵ We would have to invent stories about her – as the philosopher imagines – in order to make her a concrete reality of our realities, in order to build around her, as around an altar, our humanity, long lost. This is precisely what Vico’s “*avvisar l’avvenire*” (“to foretell the future”) means: a gradual invention of a human out of the matter of another world to which he, this poor fallen animal, inherently belongs – a spark that sprang out of the nothingness of the darkest night. The state of nature, for Vico, is not our truth; violence is not our inherent choice, because we come from a better place, and, thus, we are destined to a better place, to conquer little by little. In this sense, the philosopher’s idea of gathering around the altar to tell stories means prospecting the future, it means progressively seizing reality from the position of a human-to-be.

Who is the *known* Antigone, thus? Who did we make her become?

Can we find her in the very words which betray us, in those words which make us wonder why, and which risk distorting those perfect and false premises that have been latent in our imagery for centuries? Is not it precisely in that claim of hers, which scandalised Goethe, that Antigone’s humanity is to be found? It is this crack in our *reasonable* composition of self-suiting facts which opens onto the very core of Antigone’s story. This beautiful young woman fighting for justice, this giant carrying with courage and resoluteness the body of her deceased brother, is also the trembling girl hiding behind her elderly father in *Oedipus at Colonus*; she is Ismene’s cruel and thoughtless sister, she is Haemon’s reckless and unloving fiancée. Antigone, the protector of the realm of the spirit, the fearless defender of the rights of those

⁸⁴ G. Vico, *Principj di scienza nuova. D’intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni, in questa terza impressione dal medesimo autore in gran numero di luoghi corretta, schiarita, e notabilmente accresciuta*, 1744, Eng. trans. *The New Science*, Ithaca-New York, Cornell University Press, 1948, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

who cannot be held responsible any more, would bury her brother, but maybe would not do the same for her child.

Both divine and human, Antigone does not hesitate to share with us the rule behind her laudable act. If we decide not to listen to her words, not to see her behind the giant she became, that final mournful, yet grand, speech might deafen her cry, she might become an inconsolable ghost, as Chryssipus did.

1.1.1. *My name is Chryssipus.*

In conversation with Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon

That you shall be much solicited by our people
before your death – and after – for their welfare.⁸⁶

If it is true that Laius was cursed for abusing Chryssipus and, even more so, if it is true that Thebes is nothing less than a “theatre of violence”,⁸⁷ Oedipus’ and Antigone’s destiny could not go any other way than they did. From the very foundation of the city, whose native inhabitants were Spartans, men born from the serpent’s teeth, violence, as it seems, was the original matter, the cohesive factor, the supreme rule of Cadmea. Violence – as Carlo Gentili explains – could assume an archetypical form which alludes to the very origination of *nomos*.⁸⁸ The philosopher cites Carl Schmitt’s reminder of the original meaning of the word *nomos*, which designates *immediacy*, to open up a parallelism between the violence and the act of constitution of *the law*.⁸⁹ That is to say that the arbitrariness of *decision* (Schmitt’s

⁸⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek tragedies III*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2013, 390.

⁸⁷ C. Gentili, *Seminare «una quantità di denti di drago». L’anomalia tebana e il significato politico di un modello tragico*, in “Bollettino Filosofico”, XXX, *Nichilismo e modernità. Ripensando il tragico moderno*, 2015, p. 56, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.6093/1593-7178/3690> (Accessed: 21 January 2021).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Dezision) imposed by a sovereign, *tyrannos* – “which precedes and makes possible the very constitution of the ‘law’”⁹⁰ – is equally violent as the violence of Spartans,⁹¹ Gentili writes. If this is the background of Oedipus’ story, who would himself, once crowned as the king of Thebes, become a victim of a terrible disgrace – as Tiresias wisely observed regarding his victory against the Sphinx: “It is this very luck that has destroyed you”⁹² – the hero could have done nothing different than he did, could not but be violent himself.

There is a wound, from which Oedipus’ unhappy life originated, which was also the case with the tragedy of his children. Kierkegaard, for instance, in his essay *The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern*,⁹³ depicts with great precision the deadly fervour of Antigone, who chooses to protect her father’s secret by condemning herself. From a remote mistake of Laius, from that terrible deed which caused the suffering and death of an innocent young man, the misfortunes of Labdacides would progressively unfold. His violence against the innocent will haunt the generations of his family, it will rule over the city of Thebes, as it did in those first days when Cadmus killed the serpent to conquer its lands.

My name is Chrysippus. I think. I am not sure. I am forgotten, they say. I am a bastard, I think. I am not sure. My father could have been the king, by the name of Pelops. Somebody wrote something about me. A play, I think. Perhaps a tragedy. I no longer know for sure. The play got lost. I got lost.⁹⁴

Abducted and maybe even raped by Laius, Chryssipus died later, violently. For this atrocity, Pelops, the young man’s father, cursed the abuser, wishing for his death to come at the hand of his still unborn son Oedipus. The curse travelled, coming perhaps to Hera, who sent the Sphinx, whose riddle made Oedipus become king of Thebes.⁹⁵ It came to Antigone’s tragic story. In other words, it might have been Chryssipus – this sad young man, traversing rather

⁹⁰ “[...] *nomos* indica una condizione che precede e rende possibile l’instaurazione stessa della ‘legge’”, *ibid.* (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁹² Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, cit., 440–445.

⁹³ S. Kierkegaard, *The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern*, in *Either/Or*, cit.

⁹⁴ *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, A 24-Hour Performance*, direction and concept by J. Fabre, La Compagnie des Indes, 2016, *Chapter 12: Antigone*, 12.3. (transcribed by V. Baltić).

⁹⁵ K. Kerényi, *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia*, cit., pp. 309–311.

timidly one chapter of *Mount Olympus* – whose tragedy has never left Western tragic thought and theatre. It might have been this ghost which took possession of the fight between the brothers, of Polynice's cadaver, of Antigone's desperation.

In 2015, Jan Fabre and his theatre company Troubleyn presented their *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, a 24-Hour Performance*. They gave birth to Greek myths and tragedies out of their twenty-first-century eyes. In the thirteen chapters of the performance, the stories of Oedipus, Antigone, Agamemnon, Medea, Clytemnestra, Ajax and others re-emerge from our collective memory to take place on the stage. There is, nonetheless, this one exemption: the forgotten story, Euripides' lost tragedy of the title *Chryssipus*, which intrudes, disclosed in the monologue of a ghost, Antigone's chapter of the performance. Unsure of his fate – as if only our memory of what happened would afford him a decent death – Chryssipus, on Fabre's stage, invites us to try to understand his comfortless position.

Cédric Charron: Ah Chryssipus! I did a research and I ended up looking at all of the tragedies, and I figured out that there was a tragedy about Chryssipus, but it was tragic because his tragedy was lost, it was gone. The character had already left the tragedy... The most tragic thing is that the whole story got lost, and nobody remembers him, nobody knows any more who he is, so I got very touched about the fact that it was a double pain. For me, there was something that was important because it was real. You know, we are all trying to bring something real into this world of the theatre that is not real, but because we are putting real things inside of it, it makes it become very particular. So, I saw Chryssipus as a ghost haunted by his wounds. I remember that the first time I performed it on stage, I think, Jan refused it, then I kept on doing it for a while, I made him enter different improvisations, until Chryssipus... What is happening with this Chryssipus? It was nothing. I did not have a story. The story was not there, just the fact. The fact that he is completely forgotten and somehow for me it was a metaphor for all small human beings that we are. Most of us will end up forgotten. It is like that. But, it is not just that – it is also maybe beautiful. We don't give names to every tree, but when the tree dies, it goes back to give nourishment to the soil, so it was essential, this tree... That is the case with all of us, we will nourish the soil, so our little achievements will be already something, but it can be forgotten. The celebration of this, of the oblivion. The forgotten, for me, will be something important, and bit by bit by proposition,

Jan started to like this character and see the possibility of it... As you say something, you have already forgotten it. You forget yourself your own story, which is also tragic. It is not only that the others forget your story, it is yourself forgetting your story. It is about memory, it is all about memory.⁹⁶

As this long-lost young man steps onto the stage of the theatre to appear briefly, to remind of his existence and become lost again, the power of time to accentuate all the unpleasantness of the ghost's situation, by showing itself as entitled to progressively corrupt any – even the most remote – memory of him, shows its influence in its most terrifying light, that of a merciless, careless usurper. Nonetheless, it could be claimed as well, that time might, paradoxically, exert even the opposite agency, leaving its space to eternity. In other words, Chryssipus does not have to be tragic due to time, which threatens to cancel any trace of his existence, but precisely because of the absence of time, which crowns his irremovable presence in other's stories. His death – unnatural, tragic, violent – is the moment in which time collapses, in which it coagulates to form, it could be said, the *eternal* reason why the Labdacids are so unfortunate. In other words, Chryssipus died and was forgotten, but he also, simultaneously, never does die, since living forever as a pretext to Oedipus' and Antigone's stories – as Fabre indirectly states, including the scene *My name is Chryssipus* inside the chapter entitled *Antigone*. In this sense, time, or the absence of it, which confines the character of Chryssipus to oblivion, is a sign of a *missing* tragedy – maybe the most tragic, as Charron, who performed the character of Chryssipus in *Mount Olympus*, notices.

Cédric Charron: What is the tragic? It is about death. There is something about death in all of the tragedies; about the justice of death or the injustice of death. We are living tragic situations – look at the COVID pandemic. In the Ancient theatre, in order to be able to accept, to capture the sense of the tragedy, when the situations of death were appearing, nothing was shown on the stage, it was always hidden, the death was not shown. For us, the duration was the opening door to the taste of death. It is such a long time, the 24 hours is a cycle, the cycle of day and night, followed by another day... It is like a life, it is as a cycle of life. We gave

⁹⁶ Interview with Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon, 30 November 2021 (conducted online, transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

the audience, as we gave it to ourselves, the opportunity to live such an experience of birth, life, death and rebirth.⁹⁷

Chryssipus' appearance, it might be claimed, is the sign of the unsaid, of the removed, it is the *inexplicable*,⁹⁸ maybe in its most violent Dionysian terms, entering abruptly, in order to remember its never fading presence. With Chryssipus' visit, the time imposes itself as maybe the crucial element of a performance one whole day long.

Cédric Charron: We worked, I think, ten months, it was almost ten months. It was an extended creative process, with first some improvisation parts. Jan Fabre would give us a different *thema* of improvisation and research, and he would ask us to develop bodily materials, such as, for example: "War is sport, sport is war", simple sentences like this, to see what can come out with imagination. The scene *rope skipping with the chain* came out from this *thema*. We worked on that for at least five months, I think. In the meantime, we were looking for the monologues from the tragedies, the monologues that could be re-written by Jeroen Olyslaegers. After this period, once we all had different materials, Jan had already a plan, a skeleton of the performance. He started to compose the performance and to place every scene one with another, creating the blocks. After that, he packed everything together at the end.

Annabelle Chambon: We also, all of us, read all the tragedies, from Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, so that we could have a complete idea of what it is, and we also extracted monologues which were resonating with ourselves. So, each performer, the ones who were performing with a text, had to find for themselves which monologue they would like to perform. With this, also, we could create scenes around tragic characters.

Cédric Charron: It is an open discussion between Jan Fabre and us. We are forces of propositions. It is not Jan saying: "I'll give you that..." and you do... No, no. We come with different points of view. For instance, for me, the last monologue with which *Mount Olympus* ends is the combination of the character of Philoctetes and the real testimony from the soldiers

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Cf. L. Van den Dries, "Obscene Purgation. Pure Obscenity. Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy", available at: <https://nyuskirball.org/performance-matters/studies/program-note-obscene-purgation-pure-obscenity/> (Accessed: 10 December 2021).

from Congo who got abused, raped and tortured during the civil war there. The combination of the two was something important, for me, because it was resonating. The heart of the war of today. There were some things evident, seized intuitively, and Jeroen Olyslaegers put everything together and created a beautiful monologue. [...] It is the big difference between being an interpret and a performer. The score is not already written, so we write it in the creation process, Jan and us together.

Annabelle Chambon: Most of the time, in the work of Jan, all the material which is on the stage is coming from the performers. The vision of the theme, the artistic goal comes from Jan. He looks for the things he sees as interesting, while we are working together. It is this freedom of creation, this possibility to look, to dig inside ourselves, and to find also this possibility of creation. These little cracks will open immense possibilities.⁹⁹

Chryssipus, to whom Cédric Charron gives a voice, enters the stage, painted completely in white, but also explicitly wounded, since the colour red would come out of his mouth. He is a symbol. He is the incarnation of tragic excess.

Annabelle Chambon: What was the basic idea was to go back in the early eighties with the performing act, performing art, with its real act in real time. So, here, in this twenty-four hours, it was really the idea of a cycle and to use the length, to use time, to offer a real sweat, a real tiredness, a real situation of involving a body completely, physically, mentally, so that the audience can really feel it and live it. A lot of people, not all of them of course, but those who decide to stay for a long time, they could really perceive, and share and feel it also in their flesh, this time, this involvement, this battle. Because, it was a battle on the stage, but also in the audience. Fighting against tiredness, wanting to follow the actions, to know what are you going after, to see how are the other performers going through it...¹⁰⁰

In the theatre – with which the spectators are asked to make a tacit agreement around the veracity of what is represented on the stage – the *real durations* of actions, which Annabelle Chambon is referring to in the above-quoted observation, create a change in the perception

⁹⁹ Interview with Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon, cit.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

of the audience.¹⁰¹ As the duration of one theatrical act ceases to be functional to the meaning of it, refuses to delineate only the most important moments (those which, when put in line, would form a phrase) and gives rather equal attention to every – even the most insignificant – aspect of itself, life enters the stage violently, *immediately*. The theatrical frame shows, thus, through its very particular magnifying glass, the life of everyone – performers and spectators – composed of a myriad of moments, all competing to be the most particular, all breathing life, all directed towards death.

Cédric Charron: Go to a boxing club, you will see people rope-skipping for twenty minutes. We are actors, performers and dancers on the stage, we are rope-skipping as well for twenty minutes. Do we talk about suffering here? No, we are talking about commitment. When we have a dance of fifteen minutes, it is the power of image, the power of impression, I don't want to say the illusion, because it is real; but there is something real, which can create in the mind of the spectator the illusion that it is more, that the evocation is more; but everything that is done on the stage is possible. You cannot separate the body and the mind. [...] Of course, twenty minutes rope-skipping in the boxing club would be normal, it smells like sweat, it is possible, if you go to fitness or whatever, people training there will be OK, but on the stage, it is the evocation, normally, it is the evocation of sport, but not with the real duration. [...] This is the magic of theatre, there the duration looks much more extraordinary, because it is put in the frontline, there is the distortion of time, the distortion of comprehension, and that is the magic of theatre.

Annabelle Chambon: It is because of this different duration than usual, for example the opening dance of *Mount Olympus* was 15 minutes, just one dance... This is never-ending for the spectator, and each scene, in the beginning, was like that. Then you understand that it will all be long, at least 10, 15 minutes, each scene, which is absolutely unconventional for the spectator, mentally and physically. What you should not forget as well is that we are performers, actors and dancers on the stage. We have our tricks, in a way. What we can do is to create a breach from act to acting. Of course, it is not easy to do something for the first time, it is physically difficult. Then you repeat it, then you do it again, then you get trained, but the beauty is to continue to give to yourself and to the audience the truthfulness of what

¹⁰¹ Cf. L. Van den Dries, "Mount Olympus/24H", available at: <https://mountolympus.be/about> (Accessed: 15 December 2021).

is happening and to where you can go, to what extent you can open your imagination to take the audience with you into it, into this image of tiredness, ecstasy, pure joy... This is our job as actors and dancers to reproduce, to open the door, for the audience as well, to go there, into the imagination...

Cédric Charron: We are the masters of recreating realities. The realities that are not everyday. When we put ourselves inside of it, we believe that it is real, and we play with it.¹⁰²

In those five, or ten or two more minutes, the tragic of *Mount Olympus* takes its form. It is time – as explained by Troubleyn’s performers – which aggressively imposes itself to be the main point of agreement between performers and spectators. In this excess of time, the theatrical act changes progressively and, as the spectator assumes different positions, sleeps or stays awake, leaves the theatre to return, it continuously renews itself, becomes different.

Annabelle Chambon: The excess, for me, is losing control, while keeping everything under control. This is excess. For everyone it will be different. Excess. It’s like the consent, it is different for everyone. Everyone’s nature asks for something different, and an excess for someone will be completely standard for somebody else.¹⁰³

Through time, ordinary time, through this poetical expedient of depriving the theatrical act of its exclusivity, of its aura of wisdom, of clairvoyance, the performance offers a channel for the spectator to see himself seeing, to experience his life as if it were given to him for the first time precisely on that occasion. Tears, sweat, liveliness, fatigue, eroticism, pain, desperation, wickedness, pride, love, grief, vengeance, blood, dirt, repeat.

Similar to the character of Chryssipus, the spectator of *Mount Olympus* might be confronted with his own missing tragedy. It could be the tragedy of a wound, which everyone has within himself, which connects one’s most intimate experiences with the external world, through which one communicates with others. It could be a wound, consecrated in a violent act, maybe that of the attribution of a name, maybe one in which the law of a father, such as Oedipus’ father, threatens to become one’s destiny. The spectator is invited to see himself,

¹⁰² Interview with Cédric Charron and Annabelle Chambon, cit.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

to see his own censored, forgotten, missing tragedies, which nonetheless fill each and every one of his days.

This regular time, real time – which, instead of drawing the spectator outside of his reality while in the theatrical context, rather reports him, right there, among the known – gives the opportunity for the tragic to disclose itself. In other words, as these extraordinarily long acts breach theatrical convention,¹⁰⁴ so the spectator is eased to, metaphorically speaking, come closer to what is represented, to position himself at the very centre of tragedy, still sitting nonetheless in the theatre, in the traditional theatrical *all'italiana* space, to observe what is represented from a safe, critical distance. In this sense, as this extra time breaks through the illusion of the spectator of being different, maybe better, possibly blessed with another temporality, another chance to be a man, outside of a common, shared realm of contingency – as it deprives the theatre of the right to flatter the spectator by offering him an exclusive vision of his life composed, as it might seem, only of meaningful moments, worthy of being lived, it consequently gives him the opportunity to reconsider, to relive his very experience of life. It includes the spectator inside the sweat and tears on the stage, while, by him remaining nonetheless physically separated from what is represented, it offers the opportunity for him to see his own living. One's life – made up of hundreds of thousands of everyday moments which demand endurance, commitment, the desire to be surpassed, survived – is shown on the stage of *Mount Olympus*. The tragedy of finitude, the beauty of healing, restoring, restarting, renewing, the tragedy of loss, the irremediable loss of hundreds of thousands of ordinary moments, oblivion which will cover hundreds of thousands of thoughts, feelings, laughs, sights and intuitions, reside here in this excess of time.

In this sense, Chryssipus' appearance is a symbol. It is the image of the forgotten¹⁰⁵ which exists beyond oblivion, of the removed which could, without any disturbance, influence the reality of the one to whom it refers. It is the image of death, of a tragedy which is not acknowledged, which cannot be acknowledged so that a human can continue living, but

¹⁰⁴ “The 24-Hour Project cannibalises theatre.”, L. Van den Dries, “Mount Olympus/24H”, cit.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. F. Decreus, “Dionysus, a twofold master of ceremony in Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus*”, available at: http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2721 (Accessed: 16 November 2021).

which nonetheless must simultaneously be acknowledged in order to be able to live fully, authentically. Chryssipus is the wound, a mortal wound which grows with every new second of one's life. It is the force against which a human fights in every moment of his life, with a desire to conquer every extra second, every new possibility to be, to thrive, to live. It is a fifteen-minute-long dance scene, and another one, and another one, to infinity.

1.2. *Bare life*

Nietzsche tells¹⁰⁶ a legend about King Midas, who tried to catch Silenus, Dionysus' companion. When finally captured, the *daemon* would disclose a very important piece of wisdom to the king. To the question "What is the best and most excellent thing for human beings?"¹⁰⁷ Midas received the following response:

"Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon."¹⁰⁸

What if Silenus was right? What if there is no *beyond* for us, what if there is only bare life?

A story about Saint Margaret of Antioch says that she killed a devil with dragon's features, who tempted her in the prison cell she had been confined to for devoting her life to the Christian God. It is believed that she died at 15, as a martyr.

In October 2019, the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp opened an exhibition entitled *Madonna meets Mad Meg: Masterpieces and Their Collectors*,¹⁰⁹ in which Jean Fouquet's

¹⁰⁶ Cf. F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872, Eng. trans. *The Birth of Tragedy*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Madonna meets Mad Meg. Masterpieces and Their Collectors*, from 5 October 2019 to 9 January 2022, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, cf. <https://www.museummayervandenbergh.be/en/activity/madonna-meets-mad-meg> (Accessed: 15 January 2021).

famous *Melun Diptych*¹¹⁰ competes for attention with Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Dulle Griet*.¹¹¹ In 1894, the young art historian and collector Fritz Mayer van den Bergh bought that *Dulle Griet* at an auction in Cologne. This purchase renewed attention on Bruegel's artworks among a twentieth-century audience.¹¹² Who actually is Dulle Griet (in English, she is Mad Mag, from Margaret)?

“Mysterious and disturbing”¹¹³ – as Artaud would describe her. Griet is – and this much is at least obvious – a giant. We see her walking resolutely, capable of taking whatever she wants – as Rabelais' Gargantua, who took the bells from Notre Dame to put them around the neck of his mule.¹¹⁴ Behind her, an army of women, who, like Bacchae, impose the rule of chaos. In front of her is a mouth, wide open, like in Bosch's *Visions of Tondal*,¹¹⁵ leading maybe directly to hell.

Her eyes seem on alert, her neck is thick (with some kind of Adam's apple), her body supported on very large feet. Her head is covered by a metal cap, her chest in armour. In one hand, she carries a sword, in another the spoils of war. Among this loot, she carries a frying pan. It seems that Bruegel – by depicting this masculine woman of masculine manners – was engaged in ridiculing a hierarchical division between the sexes in the sixteenth-century Low Countries.¹¹⁶ It seems that Dulle Griet, led by the spirit of *anti-gonos*,¹¹⁷ has the power to construct and deconstruct the entire world around her, building it up or tearing it apart, as what The Living Theatre in their *Antigone*¹¹⁸ of the sixties called – very symbolically in this

¹¹⁰ J. Fouquet, *Melun Diptych*, (1450–1455, conserved in Koninklijk Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp).

¹¹¹ P. Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (1563, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp), cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 1. p. 167.

¹¹² *Bruegel*, E. Oberthaler, S. Pénot, M. Sellink, R. Spronk, A. Hoppe-Harnoncourt (eds.), published on the occasion of the exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 9.

¹¹³ A. Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Oeuvres Complètes*, tome IV, 1964, Eng. trans. *Letters on Language*, in *The Theatre and its Double*, in *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works*, vol. IV, London, John Calder, 1999, p. 93.

¹¹⁴ Cf. F. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, cit.

¹¹⁵ *Bruegel*, cit., p. 67.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 168–171.

¹¹⁷ “The “inflexible”: from *anti-gon*, where *gon/gonia* means ‘the angle’; or ‘she, who refuses to become a mother’ in the case in which *gone* from *gonos/gonia* means ‘she, who gives a birth’”, S. Žižek, *Antigone*, London-New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, pp. XX–XXI.

¹¹⁸ *Antigone*, directed by J. Beck, J. Malina – The Living Theatre, 1967–1968.

context¹¹⁹ – “the Bosch-Machine”,¹²⁰ a monstrous mechanism of the state, which grows with the consent of the multitude. Griet is, thus, both the oppressor and the oppressed, being swallowed by hell and being hell itself.

It may be the case that the one who can kill the devil is able to become the devil herself; while the very potentiality of turning into the biggest threat that is directly encountered and still remains in her essence intact might make her a saint.

“How could God ever desire the death of someone who is not a sinner?” The doctrine of martyrdom therefore justifies the scandal of a meaningless death, of an execution that could only appear as absurd.¹²¹

In his *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus writes: “Perhaps this notion will become clearer if I risk this shocking statement: the absurd is sin without God”.¹²² It is a *divorce*,¹²³ Camus claims. A fundamental divorce of myself from the rest.

It was Primo Levi – cited by Giorgio Agamben on various occasions in his *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* – who introduced the term “grey zone”,¹²⁴ individuated by the philosopher as the new ethical element, the field of “*impotentia iudicandi*”.¹²⁵ It is the zone of “irresponsibility”,¹²⁶ “in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims”.¹²⁷ One very eloquent example of what Levi meant by the “grey zone” is the

¹¹⁹ Bruegel was considered “a second Bosch” by Ludovico Gucciardini, Giorgio Vasari and others. This appellative positively influenced Bruegel’s fame. Cf. <https://bruegel.vlaamsekunstcollectie.be/en/collection-presentation/bosch-example> (Accessed 15 January 2021).

¹²⁰ Cf. C. Molinari, *Storia di Antigone. Da Sofocle al Living Theatre. Un mito nel teatro occidentale*, Bari, De Donato, 1977, p. 198. The author refers to J. Jacquot testimony in J. Jacquot (ed.), *Antigone*, in *Les voies nouvelles de la création théâtrale*, 1970.

¹²¹ G. Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L’archivio e il testimone (Homo sacer III)*, 1998, Eng. trans. *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, New York, Zone Books, 1999, p. 27.

¹²² A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cit., p. 42.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹²⁴ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, cit, p. 21.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Sonderkommando: the *special* units of those imprisoned in the Nazi camps who had to manage the functioning of the gas chambers in all its monstrous details.¹²⁸

“Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn’t think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy...”¹²⁹

Might it be possible to go even further than Levi did and assert that, in general terms, there is no specific point, no “zone” in which the victim or the executioner become the opposite of each other, but that these two correspond so perfectly as to create one inseparable entity bonded by life and death together? Might it be that hell is equally inside as outside of man? Might it be that Levi’s “grey zone” is what Mitya Karamazov names “the human heart”, a battlefield where God and the devil fight each other arduously?¹³⁰ It is precisely in this point where any *ratio* encounters a deadlock, or in Camus’ words again, it is the hour of the meeting with the absurd:

A stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults?¹³¹

Was it not Oedipus who liberated Thebes from the Sphinx, thanks to his intelligence and his wit, but who also brought sickness and disgrace right among the Thebans, due to his lack of reasoning?

If this fact is true, we ought to consider the scourge as the immediate medium or materialisation of a thinking power in close contact with what we call fate.¹³²

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–26.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25. Agamben quotes P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986, Eng. trans. *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York, Random House, 1989.

¹³⁰ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Братья Карамазовы*, 1880, It. trans. *I fratelli Karamazov*, cit. (part 1, book III, ch. III).

¹³¹ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cit., p. 25.

¹³² A. Artaud., *Theatre and the Plague*, in *The Theatre and its Double*, cit., p. 9.

Western theatre, and its culture *in toto* is useless – Antonin Artaud believed – if it is to be just a decoration, a likable entertainment for some virtuous, decent people. It refers only to human reasoning, professing numb ideas, poisoned by conventions, stereotypes, the *flatus vocis* of progress and *know-how*. It is paralysing and artificial; enslaved by the word of conformism, estranged from the life. It has to change.¹³³ “I have to change it” – Artaud thought:

I did not say I wanted to exert any direct effect on our times; I said that the theatre I wanted to create, in order to be possible, to exist and be accepted by the times, presupposed another form of civilisation.¹³⁴

It might be that, first and foremost, theatre should not lie. In Dostoevsky’s *Сон смешного человека*, a man fell into a suicidal dream, which brought him to visit the world of a “live and constant communion with the universal Whole”,¹³⁵ a world of pure joy, with no religions, nor ideas of eternity, with no science nor desire to know life, with no fear of death nor grief, but love, only love. Overwhelmed by the power of bliss, the man tried to share his earthly experiences with his host, who could not even suspect what it means to love in anguish, to hurt, grieve and hate, but still listened, accepted and understood the visitor’s words. It does not take much, though – Givone writes¹³⁶ – just a little deviation between the truth, as it is, and its mirror image in the consciousness of a man, only an act of thinking and everything changes; the truth becomes corrupted, no longer credible.¹³⁷ Just this much, this little errant spark, was enough for Dostoevsky’s character to admit the following:

All I know is that I caused their fall from grace. Like a sinister trichina, like a plague germ contaminating whole kingdoms, I contaminated with my person that entire happy, sinless planet. They learned how to lie, they came to love it, and they grew to appreciate the beauty

¹³³ Cf. A. Artaud., *The Theatre and its Double*, cit.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, *Letters on Language*, cit., p. 90.

¹³⁵ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, cit., p. 218.

¹³⁶ “Come se tra la verità qual è in se stessa e il suo rispecchiarsi nella coscienza di qualcuno ci fosse uno scarto minimo, impercettibile, ma decisivo: basta una atto di riflessione, ed essa non è già più com’era, infatti appare offuscata, inquinata, non credibile. Nel cuore della verità c’è specie di macchia originale: la colpa di doverla confessare”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit. p. 78.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

of untruth. It may have started with a joke, innocently, playfully, with a flirtation, but the germ of the lie penetrated their hearts, and they took a fancy to it.¹³⁸

This is original sin; carried by Oedipus, with his first step, in his limping walk.¹³⁹ At Colonus, the aged wanderer king defended his name as that of an *involuntary victim*:

The bloody deaths, the incest, the calamities
you speak so glibly of: I suffered them
by fate, against my will! It was god's pleasure,
and perhaps our family had angered him long ago.
In me myself you could not find such evil
as would have made me sin against my own.¹⁴⁰

Bare life is the explosion of the plague – Givone writes¹⁴¹ – it is the perfect coincidence of guilt and innocence. It should never happen, the philosopher continues;¹⁴² in fact, it could never happen (based on some shallow human expectations), but it still does; it intrudes reality, spreads quickly into every angle of the known, soaks its walls with its poisonous liquids, weighs down the air with its stagnant breath; leaves a man not only stripped of the life he knew before, but almost expelled for good from any habitable reality. The plague is much more than a human is. It hides inside what is left, after itself taking everything away.

Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, cit., p. 220.

¹³⁹ The name Oedipus (*Oidípous*), meaning “swollen foot”. Cf. K. Kerényi, *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia*, cit., p. 312. The reference here is also to the letter *lambda*. It is the first letter of Labdacids' names (Labdacus, Laius) and the symbol of the house. The *Lambda* formally looks like the “limping” letter, referring to the moral inadequacy of the members of that family. (C. Gentili, *Filosofia del tragico e teoria estetica*, as a part of academic course *Estetica filosofica*, University of Bologna, a.y. 2018–2019).

¹⁴⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, cit., 960–970.

¹⁴¹ “Che, a ben vedere, è la stessa cosa che la nuda vita, essendo la nuda vita né più né meno che l'esplosione alla peste. Donde la perfetta coincidenza, in quel nudo fatto che è la nuda vita, di colpevolezza e innocenza”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., p. 15.

¹⁴² “Fatalità: certo, quel che è successo è successo. Poteva non succedere. Anzi, che succedesse era impensabile”, *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴³ “Thus translates the young Nietzsche in a treatise completed in 1873 entitled *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of Greeks.*”, M. Heidegger, *Der Spruch der Anaximander*, in *Holzwege*, 1972, Eng. trans. *The Anaximander Fragment*, in *Early Greek Thinking. The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, San Francisco, Harper, 1984, p. 13.

Anaximander from Miletus believed that humans have their origins from the *apeiron*, meaning the infinite, the indistinct principium of all, to which they belonged unobjectionably. Nevertheless, something important happened – the reasons for which remain veiled – and pushed them right into the pit of turmoil, difference and conflict, into individualisation. From that moment on, man, this germ of *discordia*, has to pay his debt for being alive.¹⁴⁴ From that moment on, being and not being are both his enemies, as are other men, as he is to himself. Did he ever ask to be born, where being born is a fact, Givone writes,¹⁴⁵ a physical fact,¹⁴⁶ just as the plague itself is, a measurable entity with a precisely ascribed Latin name? The plague is not metaphysical – the philosopher asserts¹⁴⁷ – it is ours, as life itself is, this bare factual life, in front of which we all have to pay a debt to each other, to which we are all guilty. This is *adikìa*, the guilt of being born, the guilt of being.¹⁴⁸ The more we live, the more we pay. So it might be, as Silenus claims, that to participate briefly, if not to disengage at all, is of the best benefit to a man, this monstrous being.¹⁴⁹

Might dancing for Dionysus be a solution? Is it not precisely this divinity who re-enacts eternally his own birth, which *took place in death*?¹⁵⁰ Is not the god of *zōē*, the god of indestructible life, who was torn to pieces and reborn,¹⁵¹ a fairly relevant address to refer to?

A hundred years ago, an outbreak of plague killed all the inhabitants of a town in Persia, except the man who washed bodies, who had carried on with his job throughout.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ S. Givone, *Responsabilità per il destino*, in N. Novello (ed.), *Tràgos. Pensiero e poesia del tragico*, Pasian di Prato, Capanotto Editore, 2014, p. 234.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ “Il male ci appartiene in quanto fatto fisico prima ancora che metafisico. Intride la nostra carne, i nostri nervi, la nostra voce. Ne siamo portatori inconsapevoli: tant’è che basta un niente per scatenarlo. Un semplice contatto, una svista, un lapsus. Non appartiene a potenze che ci trascendono. È cosa nostra”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ S. Givone, *Responsabilità per il destino*, cit., p. 234.

¹⁴⁹ B. Brecht, *The Antigone of Sophocles*, cit.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. K. Kerényi, *Dionysos. Urbild des unzerstörbaren Lebens*, 1976, It. trans. *Dioniso: archetipo della vita indistruttibile*, Milano, Adelphi, 2010, p. 116.

¹⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵² A. Camus, *La Peste*, 1947, Eng. trans. *The Plague*, Penguin Classics, 2013, p. 65.

Artaud was resolute: “I intend to do what I have hoped to do or nothing at all.”¹⁵³ Theatre has to find its authenticity, bonding with life, again. Theatre, as a plague, should take away all the ornaments of one’s ego, its virtues or flaws, achievements and failures, blessings and sins, ideologies and beliefs, all its material goods and properties, all the useless burdens. Only when completely stripped of our personas can we get into Charon’s boat, as in one of Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead*,¹⁵⁴ nothing of all this will be needed in Hades.

Theatre’s true purpose is to create Myths, to express life from an immense, universal aspect and to deduce imagery from this life where we would like to discover ourselves.¹⁵⁵

Yet, this death should occur in life, it should make us immune – as Givone writes¹⁵⁶ – or better, immunised, without turning us into plague spreaders who draw pleasure from their wrongdoings, without equating us completely with the disease, but helping us return to ourselves.¹⁵⁷ The theatre, this “sense of gratuitous urgency”,¹⁵⁸ should reveal all the malignant spirits hidden from the light of day – actually under the garment of their opposites – taking upon itself, as a catalyser, “the victory of dark powers”.¹⁵⁹ Being unreal, just as a plague is – a sum of facts which does not correspond to its circumstantial resonance – the theatre should encapsulate the cruelty of disastrous immanence and sew it into its own thigh – as Zeus did with Dionysus, saved from the burning belly of his mother Semele, which had been set on fire by Hera’s anger.¹⁶⁰ It should prevent rats going out onto the streets by giving them space on the stage.

Nevertheless, Artaud’s is not the theatre of accusation or political standpoints. It does not judge and ideologise. It does not pretend to reorder and find a better solution. Above all, it is

¹⁵³ A. Artaud., *Letters on Language*, cit., p. 90.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Lucian of Samosata, *Λουκιανου, De Vita Caesarum*, II AD, Srb. trans. *Odabrani razgovori*, Beograd, Dereta, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ A. Artaud., *Letters on Language*, cit., p. 89.

¹⁵⁶ “[...] un immune; meglio, un immunizzato. Ossia un salvato, un preservato”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., pp. 17–18. The philosopher uses both terms: “immune” and “immunised”, making a difference between whom is to be considered preserved in his essence, able to bear the burden of responsibility and the one who adapts to, *goes with the flow* of destruction.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ A. Artaud., *Theatre and the Plague*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. K. Kerényi, *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia*, cit., p. 215.

nobody's servant. It is the theatre of madness, maybe the best measure of the one who does not know, but yet is obliged to respond to it all.

Responsible for it all – as Givone asserts – “tragically free”.¹⁶¹

1.3. *Why am I to blame if the world itself is ill-constructed?*

In one of his numerous so-called jokes, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek asks: “What if God underestimated man, considering him too stupid to grasp the insufficiencies of Creation?” In other words, what are we guilty of, if the world itself is defective? Žižek finds the quantum physics idea of an “ontologically incomplete universe”¹⁶² very fascinating, citing Heisenberg and Bohr's discussion around the uncertainty principle. Creation is, metaphorically described by the philosopher, like a video game, in which not everything has its factual substance. In other words, some objects in the video game end up being unusable and cannot be grasped fully, since they have not been programmed to be so. These objects exist just as some “blurred, incomplete background”¹⁶³ – Žižek claims – or as inaccessible interiors. They appear only as Plato's shadows, in this case completely deprived of any hidden meaningful substance. By this principle, it seems that all that exists is already in front of our eyes, as a clear indicator that it might not be only our scarce and unintelligent gaze that impoverishes reality, but that Creation itself is culpable of improbability.

If God is the meaning of the world – Luigi Pareyson writes¹⁶⁴ – but there is proof of the failure of his creation, it means that reality is absurd and thus that there is no God. For Ivan

¹⁶¹ “Questo significa che salvezza altro non è che restituzione al proprio destino umano. Sempre di nuovo fatti non per essere come bruti, ma *scientes bonum et malum*. In una parola: responsabili. E quindi liberi. Tragicamente liberi”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁶² S. Žižek, *Capitalism and Its Threats*, lecture at The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, 17 June 2018, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwvpLG89lwg&t=0s> (Accessed: 16 January 2021). Cf. also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv3qRcYII3U&ab_channel=TheRadicalRevolution (Accessed 16 January 2021).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij. Filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa*, cit., p. 188.

Karamazov the proof of God's nonexistence is infallible, and is filed under *useless suffering*. Suffering without a subject – as Pareyson defines it¹⁶⁵ – is excessive to the point of not wanting to be comforted, as in the case of a mother who loses her son; or unreflective, in animals or children, who might or might not be aware of the burden they carry, but remaining completely passive and compliant in regards to it. The “pure patient”¹⁶⁶ is – as Pareyson proceeds – the one who suffers for no reason, the one who cannot get beyond his own turmoil, who cannot reach any new knowledge from it, cannot be elevated or redeemed and would only pass his suffering on. He is a martyr¹⁶⁷ – Pareyson claims – an undefended, clean target, immersed in the darkness to the point of knowing his pain and nothing else.

The child is not reflective enough to feel pain, and yet its sorrow is infinitely deep. It is not reflective enough to have any conception of sin and guilt; when he sees an older person suffer, it does not occur to it to reflect upon it, and yet when the cause of the suffering is concealed from it, there is a dim suspicion about it in its sorrow.¹⁶⁸

This outrageous injustice provokes indignation in Ivan, making him deny God, who allows this to happen. Karl Jaspers, as well, after World War II professes¹⁶⁹ that being alive in those unprecedented times, being human, something strongly brought into question in its essence, by inhumanity – parading to its zenith among the ruins – meant being irredeemably guilty. Besides *political guilt* – afflicting the supporters of the Nazi movement (even if forced), a movement which led to the utter misery and devastation of all implicated parties – Jaspers individuates what he names a *metaphysical guilt*, for which we are bound to respond solely before god. Nonetheless, the philosopher does not specify the identity of a god who might be available to accept the prayers of the sinners, but prefers to pronounce all of his contemporaries, himself included, indiscriminately guilty for being alive, thus denying any unfortunate plant the chance to grow among stones, as Ivan does.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁶⁶ “pure patient”, *ibid.*, p. 172 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁶⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern*, in *Either/Or*, cit., p. 146.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. K. Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, 1965, It. trans. *La questione della colpa: sulla responsabilità politica della Germania*, Milano, Cortina, 1996.

[...] still there comes the eternal question—why must I be humble through all this? Is it not enough that I am devoured, without my being expected to bless the power that devours me?¹⁷⁰

It takes the voluntary suffering of an adult to redeem the unjust suffering of a child – Pareyson writes.¹⁷¹

Oedipus, thus, thought rightly that it was necessary to obey the oracle, find and exorcise the source of a mysterious plague – which was ravaging Thebes – by killing the *spreader*, the alleged assassin of King Laius. This search, nonetheless, led him to discover the overwhelming truth regarding his origins and the precariousness of the house of cards he had built at the Theban court. He learnt that his life did not belong to him (any more) and that the pit of disgrace he had fallen into could have been spotted in time and bypassed wisely, if only he had had eyes to see. In the midst of a set of unfortunate circumstances, the king felt obliged to be fair towards himself, just as he would be towards any other monstrous criminal out there who was in the wrong.

On whose account did Oedipus blind himself? Who did he think was looking at him at the moment the world he knew was collapsing around him? Whose gaze would substitute his own? Might it be asserted that nature – this very windy place, indifferent towards its own fate, let alone regarding the calamities of a little animal, leaf or tree – would not mind if Oedipus retained the rights to his eyes? Might we dare to claim that the king was overreacting and that he did not need to add any more pain to his already challenging life? The young György Lukács wrote as follows:

Man is conscious of his fate, and calls this consciousness “guilt.” And by feeling that everything that had to happen to him is of his own making, he draws firm contours around everything inside himself which accidentally happens to enter the flowing circumference of his accidental life-complex. He makes a necessity of it; he creates frontiers around himself; he creates himself. Seen from the outside, there is no guilt, there can be no guilt; every man sees every other’s guilt as an accident of fate, as something which the slightest, faintest breath

¹⁷⁰ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit. p. 402.

¹⁷¹ “[...] la sofferenza volontaria e consensuale d’un adulto innocente serve a riscattare la sofferenza inutile dei bambini”, L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij. Filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa*, cit., p. 203.

of wind might have caused to be otherwise. Through guilt, a man says “Yes” to everything that has happened to him; by feeling it to be his own action and his own guilt, he conquers it and forms his life, setting his tragedy—which has sprung from his guilt—as the frontier between his life and the All.¹⁷²

We need to be responsible for it all – this is a Christian stance defended by Elder Zosima in *Братья Карамазовы*¹⁷³ – ready to forgive everyone for everything, maybe even oneself. This endeavour, seemingly as arduous as evangelising the birds from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Uccellacci e uccellini*,¹⁷⁴ is inconceivable for Antigone, who was directed straight to death, with no mercy or second thoughts.

The first doubt with which pain really begins is this: why has befallen me, why can it not be otherwise?¹⁷⁵

Already from a young age, Antigone knew – Kierkegaard writes.¹⁷⁶ She could foretell the whole disturbing truth regarding the destiny of her father and her family, but, wrapped in anxiety and sorrow, could not speak. She loved her father dearly and promised to herself to cherish the memory of him by closing her soul to the entire world and by accepting his guilt as if it were her own.¹⁷⁷ For the Greeks – Kierkegaard asserts¹⁷⁸ – Antigone’s and Polynices’ fates echo the Labdacides’ curse; the tragic nature of their situation resides first and foremost in being members of their family, this indivisible unit, whose every part deeply affects all the others.¹⁷⁹ What was of interest to the Ancient Greeks was not the modern focus on the conflict that arose between the legitimacy of the state’s decree and the power of the scream emitted by the underground spirits, but the overwhelming necessity rooted in Oedipus’ sin, which provoked the tragic death of his children, and the collapse of one “small world”¹⁸⁰ that they

¹⁷² G. Lukács, *A lélek és a formák*, 1908, Eng. trans. *Soul and form*, London, Merlin Press, 1974, p. 165.

¹⁷³ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Братья Карамазовы*, 1880, It. trans. *I fratelli Karamazov*, cit.

¹⁷⁴ *Uccellacci e uccellini*, directed by P.P. Pasolini, CIDIF, 1966.

¹⁷⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern*, in *Either/Or*, cit., p. 149.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 153–162.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, Kierkegaard refers, as described here, to his Antigone, the modern one, completely self-absorbed and mute before her father and his guilt.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

had made. Antigone, a *virgo mater*,¹⁸¹ as Kierkegaard sees her – completely consumed by the idea she had devoted herself to – collects the bad seeds spread by her ancestors and brings them to the grave.

1.4. *What does it mean to be condemned to death?*

Thus gods justify the life of men by living it themselves – the only satisfactory theodicy!¹⁸²

For Nietzsche, the Ancient Greeks were well aware of all the horrors of life and, in order to be able to survive the cruelty of Creation, they invented the completely parallel, dreamlike world of the Olympians. In trying to pose, with some well-intentioned aim, a question concerning who we are, we must risk and ask, first and foremost – what does it mean to be condemned to death?

Condemned to die!

Well, why not! “Men,” I remember to have read in some book which contained nothing else that was good, “*Men are condemned to die with various reprieves.*” How is my position different?¹⁸³

One day, while crossing Place de l’Hôtel de Ville, Victor Hugo saw an executioner testing his equipment for the “spectacle” that was to take place in the evening – Adèle Hugo recounts in the biography *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*.¹⁸⁴ That man on the square was talking to some curious passers-by, while calmly preparing to kill another man, who was agonising at the same moment in his prison cell – Adèle writes.¹⁸⁵ The following day, in 1829

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁸² F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁸³ V. Hugo, *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*, 1829, Eng. trans. *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, cit. Here, the character refers to Hugo’s book *Han d’Islande*, from 1823.

¹⁸⁴ A. Hugo, *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*, Paris, Hetzel, 1863, pp. 429–431.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

– after multiple encounters with the guillotine in Paris’s public space – Hugo started writing *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*.

It is a brief novel which recounts the story of a young man, maybe one certain Jean Martin,¹⁸⁶ possibly any young man or woman, sentenced to death. From the day of the trial, the condemned had six more weeks to live and think burdensome thoughts. Hugo is interested in portraying the psychological torture endured by the imprisoned, correlated with the complete indifference of the community he belonged to before becoming a reject. The writer asks:

Have they ever considered the painful thought that in the man whom they condemn there is an intellect, an intellect which had counted on life, a soul which was not prepared for death? No. In all that, they see only the vertical fall of a triangular knife, thinking, no doubt, that for the condemned man there is nothing before or after.¹⁸⁷

The dying man, on the other hand, conflicted indeed in the instant between “who I was” and “who I am now”, had become a ghost¹⁸⁸ even before the execution, and, thus bewildered and apparently seeing everyone else becoming ghosts, asks:

But if these dead return, under what form will they come? What part of their incomplete and mutilated body will they keep? Which will they choose? Will the head or the body be the ghost?¹⁸⁹

In the foreword to *Кроткая*, Dostoevsky judges this writing as “the most realistic and the most truthful of all his [Hugo’s] books”.¹⁹⁰ The main reason for this claim is the fact that Hugo’s *Condemned Man* – as if he was being recorded on a stenograph, Dostoevsky specifies

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ V. Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, cit., (ch. VI).

¹⁸⁸ “Condemned to die!” shouted the crowd; and while they led me away, the people rushed at my heels with the noise of a falling building. I walked along dazed and stupefied. A change had taken place in me. Up to the moment of the death-sentence, I had been living, breathing among other men; now I clearly saw that there was a high wall between the world and myself. Nothing seemed the same to me. The great shining windows, the beautiful sunshine, the clear sky, the pretty flower,—all were white and dull, like a shroud. The crowd of men, women, and children following me were like phantoms”, *ibid.*, (ch. II).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, (ch. XLI).

¹⁹⁰ “la più realistica e la più vera di tutte quelle da lui scritte”, F. M. Dostoevsky, *Кроткая*, 1876, It. trans. *La mansueta. Racconto fantastico*, in *La mansueta, Il sogno di uomo ridicolo*, Milano, Garzanti, 1988, p. 10. Eng. trans. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 55.

– is describing his own state of mind and heart in detail until the very end of his life. To make it all less credible – Dostoevsky continues – Hugo decided to make his character write about his experience all the way through the story, even at the gallows, while pleading for mercy. Nonetheless, it is precisely this fantastic expedient – Dostoevsky claims – which renders this literary work possible in the first place. It seems that this idea aligns perfectly with Nietzsche’s abovementioned one. How could it be possible otherwise to respond to the question regarding the experience of being condemned to death, if not by distancing from this calumny, if not by writing about it?

J.-P. Vernant in the book *Mythe et tragédie II*¹⁹¹ looks into the origins of the Ancient Greek tragedy not by focusing on the “umbilical cord”¹⁹² which connects it with primordial religious rites, but by rather regarding it as an extraordinary invention of the city – (while still it is also important to remember that the organisation of the Greek city was never completely separated from religion either).¹⁹³ The heroes of epos – Vernant claims¹⁹⁴ – whose stories were taken and re-elaborated by tragedy, once only praised and honoured as a grandiose traditional models, now became the objects of debate on the theatrical stage. While the dramatic structure borrows plots, characters and themes from the epos, it simultaneously internally shatters its one-dimensional perspective, leaving a Greek from the fifth century BC in front of his imperfect hero, who mirrors his own humanly faulty nature. In other words, the invention of what Vernant calls “tragic consciousness”¹⁹⁵ problematises the cultural and societal setup, within which the ancient spectator interprets reality, giving him the possibility to imagine the alternatives. The theatrical stage presents what Vernant individuates as *an absence in the presence*,¹⁹⁶ – a pure fiction, fantasy of the elsewhere, embodied, nonetheless, right amongst the audience. This *illusion*, the awakening, followed by interrogation of the

¹⁹¹ J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mito e tragedia due. Da Edipo a Dioniso*, cit.

¹⁹² “cordone ombelicale”, J.-P. Vernant, *Il dio della finzione tragica*, in *Mito e tragedia due*, cit., p. 6 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁹⁵ “coscienza tragica”, *ibid.*, p. 8 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁹⁶ “La ‘presenza’ che l’attore incarna a teatro è quindi sempre il segno o la maschera di una *assenza* alla realtà quotidiana del pubblico”, *ibid.*, p. 9 (italics are the author’s, trans. by V. Baltić).

ghosts – those sacred projections of Greek thought – this new medium “based on pure artifice”,¹⁹⁷ invents itself by inventing new imagery. In regard to this, the philosopher writes:

The consciousness of the fiction [...] is the constitutive element of the dramatic spectacle; it appears simultaneously to be its condition and its product.¹⁹⁸

If there is a philosopher who would appreciate Vernant’s assertion around the importance of the embodied fiction of tragic art, of its dare to imagine different potentialities to the new world born from Zagreus’ heart, that might be Anaximander. Regarding the prime question of the origins of the world, his fellow-philosopher of the Ionian School, Thales, believed that everything around us is derived from water and that it all floats on water. Anaximenes, on the other hand, tried to resolve some major problems with Thales’ theory, concluding that the primal substance of it all must be air. Anaximander thought of the above-mentioned *apeiron* as the primal element of all beings.

Setting aside the meaning of the term and its philosophical relevance, the physicist Carlo Rovelli claims that Anaximander’s major contribution is in the fact that his *apeiron* is not any of the substances testable in our everyday experience, but still functions as a “unifying natural element to explain all things”.¹⁹⁹ This, it might be said, *fantastical* thought experiment, even though it is not necessarily empirically provable, encourages the imagination as the primal source of new knowledge. It is – as in the case of *apeiron* – that, by looking at the invisible, by imagining, a human creates and thus discovers reality. Rovelli writes:

Atoms – those of the Greek atomists Democritus and Leucippus, as well as their nineteenth-century relatives, those of John Dalton – are the direct descendants of Anaximander’s

¹⁹⁷ “un’opera umana basata sul puro artificio”, *ibid.*, p. 9 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁹⁸ “La coscienza della finzione, – ho scritto recentemente, – è elemento costitutivo dello spettacolo drammatico; appare contemporaneamente come la sua condizione e il suo prodotto”, *ibid.*, pp. 9–10 (trans. by V. Baltić).

¹⁹⁹ C. Rovelli, *Anaximandre de Milet, ou la naissance de la pensée scientifique*, 2009, Eng. trans. by M. L. Rosenberg, *The first Scientist Anaximander and his legacy.*, Yardely, Westholme, 2011, (ch. V, *Anaximander: Apeiron*). Web., It trans. “L’intuizione centrale, qui, è che per spiegare la complessità del mondo sia opportuno postulare, immaginare, l’esistenza di qualcosa d’altro, che non è nessuna delle sostanze del mondo diretto della nostra esperienza, ma possa *fungere* da elemento unificante di spiegazione per tutte queste”, *Che cos’è la scienza, La rivoluzione di Anassimandro*, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p.74.

apeiron. They are natural objects (nothing is particularly divine about atoms) that escape our direct perception but in terms of which we understand the constitution of matter.²⁰⁰

It was the methodology used by Anaximander, rather than the content of his theory itself, that would be implemented by science through the centuries, until our day – Rovelli claims.²⁰¹

Truth is accessible and an integral part of nature itself, but truth is hidden. The instruments with which it can be reached are observation and intelligence. Thought must be ready to imagine the existence of more natural entities than what we directly perceive.²⁰²

When Dionysus for the first time presents himself in front of the Theban King Pentheus, in Euripide's *The Bacchae*, he is recognised as follows:

So,
you are attractive, stranger, at least to women—
which explains, I think, your presence here in Thebes.
Your curls are long; they fall along your cheeks.
You do not wrestle, I take it. And what fair skin!
You must take care of it—not in the sun, by night
when you hunt Aphrodite with your beauty.²⁰³

While ridiculed for having an appearance similar to that of a Greek woman, whose pale skin signals her as a devoted protector of the sacred realm of *oikos*,²⁰⁴ the god listens calmly, not wanting to fully disclose his identity. He prefers to be regarded as a foreigner who honours the cult of Zeus' son, while at the same time claiming his curls to be holy²⁰⁵ and to have

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, It. trans. “Nel postulare l’*ápeiron*, Anassimandro non fa altro che aprire la strada a quello che la scienza continuerà poi a fare per secoli, con straordinario successo: immaginare l’esistenza di “entità” che non sono direttamente visibili e percepibili, ma ci permettono di rendere conto dei fenomeni. Gli atomi, sia quelli di Leucippo e Democrito, sia i loro lontani cugini di John Dalton del XIX secolo, sono diretti discendenti dell’*ápeiron* di Anassimandro”, cit., p. 75.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, “[...] la verità è accessibile è parte integrante della natura stessa, ma è nascosta. Gli strumenti per raggiungerla sono l’osservazione e il pensiero. Per fare questo, il pensiero è pronto a immaginare l’esistenza di entità naturali, cioè assumere che queste esistono, anche se esse non sono immediatamente percepibili”, *ibid.*

²⁰³ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek tragedies III*, cit., 450–455.

²⁰⁴ C. Gentili, *Seminare «una quantità di denti di drago». L’anomalia tebana e il significato politico di un modello tragico*, cit., p. 71.

²⁰⁵ Dionysus is speaking: “My hair is holy. / My curls belong to God”, Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 490–495.

Dionysus' thyrsus in his hand. The god himself is on the stage, invisible to those who do not want to see.

You do not know
what is the life you live. You do not know
what you do. You do not know who you are.²⁰⁶

This beautiful foreigner would kill Pentheus using the hands of the king's own mother, Agave, who was blinded to what she was about to do. He who brings wine, who helps humans forget the burdensome necessities of this life, who unleashes from chains, he who dances – he would tear Pentheus apart, using Agave as the perpetrator of this hideous crime. Can there be anything so blatantly present and inevitably absent simultaneously as death itself is?

Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one 'knew'.²⁰⁷

The moment of death... Hugo protested, as mentioned earlier, that neither the crowd, not the hangman, nor the judge, nor the lawyer – nobody saw anything before or after that moment. They did not see, Hugo insists, that final breach in time, split into thousands of hundreds of moments, those moments that an entire life is made of. The opening question could be, thus, reversed: What does it mean to be condemned to life? What does it mean to live through those hundreds of thousands of moments? In the long-awaited encounter with death, one's life must reveal its true essence, its hidden meaning; or else, it must not, it could not?

What is the use of all your nature to me—all your parks and trees, your sunsets and sunrises, your blue skies and your self-satisfied faces—when all this wealth of beauty and happiness begins with the fact that it accounts me—only me—one too many! What is the good of all this beauty and glory to me, when every second, every moment, I cannot but be aware that this little fly which buzzes around my head in the sun's rays—even this little fly is a sharer and participator in all the glory of the universe, and knows its place and is happy in it;—while I—only I, am an outcast, and have been blind to the fact hitherto, thanks to my simplicity!²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 505.

²⁰⁷ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cit., p. 21.

²⁰⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 401.

Ippolit, a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old boy, had only six months left to live before tuberculosis would kill him mercilessly. One day while passing along Shestilavochnaya Street, he saw a man lose his pocket-book, while hurrying somewhere. He tried to reach the man and give him back his possession, but it was crowded, so Ippolit found himself obliged to trace the stranger right to the door he had disappeared behind. Entering a small and messy room, Ippolit witnessed the very difficult living conditions of the man's family with a newborn, a little three-year-old girl and a wife. His severe cough made him stay in that place longer than he intended to; long enough to find out that the poor man was a medical doctor who had lost his job, which had put the entire family in a critical economic situation. Through a set of favourable circumstances, Ippolit managed to advocate for the man to gain a new position, thus revolutionising for the better the stranger's life, right to its core. The philosophy behind this goodwill gesture from a boy, who did not have much to expect from life, nor did he need to ingratiate the gods, who had turned their backs on him with no explanation or promise, is masterfully explicated in the following lines. Ippolit claims:

“‘In Moscow,’ I said, ‘there was an old state counsellor, a civil general, who, all his life, had been in the habit of visiting the prisons and speaking to criminals. Every party of convicts on its way to Siberia knew beforehand that on the Vorobeef Hills the “old general” would pay them a visit. He did all he undertook seriously and devotedly. He would walk down the rows of the unfortunate prisoners, stop before each individual and ask after his needs—he never sermonized them; he spoke kindly to them—he gave them money; he brought them all sorts of necessaries for the journey, and gave them devotional books, choosing those who could read, under the firm conviction that they would read to those who could not, as they went along. [...] Some wretch, for instance, who had been a murderer—cutting the throat of a dozen fellow-creatures, for instance; or stabbing six little children for his own amusement (there have been such men!)—would perhaps, without rhyme or reason, suddenly give a sigh and say, “I wonder whether that old general is alive still!” Although perhaps he had not thought of mentioning him for a dozen years before! How can one say what seed of good may have been dropped into his soul, never to die?’ I continued in that strain for a long while, pointing out to Bachmatoff how impossible it is to follow up the effects of any isolated good

deed one may do, in all its influences and subtle workings upon the heart and after-actions of others.”²⁰⁹

It might mean nothing to be condemned to death within the prospect of living eternally.

²⁰⁹ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., pp. 391–392.

II Making a mistake, or On evil

2.1. *Inheriting the Earth*

Epicurus, similarly to Ivan Karamazov – Givone claims²¹⁰ – asserts that evil obviously exists and therefore asks – if this is already fact, where does God position himself in regard to this perfidy? For Epicurus, there are four solutions to this query:

God does not want evil, but cannot impede it and does not impede it.

God can impede evil, but does not want to.

God cannot impede evil and does not want to impede evil.

God can impede evil and wants to impede evil, but leaves it be.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Givone refers here to *Epicurus' Quadrilemma*. S. Givone, in occasion of the presentation of his book *Quant'è vero Dio. Perché non possiamo fare a meno della religione*, (Milano, Solferino, 2018) in Valdagno, 2018. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=RUADH6kdKhc> (Accessed: 24 January 2021).

²¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*

The first god is – Givone proceeds²¹² – nothing less than a powerless god. The second is evil himself, while the third is paltry. The fourth god is the god of nihilism: He is absurd.

In *Beati i miti, perché avranno in eredità la terra*, Remo Bodei asserts that to be authentically noble means *to know the all as one*.²¹³ There must be a unifying term that the two parts, in some kind of disagreement, nonetheless seize in order to be reconciled. If your brother, for instance, did you wrong in some way, your mother would acknowledge your anger but would still ask you to forgive him, not because he was not wrong in doing what he did, but because he is your brother. Your mother, who gave birth to you both, asked you to forgive, not because your brother deserved forgiveness, but because he is who he is and that is bigger than your judgment. Antigone, for example, did not forgive. Could she ever defend her family by forgiving them?

She loved me, then, or rather, desired to do so.²¹⁴

Nastasya Filippovna did not forgive either, as if forgiving might have something to do with forgiving oneself first: an unhappy woman, a tormented woman, yet “such beauty could overthrow the world”.²¹⁵

Right before marrying Prince Myshkin, Nastasya escaped with a threatening and terrifying young man named Rogozhin. She did not do this because she did not love the prince. She died shortly after, stricken by Rogozhin, with an almost imperceptible stab from a knife, leaving behind only a “tablespoonful of blood”.²¹⁶ “That’s if the blow goes straight to the heart...”²¹⁷ – Myshkin understood. Moments after that horrific revelation, the prince would not understand anything any more. In the scene, which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as “one of

²¹² Cf. also: “EPICURUS’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”, D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779, in N. Kemp Smith (ed.), *Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935, p. 244.

²¹³ The author cites Mahatma Gandhi. R. Bodei, *Mitezza e coraggio*, in S. Givone, R. Bodei, *Beati i miti, perché avranno in eredità la terra*, Torino, Lindau, 2013, p. 66.

²¹⁴ “Mi amava, quindi, o meglio, desiderava amarmi”, F. M. Dostoevsky, *La mansueta*, cit., p. 30 (trans. by V. Baltić).

²¹⁵ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 444.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 600.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the most striking in all of Dostoevsky's art",²¹⁸ Myshkin gently caresses the head and the face of the man who has just killed the woman he (or maybe they both) loved. Right before falling into "complete idiocy",²¹⁹ the prince forgives *his brother* – Bakhtin writes – not occupying until the very end of consciousness "any *position* in life that might define his behaviour and limit his *pure humanness*".²²⁰

Those words of Jesus' seem so manifest to us now, that the one who loses his life, will save it and the one who saves it, will lose it. I admit to being afraid, I am not insensible before the threat, and yet, I am not afraid, because I am not insensible before eternity either. And now, when I am provided with the opportunity to choose between the two possibilities, I choose the one which means eternity. As I said, life is a chance for humanity, its one and only chance, and thus, if I am not going to be stupid, I must be brave.²²¹

Finding himself inside the gloomy belly of a beast, Jonah was forced to bring a light from within his own darkest room. When there is nothing left to cling onto, it is inside oneself that one must search for a friend, as Milan Mladenović wrote in his song²²²: "Well" – he must have said with a smirk – "America is inside you". Nevertheless, how is that possible? Where does this spark, which allows Jonah to light a fire and warm himself up while sequestered in a monster's cave, come from?

In order to be able to properly shield the credibility of the incarnation of *filius hominis* against some dubious heretics, Tertullian thought of the idea of *ineptum*, professing that *credibile est, quia ineptum est*, or in other, more famous, medieval terms: *credo quia absurdum est*.²²³ Following Paul the Apostle's teaching – about what seems to be *ineptum*, meaning *inept*,

²¹⁸ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, cit., p. 173.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 172–173. (Italics are the author's).

²²¹ „Kako nam jasno sada zvuče one Isusove riječi da će spasiti život onaj koji ga izgubi i izgubiti ga onaj koji ga spasi. A priznajem da me je strah, nisam beščutan pred prijetnjom, pa opet, i nije me strah jer nisam beščutan pred vječnošću. I sada kad mi se pruža mogućnost da biram između dvije mogućnosti, ja biram onu koja znači vječnost. Rekoh, život je šansa čovještvu, jedina i neponovljiva, i stoga, ako neću biti glup, moram biti hrabar“, Don B. Sbutega, *Kurosavin nemir svijeta*, Beograd, Plavi jahač, 2004, p. 69 (trans. by V. Baltić).

²²² America, as a metaphor for a better world. Ekatarina Velika (EKV), song: *Amerika*, lyrics: Milan Mladenović, from the album: *Samo par godina za nas* (1989).

²²³ Tertulliano, *La carne di Cristo. De carne Christi*, A. Carpin (ed.), Bologna, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2015.

*inadequate, unsuitable*²²⁴ to human eyes, which yet looks meaningful from God's perspective – Tertullian stood firm against *disbelievers*, professing that Christ was crucified, died and came back to life, ever so certainly, precisely because it is impossible.²²⁵ He was ready to be *feliciter stultum*, not to know, not to recognise, or even ready to testify exactly the opposite of what he held dear to be the truth, if a belief around some kind of superior knowledge,²²⁶ precluded to his mind, but still present in all there is around him, were to be accessible to his heart.

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that, writhing in dark passions, produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?²²⁷

It is an uncommon act, borne only by the great ones, Kierkegaard writes in his *Fear and Trembling*, to “expect the impossible”,²²⁸ “to struggle with God”.²²⁹ On his own, at the bottom of the ocean, the lone individual,²³⁰ completely resigned to his fate, still finds a reason to pray, believing that somehow he will be saved. He embraces the impossibility, allows it to be his guest, confiding paradoxically that something will happen, that God will turn the knife into a flower, that he will turn Isaac into a gift.²³¹ To believe unconditionally that everything should be as it is, that there is no shortcoming in the tissue of the reality; to trust God, means to believe in God. To trust blindly means seeing, maybe for the first time. Is there anybody who can do that? The one who can stand alone before God, *unwounded*,²³² as Abraham did, Kierkegaard himself could not find. Is there anybody who can believe, *foolishly*?

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 133–135.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²²⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 1843, En. trans., *Fear and Trembling*, in *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, vol. 6, Princeton-New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 15.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

²³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 211.

²³² S. Quinzio, *Kierkegaard, il cristiano moderno*, introduction to S. Kierkegaard, *Opere*, vol. 1, Borgaro Torinese, Edizioni Piemme, 1995, p. XVI.

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.²³³

It is the meek one, *mites* (Lat.), *praeis* (Gr.),²³⁴ the one who shall inherit the Earth.²³⁵ It is the one who accepts the deeds of evil, and even though innocent, responds to them:²³⁶ “For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.”²³⁷ He does not oppose evil with the strength of his bare hands, but says “yes” to everything, letting his soul access good, which is – as Givone asserts – stronger than evil;²³⁸ which, first and foremost, is. Receiving evil within his very heart of liveliness, saying “yes, I am”, infinitely stronger than “I am not”, dissolves the threat, making it retreat.

The meek one, *makários* (Gr.), is blessed. He is virtuous, acting by the principle of *mesotes*, by a proper measure, collocated in-between extremes. Unlike Plato, who professes a strict duality between ideas and reality, who projects the supreme morality of a man onto his longing for images of transcendental utopia. Aristotle, in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, shows maximum concern for the incarnated spirit, for the ordinary human, distinguished by courage before the call of objective immanence, for purposeful reasons, in due time, to the appropriate extent; or a noble soul who shares its radiance, consenting, nonetheless, to the fact that contours exist besides its agency. Rooted in the Ancient Greek cultural codex, Aristotle’s ethical model has to be approved by direct experience of living, whereas good is not relevant *per se*, but only as a *human good*,²³⁹ as an “activity of the soul exhibiting virtue”.²⁴⁰ In this

²³³ Paul the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 3:18–20.

²³⁴ S. Givone, *Abitare la terra*, in S. Givone, R. Bodei, *Beati i miti, perché avranno in eredità la terra*, cit., p.9.

²³⁵ Matthew 5:5

²³⁶ S. Givone, *Abitare la terra*, cit., p. 20.

²³⁷ Paul the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 4:4.

²³⁸ “‘C’era voluta la distruzione dell’umanità...’ perché il vecchio incontrasse l’amore, che non è se non la verità dell’umano. E poi che l’abiezione, lo sprofondamento, il ritorno all’orrore dell’origine, che è tanto più spaventoso quanto più ripetitivo e inevitabile, sono un cupo e disperato faccia a faccia con il niente, ma questo niente è niente rispetto a ciò di cui esso è rivelazione, che rappresenta un *prius* ontologico, un assoluto trascendere, un fondamento, perché il male è tremendo, ma il bene è più forte del male – nella ‘notte primordiale’ brilla una luce che dice più cose sull’uomo di quante ne dica la sua disumanizzazione”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit. pp. 12–13. (Italics are the author’s).

²³⁹ M. N. Đurić, *Aristotel kao etičar*, in Aristotel, *Nikomahova etika*, Sremski Karlovci-Noví Sad, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 2013.

²⁴⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, cit., 1098a 15.

sense, a moral man, according to Aristotle, is “a law unto himself”.²⁴¹ He “is a moving principle or begetter of his actions”,²⁴² and thus is free to access goodness, to earn it, through not only an innate tendency but knowledge and assiduous practice.²⁴³

Aristotelian meekness differs from the Christian ideal in that it excludes the presence of God,²⁴⁴ who watches over the virtuous, yet it alludes to the Kierkegaardian image of the incommunicable solitude of the *knight of faith*.²⁴⁵ For Aristotle,²⁴⁶ the general exists only by virtue of the particular, whereas the soul exists only if incarnated. It is the material world of a man that matters for Aristotle – the world of experiences, diversity, caducity; it is the world of what – disclosed in its vastness, as in the case of Kierkegaard’s hero – confronts a trembling human, an ordinary man, an orphan. In this sense, what is of importance for Aristotle, in his research of supreme good, is to find the method to master this life, to live properly on this Earth and take care of the now. Thus human, responsible for his own happiness, does not aspire to be virtuous for sake of an alternative reward, but by being faithful to what is in front of his eyes, cherishes the engagement in the intelligent and self-soothing practice of a good measure, which allows the successful navigation of immanence.

Was that not Ubu Roi with a *gidouille* on his big belly? For ’pataphysicists and their Pa Jarry, this symbol was representative of a thought which looks for a rule of the particular, making fun of general scientific principles. For Jacob Bernoulli, the prominent seventeenth-century mathematician, a spiral which represents a principle of self-similitude, defined in the maxim *Eadem mutata resurgo*,²⁴⁷ was able to explain, through its own extraordinary nature, the *principium formans* of the entire galaxy. It is a logarithmic spiral, *spira mirabilis*, given the appellative “miraculous” due to its attainment of sameness in each and every angle constricted between the tangent and the radius (also called the *equiangular spiral*), and due

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1128a 30.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 1113b 15.

²⁴³ M. N. Đurić, *Aristotel kao etičar*, in Aristotle, *Nikomahova etika*, cit.

²⁴⁴ R. Bodei, *Mitezza e coraggio*, in S. Givone, R. Bodei, *Beati i miti, perché avranno in eredità la terra*, cit., p. 55.

²⁴⁵ Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, cit.

²⁴⁶ M. N. Đurić, *Aristotel kao etičar*, in Aristotle, *Nikomahova etika*, cit.

²⁴⁷ From Lat.: “Although changed, I arise the same”.

to the geometric progression characterising its constant growth. Bernoulli's spiral is fascinating because of its ability to change, to grow, remaining nonetheless, as the abovementioned dictum shows, invariably identical to itself, maintaining in every state of progression its original, undifferentiated form. It gives birth to itself, by staying faithful to its own nature, even amid change. Or, in other words, it is precisely on account of change that the spiral affirms its remarkable self-originating power.²⁴⁸

To create new values – not even the lion is capable of that: but to create freedom for itself for new creation – that is within the power of the lion.²⁴⁹

For Aristotle, entelechy, *entelecheia*, refers to the soul as an active principle, not only breathing life into matter, but giving form to it.²⁵⁰ On the other hand, this material substance which is the body, gives a chance to the soul to act, to realise itself following a certain *telos*, directed, desirably, towards the good. The soul, thus empowered by entelechy, supports life, which is in itself improvable, but utterly self-sufficient, rich and purposeful. Creative energy rewards living with life, acting virtuously with virtue, acting purposefully with purpose. It encourages the realisation of an imminent potential, which then, once acquired, grows infinitely, asking more and more of the same. *Encore!* – for Jacques Lacan – is the word of love.²⁵¹

Antigone could not forgive: neither her father, nor her brother, nor Oedipus. She was, however, *born to love*.²⁵²

Was I ever lovable? (*Pause.*) Do not misunderstand my question, I am not asking you if you loved me, we know all about that, I am asking you if you found me lovable – at one stage.²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Before dying, Jacob Bernoulli desired to have the logarithmic spiral carved onto his gravestone, but what the artisans, in their ignorance, managed to produce was a spiral with completely different properties, called the Archimedean spiral. It is equally unclear if Alfred Jarry's spiral, characterising his character Ubu Rex, was logarithmic or not, since it was more than often represented (by Jarry himself) and re-represented with utter neglect of detail.

²⁴⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, 1885, Eng. Trans. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 17.

²⁵⁰ M. N. Đurić, *Aristotel kao etičar*, in Aristotle, *Nikomahova etika*, cit., p. VIII.

²⁵¹ Cf. M. Recalcati, *Mantieni il bacio: lezioni brevi sull'amore*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2019.

²⁵² Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit., 520–525.

²⁵³ S. Beckett, *Happy Days*, cit., p. 31.

Winnie from Beckett's *Happy Days* was about to sing her song, buried up to her neck, with a gun resting near her head – however, not near enough to shoot. A woman once passed by Winnie, a woman standing there, “no longer young, not yet old”.²⁵⁴ She was wondering about the state of Winnie's body underneath. “Let go of me for Christ's sake and drop!”²⁵⁵ – Winnie exclaimed – “Drop dead!”²⁵⁶ “But, no. No. No.”²⁵⁷ the time had not come for Winnie's song.

Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of The Absurd*²⁵⁸ views Samuel Beckett's works as a constant search for meaning in an unredeemable realm of uncertainty. It is by means of the disintegration of language, according to Esslin, that Beckett intends to show the “absolute absence of the Absolute”.²⁵⁹ Keir Douglas Elam does not share Esslin's conviction that Beckett's theatre is to be considered absurd, if this appellative means, as for Ionesco, a complete establishment of nonsense, leaving behind any possibility of the metaphysical.²⁶⁰ Beckett – for Elam – never excludes god from his field of vision. God may be hidden, unforgivably late or even explicitly negated, but is still a constitutive part, the main engine of Beckett's dramatic machinery. Hamm, from *Fin de partie*, professes an unsatisfactory: “The bastard! He doesn't exist!”²⁶¹ against an unresponsive god – to convincingly underline Elam's remark.

Even though it might seem that Epicurus' *Quadrilemma* is an extraordinary compact chain of thoughts, difficult to dismantle,²⁶² it was Leibnitz – Givone claims – the first modern philosopher of freedom,²⁶³ who understood the absurdity of god and conferred upon us a way out of his complete abandonment. Why does the nihilist god let evil be if he does not want it and could make it disappear? For Leibnitz, god is just acting as god – Givone explains. He

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books Edition, 1961.

²⁵⁹ S. Beckett, *Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce*, available online at: http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/classic/Anglo_I/Beckett_S/Exagmination.htm (Accessed: 2 February 2021).

²⁶⁰ D. Keir Elam, *Il teatro di Samuel Beckett*, in L. M. Crisafulli and D. Keir Elam (eds.), *Manuale di Letteratura e cultura inglese*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2009, p. 393.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, S. Beckett, *Fin de partie*, 1958, Eng. trans. *Endgame*, London, Faber&Faber, 1958, p. 38.

²⁶² Cf. S. Givone, *Quant'è vero Dio*, cit.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

chooses the best of the possible worlds. On one hand, there is a world in which he prohibits all evil. In which children can no longer die in senseless accidents. Nonetheless, without evil, there cannot be freedom either. There is nothing. On the other hand, there is a world in which evil is still present, but there is also freedom, and so good is tragically unknowable to humans if it is not in opposition to evil. God, thus, chooses the second world, choosing being rather than nothing. That was for Leibnitz a good choice.

Living is keeping the absurd alive.²⁶⁴

Encountering this lone lady, abandoned to the mercy of the desert sun, left to confide for survival only in her own words, some futile objects and the inattentive ear of her self-entangled husband, might be an absurd scene which reflects, as Esslin wrote, the absurdity of Winnie's own existence. If she were able to take the gun at least and actually bring it near to her face, the absurd – as Camus observed – might be resolved. Yet, her song is yet to be sung. She utters: "Oh yes, great mercies, great mercies."²⁶⁵

2.2. No grave can hold my body down

"Look here—before you go, just give me your opinion: how do you think I ought to die, now? I mean—the best, the most virtuous way? Tell me!"²⁶⁶

There was a certain Stepan Glebov – Ippolit recalls – who died after fifteen hours impaled at the stake. That is a noble death, Ippolit and Myshkin agree. Ajax died in a similarly noble manner; an extraordinary warrior, the first and the most deserving to be awarded Achilles' armour "for highest bravery".²⁶⁷ In Sophocles, as in Homer, he is physically strong and large,

²⁶⁴ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cit., p. 53.

²⁶⁵ S. Beckett, *Happy Days*, cit., p. 52.

²⁶⁶ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 510.

²⁶⁷ Sophocles, *Aias*, cit., 430–440.

courageous, proud and devoted.²⁶⁸ Righteous in his intents, Ajax is ready to kill even his allies if they hurt the (perceived) order of justice. Now his immobile body lies on the stage for the entire third part of Sophocles' play.²⁶⁹

Before going to war, Ajax's father advised him to take care – the Messenger reports – recommending: “‘My son,’ he said, ‘you should aspire to triumph in the field, but always with a god’s support.’”²⁷⁰ It was unwelcome advice, it could be said, which fell on deaf ears. It was the beginning of the end, a bad omen, since Ajax's reply was “arrogant and ill-considered”²⁷¹ – the Messenger comments – showing the thoughtless *hubris* of one who disowns his humanity, of one who “is begotten as a human, and yet fails to keep his thoughts within the human scale”:²⁷²

‘Even some nonentity might triumph, father,
with the gods to help. I can, I trust,
acquire the glory-crown without their aid.’²⁷³

Athena found this claim to be inadmissible, promising to punish Ajax properly. *Quem deus vult perdere, prius dementat.*²⁷⁴ She thus obscured the hero's vision so that he could no longer discern who was his enemy and who was not. Instead of killing the unjust, Ajax killed the innocent. The goddess, nonetheless, did not intend to take away the hero's good judgment forever. She restored it, so that he could find out the terrible consequences of his deeds, so that he could be sacrificed to her. Of what use to a god might a witless hero be otherwise? One who has completely lost his mind, cannot think of a god, as one should think of a god; cannot respect Athena, the way it would satisfy her to be respected. Might it take the sacrifice of one who is valuable to re-establish the divine order, which had been disturbed by human

²⁶⁸ O. Taplin, *Introduction to Aias*, in *Sophocles: Four Tragedies*, cit., p. 78.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁷⁰ Sophocles, *Aias*, cit., 760–770.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *Whom God wishes to ruin, he first deprives of reason.*

arrogance? Might it be that Ajax needed Athena in order to win in battle, as his father advised, but might it also be that she actually needed him even more?

It is interesting to reflect upon his father's speech, finding in it a little incongruence, which could support the fact that Ajax has the ultimate right to ignore his suggestion. It is almost as if it were a natural consequence to intuit that the gods might be accessories, rather than inevitabilities, in the project of achieving a victory, precisely at that moment when it is mentioned that they must be taken into consideration. In this sense, his father's words must have seemed like unpleasant noise to Ajax, rather than benevolent and even crucial advice to carry with him in every circumstance. What should he do, thus, with this unnecessary burden? He would still have to use his own strength to swing a sword and kill an enemy, while paying homage to the one watching calmly from above. On the other hand, his father also has all the due credibility to say what he said, considering the careful practicality of his observation, as in Niels Bohr's explanation of why he, as an affirmed scientist, had a horseshoe on his door: "I don't believe in it either; I have it there because I was told that it works even if one doesn't believe in it!"²⁷⁵ Thus Ajax's "presence" which "builds up to excess"²⁷⁶ might be understood not so much as the final cause of his tragic ruin, but rather as a trait of uncontainable humanity, painfully misrepresented even by him, the greatest among men. In other words, his father might have also uttered: "My son, you should aspire to triumph in the field, but the best thing for you might be not to aspire at all," echoing Silenus' prophecy, as reported in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Once defeated, the hero, in his famous so-called *deception speech*, seemingly satisfies Athena's wishes for him to recognise his error and kneel before her in an act of surrender, or his concubine Tecmessa's cry to stay, to not forget their little son, while at the same time commending himself into Charon's hands, voluntarily, inevitably.

I'm going on the path I have to tread.
Do as I say, and soon perhaps you'll find
that, even if I am for now unfortunate,

²⁷⁵ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, cit., p. 353.

²⁷⁶ Sophocles, *Aias*, cit., 750–760.

I shall have been kept safe.²⁷⁷

What if the thing that Ajax claimed in his speech points to the actual recognition of the hero's truth, rather than any kind of deception? He acts without a second thought, on his own convictions. Yet, when his rage assuages, even his first impressions affirm that what he had done in the name of justice was not just at all. One voice in his head would suggest to him the following: "If there is Athena, right amid my hurting heart" – he might have thought – "she must be guilty of my wrongdoings". The other voice, nonetheless, would know and remind, ever so tragically, that Ajax was alone covered in innocent blood. Who should be listened to? Does it not seem much better to die virtuously with Athena's envious fury lurking behind one's back, than to live as Ajax, maybe the Ajax of flesh and bone, whatever strength may lie behind them? Now it seems so terrifying to be Ajax when his noble sword, Hector's gift, no longer brings glory, but hurts, so cowardly, the very nucleus of the sacred, the defenceless. How can a noble man, who fell so low, continue to live? Should Athena herself not kill him right away? "If a man like that can choose to live, if there is a risk of him continuing to live, what is the meaning of my struggle, of my courage and my glory, of my father's words and my denial of them?" – Ajax might have thought. "If a man like that can choose life, what is the meaning of my life? I would prefer not to see the world like that. I am ready to offer up my body to rot on the stage, so that others become convinced, as I am, that a man like that could not live. I would kill myself to let Athena live." – Ajax might have said.

You know it well; your cowardly devil in you, who likes to fold his hands and lay his hands in his lap and wants to have it easier – this cowardly devil exhorts you: "There *is* a God!"²⁷⁸

It was Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*²⁷⁹ which Dostoevsky saw in 1867 in Basel on his travels across Europe. The painting remained etched onto the writer's eyes on his way back to Russia, where it found its new home at

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 690.

²⁷⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, cit. p. 144.

²⁷⁹ H. Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, (1521, conserved in Kunstmuseum, Basel), cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 2, p. 168.

Rogozhin's.²⁸⁰ Ippolit, this extraordinarily reflective young man, saw the body of the dead Christ in Holbein's coffin, describing, surprised, the painful grimace of a man just taken down from the cross, of a martyr who had once brought the dead into life by his loving light, now submerged in a deadly abyss, defenceless. This life-size painting of a man "really dead"²⁸¹ assures its observer – Julia Kristeva writes – that death is "definitive",²⁸² that "this corpse will never rise again".²⁸³ The un-closed eyes of the deceased, his disorderly hair and the stiff blue hand which almost reaches the spectator not only allude to a recent death in pain, as Ippolit observes, but position this unsettling scene at the extreme limit of the representable, as Kristeva points out. Liberated from internal gazes of tearful supporters, from the "erotic profusion"²⁸⁴ of Italian embellishments and even from beauty itself, threatened by the proximity of "nonmeaning",²⁸⁵ Holbein's Dead Christ is extremely humanised²⁸⁶ – Kristeva writes – and, as such, keeps vigil mercifully at "our death".²⁸⁷

Nature appears to one, looking at this picture, as some huge, implacable, dumb monster; or still better—a stranger simile—some enormous mechanical engine of modern days which has seized and crushed and swallowed up a great and invaluable Being, a Being worth nature and all her laws, worth the whole earth, which was perhaps created merely for the sake of the advent of that Being.²⁸⁸

It is certainly "a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God",²⁸⁹ but it might be even worse to testify to his death. Might it be better for a man to endure the gods' caprice, their jealousy and one-sidedness, sacrificing himself, as Ajax did to show respect to Athena's

²⁸⁰ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit.

²⁸¹ "realmente morto", J. Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie*, 1987, It. trans. *Sole nero. Depressione e melanconia*, Roma, Donzelli, 2013, p. 93 (trans. by V. Baltić).

²⁸² "una morte definitiva", *ibid.*

²⁸³ "questo cadavere non si rialzerà mai più", *ibid.*

²⁸⁴ "profusione erotica (come si ha nell'arte italiana, persino nella rappresentazione della passione di Cristo e anzi soprattutto in essa)", *ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁸⁵ "alla soglia del non senso", *ibid.*, pp. 112–113.

²⁸⁶ "Questo gesto di umanizzazione, non privo di *ironia* nei confronti della trascendenza, suggerisce un'immensa misericordia per la *nostra* morte", *ibid.*, p. 99. (Italics are the author's).

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 396.

²⁸⁹ *Hebrews*, 10:31.

will, than to really, irreversibly have her lying in a coffin covered by a heavy stone the weight of the Earth?

2.3. *The desert rose, or On (not) belonging to god*

It is not only the greatest of warriors who is subjected to the vengeance of the gods, but also the one who is “clear of guilt”.²⁹⁰ Even Euripides’ Hippolytus suffered this “stupidly eternal”²⁹¹ force of nature. As an authentic Lacanian obsessive, Hippolytus did not like women, since they may have planted chaos in his orderly universe. For him, a woman was a curse,²⁹² therefore she finally brought him death. Beautiful Aphrodite, jealous of Hippolytus’ absolute devotion to Artemis, irritated by his vow of chastity, used love as a weapon against the “no man more pure or temperate”.²⁹³

As Phaedra could not resist the vortex of desire which threatened to consume her delicate heart, so Aphrodite could not withstand Hippolytus’ thoughtless disregard of her beauty, charm and the sweet delight she brought to humans. How could anybody say ‘no’ to the excitement of one’s first kisses, to the unknown land of another’s desire, to the vivifying pleasure of love? Why would any mortal, aware of being such, refuse those precious moments of light-heartedness, those few sips from the waters of divine joy, to exchange them for devotion to an ideal?

You are scared of death, aren’t you?

-Scared is not the word.

I’m scared of life.

²⁹⁰ Euripides, *Hippolytus*, cit., 1380–1385.

²⁹¹ S. Givone refers here to the vision of Dostoevsky’s Ippolit on life and its forces. Cf. S. Givone, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, cit., p. 97 (trans. by V. Baltić).

²⁹² Euripides, *Hippolytus*, cit., 625–630.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1095–1100.

-A girl your age, scared of life? Absurd!²⁹⁴

The “enigma”²⁹⁵ from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Al di là delle nuvole* sparked interest in a young, graceful man who wasted no time or effort in trying to meet and get close to her. He had run into her while minding his own business but, enchanted by her presence, decided to follow her wherever she was headed to. They started to talk. The brief conversation embraced not only naïve everyday questions, revealing, nonetheless, a genuine interest in the other person, but also those concerning the most intimate outlooks on life and death. The man accompanied the girl, who was hurrying somewhere, trying to avoid, guided by impressive focus and dedication to her goal, any significant distraction which would stop her on her way. At one point, he lost her behind the doors of a beautiful Romanesque church, where mass was taking place. Despite being scarcely interested in matters of god, the man waited until the end of the ceremony to meet the lady again. He noticed that she was “showing all the signs of a girl in love”,²⁹⁶ but he still followed her back home, in an attempt to learn something more about this beautiful stranger. The enigma did not like being treated too politely, lest she be reminded of her femininity. The next day she would enter the convent.

[...] may the eye
inescapable of the mighty gods
not look on me with desire.
That is a fight that none can fight, a fruitful
source of fruitlessness. I would not
know what I could do; I cannot see
how I would escape the plans of Zeus.²⁹⁷

While left at the mercy of a bloodthirsty eagle, the one whose fate was not death²⁹⁸ meets Io, an unfortunate wanderer. As she appears before the Titan, so do images of her turbulent past,

²⁹⁴ *Al di là delle nuvole*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, cit., (transcribed by V. Baltić, translation available online at: <https://vimeo.com/12195041> (Accessed: 15 February 2021)).

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, in in D. Grene, R. Lattimore (eds.), *Greek tragedies I*, cit., 900–905.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 930.

as well as the *evangélion*,²⁹⁹ hidden under her wrinkles of pain. The beauty of Io, the daughter of Inachus, as Prometheus found out through their encounter, awoke desire in Zeus' heart. *Virtutem forma decorat*.³⁰⁰ To the jealous Hera, this interest seemed to threaten her own position and the solution, thus, was to exile the girl away from her home. Condemned to wander without respite, “with horns, pricked on by the sharp-biting gadfly, leaping in frenzied jumps”,³⁰¹ the poor woman could not find any refuge from the unbearable suffering imposed upon her. It might be said that she had refused the god among gods and thus deserved such a destiny, or it might be that she had not, but deserved it all the same.

[...]

I know no thing more needy
Under the sun, than you gods are!
You nourish scantily
On sacrifices
And breath of prayers,
Your majesty;
And you would famish
Were beggars and their children
Aught but trusting fools.

[...]

Didst thou imagine
That I should detest existence,
Flee into the desert,
Because not all
Dreams i' th' bud grew flowers?

Here sit I, fashioning men
After mine own image,
Constituted as I am,

²⁹⁹ From Gr. εὐαγγέλιον: “good news”.

³⁰⁰ From Lat.: “Beauty adorns virtue”.

³⁰¹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, cit., 670–675.

To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy and to be delighted,
And *thee* not to warship,
Like me!³⁰²

It seems that the most beautiful flower should be put in a desert, on the edge of a windy cliff, on a road where many troops leave their footprints, at places where no flower can bloom, if there is a chance for it to belong to someone else but god. “No, she does not have to be the most beautiful rose” – the Little Prince³⁰³ observed, once he had arrived on Earth and met other roses similar in every way to his. In fact, she might look the same as any other rose out there in the field, he concluded.

But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars (except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose.³⁰⁴

Could a little rose become a threat to the Almighty, if someone else were to love it in all its uniqueness – just as the Little Prince loved it, reigning sovereignly on his little planet above divine intervention?

Prometheus could foretell that Io would eventually – after a long travel through dangerous and impervious landscapes – reach the city of Canopus, at the delta of the River Nile, to testify to her mind being restored and her body impregnated by the same seed from which a hero would grow. It is Io’s descendant, born to a virgin mother Alcmene and a divine father Zeus – Heracles – who would kill the eagle and liberate the liberator.

³⁰² J. W. von Goethe, *Prometheus (Dramatic Fragment, 1773)*, in Alexander Tille (ed.), *Goethe's Satyros and Prometheus*, Glasgow, Goethe Society, 1898, pp. 64-66.

³⁰³ A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, 1943, Eng. trans. *The Little Prince*, cit.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

2.4. Stasis, or On places worse than death

Don't worry, Fomà, you will touch the bottom.³⁰⁵

It was before 1991, the year in which the war started in the former Yugoslavia, when *Top lista nadrealista*, a variety show broadcast on TV Sarajevo, asked some questions which, as the title of their programme says,³⁰⁶ might have seemed surreal at the time, but yet, during the years to come, would prove to be tragically more than relevant. One of the questions posed by “the Surrealists” was: “Is there life at the bottom?”³⁰⁷ Might this be the same bottom that Agamben wrote about in his book *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, when referring to the Gorgon’s gaze, “whose vision transforms the human being into a non-human”?³⁰⁸ There is at “the *bottom* of human being” – Agamben states³⁰⁹ – “nothing other than an impossibility of seeing.”

For Nietzsche, it is important to be very cautious when looking into the unknowable realms of existence. One’s eyes might be injured from a single gaze at Erebus, unboxed rather casually by Rita in David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*.³¹⁰ The mind might dissolve into lunacy if it were to know the idea of the infinite darkness.

When we turn away blinded after a strenuous attempt to look directly at the sun, we have dark, coloured patches before our eyes, as if their purpose were to heal them; conversely, those appearances of the Sophoclean hero in images of light, in other words, the Apolline quality of the mask, are the necessary result of gazing into the inner, terrible depths of nature – radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night.³¹¹

³⁰⁵ “Non ti preoccupare, Fomà, toccherai il fondo”, L. Šestòv, *Достоевский и Ницше (философия трагедии)*, 1934, It. trans. E. Lo Gatto (ed.), *La filosofia della tragedia (Dostoevskij e Nietzsche)*, Napoli, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1950, p. 169 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³⁰⁶ *Nadrealisti* meaning: the surrealists (Srb.-Cro.).

³⁰⁷ “Da li postoji život na dnu?”, TV sketch by Top lista nadrealista, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrPh6KSaGRg&ab_channel=thebouncinglemon (Accessed: 3 March 2021).

³⁰⁸ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, cit., p. 53.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³¹⁰ *Mulholland Drive*, directed by David Lynch, Universal Pictures, 2001. In the cited scene the character, Rita, opens a box which channels a series of mysteries, to find out, at least initially, that it is filled with vertiginous darkness, maybe nothingness...

³¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, cit., p. 46.

Is it, thus, up to Perseus to save us? His victorious gesture is exhibited in Florence's Piazza della Signoria, marking Medusa's final defeat. This beautiful young man, after rising from battle with the most dangerous beast the Earth has known, with a sword in one hand and the severed head in the other, positions himself as the guardian of that dangerous threshold between life and horror, which Nietzsche wrote about. We need Perseus – Nietzsche would state – because without him, we have no chance against Medusa. Our eyes must be protected by the image of the hero. The mirror which stares back at us has to be transfiguring. It has to, if not lie, then certainly deviate from the unknowable. For Nietzsche, the truth must be horrific, so it is better to stay shielded from it, it is better to remain in the dark about it... The *radiant patches* on Perseus' sword must be enough to distract us from the immensity of the abyss. It is the starry sky, since "Gaia (...) gave birth to the Starry Sky, Ouranos, so that it could embrace her in its entirety and be a solid and eternal place of the blissful gods"³¹² rather than a womb of nothingness; if it were not for the fact that even under the fiery stars, there are fathers who eat their sons. There are places worse than the void.

The extraordinary artwork³¹³ by Benvenuto Cellini reveals, thus, a subtle similarity between the hero and the beast. Looking like Perseus' younger sister, with some shared facial features, Medusa does not seem actually dead, but only asleep, while together they seem rather peacefully agreed on something we do not know about. Nietzsche might confirm this supposition, since he is the one who suggests that we do not ask too much, which means letting Perseus entertain some curious tourists and simultaneously annoy some grumpy Florentines, in his – forever unchanging – grandiose act. In other words, we should never ask why he looks down if he is really liberated from any danger the Gorgon might bring.

When the war started in the former Yugoslavia,³¹⁴ nobody really believed that it was possible. How could a war ever start in multicultural Bosnia, in Yugoslavia which had breathed as one

³¹² "Gea invece prima di altra cosa partorì come suo simile il Cielo stellato, Urano, affinché questi l'abbracciasse interamente e fosse sede solida ed eternal degli dei beati", K. Kerényi, *Gli dèi e gli eroi della Grecia*, cit., p. 30 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³¹³ B. Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, cit. Cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 3., p. 169.

³¹⁴ There is no intention whatsoever to enter into the nature of Yugoslav wars here. In this sense, when the Yugoslav conflicts of the 'nineties are brought alongside theoretical references to civil war, the intention is to elaborate on the position of internal conflict as such – since Yugoslav's tragic example, when fully extracted

for many decades? Something like a war seems completely impossible until it happens. There is no preparing for it; it is beyond any reason, an “utter stupidity”.³¹⁵

Why would God want it?³¹⁶ He does not, he allows, we want it.³¹⁷

While looking for his abducted sister Europa, Cadmus was invited by the gods to found the city of Thebes – Apollodorus reports in his *Bibliotheca* – in the very place where his cow would stop and take a break. The first obstacle he and his men encountered in conquering this new territory was a serpent (*drakōn*) defending the water source. It killed many of Cadmus’ men, until the king himself decided to confront it, defeat the beast and sow – as Athena advised – the serpent’s teeth over the soil of the new land. From those seeds, the Spartans (the “sowed”; from *speirō*, “to sow”) were born. They were armed with hostility against each other. Apollodorus adds that Cadmus was the one who threw rocks at these savage, violent warriors, who, in response, confused around the origin of the attack, started to kill their own brethren.³¹⁸

In the foundation of the dock, I have to build someone alive. Without that, no building is good.³¹⁹

In his book *Stasis. La guerra civile come paradigma politico*, Agamben analyses the mechanism of civil war, “a zone of indifference between the unpolitical space of the family and the political space of the city”,³²⁰ citing Jerome’s image of Leviathan, the “mighty dragon” or the serpent driven away from Paradise – as referred in a homily on the Psalms.

from its own political implications, could still show the societal and cultural implosion of what once was called a united state – abstaining here from assuming any political stance around the character of the conflict, which is by its nature complex and, thus, in need of further theoretic contextualisation.

³¹⁵ “Nessuno può credere veramente alla guerra. È una cosa troppo stupida. Così si pensa che non possa scoppiare o, una volta scoppiata, non possa durare: non sia insomma altro che un incubo”, S. Givone, *Metafisica della peste*, cit., p. 21.

³¹⁶ The author is referring to evil here.

³¹⁷ „Zašto Bog to hoće? Neće on to, on dopušta da mi hoćemo“, Don B. Sbutega, *Kurosavin nemir svijeta*, cit., p. 87 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³¹⁸ The passage from Apollodorus is reported in C. Gentili, *Il tragico e il politico. Seminario “una quantità di denti di drago”*. *L’anomalia tebana e il significato politico di un modello tragico*, cit., pp. 55–79, containing the etimological references.

³¹⁹ “U temelje pristaništa, moram nekoga živoga uzidati. Bez toga, nijedna građevina nije dobra”, *Beštije*, directed by Živko Nikolić, Avala Film, 1977, (transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

³²⁰ G. Agamben, *Stasis. Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, cit., p. 16.

On this occasion, Agamben refers to Hobbes' vision on the constitution, or better – on the embodiment of the power in the state, including the subversive agency of a civil war. In Hobbes' *Leviathan*, a *disunited multitude* of people chooses the sovereign, displacing its own *body politic* inside, for example, the king's body (as clearly indicated in Abraham Bosse's illustration on the cover of Hobbes' book), thus, conferring on him the task of representing the unrepresentable *them*, and becoming, consequently, what the philosopher calls a *dissolved multitude*. Once the people transfer their political agency to the sovereign (in a paradoxical overlap of the moments in which the multitude – that is to say, the only constancy – simultaneously becomes and ceases to be *the people*), they cannot return to their initial *disunited* position, consenting to the election of another sovereign, without going through the threshold, individuated by Hobbes in a civil war. In this sense, *stasis* is a phenomenon intrinsic to the functioning of the state. Yet, it is, at the same time, an external phenomenon – meaning that it is not so much *oikos polemos*, a “war within the family”³²¹ – Agamben states – but it is rather a position from which one is not able to discern between friend and foe; he does not recognise his own brother as such, in that way gaining for himself the permission to kill “the most intimate”, as if “the most foreign”.³²² Finding oneself to be “out of the self”, in order to be able to return to participate in the polis, means politicising the *oikos*, in order to include it in the city.

The sole form in which life as such can be politicised is its unconditioned exposure to death – that is, bare life.³²³

If civil war is congenial to the mechanism of functioning of the state, it might be important to highlight, that – even though displaced on the conceptual no man's land, as Agamben writes – it, nonetheless, originates from a wound growing inside the societal being. As in the case of Carmelo Bene's wonderful *Macbeth*,³²⁴ who removes from his head a bloody bandage, the civil war paradigm wants its supporters to think that – as in Bene's scenic reasoning – the progressive unwrapping of the conflict will show that it is only the cloth that

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³²² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³²⁴ *Macbeth – horror suite* directed by Carmelo Bene, 1996.

is stained with blood, while the forehead will remain untouched and perfectly sane. The Hobbesian re-establishing of the *disunited multitude*, thus, might seem a valid reason to spill some blood, especially if it is just the bandage that bleeds. Yet – however brave it might seem to defend what is yours, differentiating, in this case internally, between those that are more or less “mine” – there is no bandage thick enough to soak up the blood of the victims in a civil war.

Oliver Frlić in his theatrical work looks into the destiny of the abducted sister Yugoslavia. She was the one, we might say, in search of whom Europa was wisely advised to found a city. Once she reached the fertile soil, she needed a water source to be able to honour the gods for their guidance and to live in prosperity and peace. There was a serpent, as we know, at the water source of that ancient land. It killed many of Europa’s people, until she herself, decided to confront it...

In his performance *Aleksandra Zec*,³²⁵ Frlić recounts the death of a twelve-year-old girl killed in 1991 because her father was of the *wrong* nationality. Members of the state police, thus, killed her father, abducted the girl and her mother and went on to kill them as well later that night, throwing the bodies in a pit. The killers were not only acquitted for the crime that they themselves confessed to committing, but some of them later on received the highest state decorations for their heroic enterprises.

Frlić’s performance was presented twenty-three years after the murders, triggering strong societal polemics. Public dissent ensured the environment in which the work would not get the possibility of being staged in the city, some of whose citizens were members of the Zec family.³²⁶ “The identity of these states is built on the denial of their own crimes”³²⁷ – Frlić claims, referring to the post-war Yugoslav republics. Among the protesters against Frlić’s

³²⁵ *Aleksandra Zec*, directed by Oliver Frlić, 2014.

³²⁶ It was in Zagreb, in the Gavella Drama Theatre, where the premiere of this performance could not be staged because of the intolerance of right-wing, conservative and even overtly fascist part of public opinion in regards to any polemical voices directed towards their stances. The director Frlić, nonetheless, stressed many times in his interviews that the most significant place where this performance should be represented is Zagreb, where the crime that his work deals with actually occurred.

³²⁷ „Identitet ovih društva izgrađen je na poricanju vlastitih zločina“, M. Krtinić, *Identitet na poricanju zločina*. Interview with Oliver Frlić, *Danas*, 15 April 2014 (trans. by V. Baltić).

performance, one of the loudest voices was one that asked: “When will our victims get their theatre show?” “A child was killed”, is what Frljić was trying to say.

In Živko Nikolić’s film *Beštije*,³²⁸ a small community of carnivalesque characters, who live on a rainy, foggy and desolated island, welcomes with utter curiosity a poor and beautiful foreigner, who with her presence would disturb the solid precipitate of inhumanity that had diligently been built up until that moment. There is an artificial island called The Lady of Rocks in the Bay of Kotor, which – as legend says – was built gradually by people throwing rocks into the sea. Throwing rocks at each other is the way of communication between Nikolić’s *beasts*.³²⁹

The Gorgon is often represented *en face*, so that her terrifying gaze cannot be avoided. The *Gorgóneion* is, thus, often depicted on the shields of heroes – Vernant writes³³⁰ – referring unequivocally to the gate of Hades, to the encounter with death or even to the image of being dead, “empty heads and without strength”.³³¹ She is human and animal at the same time, “young and old, beautiful and ugly, feminine and masculine”,³³² supposedly dead, but yet alive enough to bring terror.

Small Venetian-style *piazzettas*, tiled with the darkest matter, echo, right from the outset of the movie *Beštije*, with the rumour of assailants’ footsteps, incessantly near, in pursuit of their victim. “She is mine”³³³ – they all say: a moribund old captain, a pervert priest, a young trickster, a violent husband and a large group of middle-aged-to-elderly women all dressed in black.

In some cases, like Baubo – Vernant claims³³⁴ – the grotesque mixture of the face and the sex of these terrifying beings – in this case precisely female genitals – contributes to the creation of a disconcerting effect on their victim. In the movie *Beštije*, a woman, maybe the

³²⁸ *Beštije*, cit.

³²⁹ *Beštije* (Srb.-Cro.) means *beasts*.

³³⁰ J.-P.Vernant, *Figure della maschera nella Grecia antica*, in *Mito e tragedia due*, cit., p. 14.

³³¹ “teste vuote e senza forza”, *ibid.*, p.15 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³³² “giovane-vecchia, bella-brutta, maschile-femminile, umana-bestiale”, *ibid.*, p. 16 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³³³ „Moja je!“, *Beštije*, (transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

³³⁴ J.-P.Vernant, *Figure della maschera nella Grecia antica*, cit., p. 17.

leader of a group of nocturnal creatures, lifts her skirt to show the others her “virginity belt”. She explains that it was fitted and locked by her late husband, in respect of whom she then threw the key into the sea. As in Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde*,³³⁵ it is a headless woman who represents the *principium*. A headless woman guards the gates of hell.

When a diver – sent by a TV crew to explore the bottom of a lake and return with information on the potential presence of living creatures out there in the mud, as *Nadrealisti* recount³³⁶ – arrived at the door of an unusual family of two, he was positive that that was the place he was looking for, confirming the hypothesis that the bottom cannot be desolate. Yet, shortly after, the family had to inform him not only that the bottom was not forsaken, but that where he was at that moment was not the bottom at all. “There is more, down below us...”³³⁷ – the family asserted.

2.4.1. A girl with a rabbit-ear hat and a machine gun

In conversation with Oliver Frljić

Do you believe in God?

– Sometimes I do, sometimes I do not...³³⁸

Uttered by a twelve-year-old girl, on the theatrical stage of Frljić’s *Aleksandra Zec*, these words open onto the worlds of those who live among us and have survived, and so can no longer do anything other than believe, and onto the worlds of those who did not survive and do not believe the witnesses. These words, as well, speak to those who have survived, and still do not believe.

³³⁵ G. Courbet, *L’Origine du monde*, cit.

³³⁶ „Da li postoji život na dnu?”, Top lista nadrealista, cit.

³³⁷ „Nije ovo dno, ima još dole ispod nas...“, *ibid.*, (transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

³³⁸ „Vjeruješ li u Boga? – Kako kad”, *Aleksandra Zec*, cit. (All the lines from the performance *Aleksandra Zec* are transcribed from the video of the performance from HNK Rijeka, n.d., and are translated by V. Baltić).

Some god, I say, was with them.³³⁹

To witness the arrival of god, to feel his hands resting on one's shoulders, to see the black heart of reality pushing to enter one's home, with the intention of installing itself there forever – as maybe happened when Dionysus came to Pentheus' court in Thebes – means encountering death while still in life and, thus, knowing tragedy. Not believing a witness, not knowing tragedy – and “knowing” is intended to mean not only living it in the first person, but also understanding it emphatically, knowing that the other's affliction is related to the very same sun that keeps you both warm – might mean repeating it. Oliver Frljić's *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu* (2008),³⁴⁰ composed of the performances *Bakhe*, *Aleksandra Zec* and *Hrvatsko glumište*, interrogates the legacy of violent deaths, tracing its roots back to the context of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in World War II – known for its brutal crimes against humanity committed by the fascist Ustaše – and forward to the more or less recent Yugoslav wars from the 'nineties, waged under the same ideological matrix.

I would say that in the *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu*, a dominant connection between the parts is the subject of death, and the other dominant subject is – and this can be learnt from the title itself – I would not say only the rapid fascisation, but the fascist continuity which showed up... In fact, society in some way auto-legitimised a very problematic ideology, or tried to establish it after World War II, some kind of ideological continuity with the NDH, and so on and so forth. Those were some of the things that I was trying to work on in that moment.³⁴¹

It was the bacchants who invaded the villages, destroyed homes, left children parentless, violated the boundaries protecting the most sacred, the very heart of humanity, the defenceless – Frljić states at the opening performance of his *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu*.

³³⁹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 760–765.

³⁴⁰ Eng. trans. *Trilogy about Croatian Fascism*.

³⁴¹ „Ja bih rekao da u *Trilogiji o hrvatskom fašizmu* jedna dominantna veza je upravo tema smrti, a druga dominantna tema, a to se može iščitati iz samog naslova, zapravo jedna, ne bih rekao čak ni rapidna fašizacija, nego jedan fašistoidni kontinuitet koji se pojavljuje... Zapravo, društvo, na neki način, samo-legitimizira jednu vrlo problematičnu ideologiju ili pokušava nakon Drugog svjetskog rata uspostaviti jednu vrstu ideološkog kontinuiteta sa NDH, i tako dalje, i tako dalje. To su bile neke stvari kojima sam se pokušavao baviti u tom trenutku“, interview with Oliver Frljić, 23 October 2021. (All the interviews with O. Frljić indicated in the text were conducted online, transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

It was they, the possessed, who disseminated terror, inverted order, brought madness. The words of Euripides' Messenger, reported four times in Frlić's *Bakhe*, testify to the bacchants' deeds. The actors would, every one of them in his or her unique manner – omitting some parts of the original text and creating a different scenic background for the words to rest upon – report what they saw on Mt. Cithaeron.

Like invaders they swooped on Hysiae
and on Erythrae in the foothills of Cithaeron.
Everything in sight they pillaged and destroyed.
They snatched the children from their homes. And see—whatever
they piled as plunder on their shoulders stayed in place,
untied. Nothing, neither bronze nor iron,
fell to the dark earth. They were carrying fire
in their hair—it did not burn them.³⁴²

In the midst of war, thus, dressed in military uniforms and surrounded by pieces of raw meat, the messengers, denouncers of war crimes, peacemakers, victims – as Frlić shows – are destined to end up inside some kind of sleeping bag, labelled with the names Milan Levar, Josip Reihl-Kir and Aleksandra Zec – all three of them, well-known in the Croatian public space, not only for their opposition to war, as in the case of the first two, but also for their tragic deaths, signified by whitewashing and practices of impunity. “The snakes which lick away the drops of the blood that dabbles Euripides' *Bacchae*'s cheeks”³⁴³ strip away their ancient skins here, to dress in the colours of the Yugoslavia of the 'nineties. In the conflicts that started among the ruins of the SFRJ (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), which took place from 1991 until the new millennium (or maybe, as some point out, have been taking place until the present day, i.e. are unfinished), hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, suffered and are still suffering serious physical injuries and psychological trauma, and have emigrated. The citizens of the former Yugoslavia, in one way or another, including those born after the war, suffered and are still suffering violations of their civil rights, the

³⁴² Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 750–760.

³⁴³ “The woman then returned where they had started, by the springs the god had made, and washed their hands while the snakes licked away the drops of blood that dabbled their cheeks”, *ibid.*, 765–770.

weakening of the rule of law, poverty, unemployment, as well as the more or less marginalised position of the post-war Yugoslav republics on the European and world stage. They live among the remnants of the fury of war, they feel the aches of unhealed wounds, bleeding through the still blooming nationalist sentiment in one part of the population, whose representatives firmly hold the majority of the levers of power. It is inside this context that Frljić's bacchants run wild, sowing death.

Nonetheless, the spectator of *Bakhe* never sees the violence itself, except in the eyes of those who say they saw it. It is recounted by the Messenger, it is implied in the names of the protagonists of the spectator's community's recent past, it is reported through documents (such as audio recordings) or quotations. It is clear to the contemporary spectator, who partakes in the *polis* hosting the performance – as it was to the Athenian seeing Aeschylus' *The Persians*, to which Frljić refers when talking about his own poetics³⁴⁴ – that those theatrical images have to do with his *enemies*, and thus, maybe, on the most intimate level, with himself.

I was interested in how we actually present a certain crime or a murder. What we hear in the Messenger's report is in fact his vision of what happened on Mt. Cithaeron, when Pentheus was killed by his mother and the other bacchants. I was in fact interested in that report, in that testimony. Hence, how certain narratives are formed, how those narratives get exploited in different contexts, and so on, and so on...³⁴⁵

Frljić is researching the idea of witness: so, since “something happened while we were not there”,³⁴⁶ how do we get to know what occurred and form even an opinion about it, if not through the stories of the messengers? In other words, it is the process of creation of narratives that Frljić finds very important to have present, since it is often the form that manipulates the contents, it is often the truth, that we might uncritically accept as ours, that

³⁴⁴ Interviews with O. Frljić, 29 June 2021 and 23 October 2021.

³⁴⁵ „Ono što me je interesiralo je zapravo kako prikazujemo određeni zločin ili ubojstvo. Ono što čujemo u izvještaju Glasnika je zapravo njegovo viđenje onoga što se dogodilo na Kiteronskoj gori, kad je Pentej bio ubijen od strane njegove majke i ostalih Bakhantkinja. I zapravo to izvještavanje, to svjedočanstvo, to je nešto što me je interesiralo. Dakle, kako se formiraju određeni narativi, kako se ti narativi onda instrumentaliziraju u različitim kontekstima i tako dalje, i tako dalje...“, interview with O. Frljić, 23 October 2021.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

is actually someone else's construction. It is maybe unnecessary to mention the role different versions of the facts might have in the dynamics of war – as was the case in Yugoslavia, where media manipulation and the toxic influence of certain religious institutions and intellectual circles gave ideological support to this senseless rampage. It takes a significant change in perceptions, a dizzying standing out from the antagonisms, to be able to produce a war. "I believe that news is the biggest fiction," Frljić claims.³⁴⁷ Thus, when it becomes evident that some important events had occurred in Thebes, the only available testimony in *Bakhe* is the Messenger's version of the facts – repeated, undebated, undoubted.

That inebriation, all that which Dionysus brings, interested me as some kind of, how could I say, lobotomy of critical thinking, which happened, I think, on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in the 'nineties, and which continues up to the present day. I think that there are only different techniques and technologies of that lobotomy, but, in principle, not even the "c" remains of critical thinking. There are some rare places where is possible to hear something which departs from these dominant narratives and ideological matrixes.³⁴⁸

If "the truth is an issue of societal agreement", as Frljić asserts, what kind of society holds dear the many deaths of its members, ethnic cleansing and numerous war crimes? What is the role of the theatre in such circumstances?

Bakhe takes place outside of the national theatre, or, actually, at its entrance; it might be said – outside of Pentheus' palace, about to get crushed under the god's rage.³⁴⁹ At one point of the performance, the stage welcomes a paper model of the sketched-out interior of the actual theatre house in the background – signified by big red curtains, as in the best European theatrical tradition. When the lights are switched on inside the real theatre, this little puppet

³⁴⁷ „Po meni su vijesti najveća fikcija, jer one nam određuju kako da gledamo ovaj svijet, kako da ga percipiramo. One nešto preskaču, nešto naglašavaju i na taj način formiraju našu percepciju i pojmove o svijetu ili društvenoj stvarnosti u kojoj živimo. Onda mislim da bilo kakav pokušaj kreiranja nekakve objektivne reprezentacije je u samom startu osuđen na propast [...]“, *ibid.*

³⁴⁸ „Ta opijenost, to sve što Dioniz donosi, interesirala me je i u smislu jedne vrste, kako bih rekao, lobotomije kritičkog mišljenja koja se dogodila, po meni, na prostoru bivše Jugoslavije u devedesetima, i koja se nastavlja do danas. Ja mislim da su samo druge tehnike i tehnologije te lobotomije, ali u principu od kritičkog mišljenja nije ostalo ni 'k'. Neki rijetki prostori gdje se može čuti nešto što izlazi izvan ovih dominantnih narativa i ideoloških matrica“, *ibid.*

³⁴⁹ “Our lord attacks this palace, turns it upside down, the son of Zeus!”, Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 600–605.

version of it – whose appearance is followed by the maybe coarse but also *noblest* sounds of a *clavicembalo* – opens its curtains to show a hand-operated meat grinder. “It could be a strong propagandistic instrument,” Frljić asserts, referring to the art of theatre. “What was represented and uttered at that stage certainly had different repercussions and resonances than today. Today the theatre is more marginalised,” the director proceeds, commenting on the theatrical praxis in the former Yugoslav republics of the ’nineties.³⁵⁰

My theatrical work was in a significant way some kind of reaction to the lack of critical voices in the theatre of the ’nineties, primarily in Croatia, but, I think it was not much different in the other post-Yugoslav societies – or in what remained after the breakup of Yugoslavia. *Hrvatsko glumište*, *Aleksandra Zec* and *Bakhe*, all three performances actually argue, on a meta level, about the absence of those contents in the theatre productions, but also about the theatrical language which was dominant at that time. I think that the main task of the theatre is to speak up about what is being suppressed in the public sphere, to give space to voices which are not being heard. [...] I was trying through these three performances to actually confront the Croatian theatre with what it had done, or not done in that period. Croatian theatre was, in fact, in most cases either a passive observer of what happened or actively engaged in the HDZ’s (Croatian Democratic Union) nationalist propagandistic machinery.³⁵¹

On one occasion of *Bakhe*’s staging in the Ivan pl. Zajc national theatre in Rijeka,³⁵² what could be heard coming from the street – the director recalls – were the shouts of those who disagreed with this vision on the war discourse, i.e. *branitelji*, (so-called *defenders* of the

³⁵⁰ „Vrlo rijetko su se čuli anti-ratni glasovi u ovom pozorišnom miljeu, i zapravo ova mašina za mljevenje mesa, mene su zanimala, dakle različita značenja koja ona može dobiti. Naravno da ona može sudjelovati u tom pretvaranju, kao što sam rekao ranije može biti snažan propagandni instrument. To što se u tom period postavljalo i govorilo sa te pozornice naravno da je imalo drugačije reperkusije i rezonance nego danas. Danas je pozorište kao medij još više marginalizovan“, interview with O. Frljić, 23 October 2021.

³⁵¹ „Moj pozorišni rad je uveliko bio jedna vrsta reakcije na izostanak kritičkih glasova u pozorištu u devedesetima, prvenstveno u Hrvatskoj, ali ja mislim da i u drugim post-Jugoslovenskim društvima – odnosno onome što je ostalo nakon raspada Jugoslavije, nije bilo bitno drugačije. *Hrvatsko glumište*, *Aleksandra Zec* i *Bakhe*, sve tri predstave, zapravo, na jednoj meta razini ulaze u polemiku sa, ne samo odsustvom tih sadržaja u kazališnim produkcijama, nego i sa kazališnim jezikom koji je bio dominantan u to vrijeme. Po meni je osnovna zadaća kazališta zapravo da govori o onome što je u nekoj javnoj sferi potisnuto, da da prostor glasovima koji se ne čuju. [...] Ja sam pokušao kroz ove tri predstave zapravo konfrontirati hrvatsko glumište sa onim što je radilo, odnosno što nije radilo u tome periodu. Jer zapravo hrvatsko glumište, u većini slučajeva, je bilo ili pasivni promatrač onog što se događalo ili su bili aktivno upregnuti u propagandnu, nacionalističku HDZ-ovu mašineriju“, *ibid.*

³⁵² Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka.

Republic of Croatia, during the civil war). This explicit interference between the space of theatrical agency and the outside world, called to account by Frljić's critique, reveals that the theatre could still be – as demonstrated many times by the public reactions to the director's works – more than often seen as, to say the least, highly problematic for reactionary political forces – a possible “place which wants to establish an ethical platform in the society”³⁵³ – as the director points out.

My theatrical work engages in the production of counter-narratives. These are those dominant narratives or dominant societal truths, if we can call them that way. They suppress, press out, eliminate certain other narratives or truths, if we can talk about the truth in plural at all – we should not... To make those marginalised, suppressed voices be heard – that is, I think, the task of the theatre. Every theatre which enters into coalition with those who already retain a position of societal power, those who already have hegemony in society, is no longer the theatre at all, I think. It could be the best theatre technically speaking, the acting could be unimaginable, the lights, the stage, the costumes, everything, but I think that what defines the theatre, what is the essence, what makes that medium what it is, is that it actually gives space, visibility, voices to those who are marginalised through different processes in a certain society, or to those who are exiled from it. I will go back to antiquity again. Medea is a good example – the play in which Euripides wants to produce empathy for somebody who is already exiled from one social community and who is very close to the point at which she will be exiled from the other. After killing her children, after Jason left her, she actually has to look for a refuge, she has to look for a new society in which she will be accepted. And, of course, Euripides' genius is in the fact that it is we who have to decide if we could accept someone who has done something as extreme as Medea did in this case, if there is space for her... She is a foreigner in every context in which she arrives. She is a foreigner even in her own country, because she betrays it in some way by leaving with Jason, and so on... There is of course even that gender component, the fact that she is marginalised again as a woman, excluded... What is allowed for her husband, that is to leave her and to take the children, to establish a new community, and everything that she made... Of course those are myths, but it is very easy to transpose them into a concrete context... Medea never gets credit for Jason's

³⁵³ „[...] kazalište kao jedno mjesto koje želi ipak uspostaviti nekakvu etičku platformu ili bi trebalo uspostaviti etičku platformu u društvu [...]“, interview with O. Frljić, 23 October 2021.

heroism. She is the one who stands behind it. Those excluded voices and societal groups, I think that that is the place where the theatre is. Because of that I do not think that the civic theatre is the theatre. I think it is called theatre, but in principle it only perpetuates a certain societal state and the positions of power which already exist. It does not perform any deconstruction, in any way. I watch it from time to time, but basically I am not interested, however it is. I have a problem with entering certain institutions. Nothing can happen there, even when they try to make something different, those national theatres... Germany is full of those theatres which deal with problems, wars here and there, but in fact that dominant Eurocentric voice which determines how will we see that reality, that is a big problem, I think. The majority of theatre workers do not have the capacity to understand where the problem is, I think.³⁵⁴

In his exploration of meanings, of subtexts, of the ways in which narration wedges itself into the fabric of reality (to produce new realities), Frlić tries to avoid positioning himself anywhere close to an idea of some kind of truth holder. He explicitly distrusts

³⁵⁴ „Moj pozorišni rad se bavi proizvodnjom kontra-narativa. Postoje ovi dominantni narativi ili dominantne društvene istine, možemo ih tako zvati. One potiskuju, istiskuju, eliminiraju određene druge narative ili istine, ako možemo govoriti o istini u pluralu, uopće, a ne bi trebalo... Upravo to da se ti marginalizirani, potisnuti glasovi čuju, to je po meni zadaća kazališta. Svako kazalište koje ulazi u savez sa onima koji već imaju poziciju društvene moći, koji već imaju hegemoniju u društvu, po meni to više nije uopće kazalište. To može biti tehnički najbolje na svijetu, gluma može biti ne znam kakva, svjetlo, scena, kostimi, sve, ali, po meni, ono što određuje kazalište, što je esencija, po čemu taj medij jest taj medij je upravo to da on daje prostor, vidljivost, glasove onima koji su kroz ove ili one procedure marginalizirani u određenom društvu ili koji su izbačeni iz tog društva. Vratću se opet u antiku. Medeja je dobar primjer. Dakle, komad u kojem Euripid želi proizvesti empatiju za nekoga ko je već izbačen iz jedne društvene zajednice, i ko se približava točki u kojoj će biti izbačen iz druge zajednice. Nakon ubojstva djece, nakon što je Jazon ostavio, ona zapravo mora tražiti sklonište, mora tražiti novo društvo u kojem će biti prihvaćena. I ono naravno u čemu je genijalnost Euripida je upravo u tome da mi moramo razmisliti da li možemo prihvatiti nekog ko je napravio nešto tako ekstremno kao Medeja u ovom slučaju, ima li prostora za nju... Ona je strankinja u svakom kontekstu u koji dolazi. Ona je čak u svojoj zemlji strankinja, jer izdaje na određen način svoj narod i odlazi sa Jazonom, i tako dalje... Naravno postoji i ta rodna komponenta da je ona kao žena opet marginalizirana, isključena... Ono što je dopušteno njenom suprugu, tj. da je ostavi i da uzme djecu, i da zasnuje novu zajednicu, i da zapravo sve ono što je ona napravila – naravno to su sve mitske priče, ali se vrlo lako mogu prevesti u konkretan kontekst... Medeja ne nikad i dobija kredit za Jazonova junaštva. Ona je zapravo ta koja stoji iza toga. Ti isključeni glasovi i društvene grupe, mislim da je to ono gdje je kazalište. Zbog toga po meni građansko kazalište nije kazalište, mislim ono se zove kazalište, ali u principu ono samo perpetuira određeno društveno stanje i pozicije moći koje već postoje. Ono ni na koji način ne radi nikakvu dekonstrukciju. Gledam to s vremena na vrijeme, ali u principu me ne interesira, kakvo god da je, imam problem ući u neke institucije. Tamo se ne može dogoditi ništa drugo, čak i kad se pokušava napraviti nešto drugačije, to su ovi HNK-ovi, Njemačka je puna tih kazališta koja se bave problemima, rat ovdje, rat ondje, ali zapravo to je taj dominantni eurocentrični glas koji određuje kako ćemo mi vidjeti tu stvarnost, to je po meni veliki problem. Mislim da je većina kazališta i kazališnih radnika nijesu kapacitirani da shvate gdje je problem“, *ibid.*

documentarism, as well as any rigid political stances, pointing the cutting edge of his critique potentially towards anyone.

I do not actually want to produce, in everything I work on, any kind of illusion that it is an objective representation, the only one possible, that it is some kind of truth. No, it is my experience of a certain reality transposed into a theatrical act, so to say.³⁵⁵

It seems that Frljić's works want to look inside those apparently one-dimensional and thus, maybe falsely innocuous, phenomena, to discover that there is space beneath the surface where the honest easily turn into villains and vice versa. Through close scrutiny of negatives – explicitly disclosed in his theatrical work – the director arrives at milestones of an ethical scale: inconvertible, pure values. In this sense, maybe the most difficult, but also the most precious task of the theatre, as Frljić asserts, should be to defend the voices of the oppressed, marginalised, suffering; since this is precisely their silent lament to guard the portal between, to put it simply, good and bad.

To disengage from active participation in the matters of the community, to ignore critical voicing of the symptoms of some kind of societal disease or even to participate in its progression, denote a lack of understanding of the potential gravity of the state of things, but also the underlying unethicity of the one who pretends to call him or herself – a citizen. It takes courage to speak up, when your potential allies' silence is filled with voices propagating discord, hatred, inequality and so on.

An artist should, nonetheless, be still enough to withstand the pain behind the dead girl's cry. In fact, he should be brave enough to rescue it from the depths of the woods and make it heard through the city; for he is aware of the lack of time to reverse anything, to put anything in order, aware of the inexorability of the ending – of his power to imagine an alternative one, a fairer one. An actor, for instance, should not be an *interpreter*, except between the

³⁵⁵ „Ja ne želim, zapravo, u svemu onom što radim, ja ne želim proizvest ikakvu iluziju da je to objektivni prikaz, jedini mogući, da je u pitanju neka istina. Ne, to je moje iskustvo određene stvarnosti transponirano u jedan kazališni čin, recimo to tako“, *ibid.*

realm of the spirit and the realm of the body, if unable to search inside him or herself for those unique secret reminders of what is better elsewhere.

I think that an actor must be, I would say, where ethics happens, where ethics enters the flesh, the scenic flesh, the performer's flesh. I have developed that a lot in different projects, especially those I did in Rijeka, Ljubljana, but also in Subotica, *Kukavičluk*, *Zoran Đinđić* in Belgrade. I was interested for the actor to go through a certain process in which he would form his own stances, articulated during rehearsals through the confrontation of different opinions, which then we would present, not just directly on stage, but we would transpose it into a certain text or scenic material; so that the actor does not just stand on the stage because I have told him so, and does not utter something because I have told him so, but that it all is a part of the process, of a common ethical maturation, I would say. Even *Bakhe*, which does not, how should I put it, present any text or any voice of actors outside of the framework of what was written by Euripides, still remains alienated at the level of theatrical language with what I have just explained. This performance came as the result of negotiation, confrontation... Believe me that it is not easy for the actors. [...] That night the *Hrvatski branitelji* (defenders) tried to make some mess, they were shouting... The way in which reality interfered with fiction on the stage was very interesting. While the actors were performing, the shouts of "kill this or that person" from the *branitelji*, standing behind the *daīs*, you saw there, in front of the HNK (Croatian National Theatre) in Rijeka on the square where we were performing. I think that that is very important.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁶ „Po meni glumac mora biti, ja bih rekao, to gdje se događa etika, gdje etika ulazi u meso, u scensko meso, u meso izvođača. To sam jako puno razvijao na različitim projektima pogotovu stvari koje sam radio u Rijeci, Ljubljani, ali isto i u Subotici, Kukavičluk, Zoran Đinđić u Beogradu. Zanimalo me je da glumac prođe kroz određeni proces gdje će formirati svoje stavove u konfrontaciji različitih mišljenja koja su se artikulirala u procesu proba, i gdje ćemo onda te stavove ne prezentirati, ne radi se o tome da to stavimo jedan kroz jedan na scenu, nego da ih zapravo transponiramo u određeni ili tekst ili scenski materijal, i da glumac ne stoji na sceni, samo zato što sam mu ja rekao, i da ne govori nešto samo zato što sam mu ja rekao, nego zapravo da je sve to dio nekog procesa, dio nekog zajedničkog etičkog sazrijevanja, rekao bih tako. Čak i *Bakhe*, gdje nemamo, kako bih to rekao, neki tekst ili glas glumca koji izlazi izvan okvira onoga što je Euripid napisao, još uvijek je na razini kazališnog jezika i teme ta predstava u skladu sa ovim što sam govorio. Ona je došla kao rezultat pregovaranja, konfrontacije... Vjerujte mi da glumcima nije jednostavno. [...] To večer su Hrvatski branitelji pokušali napraviti nered, oni su urlali tamo... Bilo je jako zanimljivo zapravo na koji je način stvarnost interferirala sa fikcijom na sceni. Dok su oni igrali mogli su se čuti uzvici: 'Ubij ovog, onog', tih branitelja koji su stajali iza tribina, vidjeli ste tamo ispred HNK Rijeka, gdje smo igrali na trgu. Mislim da je to jako važno“, *ibid.*

A projection onto a big screen, which at one point of *Bakhe* covers the entrance of the theatre, displays the following quote by Dr Branko Gavella:

“[...] it will be necessary to centralise for once the concept of responsibility at the place where it is the actual engine of theatrical action, that is the artistic responsibility of the actor.”³⁵⁷

Even though he agrees with this stance of Dr Gavella's, Frljić finds it important to point out that it was precisely he – this highly recognised intellectual – who was employed at the Croatian National Theatre during the Nazi occupation of Zagreb, until the liberation of the city and his full, subsequent, social rehabilitation.

ALEKSANDRA: Do you think that they would come to watch?

GIRL: I think that they are too cowardly to come.

ALEKSANDRA: Would you be scared knowing that they are there, in the audience?

GIRL: No.

ALEKSANDRA: (*referring to the other girls*) And you?

GIRLS: No.

ALEKSANDRA: Shall we see if they are there, among us?³⁵⁸

At the end of the performance *Aleksandra Zec*, the lights turn on to embrace the entire theatrical space, falling equally on the actors and the audience. They are all caught, for some minutes, in the scrutiny of potential killers among them. As the murdered girl invites people to take a look, so the friendly gap between the members of the audience shrinks to conceal, if not their own potential to kill, then the very idea of it, the very thought, as timid as its manifestation might seem, that there is a different qualitative and quantitative value between *our* and *their* victims, that death itself concerns others, that my own violence belongs to the one against whom I perpetuate it. This insistence of Frljić's on accountability, inherent to each and every position taken, and so also the one of the spectator – clearly shown, among

³⁵⁷ „[...] bit će potrebno taj pojam odgovornosti centralizirati jednom na onom mjestu, gdje je on zaista motor kazališnog djelovanja, a to je umjetnička odgovornost glumca“, *Bakhe*, directed by Oliver Frljić, 2008 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³⁵⁸ „ALEKSANDRA Misliš da bi došli gledati? / DJEVOVČICA Mislim da su previše kukavice da bi došli / ALEKSANDRA Bi li te bilo strah da znaš da su tu u publici? / DJEVOVČICA Ne. / ALEKSANDRA A vas? / DJEVOVČICE Ne. / ALEKSANDRA Hoćemo li pogledat jesu li tu među nama?“, *Aleksandra Zec*, cit.

other things, in the last scene of *Aleksandra Zec* by the direct implication of the audience in everything seen and professed until that moment – requires answers to: “Where were you at that time?” and maybe even more importantly to the question: “Where are you now?” In other words, as the actors, who should have their own (political) opinion on the images they create in the theatre, who should always look back at the dark parterre, so the audience – the citizens – should know their active role in the construction of the new societal realities.

What is the responsibility of the state, of the Croatian community *in toto*, if the child was murdered, after witnessing the death of her father, and later that night, the death of her mother? Aleksandra’s brother and sister survived the tragedy, to receive some kind of symbolic reimbursement from the state for the *damage* they suffered. The perpetrators of this crime, even after confessing at the trial, were never convicted.

The reconstruction of the events, which signified Zec’s family tragedy, is supported in Frljić’s performance by documents,³⁵⁹ but the unreconstructable horror of pure, senseless, abominable cruelty could only be hinted at in the words which the girl, asking her parents for reassurance before death, might have uttered:

MOTHER: Aleksandra?

ALEKSANDRA: Yes, mum?

MOTHER: Do you know that they’re going to kill us tonight?

ALEKSANDRA: I know, mum.

MOTHER: Dad, as well?

ALEKSANDRA: I know.

MOTHER: Me, as well?

ALEKSANDRA: I know, mum.

MOTHER: Dušan and Gordana will survive. Are you scared?

ALEKSANDRA: Yes, mum. Mum, what kind of people kill twelve-year-old children?

FATHER: Dušan, how’s your homework coming along?

DUŠAN: It’s going well, dad.

FATHER: And yours, Goca?

³⁵⁹ J. Novakov Sibinović, *Političko pozorište Olivera Frljića: Od empatije do simpatije*, Novi Sad, Sterijino pozorje, 2020, p. 244.

GORDANA: It's going well, dad.

FATHER: And yours, Aki?

ALEKSANDRA: I am writing it, dad. Dad, do you know that they are going to kill us tonight?

FATHER: I know. But, not everyone. Dušan and Gordana will remain alive.

GORDANA: Dad, what does it mean to remain alive?

FATHER: You are still too young. You'll understand when you grow up.

GORDANA: Dad, when they kill you and we remain alive, will it be as it always was with us?

FATHER: Do your homework...

GORDANA: Does it mean that it will?

FATHER: Do your homework!

DUŠAN: Dad, will you be afraid when they come to kill you?

FATHER: I won't.

DUŠAN: I won't then, either.

FATHER: Sure, you won't. You are already grown up, you are eleven.

DUŠAN: Dad, what kind of people kill a dad in front of his children?

FATHER: I don't know.

DUŠAN: Who will send them?

FATHER: I don't know.

DUŠAN: Who will give them guns?

FATHER: I don't know.

MOTHER: Go brush your teeth! [...]

CHILDREN: No, mum, please!!!

ALEKSANDRA: Mum, they're going to kill us!

MOTHER: (*slaps her*) What did you say!?! What did you say!?

ALEKSANDRA: That they're going to kill us anyway, mum. ³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ „MAJKA Aleksandra? / ALEKSANDRA Molim, mama. / MAJKA Znaš da će nas noćas ubiti? / ALEKSANDRA Znam, mama. / MAJKA I tatu? / ALEKSANDRA Znam. / MAJKA I mene? / ALEKSANDRA Znam, mama. / MAJKA Dušan i Gordana će preživjeti. Je li te strah? / ALEKSANDRA Da, mama. Mama, kakvi su to ljudi koji ubijaju dvanaestogodišnju djecu? / OTAC Dušane, ide li to pisanje zadaće? / DUŠAN Ide, tata. / OTAC A ti, Goco? / GORDANA Ide, tata. / OTAC A ti, Aki? / ALEKSANDRA Evo, pišem, tata. Tata, znaš da će nas noćas ubiti? / OTAC Znam. Ali, neće sve. Dušan i Gordana ostaće živi. / GORDANA Tata, šta to znači ostat živ? / OTAC Još si mala, shvatićeš kad odrasteš. / GORDANA Tata, kad vas ubiju a mi ostanemo živi, hoće li sa nama biti sve po starom? / OTAC Ajde, piši zadaću... / GORDANA Je

The family photo which opens the performance is soon ripped off by the creaking sounds entering the Zecs' home and is exchanged for real photos from the crime scene, displayed in the background of the stage. The victims: father Mihajlo, mother Marija and Aleksandra read about their deaths from the court depositions of their murderers. It seems from the confessions that the girl – who ran out of the house in her pink bathrobe to see her father lying on the sidewalk covered in blood – witnessed Mihajlo's murder and thus she, as well as her mother, needed to disappear. It seems that the murderers offered the girl some Coca Cola before deciding on her destiny.

Shortly afterwards, actress Jelena Lopatić, who played Aleksandra (even though it is hard to assert any strict assignation of the role, the roles being, as in the Brechtian tradition, generally interchangeable between the actors) gets covered in soil, until four twelve-year-olds wearing hats with rabbit's ears³⁶¹ come to free her from her grave. Covered in dirt, Aleksandra then sits around some kind of school desk with the other four girls to engage in talk about hobbies, boyfriends, god, murderers... The four children reply to Lopatić's questions genuinely, using their own words. They talk about their lives and about Aleksandra's. In this group of peers, one of the girls claims to be a Serbian living in Croatia, as Aleksandra's father was; and thus, unjustly, Aleksandra was compelled to be, as well, for which she was, unjustly, murdered.

It is necessary to know what happened. In the midst of the versions of what occurred, believing the witness might also mean recognising, besides everything else, the hurting inside the heart of humanity. It is maybe there where we might find an answer to Aleksandra's sister Gordana's question about the meaning of staying alive. To stay alive amidst death, to stay alive after a twelve-year-old is brutally murdered, does not have to be the same as acknowledging the god who has permitted such a thing; it does not have to mean believing in god who, in order to make himself credible, brings madness, chaos and destruction, but

I' to to znači? / OTAC Piši zadaću! / DUŠAN Tata, hoće te bit strah kada te dođu ubit? / OTAC Neće. / DUŠAN Onda neće ni mene. / OTAC Pa naravno, ti si već veliki, imaš jedanaest godina. / DUŠAN Tata, a kakvi su to ljudi koji ubijaju tatu ispred njegove djece? / OTAC Ne znam. / DUŠAN A ko će ih poslat? / OTAC Ne znam. / DUŠAN Ko će im dat puške? / OTAC Ne znam. / MAJKA Ajde, perite zube! / SVI Nemoj, mama, molim te! [...] / ALEKSANDRA Mama, ubiće nas! / MAJKA (šamar) Šta si rekla? Šta si rekla? / ALEKSANDRA Da će nas ionako ubiti, mama“, *Aleksandra Zec*, cit.

³⁶¹ “Zec” means “rabbit” in Croatian.

could mean, on the contrary, the possibility of knowing that there is pain, there is tragedy and that it belongs to everyone. To stay alive might be the promise of change.

“I do not hate” – is uttered in the last performance of the trilogy, *Hrvatsko glumište*, by a girl wearing a hat with rabbit’s ears, standing in front of a choir of Ustaše. The audience is positioned on the stage of the theatre (*all’italiana*) so that when at one point the curtains are raised, they can see the balconies filled with chanting fascists. The child, in front of them, has a machine gun in her hands, but does not shoot.

I was, honestly speaking, interested in the visual aspects of that image. Therefore, a girl who was murdered and put in the position of victim, and who is always in a kind of victim discourse, in that her sacrifice is either negated or exploited, and there were cases of this... I was curious to know if, with the machine gun and with “I do not hate” that she utters, we would obtain something else. She does not shoot at that choir of Ustaše, as you saw. It is the other person who shoots at them. I had big discussions about that scene, if that was OK, if it was appropriate. I wanted, honestly speaking, to radicalise that image even more. [...] I was actually interested in emancipating that child, at least in one stage image, from the position of the victim; because I think that it is not good for anyone to remain in the position of a victim. I think that in the acceptance of that position there is no transformative potential; it could be good in this or that context, but for the transformation to happen, we need to be emancipated from the position of a victim. That is my personal opinion. [...] When you are in the parterre and you are looking at that emptied HNK (Croatian National Theatre) and at those balconies full of singing Ustaše, and that girl who is standing there with a Kalashnikov, there are in fact two historical episodes connecting: the NHD (Independent State of Croatia) of ’41–’45 and what happened in ’91, where some kind of ideological continuity is shown; what is shown is that a deconstruction of the legacy of the Ustaša and of the NDH in Croatia was not being attempted, but on the contrary, that it was that inheritance that was used in some way as a currency for settling political differences at the beginning of the ’nineties. I wanted to open up those topics. Actually, it is some kind of resurrection of Aleksandra Zec in the shape of an avenging angel, which is already an active position. Of course, vengeance is taken right at the end; however, she does not shoot, she does not shoot at the ideology which took her life. She stands there, she says: “I do not hate”. [...] I would have rather heard

your interpretation, or someone else's who saw the performance, because I am interested... Mine was a kind of suggestion for the spectator.³⁶²

Once positioned on the stage, able to see those who were occupying their places, those who were maybe occupying the institutions of their state, as they did with that beautiful parterre of the National Theatre, the audience is invited to *respond*, to act, again. To see that child with a machine gun, a child who – as the director claims – refuses, in that moment, the position of a victim, might be an invitation to the audience, to the citizens to do the same. Little Aleksandra, standing there alone between the stage and the parterre is the first one on the barricades. Her life is the point at which the decision must be made: to liberate from an ideology of death, to go forward against the oppressor, to become a better society or to retreat into the dark rooms of hatred and despair. This child's life, lost in the battles between some bloodthirsty monsters, is the barricade that every citizen must sustain, honour and respect.

³⁶² „Mene je iskreno da Vam kažem zanimala likovnost te slike. Dakle, gdje jedna djevojčica koja je ubijena i koja je stavljena u poziciju žrtve, i koja je stalno u tom jednom zapravo diskursu žrtve, bilo da se njezina žrtva negira ili da se instrumentalizira, što je isto bilo slučajeva... Mene je zanimalo da li sa tom puškom i sa tim “Ja ne mrzim” što ona kaže se dobiva nešto drugo. Ona ne puca na onaj zbor Ustaša, vidjeli ste tamo, nego druga osoba puca na njih. Ja sam imao oko te scene velike diskusije, da li je to OK, da li je to primjereno. Ja sam htio, iskreno da Vam kažem, još više radikalizirat tu sliku. [...] Jer upravo me je interesiralo da emancipiram i to dijete, barem u jednoj scenskoj slici od te pozicije žrtve, jer ja mislim da nizakoga nije dobro ostat na poziciji žrtve. Da zapravo u prihvatanju te pozicije ne postoji transformativni potencijal, ona može bit dobra u ovom ili onom kontekstu, ali da bi se neka transformacija dogodila, trebamo se emancipirat od pozicije žrtve. To je moje osobno mišljenje. [...] Kad ste u dvorani, kad gledate taj ispražnjeni HNK i te lože pune tih Ustaša koje pjevaju i tu devojčicu koja stoji sa tim kalašnjikovom, gdje se zapravo i dvije istorijske epizode povezuju, NDH '41–'45 i onda ovo što se dogodilo '91, gdje se pokazuje da postoji jedna vrsta ideološkog kontinuiteta, da se nije pokušalo dekonstruirat to naslijeđe Ustaškog pokreta i NDH u Hrvatskoj, nego na neki način se ono koristilo kao moneta za političko potkusurivanje početkom devedesetih. Te sve stvari sam htio otvorit s tim. I zapravo, neka vrsta, ja bih rekao, kao uskrsnuća Aleksandre Zec u formi anđela osvete, to je već aktivna pozicija. Naravno, ta osveta je dovedena do pred sam kraj, međutim ona ne puca, ona ne puca po onoj ideologiji koja joj je oduzela život. Ona stoji, ona kaže: 'Ja ne mrzim'. [...] Ja bih radije čuo Vašu interpretaciju, ili nekog ko je gledao tu predstavu, jer me interesira... Ja sam dao to kao neki prijedlog za gledatelj“, interview with O. Frljić, 23 October 2021.

III “Good morning, Gregor!”, or On contingency

3.1. *What to do with the body?*

Gregor Samsa woke up one day as an *Ungeziefer*, “some kind of monstrous vermin”.³⁶³ He used to be a salesman, but now, the man was inside the body of a beast.

‘That was an animal’s voice,’ said the chief clerk, noticeably quiet compared with the mother’s screaming.³⁶⁴

At first, Samsa found it to be extraordinarily hard to manipulate this newly acquired body, still very stiff and unaware of its own means. It gave him pain and itching. He had to figure out what to do with “his jittery legs”³⁶⁵ and his “hard”³⁶⁶ and rounded back. How does this body move? Where does it want to go? That morning early, Samsa should have been away at work, if only he could get up from his bed. “What if I went on sleeping for a while and

³⁶³ F. Kafka, *Die Verwandlung*, 1915, *The Metamorphosis and other stories*, cit., p. 29.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

forgot all these idiocies,' he thought [...]”³⁶⁷, but he could not – Kafka writes – find the right position for himself any more.

What to do with the body? Gregor’s sister Grete rightly thought that it firstly had to be fed. She would bring a variety of meals to her brother, “to try out his taste”.³⁶⁸

There were some old, half-rotten vegetables, bones from yesterday’s supper covered in a white sauce that had gone solid, a few raisins and almonds, some cheese which two days ago Gregor had declared was uneatable, one piece of dry bread, one piece of bread spread with butter, and one piece spread with butter and salt.³⁶⁹

It also needs space. Considering this, Grete believed that it would be for the best to remove all the furniture from Gregor’s room. Her reasoning lay on the conviction that an insect must be pleased to explore all the cracks in the walls, to climb and crawl without obstructions, to get to know – the only way it could get to know – this lonely and dusty planet that it happened to be thrown into. This supposition of his sister’s was almost true, since Gregor, at that point already “confused in his mind”,³⁷⁰ was prepared to forget his human past indeed and give away all the objects that filled it with meaning; were it not for the mother’s desperate lament:

[...] ‘and wouldn’t it look as though by removing the furniture we had given up any hope of recovery and callously abandoned him to himself? I believe it would be best if we tried to keep the room as it was before, so that when Gregor comes back to us, he will find everything unchanged and be able to forget the interim more easily.’³⁷¹

Did anybody ever come back? “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!”³⁷² – Gregor’s mother screamed when she saw this dark, despicable blemish her son had become. Once trampled by the merciless rush of Fate, a man never returns to what he was before. Sometimes it takes only

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁷⁰ “As he listened to these words of his mother’s, Gregor came to see that in the course of these two months, lack of any direct human attention, combined with the monotonous life within the family, must have confused his mind, for there was no other way he could explain how he could seriously have desired his room to be emptied”, *ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

one dark morning, or maybe a fraction of a second of it, to display itself abruptly in a man's mind and heart, to open onto those realms which threaten the existence not only of man's future, but even of his past. It takes an instant for all that is, to vanish, irrevocably. It takes a whole lifetime, as a consequence, never to stop coming back, never being able to, any more.

The body should not be left to the mercy of vultures – Antigone thought. It should be honoured. No one should walk the Earth unburied!

It was Kant who introduced – as Žižek writes in *The Parallax View*³⁷³ – this new theoretical field of the possible, within a negation which does not rest on the denial of a predicate, but on the affirmation of a non-predicate. This negation is – as Žižek specifies – exemplified in what is called *indefinite judgment*. In other words, Kant shows clearly that it is not the same thing to assert that the *subject is not* and that *it is un-...* The *un-dead*, for instance, is not someone who is simply alive, but can be much more than that, since the term refers to a spectrum of existential possibilities confined in what Žižek individuates as “the third space between phenomena and the noumenon itself”.³⁷⁴ It might refer to the living dead, for example. Kant, thus, includes in the conceptual realm of modernity a “terrifying excess”³⁷⁵ inscribed in that which goes by the definition of human, precisely through direct negation of it.

No one should be trapped in that horrible space of *un-being*. Yet, Antigone herself, in order to save the soul of her brother's body, had her own soul taken when she was imprisoned. Yet Gregor, the *un-human*, saw his own death, the furniture being taken out of his room.

[...] as he couldn't be understood, no one, not even his sister, even dreamt that he was able to understand others [...]³⁷⁶

What should be done with the body? Jan Fabre in his *The Grave of the Unknown Computer* (1994–1995) built a cemetery of little blue crosses to bury those whose carapaces, as he

³⁷³ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, cit., pp. 21–22.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁷⁶ F. Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, cit., p. 47.

believes, conserve prehistory³⁷⁷ – insects. In this temporary art installation, Fabre used blue ink to cover crosses arranged over a grassy valley. The name which appeared inscribed on the crosses more than once – among the different family names of this species – was *schrijverkebeetle*, the whirligig beetle – while it might be important to mention that the term *schrijverke* means “writer” in Dutch. These most extraordinary artists who turn chaos into the *principium* of life, as Fabre sees insects – Germano Celant writes³⁷⁸ – must be honoured through art.

“[...] it is precisely this insect, whose cryptogram, as Guido Gezelle asserted, was readable on the water: it represents the sacred name of God, the encrypted word of a fundamental secret.”³⁷⁹

When Gregor died, it was sorrow that killed him. He could not communicate with anyone that he was still able to watch and listen to, even in death, or better, he was able to see death itself placing its hands on him. His body had changed, but his *ratio* had stayed intact. Did Grete recognise her brother while he was defending the last remaining picture hanging on the wall of the empty room, with nothing more than his monstrous presence? “‘Gregor!’ his sister called, raising her fist with a compelling look.”³⁸⁰ They looked at each other for a while. Could she recognise, in his radical alterity, at least his room as still his?

No, stop with the explanations. The body has to think.³⁸¹

³⁷⁷ Cf. *Fantasy-insect-sculptures (1976–1979)*, *Project for Nocturnal Territory (1978–1979)* in G. Celant (ed.), *I_Germano Celant and Jan Fabre* (Vis, Croatia, 6 August 2013), interview with Jan Fabre, in Id., *Stigmata: Actions & Performances, 1976–2013: Jan Fabre*, Milano, Skira, 2014, p. 165.

³⁷⁸ G. Celant (ed.), *Un guerriero della bellezza nel labirinto delle immagini*, in Id., *Jan Fabre: arti & insetti & teatri*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1994, p. 8.

³⁷⁹ “[...] precisamente quell’insetto il cui cittogramma Guido Gezelle asseriva di essere riuscito a decifrare sull’acqua: esso rappresenterebbe il sacro nome di Dio, parola cifrata di un segreto fondamentale”, S. Hertmans, *La farfalla della morte di Rorschach, Su Fabre & Fabre*, in A. Soldaini (ed.), *Jan Fabre. Questa pazzia è fantastica*, (19 November 1994 – 23 January 1995), Prato, Museo Peci, 1994, p. 18 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³⁸⁰ F. Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, cit., p. 56.

³⁸¹ “No, basta spiegazioni. Il corpo deve riflettere”, (Jan Fabre’s words referred to a dancer during the rehearsals), L. Van den Dries, *Corpus Jan Fabre. Observaties van een creatieproces*, 2004, It. trans. *Corpus Jan Fabre: annotazioni su un processo di creazione*, Milano, Ubulibri, 2008, p. 84 (trans. by V. Baltić).

The Kantian *un-human*³⁸² resides in the realm of the spirit – for Žižek. A *monster*, thus, has the power to question a man in the most fundamental aspects of his identity, by being *other than* and offering, accordingly, a kind of alternative prospect of possible humanity. In this sense, Gregor himself is still a man, but another kind of man; one who is not, at least at first sight, recognisable as such. Nonetheless, more importantly, Gregor is not just different *per se*, he is different because of what has happened to him. Following this line of thought, one might say that the term *un-human* could refer not only to what is “external to humanity”³⁸³ to begin with, but to the humanity that was once there, or better, to what remained of the humanity the subject in question personified in the past. The Kantian concept of *indefinite judgment*, thus, also points with great precision to the intrinsically irreversible nature of change which afflicts a man in an instant, or in the few instants his life is made up of. It also, simultaneously, indefinitely arrests those few moments of *metamorphosis*, censoring in that way the image of death as nothing more than a freefall into nothingness. An *un-human* is, thus, a monument to a human who once was there. It is a memorial to a man who will never come back, but at the same time who could never not have been, who once was and, thus, could never not be, any more.

It is Kirillov from Dostoevsky’s *Бесы* who explicates this concept with great clarity, by sharing with Stavrogin the image he has in his head of a beautiful green leaf still in life, in the middle of winter. “Time has nothing to do with the truth, from the point of view of aesthetics”³⁸⁴ – Sergio Givone asserts, commenting on Kirillov’s story. When time is “‘captured’, removed, put inside brackets”³⁸⁵, the truth shows itself as it is: timeless – Givone proceeds. Kirillov’s leaf, thus, once recognised in its beauty, would have withered a short time after, when winter would come, but would have also, simultaneously, remained eternally beautiful, while caught in a perfect instant that its beauty had inhabited.

³⁸² Žižek uses the term *in-human* and *un-dead* as the examples for Kant’s *indefinite judgment*. Here, was used the term *un-human*, in order to avoid any negative connotation the word *inhuman* brings along and to be able to focus solely on the negation.

³⁸³ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, cit., p. 22.

³⁸⁴ S. Givone, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, cit., pp. 93–94 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

In this sense, *indefinite judgment* testifies that a man, could *un-die* – that is to say (without referring to an actual resurrection as intended in religious discourse): he could die and be remembered; be cherished in a memory which incorporates the death of the subject, without ever letting it inhabit the life of the deceased, unless at its very end, giving death (with all its circumstances) only the value of one episode of life. It might seem, thus, that all the dead are *un-dead* as long as there is someone who remembers in the cold of the winter every detail of their greenness (or maybe, going even further: as long as there is nature – it might be said – no one is forgotten).

In other words, a man could die, but the very fact that he has died is conditioned on the premise that he, nonetheless, lived, once. Following the same line of reasoning, no one could become an *un-human* without, as happened with Gregor, remaining a human inside (or somewhere, anywhere where this residual humanity might be contained), without becoming, at the same time, irreversibly different than the remnants of his own humanity.

For Jan Fabre, insects have this enormous power to transform, even merely by moving their mechanical body in some most illogic directions. As a young man he used to cut them open, to experiment with their legs and wings, to observe – secluded in his parents' garden – what would be born out of this ruthless *engineering*. Fabre's curiosity about insects has never left his artistic imagery. Not only did his drawings from *The Blue Hour* (1977–) collection hide the bodies of these silent *warriors*³⁸⁶ under the layers of a blue Bic pen, not only did the

³⁸⁶ “Gli attori e danzatori sono guerrieri della bellezza, che – nell’universo dei miei spettacoli - hanno il coraggio di vivere pericolosamente e di trionfare o rischiare di fallire. Sondano i limiti della loro natura, e superandoli accedono a un altro stato di coscienza. L’energia richiesta per raggiungere questo obiettivo è spesso immensa, così intensa che alcuni guerrieri si consumano, e lasciano, per un attimo, la propria professionalità d’attore. In quell’istante hanno l’allure di eroe tragico. I miei guerrieri della bellezza, come gli eroi delle tragedie classiche, si battono contro strutture e sistemi imposti, tentano ogni volta di muovere o modificare le regole del gioco. A volte vincono, a volte perdono, ma dimostrano sempre la potenza dell’individuo, diventando così simboli della ricerca del potenziale della libertà”, (“Actors and dancers are warriors of beauty, who – in the universe of my performances – have the courage to live dangerously and to triumph or to risk failure. They test the limits of their nature and when they exceed them, they access another state of consciousness. The energy required to reach this objective is very often immense, so intense that some warriors consume themselves and leave, for a moment, their profession as an actor. In that moment, they have the allure of a tragic hero. My warriors of beauty, just like the heroes of the classic tragedies, fight against structures and against imposed systems, they try every time to move and change the rules of the game. At times they win, at times they lose, but they demonstrate the strength of the individual, becoming in that way symbols of the search for potential and freedom”), H. de Greef (ed.), *Il tumulto del silenzio*, interview with J. Fabre, in G. Celant (ed.), *Jan Fabre: arti & insetti & teatri*, cit., pp. 69–70 (trans. by V. Baltić).

sculptures made of extraordinary marble from Carrara portray butterflies resting upon those whose souls had just recently flown away, but so also his theatre was and is permeated with the bodies of beetles, yet looking like humans... For the performer of the Troubleyn company, it takes an image, an image drafted by the director, for instance, to enter the body, pass through the mind and the heart, and reappear again, which happens – Fabreian, but no longer Fabre’s. The movements of these unpredictable machines, whose body maps the mind, are the protagonists of Troubleyn theatre. During the rehearsals, the director asks the performer to imagine being a tiger, or a lizard, or an insect, for example, and asks him or her to show what would they do if they had that particular kind of energy resting in their bones.³⁸⁷ The question is, thus, what would a human do if he had a lizard’s mind, or maybe, what would a lizard do if it had a human’s body?

The remote quality of time, the absolute co-generic interchangeability, the enormous dimensional distance and the total impossibility of observing that world from the inside puts insects on a level, which is, for us, as timeless as fairytales and myths.³⁸⁸

Grete, like Antigone, “sobbed”³⁸⁹ in the face of her brother’s tragedy. Nonetheless, unlike the Theban princess’s case, the underground divinities had left Grete, at least seemingly, without a body, whose silent mouth must have been the most convincing evidence of the barrier of incommunicability established between the two, once and for all. The lack of a dead body, whose presence would have been proof of the absence, not only of a person, but of an entire world lost forever, meant also the lack of a monument to be built around what once was. A monument to keep Gregor *un-dead*, to secretly hope in his return, to remember him.

³⁸⁷ Cf. L. Van den Dries, *Corpus Jan Fabre: annotazioni su un processo di creazione*, cit. Cf. also: The references to the rehearsals: V. Baltić’s notes, produced during a visit to Troubleyn Laboratorium, in November 2016.

³⁸⁸ “La qualità remota del tempo, l’assoluta intercambiabilità cogenerica, l’enorme disistanza dimensionale e la totale impossibilità di osservare quel mondo dall’interno, pone gli insetti su un piano che, per noi, è senza tempo, come le favole o i miti”, G. Celant (ed.), *Jan Fabre: arti & insetti & teatri*, cit., p. 127 (trans. by V. Baltić).

³⁸⁹ F. Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, cit., p. 35.

‘Come and see; it’s snuffed it; it’s lying in there, snuffed it. Completely!’³⁹⁰

What should be done with the body? It was gathered up with a broom, to be disposed of afterwards.

3.2. Behold god

Look there, soon the Palace of Pentheus will totter.

Dionysus is within. Adore him!³⁹¹

What does it take to continue to live after witnessing god’s arrival? It takes only the slightest blow from a knife to irremediably shut a world down. One reckless movement of a hand was enough to kill Nastasya. Therefore, when Myshkin finally managed to encounter Rogozhin in the latter’s home, Nastasya was already lying still, covered with a white sheet. Some pieces of her lavish garment and jewellery were scattered around the room. Her bare foot could be glimpsed, protruding from under the sheets.

“It’s hot weather, you see,” [...] and, naturally, there will be a smell. I daren’t open the window. My mother has some beautiful flowers in pots; they have a delicious scent; I thought of fetching them in [...]”³⁹²

While Myshkin was observing this horrendous scene, a fly started buzzing, to settle shortly after right near the head of the *sleeping one*. Had it seen it all, or had it just come afterwards, to enjoy the banquet? It certainly came out of nowhere, just as Dionysus who abruptly entered Pentheus’ tragedy, professing arrogantly: “And here I stand, a god incognito.”³⁹³

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁹¹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 585–590.

³⁹² F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 599.

³⁹³ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 5–10.

There was no sound of the doors slamming; they had probably left them open, which tends to happen in dwellings where some great misfortune has occurred.³⁹⁴

“The god who appears”,³⁹⁵ who arrives unexpectedly from the depths of the seas or from the eyes of a new-born³⁹⁶ – as Walter Otto writes – always about to burst in, is *inescapably present*.³⁹⁷ Disguised as a foreigner, the god, who, they say, has come all the way from Lydia, starts speaking his strange, nonsensical language. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a buzzing, or some other inarticulate voice acknowledges itself by acting according to its self-explanatory nature.

The ultimate symbol of this presence is a mask, Otto proceeds.³⁹⁸ The Dionysian mask is two-dimensional; sometimes – as Otto explains was the case in the ancient times – it assumes very large dimensions,³⁹⁹ not needing an actor’s body to carry it.

This god is depicted with big eyes looking straight at the spectator, insisting upon pure and unavoidable confrontation.⁴⁰⁰ In this sense, differently from other gods – as the famous François vase attests⁴⁰¹ – Dionysus has his eyes fixed on the *hic et nunc*, never withdrawing his gaze. To look at him, as Euripides writes in *The Bacchae*, means to get, inevitably, seen.

That is to say that, even though god is recognised as being body-less, depicted on a plane surface and thus envisioned as part of a reality different from the one of his worshippers, he is, simultaneously, evocated through the suggestiveness of a mask directly into the time and space of the one who is looking. In other words, god is evasive, he is never really there, but his eyes reflect the world before his representation; his mask is able to *un-mask* the one who is gazing at it. Therefore, as the spectator acts, god’s eyes reflect that action; it is through that *repeated* acting that Dionysus reveals himself. He is, thus, a principle. He cannot be present,

³⁹⁴ F. Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, cit., pp. 37–38.

³⁹⁵ W. F. Otto, *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, cit., p. 85.

³⁹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90, *François vase*, (roughly mid-sixth century, conserved in the MAF, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Firenze). Dionysus is depicted with his eyes wide open, looking straight at his spectator.

since he is not god, but rather, it might be said, using an adverb instead of a noun, he acts *in a godly way* – as Sergio Givone reports, citing Wilamowitz’s *theós*.⁴⁰²

In this sense, it is impossible to negotiate with Dionysus, since he is not there to listen. He is not a divinity available for dialogue, given that he, as documents attest, disregards his environment, represented always *en face*. Going even further along this line of reasoning, it might be said that there is no actual ‘he’ on the other side. There is always a man, alone, condemned to confront the otherness installed deeply inside him. Dionysus looks, and reflects, consequently, all that might be there to show.

An eloquent example of this claim is Pentheus’ tragic ending: the king’s wickedness, his arrogance and thoughtlessness rebound, when he who “was spawned by the dragon, whelped by Earth, inhuman, a rabid beast, a Giant in wildness”⁴⁰³ encounters Dionysus, his alter-ego. The story of Dionysus Zagreus – torn to pieces by the Titans – arrives maybe from the unconscious, travels *back to* the future, to assure this man whose name is to be repented of,⁴⁰⁴ that he might even have been right to assert that the god could be fought against, but would certainly be mistaken to think that one could escape oneself.

“I thought of buying flowers, and putting them all round her; but I was afraid it would make us sad to see her with flowers round her.”⁴⁰⁵

The fly, thus, must have known the truth. Death filled up the room. It came abruptly, as it comes, when keen on showing off its best game, its precious plumage. It did not negotiate, being as it is, one-faceted. Yet, when Myshkin’s gaze was searching for a sign of life from Nastasya, it must have seemed that she would have been able to come back, that she would have been able to move, to rebel again, against everyone who had hurt her, against herself... She was still there, beautiful as always, maybe even more beautiful, and thus, why would she

⁴⁰² “Vuol dire che Dio era *divinamente*. Dio è come una brezza leggera, lo dice anche la Bibbia, Isaia: “Dio è un vento silenzioso”; e poi lo dice anche il Salmo: “Non in commotione dominus” – “Dio non fa rumore”. [...] Dio come un brivido, un fermito, come un vento che sfora le onde del mare e le increspa. Questo è Dio. Dio che non viene a darci ragione di sé, ma Dio che si presenta a noi, semmai si presenta a noi, in un evento.”, S. Givone, *Kronos e kairos*, cit. (transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

⁴⁰³ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 540–545.

⁴⁰⁴ “Pentheus: you shall repent that name”, Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 505–510.

⁴⁰⁵ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 599.

not be able to return? Death had visited Nastasya right at the moment she left the room. Therefore, how is it possible that they had met nonetheless? Everything must have been reversible, everything must have been orderable, if it were not for that fly.

“Whoever sees God, dies,” Ibsen wrote once; “but can he who has been seen by God continue to live?”⁴⁰⁶

When death came, the fly must have been informed. Its enormous inexpressive eyes must have seen it coming, long before Rogozhin extracted the knife, years before the spoonful of blood would soil her wedding dress, it must have known, long before, that Nastasya would die on that day, murdered.

KNIGHT: They say that you have been in league with the Devil.

TYAN: Why do you ask?

KNIGHT: Not out of curiosity, but for very personal reasons. I too want to meet him.

TYAN: Why?

KNIGHT: I want to ask him about God. He, if anyone, must know.

TYAN: You can see him anytime.

KNIGHT: How?

TYAN: You must do as I tell you.

The KNIGHT grips the wooden rail of the cart so tightly that his knuckles whiten. TYAN leans forward and joins her gaze with his.

TYAN: Look into my eyes.

The KNIGHT meets her gaze. They stare at each other for a long time.

TYAN: What do you see? Do you see him?

KNIGHT: I see fear in your eyes, an empty, numb fear. But nothing else.

*He falls silent. The soldiers work at the stakes; their hammering echoes in the forest.*⁴⁰⁷

Could it be stated here that Bromius, “the god of joy”,⁴⁰⁸ the master of countless unrestrained spirits, expressing their liveliness in some most outrageous and rebellious ways, has nothing

⁴⁰⁶ G. Lukács, *Soul and form*, cit., p. 152.

⁴⁰⁷ *Det sjunde inseglet*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, cit. Script available online at: <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Seventh-Seal.-The.html> (Accessed: 5 November 2021).

⁴⁰⁸ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 410–415.

to say at the violent death of this young woman, other than buzzing? Could it be claimed that the mighty Lysios, the god of “inexplicable, indemonstrable, incomprehensible”⁴⁰⁹ freedom – from which it all originates, good and bad – permitted the death of an innocent to be chosen?

God must have seen it all. When Nastasya left, emptiness took over the room. Rogozhin and Myshkin were looking at her new body, crafted in marble.⁴¹⁰ It is there, in her empty eyes that god must have been – as a poor young woman, condemned to death, told to the knight Antonius Block. God was in the nothing, nothing left there anymore. He is in that nothing, that Myshkin, the first man Nastasya ever recognised as such,⁴¹¹ nonetheless, saw right before losing his mind.

3.3. *Kairos*

“The irruption of God into reality is a victory against nothingness”⁴¹² – Luigi Pareyson writes. Thus, when death arrives – a chosen death, a murder – to shut down the light that God kindled in time, risk presents itself even in front of the mighty. When God created man, he gave him freedom. He permitted man to choose evil, to put the whole of creation under threat. And that is exactly what man did.

Unarmed, they swooped down upon the herds of cattle
grazing there on the green of the meadow. And then
you could have seen a single woman with bare hands
tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright,

⁴⁰⁹ L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà: il male e la sofferenza*, cit., p. 31 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴¹⁰ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit., p. 597.

⁴¹¹ Cf. F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, cit.; Cf. also: “Myskin come figura messianica per eccellenza: tragicamente messianica, apocalitticamente messianica. La “bontà” di Myskin è la “mitezza” del “buono deriso”, dice Dostoevskij, è la mitezza dell’Agnello... [...] Dostoevskij afferma inoltre che l’idea che l’”idea principale del romanzo è di rappresentare un uomo positivamente buono” [...] ma prima ancora appare come il martire di Dio: se si lascia deridere, se si lascia condurre al macello della derisione, ciò accade perché, apocalitticamente, egli testimonia che Dio è il solo interlocutore, e lo testimonia sopportando tutto, patendo tutto: Ecce homo, dunque (leggerei in questo senso il saluto di Nastas’ja Filippovna al principe: “Addio, principe, per la prima volta ho veduto un uomo”, S. Givone, *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, cit., p. 89.

⁴¹² “E quest’irruzione di Dio nella realtà è una vittoria sul nulla”, L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà*, cit., p. 37, (trans. V. Baltić).

in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces.
There were ribs and cloven hooves scattered everywhere,
and scraps smeared with blood hung from the fir trees.
And bulls, their raging fury gathered in their horns,
lowered their heads to charge, then fell, stumbling
o the earth, pulled down by hordes of women
stripped of flesh and skin more quickly, sire,
than you could blink your royal eyes.⁴¹³

As for Oliver Frljić, in his *Bakhe* (2008), a part of *Trilogija o hrvatskom fašizmu*, Euripides' careful description of the atrocious violence of the bacchants corresponds to the imagery of the Yugoslav wars of the 'nineties, the most terrible events, which modelled the unhappy prospect of post-war society in the Western Balkans, must be confronted in order for the sane parts of the societal being to be saved from further corruption. In *Bakhe*'s case, the Croatian audience is invited to stop the ruinous practice of the dismissal and relativisation of war crimes, to condemn historical revisionism regarding the malignant influence of fascist and nationalist heritage and to honour the victims, to whichever party they belonged. Frljić does not restrain from bringing up names, places and deeds – which also occurs in his other works – denouncing with transparency the fact that the recent past of the community he refers to is of such a nature that it does not permit embellishments of any sort or any excuse. Until the story of Zeus's son, *dithýrambos*, the one who was born twice, the one who suffered thoroughly, is told, Pentheus will rule and will die as he did, infinitely. Until the truth is told so as to be heard, the story will not change, it will be a tragedy.

History – as the philosopher Massimo Cacciari claims⁴¹⁴ – even in its most inexplicable, horrendous aspects, has meaning. It is not absurd – he proceeds – and despite the injustices inherent to it, the moment will come for us to reach the end of time; that moment, as Christians believe, in which the reason for it all will be given. While still living within this well-known, yet ever surprising reality, man cannot see clearly. Nonetheless, in the moment

⁴¹³ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 735–750.

⁴¹⁴ M. Cacciari, *Apocalisse*, cit.

of *eschaton*, the ultimate meaning of everything will be illuminated. The moment of return. “Should it be awaited impatiently?” – the philosopher asks. Should a man pray for god’s imminent arrival, for the moment which will answer every one of his *whys*? Is there any way to anticipate the advent, or would it be – as John claims in *The Book of Revelation* – a rather vain and arrogant presumption to consider oneself capable of influencing in any, even minor, way the holy victory against the unjust?

Many die too late, and some die too early. The doctrine still sounds strange: “Die at the right time!” Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches it. To be sure, how could the person who never lives at the right time ever die at the right time?⁴¹⁵

In Frljić’s *Bakhe*, the just and the innocent are contained in plastic bags, with transparent top sections, where the heads of the dead are exposed. As the actors, who close themselves up in the bags, breathe, condensation forms on those transparent openings. It might seem as if the dead were hurting. It might seem that until the story is told, while still within history, the *un-dead* are hurting.

God chose good, he chose being. “He is being, who chose to be”,⁴¹⁶ Pareyson writes. “Being itself is freedom”,⁴¹⁷ the philosopher proceeds. Therefore, god, who is freedom, gives the chance to be negated, he allows the same force that he himself is made of to doom, if necessary, the whole of his creation – given that even in this most unfortunate prospect, he would be affirmed in his very essence. In other words, freedom “cannot negate itself, except by affirming itself”,⁴¹⁸ the philosopher proceeds. It permits black holes or nuclear catastrophes – Givone points out.⁴¹⁹ In the blink of an eye it agrees for everything to disappear, it allows the annihilation of it all, except itself. When god created man, he gave him choice. The man chose to betray good, and history had its start.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, cit., p. 53.

⁴¹⁶ L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà*, cit., p. 65 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴¹⁹ S. Givone, *Quanto è vero il dio*, cit., p. 92.

⁴²⁰ L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà*, cit., p. 53.

In a world stricken by plague and wars, hunger and poverty, ignorance and fear, Antonius Block thought that it would be good to get the chance to consult with God. The knight had some questions that he longed to have answered but, instead of meeting the Almighty, he only encountered Death. Almost benevolent and certainly kind – since it would first present itself and then cut down the tree one might climb up in an attempt to escape hungry wolves – Death acted as if it were generally ignorant (maybe, unexpectedly, even more than the life is) of the matters of the great mysteries of human existence.

KNIGHT: Why can't I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse him and want to tear him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is he a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

DEATH: Yes, I hear you.

KNIGHT: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand towards me, reveal himself and speak to me.

DEATH: But he remains silent.

KNIGHT: I call out to him in the dark but no one seems to be there.

DEATH: Perhaps no one is there.

KNIGHT: Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.⁴²¹

In Ingmar Bergman's famous *Det sjunde inseglet*, the knight and Death sit opposite each other in a chess duel, as the knight tries to buy time, which he is increasingly running out of. At one point of the game, Block clumsily knocks over some chess pieces. He was either trying to disrupt his opponent's concentration or, rather, it happened due to his own poor focus on the development of the match. Death, thus, kindly recommended it would put back those moved pieces, assuring him that it knew exactly where they had been positioned before. Nonetheless, spectators can witness Death arranging the pieces in a different manner than before the incident. This negligence would lead Block to his – even though this is maybe, in any case, expected – defeat in the game.

⁴²¹ *Det sjunde inseglet*, cit.

If the knight had been more careful, if Death had not been cheating, if the game were fair, could it be asserted that the mortal might have had, nonetheless, a chance to win? If the knight were to be truly present – undistracted by his doubts, fears and frailties – if he were to follow the game, in all its developments, if the human being were to be, to truly be, would he have a chance to not be, as well? The knight might have won, it could be stated, had he not had to not be able to; had he not had to say “no”.

This scene is masterfully represented in one of the frescos in Padua Baptistery, depicted by maybe Giotto’s student, de’ Menabuoi, in the fourteenth century.⁴²² The image shows the Virgin Mary with a baby on her lap looking defenceless in front of a dragon. As *The Book of Revelation* reports:

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.⁴²³

Christians were the first to think through the idea of *event*. The incarnation – Sergio Givone claims – would mean nothing, if it were only to be a theatrical act, if God were not to risk, if the cross were not the occasion when his actual death would occur. An event is nothing less than a real possibility of being or of not being – Givone proceeds – from which not even god himself is exempted. There is a dragon ready to eat the Saviour, as the fresco shows; in every single moment, it might take the chance to attack, to annihilate all that there is. In every moment, creation could turn to nothing. As professed in the *Apocalypse*, there is a possibility for everything that was written, for the word of god, for the meaning of the creation to vanish irretrievably from one moment to the next.

⁴²² G. de’ Menabuoi, *The woman clothed with the sun and the seven-headed dragon*, (1360–1370, Padua Baptistery), cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 4., p. 170.

⁴²³ *The Book of Revelation*, 12:1–4.

In the present moment, in every moment – by the same logic – there is also a chance for being to be safeguarded. In this “realm of nothing”⁴²⁴ – as Givone defines history – torn between the past, which is lost forever, and the future, which is not there yet,⁴²⁵ a moment has its chance to be. The appropriate moment, the perfect moment, “the moment which deserves to be remembered”,⁴²⁶ which “touches eternity”,⁴²⁷ which is eternal and “eternally worthy of being”.⁴²⁸ It is *kairos*. The moment in which god is revealed. The moment in which man meets himself, maybe for the first time.

In this sense, there is no need to pray for God to come, as early Christians faithfully hoped he would, even during their lives, nor is it necessary to project the future advent – Cacciari affirms. The occasion for transformation was and is always there, in the now, in every moment – the philosopher proceeds. Every moment is a potential entry into a place of peace.⁴²⁹ In every moment a “yes” could be adopted as an answer. In every moment being could be chosen.

⁴²⁴ S. Givone, *Kronos e kairos*, cit.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁹ M. Cacciari, *Apocalisse*, cit.

IV *Anamnesis, or On suffering*

4.1. *Sparagmos, or On the grotesque body*

When in 2010 he was writing his first theatrical play, *La Merda*, Cristian Ceresoli, a young man from Bergamo, tried to banish the world of cultural dictates of the early 'nineties out of his body-mind. The invitation to build up *perfect* muscles, to be *masculine enough* and act as such – personified in famous characters of that age, such as Rocky Balboa,⁴³⁰ for instance – carried considerable weight for a fragile body of a 13-year-old boy, which Ceresoli was at that time. This noxious societal demand – a wrapping, filled with organs, with some bones and flesh, liquids and skin tissue, which would collide against each other, piled up indiscriminately – made quite a noise. This painful request plunged into the violent gratuitousness of an act of emptying: depriving the body of the soul, it entered the body of a child, to stay hidden somewhere inside the writer he had grown up to become. The body of a writer is active, it is tense; “If someone were to film me while I was writing, he would understand...”,⁴³¹ Cristian claims. It is the body which transforms the most particular experience of one man into the shared heritage of the particular experiences of every man and woman out there in the audience. The body of the writer is offered there, on the paper,

⁴³⁰ Interview with Cristian Ceresoli, 6 May 2021. (All the interviews with C. Ceresoli indicated in the text were conducted online, transcribed and translated by V. Baltić.)

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

on the stage, to be torn to pieces – again. It is offered, to be torn to pieces differently, this time maybe better, with the prospect of recomposing the whole...

“She offers herself”,⁴³² Ceresoli claims, when talking about the main character of his play *La Merda*. A young woman is alone on an empty stage, while the lights glare directly into her face. She has her hair gathered up to remind one of a girl, or of an animal with some kind of horns, maybe a bull – a Dionysus, who himself was dismembered by the Titans.

In *La Merda*, the naked body of a grown-up woman argues, with the intrusions of gestures and the voice of maybe a little girl; certainly a trembling voice which denotes some kind of instability, some kind of muffled lament, a suffering compressed into a negotiation with the self: a childish self and a future self, placed in opposition to each other. It argues with this young lady’s history, marked by violence and tragedy. The body argues by refusing to argue, it engages in an extremely fast stream of consciousness; it seems as if it is trying to affirm itself by dissenting from most of the words the mind holds truthful. It is as if it were saying: “I was and still am subjected to violence, but, nonetheless, I am here, still, listening.”

I do not know
but
I do know that
space,
time,
dimension,
becoming,
future,
destiny,
being,
non-being,
self,
non-self,
are nothing to me;

⁴³² *Ibid.*

but there is a thing
which is something,
only one thing
which is something,
and which I feel
because it wants
TO GET OUT:
the presence
of my bodily
suffering,
the menacing,
never tiring
presence
of my
body [...]⁴³³

The woman's mouth is particularly eloquent. It shows disgust, maybe directed towards the woman herself: the mouth of one who is thirsty for fame, who is desperate to succeed in the world of the *big people*.

It is a grotesque body which is characterised by a *gaping mouth* – Mikhail Bakhtin writes in his *Творчество Франсуа Рабле*.⁴³⁴ This “open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld”,⁴³⁵ Bakhtin individuates in Pantagruel – a devilish creature, born in Rabelais' writing in 1532, which was precisely the year of a great drought.⁴³⁶ The image of Pantagruel,

⁴³³ A. Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, 1945, It. trans. M. Dotti (ed.), *Per farla finite col giudizio di Dio*, Roma, Stampa alternativa, 2001, pp. 43–45, Eng. trans. *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, available online at: <http://www.labster8.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Artaud-ToHaveDoneWithJudgementofGod.pdf> (Accessed: 15 November 2021).

⁴³⁴ M. Bakhtin, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и Ренессанса*, 1965, Eng. trans. *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴³⁶ F. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, cit.

“the all-thirsting one”,⁴³⁷ is connected with the body of opposites, whose mouth is “with a purely carnivalesque gesture”⁴³⁸ filled with salt, but also simultaneously inebriated.

It was Phaeton – Rabelais writes⁴³⁹ – who made a mistake which interfered with the Sun’s trajectory. This negligence caused the Sun to burn a large part of the sky and to cause a drought among the inhabitants of the Earth. The writer proceeds on narrating that, on that occasion, the Earth was so heated up that it started sweating. As a result, great drops of water came from inside the Earth, to deceive thirsty humans into thinking that they had been blessed and that, after all, their thirst would be quenched. They thus drank. It was unfortunately brine coming from the body of the Earth – Rabelais narrates – since sweat is salty, just as the sea is. Pantagruel was born in those days, and was given a name which referred precisely to this unhappy event. *Panta*, thus, means “all” in Greek – the writer proceeds – while *gruel* means “thirsty” in Hagarene.⁴⁴⁰

In respect of men, there was the pity, you should have seen them lay out their tongues like hares that have been run six hours. Many did throw themselves into the wells. Others entered within a cow’s belly to be in the shade; those Homer calls *Alibantes*. All the country was idle, and could do no virtue. It was a most lamentable case to have seen the labour of mortals in defending themselves from the vehemency of this drought [...]⁴⁴¹

In *La Merda*, the woman eats much more and much faster than she can digest, in order to gain weight and become eligible to compete for a role in a TV commercial. In order to appear on the big screen and to be seen, the woman is ready to do whatever it takes. Her body must change. The body must change. It has to become bigger. Abel must be killed, so that his blood will saturate the soil, which will then – fertilised by the blood of the righteous – be able to yield great medlars, Rabelais recounts in *On the origin and antiquity of the great Pantagruel*.⁴⁴² Once eaten, those curious fruits would make humans grow disproportionately large body parts. For some, it was their belly that would grow, for others their legs, nose,

⁴³⁷ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 331.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁴³⁹ F. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, cit., pp. 72–73.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 69–71.

genitals... “This is actually a picture of dismemberment, of separate areas of the body enlarged to gigantic dimensions”⁴⁴³ – Bakhtin writes. The young woman from *La Merda*, thus, it might be said, has grown thighs; it is in spite of “these thighs”⁴⁴⁴ – as she refers to them with contempt – that she *won’t quit*. These thighs which have grown *wrong* are those which need a cure, which should be, in the end, eliminated.

I don’t just think, but know, that the *solution*, the real *final solution*, (the voice abandons the vocal mask, then in a crescendo, as if determined to kill, for this, to make it big) will be *to eat* these thighs of mine, and it’s only like this, by eating them and tearing them off by bites, taking them away from me forever and shitting them out of my ass once eaten, these thighs of mine, will let me be *free*, free to be the woman I am and to sign thousands of autographs and to be adored [...] and then perhaps one day, while queuing on the motorway, the people in the car next to mine will recognize me, and they’ll start tapping on my window [...]⁴⁴⁵

Cadmus’ heir, the king of Thebes, disregarded the god’s request for recognition, to find himself, at the end of *The Bacchae*, at the mercy of his mother Agave, who could not recognise her son any more. To Agave, whose vision was obfuscated, Pentheus looked like a wild lion, a hunting trophy to bring back home. Before dying, the king, Pentheus, *penthéin*, *pénthos*,⁴⁴⁶ the one who is meant to suffer, implored his mother to spare his life with the following words:

“No, Mother! I am Pentheus,
your own son, the child you bore to Echion!
Pity me, spare me, Mother! I have done a wrong,
but do not kill your own son for that offense.”⁴⁴⁷

Agave could not see what she was doing until it was too late. Only after her final fall was she in a position to recognise the god’s agency crafting a new world through her own hands. It

⁴⁴³ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 328.

⁴⁴⁴ C. Ceresoli, *La Merda*, London, Oberon Books Ltd, 2012.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, (italics are the author’s).

⁴⁴⁶ “[...] *Penthéus* ha la stessa radice di *penthéin*, che significa ‘patire’, e di *pénthos*, la ‘sofferenza’[...]”, (“[...] *Penthéus* has the same root as *penthéin*, meaning ‘to suffer’, and as *pénthos*, the ‘suffering’[...]”), Euripide, *Le tragedie*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007, pp. 70–71 (trans by V. Baltić).

⁴⁴⁷ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, cit., 1115–1120.

was a world she did not know of, yet she might have remembered it, as in a long lost dream, maybe the dream of Actaeon⁴⁴⁸ or a Platonic *anamnesis*⁴⁴⁹ – the abyss opening in front of her, the strangest sight ever seen, yet somehow familiar. She could not have foreseen the head of her son, emptied in an act of furious violence being perpetrated, furthermore, by anyone other than herself and her sisters, ever before, but now this image presents itself in front of her so abruptly, as if it were meant to be there long ago; as if *those* two hands of hers were the only place on the Earth where this head had to be laid. Now, Agave sees. Nonetheless, she could not have known before, just as she will never again be able to un-know. In other words, for her, the sad ending of her son's life was not only never seen before, but it was tragically *un-seen*, as, from that moment on, the image of his impassive head swaddled on her lap, will never be *un-seen* any more.

When Pantagruel was born, he was already so big that he caused his mother's death. The insistence on the binding of the motifs of birth and death corresponds – Bakhtin writes⁴⁵⁰ – to the carnivalesque imagery of Rabelais, which nourishes its mocking grin through establishing bonds between symbolic opposites, such as between, in this case, the gaping mouth and the uterus. The mother, as with Mother Earth, fertilised in Abel's blood, would give life, if soaked in death.

As the gate of one world is to be closed forever in the precise moment in which Agave recognises her son, so another is simultaneously opening. The passage becomes almost imperceptible, since the suffering for the lost tends to obfuscate those rigid boundaries between the two realities. The body and the heart broken into pieces by the terrible grip of tragedy will be recomposed into suffering, through the suffering.

They all say that I'm a mother and no longer a lover. Yet, both mother and lover feel before they see. Both have nerves like tentacles reaching out for the most tender emotions. Both need space. For there is this moment when it gets so intense. The moment when space means everything. You know it, don't you? It is this moment when it feels like you would like to be

⁴⁴⁸ Actaeon was Autonoe's (Agave's sister's) son, a hunter, who died being torn apart, because of Artemis' curse, by his own hounds.

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. Plato, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit.

torn apart, split in two. You would like to open up the door of your flesh, but you can't. You would like your actual skin to split open. You would like to crack open your ribs, get rid of your hip joints, but you can't. You would like your womanhood to turn into a creature. You would like tentacles growing out of your sacred wound. You would like your vagina to become a giant octopus sucking him in deeper and deeper and deeper, but you can't. You would like to become a merciless black hole swallowing him, swallowing everything, but you can't. Because both mother and lover need space. More space. So, here is what I did. My fingers worked slowly inside of me. It felt soft, yet strong. I went deep, deeper inside myself, until my hand felt the soft wet bag of my bladder. I made a fist, I twisted it and...I ripped it out. It tore and bled its liquid onto the ground, but that was not enough. I had to find my intestines. They were long and slippery, like wet ropes keeping me imprisoned inside. So slowly I pulled, ever so slowly. And now, they tumbled out of me, taking out the organs[...]. But, even that was not enough. My kidneys – my hand found them and I got them out. My liver – my hand went above it. It was soft. It felt exquisite. I pushed, I pushed and slowly it fell out onto the bloodstained ground and then I cracked my ribs, one by one, like you crack a nut. And finally, all that space. So next time, my lover, my son was inside me, this is how far he got to my beating heart. Deep inside the emptiness of me. Nothing there. No apology.⁴⁵¹

Ivana Jozić, dressed in white, is seated on a stage of *Mount Olympus*. Her hands are covered in red, her dress is stained by red. There is raw flesh between her legs. She is speaking in the name of Jocasta – a mother who gave birth to Sophocles' heroes.

4.2. Sparagmos, or On the death within

In Kafka's short story entitled *Ein Hungerkünstler*,⁴⁵² a man voluntarily confined in a cage exhibits in himself the process of dying. He finds his vocation in fasting; a project imagined

⁴⁵¹ Transcription from the video of the performance *Mount Olympus, To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy, A 24-Hour Performance*, (chapter *Heracles*, scene *Iocaste's sparagmos*: "You all say that I am a mother and no longer a lover"), La Compagnie des Indes, 2016. (Transcribed by V. Baltić).

⁴⁵² F. Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler*, cit.

so as to involve as many curious eyes as the parterre can host, ready to offer their attention, tribute, or even admiration to this valiant man. On the fortieth day of fasting, when interest among the audience would generally start to fade away, the man triumphantly leaves the cage – Kafka writes – to be greeted with his first meal after a number of difficult days.

Yes, – Kafka insisted – the Hunger Artist needed to sing to convince some neglectful guards that he was, most certainly, not eating, even when, due to their poor surveillance, he was in a position to do so. Yes, he was very worried about the success of his performance, so he would try to prove in any possible way that he was uniquely suited to the arduous assignment entrusted to him. To eat, finally, meant to fail, according to the judgment of the sensitive heart of an artist.

[...] on the third day I get hungry and out of hunger I bite my nails and when I finish my nails I start nibbling at the skin around them, and it disgusts me but I get used to it, and on the fifth day I hold on tight and finally feel like a brand new woman, as if by being so determined I had begun a new life [...]⁴⁵³

The Artist despised the vulnerability of his body, its dependency on any kind of matter shaped outside of his own mind. He wanted to exceed the forty-day goal and thought that he would be able to go pass that easily. He felt able to resist indefinitely, to resist forever.

[...] despite it all I've got talent, and so even if it's dark, here I'll stay, in front of the cameras, and if needed, tonight, I'll stay here, I'll sleep here, and while I'm there, like that, in this garage, in the dark, there are some voices laughing and saying, well look, ha ha ha, look at this one what fuckin' photos she's got, ha ha, with these chubby tuna-legs, ha ha, a tuna, a tuhuuuna, the other one replies, yes, a tuna fish, or a mermaid, as my daddy used to say, those chubby mermaid-legs, ha ha, anyway a quick bang eh, my bambina, says the first one, why not, replies the other one, as long as she breathes, ha ha, as long as she breathes, ha ha, how funny, ha ha, how funny, yes yes, a quick bang, ha ha ha, oh God what a laugh, oh so funny, ha ha, but about laughing, me, I'm not laughing, and I stay there, and resist, because it's

⁴⁵³ C. Ceresoli, *La Merda*, cit.

thanks to the *Resistance Movement* that Fascism is over and our country exists, yes, and I stay there, like that [...]⁴⁵⁴

One day, the Artist's body became a soul lighter. If no one was to see it dissolving progressively, would his body simply decay and turn into traceless dust, as it does for many?

Death must be observed carefully while sneaking up on the body. This process must be shown live, in front of many eyes. One after another, all of the Artist's organs must show disobedience. One by one, they had to desist and stop *ticking*. Worthless, pitiful, vulgarly conditioned by their position in the whole, the organs should obey the supreme idea of the mind. With the progression of time, which would corrupt them by the rusty hand of severe neglect, the organs would start asserting their insufficient self-sufficiency. At that point, every one of them would try to prove that it is able to think on its own, to thrive on its own, to present, each, its own disregard of the whole. The man must be dismembered. Every one of his organs must be able to say: "No". His body must be able to hold back death. It should drink from the waters of the Styx, one sip at a time, before becoming immune to its poisonous flavour; it should collect the divine nectar from its own indestructible heart – that very organ able to resist the longest.

And so, all this big, me, I've got to earn it by myself, my big chance, my first step in the world that counts, the world that those *starving little midgets*, with their red shirts, built for us, for me, and those others who *resisted*, with their fight for a free country, yes, it is, and me, even in their name, I must be a new woman, free, and I must make it, and if they've said fat, so it is, and if they want me fat, fleshy, opulent and large, so me that's the one that I will be.⁴⁵⁵

The body is tortured to the point of disowning itself. It must be fragmented. All of the organs in the system should get a chance to work on their own, until man himself, man utterly different from his body – this heavy shell which only burdens him along his earthly road – man who is different from this world he fell into, can be set free. The organs must – once divided from the rest – start working on their own, for themselves, or maybe for another god;

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

for a god who does not promote life, this life, short, trying, tragic... The heart, for instance, should pump the blood by its own will.

The body must suffer. The body must hurt, for its scream to wake up the mind; the mind which sees a human as an outcast in this world, which wants to convince everyone, even itself, that it would still be, despite the body. A human being – the mind would assert – cannot be reduced to a set of organs, since every single one of his organs, once disjoined from each other, would have its own mind, its own unassailable will. The mind, thus, wants the liver to show resistance, it wants the bladder to show resistance, it wants the lungs to show resistance, against the tyranny of death.

4.2.1. *On what you might need to do to be permitted to sit at the “winners’ table”*

In conversation with Cristian Ceresoli and Silvia Gallerano

The performance *La Merda* was created in 2010 in Italy. It was precisely 28 July when Cristian Ceresoli wrote the first lines of the *pièce*. He saved this first version in a computer folder with 184 other revisions.⁴⁵⁶ It was a filigree work. Every word had to find its place in the score and it had to feel comfortable there. Nothing could disrupt the musicality of the writing. Similarly to the poetics of the master of polyphony, Johann Sebastian Bach, every word was justified by its particular function. “I used to listen to him obsessively”⁴⁵⁷ – the writer recounts.

On 11 September, the first chapter – a twelve-minute-long monologue – debuted in Udine at a theatre competition promoting the works of young artists. Silvia Gallerano got the completed writing only twenty-four hours before the show – Cristian recalls. They won.

⁴⁵⁶ Interview with Cristian Ceresoli, 6 May 2021.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The specific thing, I think, as well as my great luck, the advantage that I had in this work, is that the vocal mask pre-existed the writing. The character – even though I don't like to call her a character, since she became a vocal mask – pre-existed the text. It is a figure that I had used in another performance, which had appeared in another work with my own theatrical company and it continued to persecute me in some way. She was like some kind of *alter ego* of me, outlined at the beginning in a much more simplistic manner. This was particularly the case during her first appearances, when she found her form in one of my performances entitled *Assola. Elogio della solitudine*. In that case, she was a young single woman, in her little apartment, who was suffering because she was alone and unable to find love. [...] She was a real stereotypical single. With this lamenting voice she asked – why is it that nobody loves me? This character, nonetheless, was fuller than that. It was outlined there a little bit two-dimensionally, but, clearly; it was asking for space, in the sense that it continued to enter every work that I was doing. However, I was not able to give it words. I could not find them. At one point, after a first collaboration with Cristian on another work, which went well, I asked him: “Why would not you write a *piece* for her?” [...] In this sense, Cristian had the genius idea to take away the two-dimensionality and give her rather a ferocious, cruel look. I think that the tragedy is born precisely from this: the human fulness of this figure.⁴⁵⁸

La Merda was born in the midst of many currents. On one hand, there was that burning presence of Silvia's “little sister looking for space”⁴⁵⁹ – as the actress attests. On the other hand, there were Joyce's and Hrabal's streams of consciousness – as in *Ulysses'* final

⁴⁵⁸ “La cosa particolare, credo, anche la mia grande fortuna, un vantaggio che io ho avuto in questo lavoro, è che la maschera vocale preesisteva la scrittura. Il personaggio – anche se non mi piace tanto chiamarlo personaggio, perché poi è diventato più una maschera vocale – preesisteva il testo. È la figura che io ho usato in un altro spettacolo, che era apparsa in un altro lavoro con la mia compagnia e continuava un po' a perseguitarmi. Era come una specie di mio *alter ego*, delineato all'inizio in maniera molto più semplicistica. Nelle sue prime apparizioni in particolare, poi ha trovato una sua forma in un mio spettacolo che si chiamava *Assola. Elogio della solitudine*. In quel caso era una giovane single, nel suo piccolo appartamento, che soffriva per il fatto di essere sola e di non riuscire a trovare l'amore. [...] Era proprio uno stereotipo della single. Con questa voce lamentosa si chiedeva perché nessuno mi ama. Questo personaggio, però, aveva una pienezza maggiore. Così, era delineato un po' bidimensionale, però, evidentemente chiedeva spazio, nel senso che continuava ad entrare in tutti i lavori che io facevo. Io però non avevo la capacità di darle le parole. Non sapevo trovarle. Ad un certo punto, dopo una prima collaborazione con Cristian su un altro lavoro, che è andato bene, a quel punto io gli ho detto: ‘Perché non scrivi un testo per lei?’ [...] In questo senso, Cristian ha avuto l'idea geniale di toglierla da questa bidimensionalità e di darle, invece, un aspetto feroce, crudele. Credo che la tragedia nasca anche proprio da questo: dalla pienezza umana che ha questa figura”, interview with Silvia Gallerano, 19 July 2021. (The interview with S. Gallerano indicated in the text in various places was conducted online, transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

⁴⁵⁹ “[...] una sorella minore che chiedeva spazio [...]”, *ibid.*

monologue and in *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*,⁴⁶⁰ which were very inspirational for Cristian. Above all, as both artists claim, *La Merda* is a theatrical work which did not come to life out of one person. It was born *in between* them.

At that time, Silvia wrote some brief biographical notes and recollections of some of her past experiences, from which Cristian derived stories which preceded the writing of the play. They would confront and exchange opinions. From that material, their material, their most personal belongings – images of their raw, unapologetic outlooks on life – *La Merda* took its first form. It was precisely their own humanity that was able to get into the hearts of others. It is the honest gaze of a single person that shines a beam of light onto the most secret encounters of many.

In Udine, a girl, now a woman, put on the vocal mask of her nameless character, to be able to speak those words that she once might have heard, as many might. Those are the words she could not give life to, except through the art of acting; those words buried inside the bodies of many. On the stage of *La Merda*, Silvia's body shrivels in the grip of dismissal, it freezes in front of fear, it cringes to avoid violence. That body, oppressed by the heavy hand of the – often implicit, and thus, even more dangerous – fascist cultural heritage, without which even the most inexplicable exclusions from the mercy of Chance might seem bearable, is compelled to climb. The ladder, as the tree in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, goes up to the clouds, where a terrible giant is waiting to make a delicious meal out of human bones. Nevertheless, this woman on the stage of *La Merda* does not fear the giant. She fears the possibility of failing, of falling down the ladder, of not becoming a giant herself. This dictate, once it enters the body of a girl, now a woman, explicates the suffering of one who does not know of any world other than the loudest, the one which does not allow any reply.⁴⁶¹ It is this tragic

⁴⁶⁰ Eng. trans. *I Served the King of England*.

⁴⁶¹ “Ciò che mi ha detto e insegnato quella tenda non ammetteva (e non amette) repliche. Con essa non era possibile né ammissibile alcun dialogo né alcun atto autoeducativo. Ecco perché ho creduto che tutto il mondo fosse il mondo che quella tenda mi insegnava: ho creduto cioè che tutto il mondo fosse perbene, idealistico, triste e scettico, un po' volgare: insomma, piccolo-borghese”, P. P. Pasolini, *La prima lezione me l'ha data una tenda*, in *Lettere luterane*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976, p. 35, Ceresoli refers to this writing of Pasolini's when talking about his childhood.

experience of life that both artists have known of, that contributes to the original chaos out of which their work has sprung – Cristian points out.

We had shared this tragic aspect a lot. My biographical story, as Silvia's – especially in that delicate phase around 13 years old, or maybe just after – has a lot to do with tragic and extremely human experiences which were, for many reasons, also not very evident. I spent a lot of time suffering the inability to be the type of person which the system of things – the society in which I lived and through which I lived, the type of parents I had, the provincial context within which I grew up – somehow suggested to me, almost forced me, to pursue. There was a model of a male, of a boy, of a man, of a citizen, of a human being which was recommended to me. Those were the 'eighties, the beginning of the 'nineties... My references were heroes from cinema, the victorious American heroes: tall, big, beautiful, muscular. The more direct references from the class were the boys who tended to be characterised as alpha-male types and, thus, as strong, overbearing and dominant in the little class-community, in the little community of friends and mates in play and fun... I imagine you have a pretty clear image of the type of reference of man and citizen still extremely present in our contemporaneity, even though some gigantic steps have been made maybe and we are all glad about it... [...] In our cities, in our proximity [...] the human mass, lives in different conditions and the conditions in which it lives today are still, I believe, overwhelmingly conditioned by a certain type of patriarchal system. Well, the encounter with this patriarchal system for me at the most tender and malleable age, which is precisely the period of learning, of the discovery of sexuality, of the discovery of relationships and of one's own thought, was a tragic experience. I tried desperately to become tall, being short; to become strong, being fragile; to have satisfying sexual experiences, speaking from the standpoint of performance and result, without having the luck of meeting a boyfriend or a girlfriend with whom to discover sexuality together. [...] All this effort, without actually ever managing to be those who, for me, were really, tragically references. [...] A few years before I was born, Pier Paolo Pasolini recounted, described, debated about the distance which we, the youngest, the adolescents, have between what we are and what we think we need to become – not between what we are and what we could become. This aspect, in some way, on a maybe even more

tacit, implicit level than that of the words, of the dialogues, of the conversations that Silvia and I have had, was a common ground.⁴⁶²

At the Nico Pepe Academy of Dramatic Arts in Udine, as they were about to take the stage before the initial twelve-minute performance of *La Merda*, Silvia decided to take off the shirt she was wearing of the Italian national football team's player Roberto Baggio, and to enter the stage completely naked. She asked: "Should I take it off?"; to which Cristian replied with: "Do as you wish".⁴⁶³ As Baggio's shirt – this kind of magical object for Cristian – hit the floor, all their fears, anxieties and doubts vanished. The show started. That very first time that the performance saw the light of a day, the audience was very enthusiastic – Cristian recalls:

[...] several minutes of applause at the end, which, at this point, was not that much, I think, the applause for the actress, because she was good and for the writing because it was beautiful; that was ritual applause, a moment of political sharing of a state of difficulty and suffering. It was not a political sharing of joy, it was a joyful sharing to be able to finally have

⁴⁶² "Noi abbiamo condiviso tanto questo aspetto tragico. La mia storia biografica, così come quella di Silvia, ha molto a che fare – soprattutto in una fase delicata che è quella intorno ai 13 anni, poi magari gli anni subito successivi – con esperienze tragiche ed estremamente umane e, per molte ragioni, anche poco manifeste. Io ho passato molto tempo a soffrire dell'incapacità di poter essere quel tipo di persona che il sistema di cose, la società in cui io vivevo e ho vissuto, il tipo di genitori che ho avuto, il contesto provinciale in cui sono cresciuto mi hanno, in qualche modo, suggerito, quasi forzato, ad inseguire. C'era proprio un modello di maschio, di ragazzo, di uomo, di cittadino, di essere umano che mi veniva proposto. Erano fine anni Ottanta, inizio anni Novanta... I miei riferimenti erano gli eroi del cinema, eroi americani vincenti: alti, grossi, belli, muscolosi. I riferimenti più diretti in classe, erano i ragazzi che tendevano a una caratterizzazione di tipo maschio alfa, e quindi di forza, di prepotenza, di dominio della piccola comunità classe, della piccola comunità degli amici e dei compagni di gioco e di divertimento... Immagino ti sia abbastanza chiaro che tipo di riferimento di uomo e di cittadino, ancora estraneamente presente nella nostra contemporaneità, anche se forse sono stati fatti i passi da gigante e siamo tutti contenti... [...] Nelle nostre città, nelle nostre vicinanze [...] la massa umana, vive in diverse condizioni e le condizioni in cui vive oggi sono ancora, credo, prepotentemente dettate da un certo tipo di sistema patriarcale. Ora, l'incontro con questo sistema patriarcale per me in epoca più tenera e dolce, che è quella appunto di apprendimento, della scoperta della sessualità, della scoperta delle relazioni e del proprio pensiero, è stata un'esperienza tragica. Io ho tentato disperatamente di diventare alto, essendo basso, di diventare forte, essendo fragile, di avere delle esperienze sessuali soddisfacenti dal punto di vista performativo e del risultato, senza avere la fortuna di incontrare un compagno o una compagna con cui scoprire insieme la sessualità. [...] Tutto questo sforzo, senza in realtà mai riuscire ad essere quelli che per me erano realmente, tragicamente, i riferimenti. [...] Pochi anni prima che io nascessi, Pier Paolo Pasolini aveva raccontato, descritto, trattato della distanza che abbiamo noi, giovanissimi, adolescenti tra quello che siamo e quello che pensiamo di dover diventare – non tra quello che siamo e quello che potremmo essere. Quest'aspetto, in qualche modo, ad un livello forse ancora più tacito, implicito, più ancora che nelle parole, nei dialoghi, nei discorsi che abbiamo fatto io e Silvia, era proprio un terreno comune", interview with C. Ceresoli, 6 May 2021.

⁴⁶³ "La tolgo? – Come vuoi tu", interview with C. Ceresoli, 17 June 2021.

a place where it is possible to say: “We are not fine, we are not in a good shape”, let’s face it, let’s sing, we need to share the fact that there is a ready-made reality that wants, as always, efficient people, winners, adversaries, participants in one big race, but we – who are born and should maybe, in some way, live in the spirit of celebration, which is the experience of life – we are forced into this race, in which, among other things, we are not allowed to participate in an honest manner, but the only way to partake is to be as unfair as possible, and we neither have figures who represent us, nor is there a story. On the contrary, it is increasingly difficult to find in those more anarchic contexts, in freer contexts, such as theatres, for instance, a narration which concerns us. Therefore, being here and now, in this moment to share the human tragedy of an individual, and of a state, and of a society, with the possibility of doing that with some levity, through liberating tears, through laughter, through clapping, through the fact that after being present at this collective rite, one can stay for a while at the theatre to talk, one can establish new relationships. The community in some way was composed and it recomposes [...].⁴⁶⁴

The performance was created at a moment when Italian public opinion was significantly engaged in a prostitution scandal known as “Olgettine”. In the context, already sated by the *joyful* commodification of the female body, another exposure of nudity – even though, this time off the TV screens – of a young woman, determined to succeed in show-business, was highly problematic for theatrologist Laura Mariani:

I did not like it for three reasons: in that year of 2011 afflicted by “Olgettine”, it seemed to me as too connected with the news; I did not understand the choice of nudity and I got uneasy,

⁴⁶⁴ “[...]diversi minuti di applausi alla fine, che ormai, non erano più, secondo me, neanche tanto applausi a un’attrice perché è brava e a un testo perché è bello, erano proprio applausi rituali di un momento di condivisione politica di uno stato di difficoltà e di sofferenza. Non era la codivisione politica di una felicità, era condivisione felice di poter avere finalmente un luogo dove poter dire: “Non stiamo bene, non siamo messi molto bene”, diciamo, cantiamo, abbiamo bisogno di condividere che c’è una realtà precostituita che ci vuole sempre efficienti, vincitori, concorrenti, partecipanti di un’ unica grande gara, ma noi, forse, che siamo nati e dovremmo in qualche modo vivere in spirito di festa, quella che è l’esperienza della vita, siamo costretti a questa gara, dove tra l’altro, non ci fanno neanche partecipare in maniera leale, ma l’unico modo per parteciparvi è cercare di essere più scorretti possibili e non abbiamo neanche le figure che ci rappresentano e non esiste neanche una narrazione, anzi, è sempre più difficile trovare in quei contesti più anarchici, più liberi, come per esempio i teatri, una narrazione che ci riguarda. Quindi, essere qui ed ora in questo momento a condividere la tragedia umana di un individuo, e di un Paese, e di una società, con la possibilità di farlo nella leggerezza, attraverso il pianto liberatorio, attraverso la risata, attraverso il battere di mani, attraverso il fatto che poi dopo aver assistito a questo rito collettivo ci si può fermare al teatro a parlare, si possono stabilire nuove relazioni. La comunità in qualche modo si è composta e si ricompone [...]”, interview with C. Ceresoli, 25 May 2021.

also because I was two steps away from an actress whom I knew; the closeness magnified the movements of the face, amplified the voice, provoking additional discomfort. These restraints rapidly solidified into a prejudice which conditioned the whole view. A further confirmation, as if it were necessary, of how much the view could be influenced by elements partially external to the performance in itself concerning the expectations of the spectator and his own fragilities: tied, in my case, to intolerance toward Berlusconi and also toward anti-Berlusconi, toward nudity and the provocation in the title itself. Nonetheless, I have not forgot the performance and I was stricken by its successes: the unequivocal sign that it was intercepting something very much felt and that it knew how to express it.⁴⁶⁵

For Cristian and Silvia, nothing could have been more distant from their poetic vision than to produce a commentary of the present, from any particular societal, political or even ethical perspective. For them, what mattered was some kind of internal, intimate clock of theirs which had travelled through the times of their lives to turn upside down in that year of 2012, to seize the moment and, then, restart counting, before all the grains of sand had dropped to the other side. If their visions of life, of life in yesterday's and today's Italy, of life in Europe, had picked up on, or even foreseen – as Cristian not very happily notices that *La Merda* might have done – the products of those rat races which somehow stood out as being necessary to claim the feelings of inadequacy, exclusion and the terrible multiform suffering of many, it did not happen through their desire to outline the outside world's dynamic and societal currents, but through their understanding of their own, personal, human mismatch from these oppressive life prospects. In other words, even though without a direct cause-and-effect connection, these two contemporary realities cannot but encounter each other: until *La Merda*

⁴⁶⁵ “Non mi è piaciuto per tre motivi: mi è sembrato troppo legato alla cronaca, in quel 2011 afflitto dalle ‘Olgettine’; non ho capito la scelta della nudità e ho provato disagio, anche perché stavo proprio a due passi dall’attrice, che conoscevo; la vicinanza ingigantiva i movimenti del viso e amplificava la voce, causando un disagio ulteriore. Queste riserve si sono rapidamente cementate in un pregiudizio che ha condizionato tutta la visione. Una riprova, se ce ne fosse bisogno, di quanto lo sguardo possa essere influenzato da elementi in parte estrinseci allo spettacolo in sé, riguardanti l’orizzonte di attesa dello spettatore e le sue stesse fragilità: legate, nel mio caso, all’insofferenza nei confronti del berlusconismo come dell’antiberlusconismo, alla nudità e alla provocatorietà del titolo stesso. Ma non ho dimenticato lo spettacolo e sono rimasta colpita dai suoi successi: segno inequivocabile che intercettava qualcosa di molto sentito e sapeva esprimerlo”, L. Mariani, *Il dramma dell’umiliazione, “La Merda” di Cristian Ceresoli e Silvia Gallerano, un successo internazionale (2010–2016)*, in “Mimesis Journal”, 5, 2, 2016, pp. 67–88 (trans. by V. Baltić).

is able to intimately touch the spectators and to provoke long-lasting, thrilling applause, indiscriminately in Italy and abroad, “Olgettine” is the reality.

When we presented those twelve minutes at that school in Udine, within the competition dedicated to young artists, what happened in the parterre after a few seconds was a merry reaction, Dionysian, orgiastic, which is precisely the one that Silvia and I were always enchanted by in the performing arts, in live theatre; it is something we have always been searching for... [...] I am always looking for a barbaric unleashing similar to what is recounted from sacred ceremonies, from the theatre of Ancient Greece, which looks a lot like David Bowie concerts, or like certain sports events. Seeing that this work of ours, this extreme intimacy of ours, this getting naked of ours [...] was so engaging and exhilarating, gave, in some way, a lot back to Silvia, in a moment of extreme precariousness, because it was her first time uttering a text by heart in front of an audience ... [...] This response, this transverse, popular engagement, a shared tragedy, a public, a civil or political testimony, so to say – referring to the *polis* of humans who share, firstly, existence – communicated to us a strength, an energy of such dimensions, that would help us, in the years to follow, to resist many dramatic situations connected with our profession: the closing of our country to us as artists, to this play in particular, the censorship which in some ways still persists... [...] We got to know censorship very well. RAI’s (Radiotelevisione Italiana) is maybe the most banal to report.⁴⁶⁶ There are much more dangerous types of censorship, those that we have already inside, automatic, incorporated, already there when we start to talk, to follow patriarchal schemes... I think that the worse of all the types of censorship is the one we place on ourselves, by not permitting that writing of dancing wild, as if we were in a party and a bit drunk, happy and allowing ourselves to throw off our clothes, to let ourselves go in a unchained dance. Here it is, this is an extremely rare thing to find in authors, increasingly rare. [...] It is because we still live in some way – and I do not know how many more years we will do – a kind of life set up on the obtaining of a result, and therefore, of success. Living, still today, now, in this moment, in these cities, in our days, is in some way directed towards the obtaining of a result. Living as in a race, while maybe we should be creatures destined to live in the spirit of celebration, to live like at a party... The human experience, the experience of life, about which we know, is, among other things, extremely limited, generally gross and

⁴⁶⁶ Here, Ceresoli refers to a general practice of censorship, that he finds easily noticeable in the policies of the Italian national broadcasting service.

it ends very quickly... I think that a living being with different types of conditions, different types of relations, different types of society would not build itself so much to be destined for a race, for a result, to prevail, to dominate. In *La Merda*, there is this aspect as well: she has to make it, that is to say, her existence is marked by whether she makes it, obtains a result. I discover ten years later, with a new maturity obviously, appropriate to our time, to the time of our society, of our civilisations, of a macro-time, that we have an animality which leads us to oppose our neighbour, to try to prevail, rather than to encounter, confront, cooperate. It is as if today a friendship were a conquest, brotherhood, cooperation. If there is a political moment extraordinarily set up on *self-made man* it is precisely the one of the 'eighties–'nineties, of the long post-World War II period; the society which first set up life to be for revenge, for making it, for being a loser who would become a winner – the American society which forged us because we had the Marshall Plan and thus, colonisation (I am surely not the first person to define it that way). It shaped me in that sense, which then shows in *La Merda*.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ “Quando noi presentiamo i 12 minuti in quella scuola a Udine, all’interno di un premio dedicato ai giovani, quello che succede, in sala, dopo pochi secondi, è che si scatena una reazione festosa, dionisiaca, orgiastica, che è proprio quella di cui io e Silvia siamo sempre incantati per quanto riguarda la forma del teatro performativo, del teatro dal vivo, è quello che andiamo a ricercare sempre... [...] Io cerco sempre uno scatenamento barbarico simile a quello che viene raccontato delle feste sacre, del teatro dell’Antica Grecia, che assomiglia molto ai concerti di David Bowie, o ai certi eventi sportivi. Vedere che questo nostro lavoro, questa nostra estrema intimità, questo nostro denudarci [...] è stato talmente coinvolgente e trascinante, che in qualche modo ha ridato tantissimo a Silvia in un momento di estrema precarietà, perché era la prima volta in assoluto di fronte a un pubblico e a memoria. [...] Questo elemento di risposta, di coinvolgimento trasversale, popolare, una tragedia condivisa, una testimonianza pubblica, civile, se vuoi, politica, in un senso della *polis* – degli umani che condividono intanto delle esistenze – a noi ha comunicato una tale forza, una tale energia, che ci è servita poi negli anni successivi a sopportare tantissime situazioni drammatiche, legate al nostro mestiere, alla chiusura del nostro Paese verso di noi come artisti, verso quest’opera in particolare, la censura che ancora per certi versi rimane... [...] Le censure noi le conosciamo bene. Quella della RAI è forse la più banale da denunciare. Esistono censure più pericolose, che sono quelle che abbiamo già inserite, automatiche, incorporate, già nel quando cominciamo a parlare, a seguire i schemi patriarcali... Io credo che la più terribile delle censure sia quella che noi poniamo a noi stessi, non permettendoci quella scrittura di danzare selvaggi, come quando siamo in una festa e siamo un po’ ubriachi, siamo felici e ci permettiamo di buttare i vestiti, di lasciarci andare in una scatenata danza. Ecco, questa è una cosa rarissima da trovare nelle autrici e negli autori, sempre più rara. [...] Perché noi viviamo ancora in qualche modo, non so quanti centinaia di anni ancora, un tipo di vita che è impostato all’ottenimento di un risultato, quindi a un successo. Il vivere, ancora oggi, adesso, in questo momento, in queste città, nei nostri giorni, è in qualche modo destinato ad ottenimento di un risultato. Vivere come in una corsa, mentre forse noi saremmo creature destinate a vivere in spirito di festa, vivere come una festa... L’esperienza umana, l’esperienza della vita, di cui sappiamo tra l’altro è pure estremamente limitata, fa anche tendenzialmente schifo e finisce pure presto... Penso che un essere vivente con altri tipi di condizionamenti, altri tipi di frequentazioni, altri tipi di società non si costruirebbe così destinato alla corsa e al risultato, al prevalere, al predominare. Nella *Merda*, c’è anche questo aspetto, lei deve farcela, cioè, la sua esistenza è improntata al fatto di farcela, di ottenere un risultato; mentre scopro, dieci anni dopo, e con, ovviamente, una nuova maturità, che è proprio del nostro tempo, della nostra società, delle nostre civiltà, un macrotempo, noi abbiamo proprio un’animalità che ci porta a contrastare il prossimo, a tentare una supremazia, piuttosto che,

Cristian recalls one Saturday evening in 2016 or 2017, at the Teatro Valle in Rome, when a rather unexpected technical problem enabled a memorable encounter between an actress and the audience to happen. Namely, only few minutes after the spectators entered the parterre, the microphone broke. Silvia would, sometimes – Cristian recalls – since she was already on the stage, before anyone in the audience arrived, greet them by talking to herself or to them, asking them not to take photos or maybe by singing softly. On the occasion of that evening, Silvia managed to create – despite or maybe even inspired by the slight confusion and the embarrassment which inevitably transpired in the room – a situation of intimacy between the members of that small, one-night theatrical community. This context enabled the actress – in order to buy some time until the microphone would function again – to propose to the spectators that they sing together the national anthem of Italy. Shortly before the audience would enter the world of *La Merda*, they were invited to sing together; so they did, “seriously” – Cristian recounts: “a liberating applause followed.”⁴⁶⁸

We did not have Italy as a reference. We always wanted to make a more universal play, a classical one, if you like, so that it could speak to everyone in an indiscriminate manner. On one side, we obviously are the bodies, the souls of these times, therefore the words that I am choosing, in speaking with you at this moment, come from the years that I have been living, from the era I have been growing up within, becoming an adult, and so on... Nonetheless, our interest was always located beyond eras.⁴⁶⁹

The audiences from the different countries where *La Merda* was staged over many years would have recognised, without significant difficulty, their own experiences in the story

invece, un incontro, un confronto, una cooperazione. È come se fosse una conquista oggi l'amicizia, la fratellanza, la cooperazione. Se c'è un momento politico starordianarimante impostato sul *self-made man* è proprio quello lì degli anni Ottanta-anni Novanta, dell'arco lungo del post-Seconda guerra mondiale; la società che per prima imposta la vita della rivalsa sugli altri, del farcela, dell'essere un perdente poi un vincente, che è quella americana, che ci ha forgiato, perché noi abbiamo avuto il Piano Marchall, e quindi una colonizzazione (non sono di certo il primo a definirla così) che a me ha plasanto in quel senso, il che poi ricompare nella *Merda*”, interview with C. Ceresoli, 6 May 2021.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 May 2021.

⁴⁶⁹ “Noi non abbiamo avuto l'Italia come riferimento. Noi abbiamo sempre voluto fare un'opera più universale, se vuoi, classica, ma che potesse rivolgersi a tutti in maniera onnivora. Da una parte noi siamo ovviamente corpi, anime di questi anni, quindi, le parole che io sto scegliendo con te, in questo momento, vengono dagli anni in cui io vivo, dall'epoca in cui io cresco, divento adulto, ecc. però il nostro interesse si collocava sempre al di là delle epoche”, *ibid.*

recounted. “The Italian story is not that relevant”⁴⁷⁰ – they would comment. For them, what mattered the most – as it might be obvious – was the revealing of their own truths, the occasion to look into the references to their known landscapes – inhabited certainly by some other protagonists, but compressing maybe the same emotional load. The Italian anthem or the national flag that the actress would drape over her put on at the very end of the performance are symbols of a place, of a time, of a background, but those are also, contemporarily, only pretexts, maybe to bring people together and sing a song known to them all, as in the Italian case.

Right before the last verses of the anthem, an interesting image overwhelms the setting of *La Merda*. Instead of lowering the lights to permit this communal act to acquire, rather inappropriately for the occasion, celebrative tones, they get brighter, showing, for an instant, the background of the stage, stripped of all the scenographical equipment meant to cover the factory of theatrical illusion. For a brief moment, the spectator can see not only a motorised ladder, random objects, the dust and dirt of a place similar to a garage, but also a young woman, abandoned and deprived of everything but her bare life. Entering, with some kind of potent torch, inside the belly of the theatre, illuminating it all, rendering it all transparent – an expedient, which sometimes passes rather unregistered by the spectators, at least on a conscious level – might seem to be not only an attempt to metaphorically expose the dark side of the world of spectacle, to which this poor girl aspires to belong, but also to explicate – as Cristian claims – the abandonment of a body. It is an overly illuminated, and thus deformed, emptied body of an *un-human*, of a reject. “It is the image of a body left there, as if it were garbage, as bodies are treated today rather often, and probably will be for a long time; as if it were the victim of abuse, of oppression.”⁴⁷¹ In this brief scene, it might be said, the theatre opens its mouth, for a fragment in time, to reveal hell.

“*The shit* is the injustice. It is that what humiliates.”⁴⁷² – Cristian asserts.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ “È l’immagine di un un corpo buttato lì come se fosse immondizia, così come i corpi vengono spesso ancora oggi, probabilmente ancora a lungo trattati. Come se fosse la vittima di un abuso, vittima di un’oppressione”, *ibid.*, 17 June 2021.

⁴⁷² “La merda è ingiustizia. Cio che umilia”, *ibid.*, 30 June 2021.

The nameless young woman is sitting on a bar stool, alone, on the empty theatrical stage. She confides her story to the audience, as if to a friend or to a psychotherapist. She mentions – through an extremely animated stream of consciousness divided thematically into three parts: *The Thighs*, *The Cock*, *The Fame* – her past, re-evocating some happy moments that she shared with her father, but also, some other rather unpleasant or even very disturbing episodes she lived through. What is disclosed, as well, with considerable conviction, is her idea of the future, her plans and aspirations. By listening to her careful depiction of *how it was* and *how it will be* – in a vision of the world completely biased and heavily contaminated by *the others'* voices – the spectator learns that her father probably died from suicide, that her mother has very little regard for her, that she was sexually abused at school, that she will probably be sexually abused again in the future, maybe at the work place she is so fiercely trying to *conquer*, that she is struggling to gain some weight to be eligible for a TV commercial and so on.

All of her recollections and comments seem as if they are located on the same, one-dimensional level of narration. She tries to give to them all – the good and the bad ones – the same substantial quality, presenting them more as a kind of chronicle of yesteryear than as her own most personal heritage. In other words, she is distancing herself from her own experiences, treating them uncritically, with a slight disdain and an utter lack of empathy. Her monologue exudes, thus, the manner of one who has been suffering thoroughly without being able to do anything about any of her wounds, except to endure their aches and to resist their gravity; to justify the violence. More than anything, it seems as if the woman does not understand her own pain, and thus, does not see any other way out of it than to actively participate, or even gain a good, if not the best, position in a world hostile to her wellbeing. She, nonetheless, knows about the violence, she has good insight into the logic of her persecutors, and thus, wants to win over, get her revenge, by becoming better than them in what they do very well. She wants to get free from oppression, by gaining their applause.

“She is like me. She is like you.”⁴⁷³ – Cristian asserts.

⁴⁷³ “È come me. È come te”, *ibid.*, 6 May 2021.

The voices of the people the woman mentions in her recount, people she knew, those who had hurt her in many different ways, could not but pass through her body, through her unique way to perceive them, to experience emotionally and physically the weight of the baggage they had unloaded onto her self. They all are a part of her. They have modelled her.

For Silvia Gallerano – who interprets this young lady in both the Italian and English versions of *La Merda* – the audience is an important factor in determining the *quality* – in the specific, strictly artisanal sense of the term – of the performance. It is an encounter with the energy of the audience, with a specific theatrical space, with a unique moment in a common time, which will make Silvia decide the tone of her *voices*, the colour of her vocal mask. This decision of hers takes place progressively, and as the monologue develops, the actress looks for her specific place in the dialogue with the audience. As in the case of Fischer-Lichte's concept of *event*,⁴⁷⁴ Silvia explains that she is one of the dancers, in fact the leading one, in a dance with one small community of people who have visited the theatre, in one of a number of unrepeatable evenings:

I have perfected, in the last years, between the Italian and English versions, all the tonalities, to the point of finding the one which is right for me, or maybe the one which is right for me on that evening. The encounter with the audience is very important for me. This is work which is extremely related to those people who are in front of me. I am recounting to you all that is happening to me in the present and in the past. As much as the score is extremely defined, the score is very narrow, the voices as well, the tonality of the voice... [...] There is a small percentage of variation compared to a perfectly regulated score which depends on the game, on the relation which involves you and me. There are evenings in which there is a lot of laughter, and thus maybe I push, or, on the contrary, there is a lot of laughter and, instead, I hold – it is because I know that, nonetheless, after we have laughed a lot, we will arrive at moments that are either tragic or where I look gross. Therefore, I – how should I say – want

⁴⁷⁴ “Instead of a work of art that existed independently of her and the recipients, she created an event that involved everyone present. The spectators, too, were not presented with a distinct object to perceive and interpret; rather, they were all involved in a common situation of here and now, transforming everyone present into co-subjects. Their actions triggered physiological, affective, volitional, energetic, and motor reactions that motivated further actions”, Cf. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, 2004, Eng. trans. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 17. The author is referring to Marina Abramović's performance *Lips of Thomas* (1975).

to create a delusion, but not too much, or to amaze... All of it happens at the level of consciousness... There is very fast thought. It is not controlled, otherwise I would not be able to have such a fastness in the performance. It is as if I am continually absorbing and giving back what I feel from the parterre. So I absorb, listen, feel the perception of the audience and then give it back... The score changes, imperceptibly, almost unconsciously, at the level of profound consciousness, it changes slightly. However perfectly metric, clearly defined, the score is – the performance lasts fifty-four minutes, always – there are little modifications of the rhythm, of the nasality ... [...] For me the main characteristic of this work is the encounter with people. It is a different performance every night for me, otherwise I would not be able to do it for all these years, for all these encores. Every night it is different for me, as much as I know the score perfectly by heart, and every time before the show, the same day of the performance, when I repeat the text, I rehearse, every day... However perfect the score is, every time when I enter the stage, I say: “Who knows what will happen! I do not know what will happen!” It depends on the encounter that I have with you. Therefore, in this sense, the performance is surely growing, it is surely changing, because the people that I have in front of me are always different. They are not only different from evening to evening, they are ten years different now, the world is different, not only the people, the world has changed. How will it be to do the performance after the pandemic, after the lockdown? I do not know. I will find out by living it. Next year. I will understand how the words sound. I will discover it by uttering those words, I will discover it maybe with those who will watch me. They will sound different. They will have meanings they did not have before, for sure.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁵ “Io ho affinato negli anni, tra l’italiano e l’inglese, tutte le tonalità fino a trovare quella che per me è giusta, o forse quella che è giusta per me per quella sera. L’incontro col pubblico è importantissimo per me. Questo è un lavoro che è estremamente in relazione con le persone che stanno davanti a me. Io racconto a voi tutto quello che mi sta succedendo nel presente e nel passato. Per quanto la partitura sia estremamente fissata, la partitura è strettissima, anche le voci, la tonalità della voce... [...] Ci sono delle piccole percentuali di variazione rispetto a una partitura perfettamente fissata che dipendono dal gioco, dalla relazione che si mette in campo tra me e voi. Ci sono delle sere in cui si ride molto, e allora magari io spingo, oppure, al contrario, si ride molto, e quindi io, invece trattengo, perché so che poi, comunque, dopo che abbiamo riso tanto, dobbiamo arrivare a dei momenti invece, o tragici o in cui io vi faccio schifo. Quindi, io, come dire, voglio creare una delusione, ma neanche troppo, oppure stupirvi... Tutto ciò avviene al livello cosciente... C’è un pensiero velocissimo. Non è controllato, altrimenti non potrei avere la velocità che ho per fare lo spettacolo. È come se continuamente assorbissi e rimetessi quello che sento che mi arriva dalla platea. Quindi, assorbo, ascolto, sento la percezione e vi rimando... La partitura, impercettibilmente, quasi incosapevolmente, al livello di coscienza più profondo, varia leggermente. Per quanto sia una partitura perfettamente metrica, chiaramente fissata – lo spettacolo dura 54 minuti, sempre – ci sono delle piccole modificazioni di ritmo, di nasalità... [...] La caratteristica di questo lavoro – principale, per me – è l’incontro con le persone. Ogni sera per me è uno spettacolo diverso. Altrimenti non avrei potuto farlo per tutti questi anni, per tutte queste repliche. Ogni sera per me è diverso. Per quanto conosca

The voices which disregard the individuality of this woman, once a little girl, enter the theatrical stage as some kind of apparitions. They almost seem to put even a kind of physical boundary on her thought and her free expression. Her life depends on them. They decide on her worth, her potential, her past and her future. She has to conform. In this sense, the naked body of a woman – masterly performed by Silvia Gallerano – acts as if these voices were really there, present on the stage with her. The body bends, it tries to escape the punches, it tries to occupy as little space as is possible, it is tense, it fights back...

The key word is *humiliation*. It is the humiliation we are subjected to and the one we inflict upon ourselves. We feel inadequate towards the demands of the time. The story of this girl is the story of a person who recounts a lot really, many moments from a part of her life which is adolescence: when, in trying to fit in, we humiliate ourselves. In the sense that whoever does not recognise himself in that model, humiliates us and we agree with it, we make ourselves humiliated. We humiliate, above all, our body, we try to transform it to make it according to the model of the correct and beautiful that we see around us. In this sense, I believe that it is a story which remains contemporary always, in the sense that there is always a model to adapt to, a physical model of appearance, of how one is, how one behaves, how one presents oneself in the world and shows oneself. We are talking about Western society, consumer, globalised, where success is a fundamental thing; we all want fifteen minutes of fame. The story talks about an era, it is a representation of an era, of a philosophy, of a mindset, which is a mindset of supremacy, of wanting to emerge, to be first; it is a mindset that we have been carrying around for a long time, since the Industrial Revolution probably; this idea of progress, of growth, that you must always move forward – this is what we project in our society, but we project it also in ourselves on an individual level, as a generation, the sons must outdo the fathers, so to say... In this historical moment we have seen that this

la partitura perfettamente a memoria, e ogni volta che io faccio una replica, il giorno stesso della replica, io mi faccio una memoria, faccio delle prove, ogni giorno... Per quanto la partitura sia perfetta, per me, ogni volta che entro in scena, io dico: "Chissà che cosa succederà! Non so che cosa succederà!" Perché dipende dall'incontro che io ho con voi. Quindi, in questo senso, lo spettacolo sicuramente cresce, sicuramente cambia, perché le persone che io ho davanti sono sempre diverse. Non soltanto sono diverse da sera a sera, ma questo punto sono diverse nei dieci anni, il mondo è diverso, non soltanto le persone, il mondo è cambiato. Come sarà fare lo spettacolo dopo una pandemia, dopo il lockdown? Non lo so. Lo scoprirò vivendo. L'anno prossimo. Capiro come risuoneranno le parole. Le scoprirò io dicendo, le scoprirò magari insieme a chi mi guarda. Risuoneranno in un altro modo. Avranno degli altri significati che prima non avevano, sicuramente", interview with S. Gallerano, cit.

mindset starts to reveal itself to be full of holes at the societal level, as at the generational level. Infinite growth does not exist. We have understood it, but, nonetheless, we are still projected in that direction. Are we not? No? This girl wants that. She wants to make it, to go always up, she wants to go up high... This is the thing that I have grown up with. We are still inside this thing – it is only now that it is starting to crumble, it is showing itself to be an illusion. We, especially my generation, have grown up still with that idea that human society will go infinitely towards progress. Obviously, this is not possible and we are seeing that now. Here, I perceive the tragedy. Maybe today, I see the tragedy of this writing in this. This desire of hers to stand out, to be first, to go forward with a world which is about to spit us out from one moment to another... This desire of hers is tragic. The importance she gives to being successful. In this historical moment, what is the sense of looking for success by doing a stupid TV programme, a commercial?⁴⁷⁶

To land a role in a commercial, the woman is ready to do, probably, anything. She is, thus, asked – as is recounted in detail – to gain some necessary weight and become the most suitable body for that job. These struggles to become as one is expected to be – not only by those *others*, whoever they might be in a given situation, but, more importantly, by oneself –

⁴⁷⁶ “La parola chiave è umiliazione. È l’umiliazione subita e che ci autoinfliggiamo. Ci sentiamo non adeguati alle richieste del tempo. La storia di questa ragazza è la storia di una persona, che racconta poi tanto, tanti momenti di una parte della sua vita, che è l’adolescenza: quando cercando di aderire al modello dominante, ci facciamo umiliare. Nel senso che poi chi non ci riconosce in quel modello ci umilia e noi gli diamo ragione, ci facciamo umiliare. Umiliamo soprattutto il nostro corpo, cerchiamo di trasformarlo per farlo diventare quello che secondo il modello che vediamo intorno a noi è quello giusto, è quello bello. In questo senso, credo che sia una storia che rimane contemporanea sempre nel senso che c’è sempre un modello al quale adeguarsi, fisico, di aspetto, di come si è, di come ci si comporta, di come ci si presenta al mondo, di come ci si mostra. Stiamo parlando di una società occidentale, consumistica, globalizzata, in cui il successo è la cosa fondamentale, un quarto d’ora di celebrità lo vogliamo tutti. La storia parla di un’epoca, è uno spaccato di un’epoca, di una filosofia, di un pensiero, che è un pensiero di supremazia, di voler emergere, di voler essere il primo, è un pensiero che ci portiamo avanti da tanto, dalla Rivoluzione industriale probabilmente, quest’idea del progresso, della crescita, che si va sempre in avanti, questo lo proiettiamo nella nostra società, ma lo proiettiamo anche in noi come individui e in noi come generazione, cioè, i figli devono superare i padri... In questo momento storico abbiamo visto che questo pensiero comincia a fare acqua da tutte le parti, sia al livello di società, sia al livello generazionale. La crescita infinita non esiste. Lo abbiamo capito, però, noi siamo proiettati verso questo. No? Questa ragazza vuole questo. Vuole farcela, sempre più in alto, sempre più in alto, vuole andare sempre più in alto... È una cosa con cui io sono cresciuta. Siamo ancora dentro questa cosa – soltanto che ora si sta sgretolando, sta mostrando la sua illusione. Noi siamo cresciuti, soprattutto la mia generazione, ancora con quell’idea che la società umana andasse all’infinito verso il progresso. Ovviamente, non è possibile e lo stiamo vedendo adesso. In questo poi io percepisco la tragedia. Forse oggi la tragedia di questo testo la vedo in questo. Questo suo desiderio di primeggiare, di essere prima, di andare avanti con un mondo che ci sta per sputare fuori... È tragico questo suo desiderio. L’importanza che dà al fatto di fare successo. In questo momento storico, che senso ha cercare di fare successo facendo un stupido programma televisivo, una pubblicità?”, *ibid.*

to become the right girl, the best one for that role, the one they have been looking for, bring the spectator to the climax of the third act. The monologue will lead – in an energetic final *crescendo* – to the point where this girl, so determined, hardworking and courageous, this traumatised, suffering girl, this Machiavellian *warrior*, is not able to eat any longer. Even then, when completely overwhelmed by this hard task given to her, she decides that her body is not ready to assure her of a sufficient advantage against the potential opponents at the casting taking place the next day. She, thus, starts to gather and eat even her own excrement.

The *shit* is all that importance that certain persons give to themselves, a certain milieu. They feel much more important than the others, only because they have ephemeral success. The shit is all that you are compelled to swallow to get listened to, to find your space, to acquire your own space in the world. Metaphorically in the text, she eats, she swallows shit... The metaphor is very clear. She is ready for everything, ready to do anything, to eat shit, to welcome inside herself the rot of the ambience that she absolutely wants to enter. This is the price to pay for entry. If you want to sit at that table, you need to go through a lake of shit first, and then, maybe, you can sit there. Maybe, if you do not drown first. The shit is everything that you need to leave out in order to appear perfect. Even simply speaking about the body: everything that you eliminate, to make it more tidy, to make it similar to the models who you are trying to look like... It is as if there were an entire part of the self which we eliminate, inside of which are, actually, also some beautiful things, but those are things that will not make you successful... At this moment I was imagining as if sitting at the table with them, white, pale, skinny, perfect and with the excrement around, were all those things that you needed to rid yourself of to arrive at success... The problem is that all that you are removing is not just fat, cellulite, hair, but it is also feelings, fraternity as well, and also the fact that you are helping your neighbour rather than hitting him so that you can move forward; it is all those things considered weaknesses by those people who excel. It is as if, in order to sit at the winners' table, you need to remove your humanness. The shit is, in fact, all that is most human that we have – that which is our strongest animalistic essence, what you have to deprive yourself of in order to get on the stage and prove yourself to be a winner. This is a poetic image. Concretely, you know, concretely, the shit is also simply sexism, the patriarchy, it is everything you as a woman have to be subjected to in show-business, everything you have to swallow, what you should not comment on, because, otherwise, you will not go anywhere. It is to see people who do not deserve it moving forwards, only because they are

recommended, having to participate in useless dinners, because you have to prove that you are part of a certain group, rather than the other... Our country is also famous for having a lot of corruption. In Italy, the shit is corruption, it is nepotism, it is the absence of meritocracy, the fact that you have to be a part of a certain elite in order to be able to finally find your own space... This is present in every profession, also in the world of theatre. [...] We are in a country, where the meritocracy is struggling to find its space and, thus, the shit is precisely all that *surplus* that you have to swallow to have what you would get otherwise simply with your abilities.⁴⁷⁷

In its completed version – its fifty-four minutes of performance – *La Merda* debuted in Milan on 29 March 2012. The next year, 2022, will see the celebration of ten years of its life on stages all over the world. The *piece* was originally written in Italian, published in an Italian–English bilingual edition; it is translated, published and staged in many languages, such as Spanish, Galician, Portuguese, French, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and so on. It won the *Edinburgh Fringe First Award for Writing Excellence* in 2012, *The Stage Award*

⁴⁷⁷ “La merda è tutta quell’importanza che si danno certe persone, certi ambienti, che si sentono molto più importanti degli altri, semplicemente perché hanno un effimero successo. La merda è tutto quello che sei costretta a ingoiare per farti ascoltare, per trovare il tuo spazio, per acquisire il proprio spazio nel mondo. Metaforicamente nel testo, lei mangia, lei ingoia la merda... La metafora è chiarissima. È pronta a tutto, a fare tutto, a mangiare merda, ad accogliere dentro di sé il marcio dell’ambiente dentro al quale vuole assolutamente entrare. Questo è il pedaggio da pagare per entrarci. Se tu ti vuoi sedere a quel tavolo, devi prima attraversare un lago di merda, e poi dopo, forse, ti ci potrai sedere. Forse, se non affoghi prima. La merda è tutto quello che tu devi lasciar fuori, per apparire perfetta. Anche parlando semplicemente del corpo: tutto quello che tu elimini per renderlo pattinato, per renderlo simile alle modelle, alle quali cerchi di assomigliare... È come se ci fosse tutta una parte di sé che noi eliminiamo, dentro alla quale, in realtà, ci sono anche delle cose belle, ma sono quelle che non ti fanno ottenere successo... In questo momento, mi stavo immaginando, che come se per sedersi a questo tavolo, tutti bianchi, diafani, magri, perfetti e degli escrementi che ci sono attorno sono tutto ciò che tu hai dovuto togliere da te per poter arrivare al successo... È soltanto che tutto quello che tu togli non sono soltanto il grasso, la cellulite, i peli, ma sono anche i sentimenti, anche la fratellanza, anche il fatto di aiutare il tuo vicino invece di tirargli una gomitata per andare avanti, sono tutte quelle cose che sono considerate debolezze delle persone che primeggiano. È come se per sedersi al tavolo dei vincitori, devi toglierti l’umanità. La merda è, in realtà, tutto ciò che più di umano noi abbiamo – ciò che è la nostra più forte essenza animale, di cui ti devi privare per poter salire sul podio e risultare vincitore. Questa è un’immagine poetica. Nel concreto, sai, nel concreto, la merda è anche semplicemente il sessismo, è il patriarcato, è tutto quello che come donna nel mondo dello spettacolo devi subire, ingoiare, sul quale non fare nessun commento, perché altrimenti, non vai da nessuna parte. È vedere andare avanti persone che non se lo meritano, soltanto perché sono raccomandate, dover partecipare a cene inutili, perché devi far vedere che tu appartieni a un certo gruppo, invece che un altro... Il nostro Paese è famoso anche per una sua buona dose di corruzione. In Italia, la merda è la corruzione, è il nepotismo, è l’assenza di meritocrazia, il fatto di dover far parte di alcune elite per poter trovare finalmente il proprio spazio... Ci sono in tutte le professioni, ci sono anche nel mondo teatrale. [...] Siamo un Paese, dove la meritocrazia fa molta fatica a trovare il suo spazio e quindi, appunto, la merda è tutto quel surplus che devi ingoiare per avere quello che potresti avere semplicemente con le tue capacità”, *ibid.*

2012 for Silvia Gallerano's *Acting Excellence*, the *Arches Brick Award for Emerging Art* in 2012, a nomination for the *Total Theatre Award for Innovation* at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the *2012 Critics' Award* in Italy (*Premio della Critica*) and others. Brazilian, Norwegian and Danish productions of the performance have earned important acting nominations and awards for Christianne Triccerri's, Helga Guren's and Danica Ćurčić's performances.

4.3. *The atheist god*

Those moans express in the first place all the aimlessness of your pain, which is so humiliating to your consciousness; the whole legal system of nature on which you spit disdainfully, of course, but from which you suffer all the same while she does not. They express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish, but that you have pain; the consciousness that in spite of all possible Wagenheims you are in complete slavery to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will leave off aching, and if he does not, they will go on aching another three months; and that finally if you are still contumacious and still protest, all that is left you for your own gratification is to thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more.⁴⁷⁸

Suffering must be at the very "heart of reality",⁴⁷⁹ if God himself suffered and died, as he did, Pareyson writes. If Christ himself suffered, it must mean that a flower with a broken stem, a child with no parents, a young life lost in the torrent of unrest and an old life filled with sorrow and loneliness, sickness and misery, hunger and war – it must mean that it all is within God. Does this fact denote that God must be, thus, inherently cruel, as Pareyson writes:

⁴⁷⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, cit., p. 24.

⁴⁷⁹ "Con l'idea del Dio sofferente la sofferenza non è più limitata all'umanità, ma diventa infinita e s'insedia nel cuore stesso della realtà", ("With the idea of suffering God, suffering is no longer limited to humanity, but it becomes infinite and installs itself at the very heart of reality"), L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij. Filosofia, romanzo ed esperienza religiosa*, cit., p. 211 (trans. by V. Baltić).

“there is in him, a radical, an original cruelty, which induces him, first and foremost, to negate himself and to stand up against himself”⁴⁸⁰ to allow tragedy?

For Ivan Karamazov, nonetheless, this is not a relevant question, since, as much as God’s cruelty might offend, wound and violate, it is still an active agent, consenting an objection, a disagreement, a rebellion on the part of the damaged – Pareyson writes.⁴⁸¹ It is his inexistence, according to Ivan, that is a real scandal, deserving our determined refusal of the idea of the divine. Ivan’s atheism, his irreverent “refusal of salvation”,⁴⁸² or – as Pareyson continues, citing Camus – his gratuitous “even if”, as a conjunction between indignation and the potentiality of being in the wrong, could be confuted, nonetheless, through careful scrutiny of the idea of God’s suffering, brought to its most radical emanation.

There is, on one hand, Ivan’s brother Dmitri, who is willing to go to Siberia if that would be his chance to comfort a crying child he saw in a dream. Even though innocent, Dmitri is ready

⁴⁸⁰ “La sofferenza del Cristo è tanto più infinita e terribile se si pensa che in lui è Dio stesso che ha voluto soffrire e ha sofferto. Per quanto tutta intera cruenta e straziante, la sofferenza del Cristo ha conosciuto culmini particolarmente tragici e dolorosi, e indubbiamente il più drammatico è il momento in cui egli sulla croce si è sentito abbandonato da Dio. E s’è trattato da un reale abbandono, ciò che, come osserva Kierkegaard, può succedere non a un uomo, ma solo al Dio-uomo: Dio ha risposto col suo silenzio al grido del Cristo, il che è doppiamente crudele da parte di Dio, perché Dio non soltanto ha voluto che il Figlio soffrisse, ma lo ha abbandonato nel momento della sofferenza. Ciò significa che Dio è crudele anzitutto con sé: egli stesso vuol soffrire, e si abbandona perciò alla crocifissione; non ha risparmiato suo Figlio, cioè se stesso, e in una forma di sublime masochismo s’è messo contro di sé; v’è in lui una crudeltà radicale e originaria, che lo induce anzitutto a negare se stesso e a ergersi contro di sé”, (“The suffering of Christ is much more infinite and terrible if we think that there is a God within him who wanted to suffer and who suffered. As much as it was completely ferocious and agonising, the suffering of Christ knew particularly tragic and painful peaks, and indubitably the most dramatic moment was the one in which he felt abandoned on the cross by God. It was a real abandoning, which, as Kierkegaard observes, could happen not to a man, but only to a God-man: God answered Christ’s scream with silence, which is doubly cruel of God, because not only did God want the Son to suffer, but he abandoned him in the moment of suffering. That means that God is cruel first of all towards himself: he himself wants to suffer and therefore he abandons himself to crucifixion; he did not save his Son, that is himself, and in some kind of sublime masochism he put himself against himself; there is in him, a radical, an original cruelty, which induces him, first and foremost, to negate himself and to stand up against himself”), *ibid.*, p. 212 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴⁸¹ “Perché la sua non è la rivolta a un Dio crudele, ma la negazione d’un Dio ingiusto. Ciò che caratterizza Dio non è crudeltà, che darebbe ancora luogo a una ribellione, ma l’inesistenza, che non implica che una pura e semplice negazione” (“It is because his is not a revolt against a cruel God, but the negation of an unjust God. What characterises God is not cruelty, which would still give space for rebellion, but inexistence, which implies nothing else but a pure and simple negation”), *ibid.*, p. 186 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴⁸² “Secondo Camus, Ivan incarna il “rifiuto della salvezza”: la chiave per interpretare la sua posizione è l’“anche se”. “Preferisco tenermi il mio sdegno insaziato anche se ho torto [...]”, (“According to Camus, Ivan incarnates the “refusal of salvation”: the key to interpret his position is “even if”. “I prefer to have my insatiable disdain even if I am wrong” [...].”), *ibid.*, p. 192 (trans. by V. Baltić).

to suffer, to bear the suffering he is not entitled to, with the hope that his own strength would make the burden of the world less heavy. What guides Dmitri is this Christian idea of universal love; it is accepting and even willing to suffer for another's guilt which, for Pareyson, discredits Ivan's cogent negation.

For the youngest brother, Alyosha, on the other hand, God's suffering on the cross is the biggest scandal of all. It is more outrageous than the *useless suffering* of a child – for Ivan, the most striking proof of divine injustice. Luigi Pareyson writes:

The problem of suffering does not have any other response than that of the suffering Christ. Only Christ can win against the pain, assuming it onto himself, and by doing so, he carries it all the way through, turns it upside down, consumes it, cancels it. Like the drama of the divinity, Christ is the only possible basis for meditation concerning evil and suffering. What is it that happens, in that abyss concentrated within Christ? The struggle of God against God is the victory against evil and pain.⁴⁸³

It is the suffering of Christ which introduces the *dialectics* within God's being.⁴⁸⁴ This internal scission created by God's decision to incarnate, and thus, to live through the human experience, even in its most tragic aspects, should prove – contrary to what Ivan Karamazov believed to be the rotting stigmata in the body of the divinity – the power of resistance, of a peaceful assuming onto the self of even the biggest pain, the most explicit cruelty. In the midst of excruciating pain – the enormous pain, *God's pain* – in Alyosha's sense of the term – there is a moment in which evil is so powerful that it captures and overwhelms not only the body of Christ, but also, for an instant, his very spirit. The culmination of pain reaches imaginable dimensions, compressed into the words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That little breach in time was the best chance for the absurd to take over the world, allowing nothing but Barabbas' rule to prevail, but it was also the circumstance which

⁴⁸³ “Il problema del dolore non ha dunque altra risposta che il Cristo sofferente. Solo il Cristo può vincere il dolore, in quanto lo assume su di sé, e così facendo lo porta fino in fondo, lo capovolge, lo consuma, lo annulla. Come dramma della divinità, il Cristo è l'unica base possibile per una meditazione sul male e sulla sofferenza. Che cosa accade in quell'abisso che si concentra nel Cristo? La lotta di Dio con Dio e la vittoria sul male e sul dolore”, *ibid.*, p. 214 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴⁸⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 214.

marked Christ's complete victory against evil.⁴⁸⁵ The moment of the abandonment of a suffering child is the moment of God's atheism.⁴⁸⁶ God negates himself, Pareyson writes, introducing *a contradiction, a conflict* inside his own identity.⁴⁸⁷ This is "superior atheism"⁴⁸⁸ for Pareyson; as God rebels against himself, against his own cruelty directed towards himself, Ivan's atheism is confuted.

"The atheistic moment of the divinity is also the theistic moment"⁴⁸⁹ – Pareyson proceeds. If an act of minimal resistance⁴⁹⁰ was enough to restrain this most violent attack against God, negativity is defeated, forever. To defend from the most serious attempt by evil to seize the divine, taking advantage of an instant of extreme vulnerability of God, means also that humanity is saved.

4.4. *The Mocking of Christ*

Fra Angelico's fresco painting known by the name *The Mocking of Christ*⁴⁹¹ (1438–1445) – this "miraculous and solemn harmony of forms and spirit"⁴⁹² – portrays one episode of the Passion, as a part of a series of works with the theme of sacred stories. The painting is conserved in the seventh cell of San Marco's Convent in Florence, proposing to act as a

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁴⁸⁸ "Questo superiore ateismo consiste nel concetto non meno profondo che paradossale d'un momento ateo della divinità", ("This superior atheism consists in a concept no less profound than paradoxical in an atheistic moment of the divinity"), *ibid.*, p. 213 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴⁸⁹ "Il momento ateo della divinità ne è anche il momento teistico", *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴⁹⁰ "[...] proprio perché è il posto più avanzato dello spedito cammino della negatività, oltre il quale essa non ha potuto né può più andare; e se questo argine di minima resistenza non s'è infranto al massimo urto, allora la negatività è stata vinta per sempre, e l'umanità è stata affrancata dal dolore", ("[...] precisely because is the most advanced place in the quick progression of negativity, beyond which it could not and it cannot go; and if this bulwark of minimum resistance did not break at the strongest impact, that means that negativity was defeated forever and humanity was liberated from pain"), *ibid.*, p. 216 (trans. by V. Baltić).

⁴⁹¹ Fra Angelico, *The Mocking of Christ*, cit. Cf. *infra* Iconographic Appendix, Fig. 5., p. 171.

⁴⁹² "Miracolosa e solenne armonia di forme e di spirito", A. M. Francini Ciaranfi, *Beato Angelico. Gli affreschi dell'Angelico a San Marco di Firenze*, Milano, Edizioni d'Arte Amilcare Pizzi, 1953.

pretext for meditation for those who inhabited the silence of this marvellous refuge, commissioned many centuries ago by Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici.⁴⁹³

The figure of Christ is positioned at the centre of the painting, while – similarly to the triangular composition of a couple of decades earlier, Lorenzo Monaco's *L'uomo dei dolori* (1404)⁴⁹⁴ – the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic are placed at both sides of the lower section of the work. From the background behind Christ – here, as well, echoing Monaco's themes – the details of the bodies of torturers emerge.⁴⁹⁵ Christ's eyes are bandaged, his nose, cheeks and lips are painted in red. He has a crown of thorns on his head.

Even though the Virgin Mary averts her gaze away from her son and shows in the movement of her hands a kind of shy plea for the soldiers to stop, she is, nonetheless, a mother who, it might be said, *knows*.⁴⁹⁶ Saint Dominic, on the other hand, completely calm and steady, immersed in his study of the Bible, is thinking maybe, as John T. Spike writes,⁴⁹⁷ precisely the thoughts of the suffering *Virgo Mater*. In this sense, despite the determination of the aggressors, neither Christ himself, nor his mother nor Saint Dominic, express – either in their body posture, or in their facial articulation – any significant agitation, fear or worry.

Christ's closed eyes, covered with a slightly transparent blindfold, foresee imminent death, but his white clothing suggests that the Son of God, holding the entire world in his left hand, is already dressed for the Resurrection.⁴⁹⁸

Oh, absurdity of absurdities! How much better it is to understand it all, to recognise it all, all the impossibilities and the stone wall; not to be reconciled to one of those impossibilities and stone walls if it disgusts you to be reconciled to it; by the way of the most inevitable, logical combinations to reach the most revolting conclusions on the everlasting theme, that even for the stone wall you are yourself somehow to blame, though again it is as clear as day you are not to blame in the least, and therefore grinding your teeth in silent impotence to sink into

⁴⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ J. T. Spike, *Angelico*, Milano, Fabbri, 1996, p. 154; G. Bonsanti, *Beato Angelico*, Firenze, Octavo Franco Cantini Editore, 1998, pp. 94–95, 144–146.

⁴⁹⁵ Cf. J. T. Spike, *Angelico*, cit.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

luxurious inertia, brooding on the fact that there is no one even for you to feel vindictive against, that you have not, and perhaps never will have, an object for your spite, that it is a sleight of hand, a bit of juggling, a cardsharp's trick, that it is simply a mess, no knowing what and no knowing who, but in spite of all these uncertainties and jugglings, still there is an ache in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache.⁴⁹⁹

The very curious and maybe unexpected decision to fragment the bodies of mockers in Fra Angelico's painting might be read in its symbolic capacity to embrace the subversive meaning of their gesturing. In other words, it might be claimed that, through this creative expedient, the artist is not only predicting the intentions of the mockers – who might want to tear to pieces the object of their mockery – but he is also commenting with genius intuition the hidden subtext of the sacred story. It seems clear that the depicted figures are supposed to represent not any specific individual who might bear some responsibility for his acts, but rather a principle of human behaviour, shown through sifting out its exemplary traits. What, then, does this mockery mean? Why are the bodies of the mockers broken apart?

“Suffering means doubt, negation”⁵⁰⁰ – Dostoevsky writes. A man would never renounce it – the character from his *Записки из подполья* asserts – since suffering is the only reason one gets to know the world: “suffering is the sole origin of consciousness”.⁵⁰¹

To laugh means to assault the established order of things. In order to laugh, you need to understand the subject of your laughter – Umberto Eco writes⁵⁰² in his *Elogio di Franti* – you need to greet it fully inside your cognition and be able to look at it, critically, from a certain distance. What do those hands and heads know about their own laughter? To laugh *seriously* means to enter the Order of Things, to corrupt it from the inside, disclosing its intrinsic temporariness; it means to enter the story, in a manner similar to that of Rabelais' Panurge,⁵⁰³ only to “integrate *à rebours*”.⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁹ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, cit., pp. 21–22.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰² U. Eco, *Diario minimo*, cit., p. 95.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–94

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Laughter has a corrective power – Eco claims – able to open onto alternative truths in the environment that are strictly regulated by one exclusive set of morals. It represents the Negation.⁵⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the one who laughs is recognised as evil by those who are not capable of laughter and who prefer the given disposition of forces, the philosopher proceeds. “He who laughs is evil only to the one who believes in what is being ridiculed”.⁵⁰⁶

The mockers, as shown in Fra Angelico’s imagery, doubt Christ and, by laughing at him, they try to threaten not only his physical – but more importantly his spiritual – integrity. By laughing at Christ, it is the idea of Christ which should be brought into question, it is some kind of *ante-mortem* ritual whose purpose could be to assure the devaluing of the life and message of the condemned; to prohibit actual death from crowning the deceased with an aura of solemnity, his image should be tainted, broken; his public death should occur while the victim is still in life.

Laughter shows disrespect to each and every certainty, it does not reconcile itself with reality. A man is afraid of the doors which might slam in his face once certainty is attained, once the Tower of Babel reaches the sky. As in the myth of Tantalus, a man must be distant enough not to be able to reach for the object of his desires, but yet close enough to be assured of its existence. That is the position of a sufferer – it entails the possibility of transformation: since I cannot change my position, it is I myself who can transform. It promotes life, however paradoxically; it cherishes laughter as the agent of change.

Does not man, perhaps, love something besides well-being? Perhaps he is just as fond of suffering? Perhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to him as well-being? Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering, and that is a fact. There is no need to appeal to universal history to prove that; only ask yourself, if you are a man and have lived at all. As far as my personal opinion is concerned, to care only for well-being seems to me positively ill-bred. Whether it’s good or bad, it is sometimes very pleasant, too, to smash

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95 (trans. by V. Baltić).

things. I hold no brief for suffering nor for well-being either. I am standing for ... my caprice, and for its being guaranteed to me when necessary.⁵⁰⁷

A man has to wonder, to be unsure, to *err*. The attained must be destroyed to assure imperfection, to assure life. He might not need a god to incarnate and tell him what to do and teach him how to live. He might ultimately prefer to have his god distant, even silent, *un-human*; so the god who incarnated must be murdered, his image should be torn to pieces, as Fra Angelico shows.

Nonetheless, Christ is irremovable, as the painting represents, in his dignified posture on the throne of the world. There is no fear nor worry on his mother's or Saint Dominic's faces. It is the mockers who suffer, who are torn apart, dispossessed of their own integrity. It is Christ here, it could be claimed, who *laughs back*.

⁵⁰⁷ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, cit., p. 53.

Remnants

Concluding remarks

Is it a sin to die in the spring?⁵⁰⁸

In his short story, entitled *Бобок*,⁵⁰⁹ Dostoevsky narrates about an extraordinary and maybe rather bizarre phenomenon witnessed by an alcoholic journalist, who found himself in a cemetery one day by chance. The man, rather unexpectedly, heard the dialogues of voices coming from the graves.

Until what remains of life is still condensed in consciousness – as Platon Nikolaevich, the philosopher among the deceased, was explaining this curious situation he happened to be part of – the voices are willing to put their own truth out there, until they finally decompose, in two or three months, or even half a year. There is no need for them to pretend any more. Confined inside coffins, the spirits, maybe for the first time, are willing not to lie. Who would ever know that it could be actually possible to think, while dead, in a coffin? Who would ever come up with such an outrageous cruelty? In this “life outside of life”,⁵¹⁰ or even on “the

⁵⁰⁸ “*Je li greh umreti u proleće?*”, *Vratiće se rode*, directed by G. Gajić, RTV B92, 2007 (transcribed and translated by V. Baltić).

⁵⁰⁹ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Бобок*, 1873, Eng. trans. J. Coulson (ed.), *The gamble, Bobok, A Nasty Story*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1966.

⁵¹⁰ M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 140.

threshold of life and death”⁵¹¹ – as Bakhtin writes – the voices are willing to profess *un-heard* truths. Yet, the journalist did not hear any of it, since his sneeze caused them to stop and retreat into the silence.

For Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century theosophical theorist, what happens after death is that “‘the exterior’ disappears and spirit is revealed as it truly was in life”.⁵¹² Spirits, at this stage, as Swedenborg imagines in his *De coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno*, are not subjugated to any ethical or societal obligation and can express their nature with the full freedom of one who is exempted from any responsibility towards his neighbour. This is precisely the context in which Dostoevsky’s characters decide to “lose all sense of shame”⁵¹³ and go “naked”.⁵¹⁴ This is the context which is, maybe, in itself the most appropriate concluding remark for this doctoral thesis, since it is able to explicate, through its striking fantastic elements, all of the core aspects of the idea of the tragic.

The story is located in a place of the *un-dead*, i.e. where those who saw death while still in life, come to be assured of it; among monuments built to celebrate the forever lost, which is simultaneously their only possession. The graveyard is the perfect place, maybe the nearest place to the gates of a mute mystery. That is to say that Dostoevsky’s *Бобок* is completely permeated by the tragic sense of life – static, irresponsive, mercilessly necessary. It portrays with great precision the horror of a lack of space, of a lack of time, the intrusiveness of *non-meaning*, substituting God’s place. The title itself hints at the underlying absurdity of the situation, in which the only witness’s perception is corrupted by alcohol, and is thus unattainable.

In a world like this, nonetheless, an opportunity appears, asking to be immediately recognised as such. Once deprived of the life the *un-dead* knew before, they can finally speak freely, express without any external limitation, without censorship and worry. Since they have entered the waters of the Styx, they can leave all of their burdens, and even though they are

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵¹² I. Vinitky, *Where Bobok Is Buried: The Theosophical Roots of Dostoevskii’s “Fantastic Realism”*, in “Slavic Review”, Vol. 65, n. 3, Autumn 2006, p. 528.

⁵¹³ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Bobok*, cit., p. 178.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

still oblivious to the path they are taking, to the truths it entails, they themselves can finally become truthful.

Through an excess of life, an excess of time given to the mind and heart to get used to death, what is offered here is an opportunity for transformation. In other words, while maybe the most tragic aspect of human life is the excess of consciousness, which leads a man to see more than he can bear, an excess of vision, yet insufficient for one to see the whole, this is at the same time man's biggest chance. In this little *more than*, in this undefinable, inexplicable hurting *surplus* of vision, in this little crack in between the realms, between the human and the divine, man has the possibility to change, to imagine different worlds, to continue changing incessantly.

The tragic excess, the same hinted at in Chryssipus' unexpected visit from Hades, in his using more time than he could have possibly had – all the time that anyone could think of – while recalling the long chain of the Labdacids' misfortunes through his disconcerting presence; the same nested in Myshkin's Christlike forgiveness, in his reluctance to give any space in his heart to evil and mayhem; the excess of the bravest Ajax, whose divine arrogance touches the confines of Athena's humanness; Antigone's thoughtless dare to be less than a heroine and more than a sister; Io's cursed beauty, which led her to experience the most hideous landscapes; the excess in Samsa's existential deadlock. Tragic excess can be found in the deepest pit prepared for the body of Aleksandra Zec, of a dead child, the deepest pit in which humanity precipitates in itself. The excess is in the feelings, in those most precious, but yet, as it sometimes seems, most despised *vulnera* which constitute a human being as such, supposed to be left behind in order for the TV star to shine – as Silvia Gallerano points out.

Tragic excess collocates at the breaking point. It enters nothingness to advocate for being. It swears on the noonday sun to assure that there will be shadows. It awaits God's death on the cross, to promise humanity that there is no death. It rips the child from its mother's hands, precisely to be in the position to let her know afterwards that it most certainly would not have happened if she had only stood three steps back from there, for instance, or maybe two, if only she had not been standing at all...

The tragic *more than*, makes a human think that if only he were to look with enough scruple, he would see, if only one's consciousness were to remain alight for six more months after death, as in *Bobok*, it would get to know the truth. It asks to wait and see, because there must be something to see, because a human being cannot be just that, a perfect assembly of matter. There must have been a beginning to it all. There must be some kind of *telos*.

The tragic hero would do anything to prove that he is not just that, a predictable, definable, and thus, simple mechanism which, as such, could be held a prisoner of its own settings. The tragic heroes desire is more than desire, their rage is more than rage, their pain is cosmic. It burns, breaks, kills, sacrifices deliberately, unreasonably, mercilessly, only to prove that it can. To prove that there is something to sacrifice, that there is someone to whom to offer a holy goat.

Does not that seem foolish?

This gratuitous expense, on the orders of some most mysterious forces, nonetheless, proves exactly what a mortal would like to prove. That is to say that, there is no rage which does not turn into a hug, since an excess of rage cannot but embrace its opposite. There might have never been a beginning, or at least if there had been, it must have coincided with the end.

Iconographic Appendix



Fig. 1.

Peter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (1563, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp), image available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dulle_Griet (Accessed: 5 January 2022).



Fig. 2.

Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, (1521, Kunstmuseum, Basel), image available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-8-autumn-2006/messages-master> (Accessed: 5 January 2022).



Fig. 3.

Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, (1545–1554, Loggia dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria, Florence). image available at: <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/perseus-with-the-head-of-medusa-benvenuto-cellini> (Accessed: 5 January 2022).



Fig. 4.

Giusto de' Menabuoi, *The woman clothed with the sun and the seven-headed dragon*, (1360-1370, Padua Baptistery), image available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woman_and_dragon_\(Giusto_de_Menabuoi\)_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woman_and_dragon_(Giusto_de_Menabuoi)_2.jpg) (Accessed: 5 January 2022).



Fig. 5.

Fra Angelico, *The Mocking of Christ*, (1438–1445, San Marco's Convent, Florence), image available at: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cristo_deriso_\(Angelico\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cristo_deriso_(Angelico)) (Accessed: 5 January 2022).

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Interviews

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- S. Gallerano: 19 July 2021.
- O. Frlić: 29 June 2021, 23 October 2021.
- C. Charron: 30 November 2021
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