

Negative Dialectic in *Othello*

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The question about *Othello* that has puzzled generations is: what are the motives behind Iago's evil plans?¹ This question is based upon something genuinely puzzling in *Othello*. A force of necessity, the necessity of a certain logic, runs through the play and gives it its coherence, its dramatic potency and its darkness. Through Iago's wit and the operation of chance the plot unfolds inescapably. We are told what is going to happen and destiny makes it happen in all necessity. Even the end, the disclosure of the truth, the failure of evil, is somehow sensed in advance. And yet the principle of reason justifying this necessity is quite puzzling. Why? Why did Iago set out on this more than cunning odyssey of evil? Why risk everything for so very little? If Iago is truly a personification of reason and egotism, why risk everything only for an unjustified hatred and a petty jealousy? What is the necessity of the dramatic necessity? My theory is that the necessity of the dramatic necessity, the nature of this necessity and the necessity for it, are nothing but dialectic, in a very precise Hegelian sense of the term. The power of *Othello* lies in its consummate use of dialectical logic and Iago is the personification or characterisation of the power of the negative.

One way of accounting for the double necessity in *Othello* is to stress the religious undertone of the play. It has been claimed before that the characters of Desdemona, Iago and Othello are based on the dramatic triad of Jesus, Satan and Judas and that numerous passages, notably the end of the play, refer directly to the death and resurrection of Christ and the repentance of Judas, the 'base Judean'. Such an interpretation provides a good explanation for the poetic and dramatic power of the three main characters, and for the unity of the play. The story that unfolds before our eyes is not only the archetypal struggle of good versus evil; it is the founding story of the western world. A vulgar story of matrimonial jealousy takes the proportions of the Passion itself. Or inversely, Love as a theological notion becomes the pure love of Desdemona for Othello. Secondly, Iago is literally a 'demi-devil'; he is another literary representation of Satan. The second sense of necessity is then also well accounted for. There is no psychological motive for the devil to be malicious and devilish.

But there is a layer underneath. The text says very clearly that Iago

is a representation of Satan. What about Othello and Desdemona? Is Desdemona truly a representation of Christ? How well does Othello fit with the traitor Judas? He might have many faults, but it does not seem to be the point of the play to portray him through and through as the 'base Judean'. In a famous article, Robert Heilmann opposes Iago's wit to the witchcraft of love embodied by Desdemona.² Is her love for Othello so pure? Is the point of the play really to emphasise the power of love beyond the artifice of reason? Again, this seems to miss the meaning of the play. Why would the lovers have to die in such an awful way if love was to be the victor? The love of Desdemona is very far from Juliet's love and, anyway, Desdemona is not the hero. Although the religious interpretation and the antithesis interpretation point to layers of significance beyond realistic psychology, they are not sufficient. They are not dialectical enough. Dialectic is figured in Iago-Satan and it operates in each of the characters, in every *peripeteia*. This is the basic logic of the text.

Iago is Satan as Ha-Satan, 'the Slanderer' in Hebrew: 'O, fie upon thee, slanderer!' (II.i.113; see also IV.ii.135).³ He is also the Devil as Dia-bolus, the force of dis-union, of division. He systematically slanders and disunites every symbol of spirituality or ethical truth, every institution of *Sittlichkeit*:⁴ he desecrates the love of Desdemona, friendship with Cassio and Roderigo, marital bond with Emilia, faithfulness to his master, honour, the political realm of the City, piety, piety. He is quite literally the 'absolute inequality with the universal', 'singularity' pretending to be 'essence',⁵ to refer to two definitions of evil in the *Phenomenology*. In conceptual terms, in every identity, he introduces difference, in every universal ethical moment the point of view of the particular: 'not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end' (I.i.59-60). He is difference and particularity, the pure for itself that refuses to become equal to any in itself, and therefore is not equal to itself. Iago defines himself as this moment of pure difference, the opposite of concrete universality that is identical to itself: 'I am not what I am' (I.i.65). In one word, as one who 'gives his own particularity the precedence over the universal and realises it through action'⁶ to quote from *The Philosophy of Right*, he exactly corresponds to Hegel's definition of Evil.

Indeed, he personifies all the figures of evil. If hypocrisy is, according to *The Philosophy of Right*, 'subjectivity asserting itself as the absolute',⁷ then his first soliloquy is a monument to this. He is the psychological servant for whom there is no greater man. He is reason as understanding, the power to separate what belongs together and to

hold it separately. As Robert Heilmann has pointed out, 'good sense, hard sense, common sense, no nonsense, rationality—all these terms are ones which Iago might consider as defining his perspective'.⁸ Othello: 'O, thou art wise, 'tis certain' (IV.i.74).

Language for Hegel is the '*Dasein* of Spirit'.⁹ In language, the I, the Self is at the same time this I, this Self, and universal I. In language 'The I has gone to Being ... The I has sublated its arbitrariness in its Being, has posited itself as universal'. This is a substantial definition of language, designating a normative way of using it. There is also a way of twisting language, of perverting it, so that the universal in language is made to serve the particular in it. Evil is always best manifested and festers in the evil way of using language. If language is particularity sublated in universality, then evil as hypocrisy is most at home in a perverted use of language. Iago is the master of this perverted language. The play exhibits all possible ways of using language. Othello is the man of action, whose rhetoric is at the same time hyperbolic and inefficient: 'Rude am I in my speech, / And little blest with the soft'¹⁰ phrase of peace, / ... And little of this great world can I speak, / More than pertains to feats of broil, and battle' (I.iii.81–87). Cassio is the master of the 'soft phrase', but his phrase is too soft, too precious, too full of metaphors, allegories and hyperboles; this is language as decoration: 'a knave very voluble', as Iago says (II.i.236–37). Desdemona is language as non-dialectical, as immediate expression of pure thoughts, beyond rhetoric and dialectics: 'most gracious duke, / To my unfolding lend a gracious ear, / And let me find a charter in your voice, / And if my simpleness ...' (I.iii.243–46).

Iago is the master of the dialectic in language, even though he uses it in a perverted fashion. First of all, he is the master of language as a tool. He is the Snake that insinuates Evil in the ear of Man ('Where is this viper?' [V.ii.286]). All his wit consists in the ultimate mastering of language as a means. He is the master of persuasion and seduction. The scenes are too numerous to quote where in just a few lines he completely turns around the psychological state of a character. But his language is perverted language. It is language as irony, the ultimate form of evil according to Hegel. Again, passages are too numerous to quote where Iago makes a fool of his counterpart, using irony in the exact sense of the term, that is, he says something that is at the same time a true declaration and the reflection on it and as such false. Because it is false it is true, or because it is a reflection on truth it is false.

His language as *verkehrrt* is structured around the negative-dialectic moment, the negation. Like Mephistopheles he is the '*Geist der stets*

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verneint: 'I am not what I am', 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (I.i.57), etc. 'No' is the word that summarises the logic of his entire discourse.

Another figure of language as perverted dialectic is the paradox. Iago is the master of it: 'These are old paradoxes, to make fools laugh i' the alehouse' (II.i.138-39) says Desdemona; and a few lines later 'O heavy ignorance, that praises the worst best' (II.i.143).

Iago is the man who masters the language of persuasion because he is an expert of the human heart: 'This fellow ... knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / Of human dealing' (III.iii.262-64). Iago has the best understanding of all the characters, and despite his perverted use of language, he must be said to often say the truth. In fact, he states the truth much more often than he conceals or distorts it. As the figure of the negative-speculative, he is contradiction in itself: in his speech, truth and lie are tightly intertwined and flow into each other constantly. He tells each of his victims the exact truth about his evil nature and they do not listen because of the simple logic of contradiction. When he lies they think it is true and when he speaks the truth, they think he lies. To Desdemona asking: 'What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?' he replies: 'O gentle lady, do not put me to't, / For I am nothing, if not critical' (II.i.117-19). In the central scene, he warns Othello in the clearest terms: 'Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false' (III.iii.140).

It is quite striking to note that the phenomenological figure of the ignoble consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* synthesises perfectly all these determinations of the Iago character. Iago is exactly 'the self that is for itself', 'that knows not only how to pass judgment on and chatter about everything, but how to give witty expression to the contradiction that is present in the solid elements of the actual world'. 'He knows better than each what each is, no matter what its specific nature is', he 'is the universal deception of himself and others, and the shamelessness which gives utterance to this deception is just for that reason the greatest truth'. Finally, his 'vanity needs the vanity of all things in order to get from them the consciousness of self; it therefore creates this vanity itself and is the soul that supports it'.¹¹

Iago is a representation of the destructive moment inherent in the dialectic structure of spirit, the pure power of the negative, of contradiction viewed for itself. As such, Iago is not only devil but also Monster. The Monster is etymologically a sign given by the Gods, 'monstrum' comes from 'moneo', it is based on the root that means Spirit, *mens*, mind. Iago is the spirit in its negative-speculative moment,

the evil moment. It is the root of freedom and of its 'mystery'.¹²

This way of understanding the power in Iago's character answers the objection put to Bradley by Leavis, that by focusing too strongly on Iago's motives, one forgets that Othello is the *ethos* portrayed.¹³ Iago is not the main character, because, as a representation of evil, that is, of the negative power in spirit, he is purely the principle of dramatic movement in the play. As such, he is in a way the most important character; as dialectical principle he is the pure dramatic element, but dialectic only discloses what is already present in itself in the moments, and so at the same time he is less important than the characters he sets in motion. The position of dialectic is itself dialectic.

Based on this logic I would now like to meditate on the name of dialectic in the play and the poetic effects derived from this. Why 'Iago'? The story which inspired Shakespeare does not name Iago, just calls him the Ensign of the Moor.¹⁴ Why did Shakespeare choose the name Iago? Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* offers a very intricate explanation: Iago is the Spanish equivalent of James. The symbol of St James of Compostella is the cockleshell, in which it is easy to hear the cuckold resonate.¹⁵ Joyce's interpretation of the play was that Iago and Othello are one and the same persona, namely representations of Shakespeare, Joyce and Leopold Bloom as cuckolds. In the Circe episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen and Bloom look in the mirror; Shakespeare appears 'crowned by the reflection of the reindeer antlered hatrack in the hall' and shouts 'Iagogo! ... Iagogogo!'. In French a 'gogo' is a naive man, a possible name for a cuckold.¹⁶ My reference to Joyce's convoluted reading of Shakespeare is not random. His use of anagram (the three letters HCE) in *Finnegan's Wake* as the structuring principle of the book, as well as a defining poetic, phonetic or rather grammatical principle of word-production, is an inspiring tool for interpretation. Poetry uses signifiers as raw material. Joyce's moulding of words is based upon the oldest of traditions, that of the interpretation of the letter, of the power of the letter, in the name of Yahve or in the name of Christ for instance, and has been given theoretical status for the study of poetry. By studying language in *Othello* as matter, all I do is treat the play as a poem. I would like to suggest a paragrammatic seemingly non-Hegelian reading of *Othello* based on the logic of negative dialectic.

Iago, I A G O, I read as the cipher or *chrismon* of the text. One has to be puzzled by the use of three vowels and the exclusion of the others. I A O. First of all, they are the vowels of the Devil as Daimon, or of the *diabolikos*, the 'Diablo' (II.iii.152). E and U are reserved as the vowels of Jesus and Deus. E is only present in the name of the single pure

being in the play, Desdemona, and to a lesser extent in the less pure Emilia. It is the disappeared letter.

The *diabolikos* is dialectic in its negative moment. The IA sequence signals the operation of dialectic within the dialogue and plot. This applies firstly to the names of the characters. BIANca the white whore, the truth of what Desdemona is accused of being, triggers the downfall of the fair lady. Emilia is the wife of the 'Diablo' and she is directly responsible for Desdemona's death. Cassio is the inverted Iago. Roderigo is the half-willing servant of the Devil; half a devil himself, he plays his part in the tragic plot. IANus, the God with two faces is the only God apart from Satan himself that Iago swears by.

Furthermore, Satan is the Prince of Angels fallen from the sky because he wanted to take God's place. Hence the G. As the mad finite Self asserting itself as the absolute, Iago acts as if saying: 'I am God'. The Goat as a mockery of the name of God (see IV.i.259) and the Dog, the phonetic inversion of God (Roderigo: 'O damn'd Iago, O inhuman dog' [V.i.63]; 'the circumcised dog' [V.ii.356]; 'O Spartan dog' [V.ii.362]), are two animal symbols of the false deity.¹⁷

But the paragrammatic reading also implies that the sequence of letters operates as a productive, poetic and grammatic engine producing textuality and poetry. For instance, it is very striking to note how many times Iago speaks of himself in the first person, how many times he says: 'I am'. This can be explained as the hybrid of subjectivity asserting itself as the absolute. But there is more to it. If you read the text carefully, you notice the occurrences of 'I am' are systematically followed by an O-word. The I A G O sequence is the sequence of the I, the Ego abstractly asserting itself as absolute principle against objectivity. The phrase 'I am God', the sequence IAGO, is the cipher of the text considered as a poem. The examples are numerous; I shall only quote those that appear in crucial moments. In the confrontation between Iago and Desdemona—'O gentle lady, do not put me to't, / For I am nothing if not critical'—IAGO is the obvious paragram of this verse. It appears almost literally when Iago urges Roderigo to engage Cassio in the fatal brawl: 'Away I say, go out' (II.iii.148). In the damnation scene, Iago concludes thus: 'I am your own forever'. Finally, in the central scene, the few words that completely overturn Othello's mind and soul are Iago's: 'I like not that', 'I know not what', 'I cannot think it' (III.iii.35, 37 and 39).¹⁸ This choice of words is obviously not limited to their phonetic or rather grammatic power. 'I like not that', 'I know not what', this is thought or spirit as the power to negate absolutely, to absolutely negate anything, the source of all evil.

The entire deception scene is centred on the word 'Thought'. Iago adds the final touch at the beginning of Act IV, again through the perversion of thought.¹⁹ What I think as positive I can also posit as negative and vice-versa, vice is exactly this faculty of the vice-versa. There is nothing, neither love nor friendship, nor honour, nor any other consideration that could stop the negative power of spirit in its destructive side. But it is also true that IAGO is the poetic or symbolic cipher of the destructive power of spirit. It comes to light in the clearest grammatic way in the most destructive scene of the play.

But again, a paragrammatic reading implies that the primitive anagram is the primitive signifier as a focus producing, by expansion, text and drama. The IAGO or IAO sequence can be detected in numerous combinations throughout the play. First of all, this sequence is a very practical one for the English writer because it is contained in all these long-winded notions originating in Latin that end in -ion. The play is full of them, but they especially abound in the judicial vocabulary. This makes good sense. The staging of judgment and punishment, of proof and witnessing, of oath and perjury, of truth and lie, are central to the drama and its philosophical meaning. From the very beginning, Desdemona is put on trial with no chance to defend herself, accused of being a pure soul in a world of vice. The play is a grand, vivid metaphor of the human world as the realm of injustice: conjuration, redemption, perdition, provocation, reputation, perdition, suspicions, confirmation, probation, damnation, imputation, give/seek satisfaction, execution, castigation, advocacy, solicitation, restitution, reprobation.

Other central signifiers also contain the sequence of the devil: the dialectical 'notwithstanding' and 'equivocal', 'villainous', 'warrior', 'hideous', 'jealousy', 'mandragora' and 'coloquintida' as diabolical plants, the 'monstrous Anthropophagi', 'ignorance', 'disloyal', 'insinuating rogue', 'pernicious', etc. The verse that closes the plot is 'look on the tragic lodging of this bed' (V.ii.364).²⁰

But Iago is not the hero of the play. He represents and expresses the dramatic force that moves the characters. This can be translated in paragrammatic terms or in dramatic, dialectical terms. The most important feature of the logic of dialectic is that it is immanent. Any self-coherent spiritual being can only falter on the grounds of inner flaw, not through external intervention. Iago can only manage these fantastic inversions in other characters' minds because he spells out what they want to hear, what they really are. Each character follows only the necessity of its true self. Iago's sole responsibility is that he helps them attain what they had to become. His last words spell out the

truth about this: 'Demand me nothing, what you know, you know' (V.ii.304). In paragrammatic terms, the devil and the letters of the devil are present in every character, even in Desdemona. Iago is a Monster but so is every other character, because Iago is the Monster in the soul of each of them.

This is true of the hero himself. What is Othello? He is pure abstract being. This passage from *The Philosophy of Religion* describes him perfectly: 'being is universality in its empty meaning, in its most abstract meaning. "It is"—this is this simple determination entirely abstract'. This is the way Othello defines himself in opposition to the dialectical Iago: 'my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly' (I.ii.31–32). Tautology reappears at the end: 'Speak of me as I am' (the First Folio reading, V.ii.343).²¹ 'Being expresses this relation to itself, without any relation towards the outside or towards the inside'. Othello's love is purely egotistical, as we will see. 'Abstract universality. The universal is essentially self-identity (I am what I am); this is also being, it is simple'.²²

The expression of pure abstraction in the ethical realm is the virtue of the soldier. According to *The Philosophy of Right*, 'valour is in itself a formal virtue, because it is the highest abstraction of freedom from all particular ends, possessions, pleasure, and life ... The alienation of these, as the enactment of valour is not in itself of a spiritual nature'.²³ Othello is the dramatic representation of pure immediacy and abstraction. His ethos is that of the soldier. But because the virtue of the soldier is purely formal, detached from all objective ends of the ethical world, this virtue left unchained is pure violence. Bravery is savagery when unchecked by political authority, which is exactly what happens in Cyprus.

Othello is described as a bloody, violent man from the very beginning. Already in the third scene his relationship to Desdemona is of violent possession: 'I won this daughter', like a fortress. In his second self-representation, he is clearly described as a being beyond humanity, one day a slave, the other day as strong as Hercules, having lived in places that symbolise the savagery of raw nature, antres, deserts, rough quarries, rocks, hills whose heads touch heaven. The creatures he deals with are the Cannibals, the Anthropophagi, men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. It is not necessary to detail at length the savagery of the character, it punctuates the play from beginning to end; just one example among others: 'I will chop her into messes' (IV.i.196).

The fate of abstract being is to become immediately sublated by and

into nothingness. In ethical and dramatic terms, the fate of violence is to perish violently and to destroy the thing it loves. Jealousy is love turned into destructive and self-destructive violence. It is too obvious to show in detail that Iago has almost to do nothing to convince Othello he is being betrayed. Othello is only too ready to believe it and to act on it. The signs were being given as early as the first act, when Iago was not even present. Brabantio: 'Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see: / She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee'—Othello: 'My life upon her faith' (I.iii.292, 294). Iago only has to reflect outwardly Othello's inward doubts to actualise the potential violent mistrust: 'By heaven, he echoes me, / As if there were some monster in his thought, / Too hideous to be shown' (III.iii.110–12). It is actually Othello who drops the handkerchief, and thus physically creates Desdemona's guilt. He won't listen to Emilia's powerful defence of her mistress, but once murder has been committed, it takes Emilia two lines to convince him of his mistake.

Now we ask, why the signifier 'OTHELLO'? It develops the original signifier 'THE MOOR' as a close anagram of it. One obvious change is the stretching apart of the two Os. This combination 'OO' is the characteristic of Othello. In the most violent scene of the play, the doubled vowel, that of a 'bloody' 'fool', is very frequently used.²⁴ But the two OOs are kept furthest apart in the name of the hero. The scarlet letter of blood and violence is like the alpha and omega of the character. The letters 'R' and 'M' remain, once 'THE' and the two OOs have been removed from 'THE MOOR'. They are replaced by 'LL'. This makes sense not only phonetically, but also because then the combination reads 'OLLO'. The palindrome thus created emphasises the symbolism of the 'O' in the Othello character.

Now what of Desdemona? What is her true nature and hence her destiny? It is undeniable that in several passages and notably in her death her character is clearly modelled on Christ. But there is another side to her. Desdemona is not only an almost divine creature, she also has the A and the O of the *diabolikos* in her name. I would like to suggest that it is possible to argue that Desdemona is also a type of monster, albeit obviously in a different sense from Othello and Iago. Not only has she the letters of the devil in her, but the name of the devil itself. She is Demona, the female Demon.

To support this difficult claim we only need ask: how can the supposed pure soul of the play, a representation of Christ himself or at least some pre-lapsarian soul, actually fall in love with a Monster? Only a monster can love a monster. This is quite obvious in the passage

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where the meeting and falling in love of the two characters is narrated by Othello. What moves Desdemona is the story of the inhuman adventures of the hero, not his human qualities or virtues. She is the opposite of Juliet. Juliet would like Cassio, not the older man full of sound and fury. It is Desdemona herself who insists in going to war with her husband. Her reason is not primarily that she does not want to be separated from him, but that she fell in love and loves him as a warrior and that it is only natural that she should be there when he acts like a warrior: 'if I be left behind, / A moth of peace, and he go to the war, / The rites for which I love him are bereft me' (I.iii.255-57). She loves a bloody man, she will die at the hands of a bloody man.

When Cassio describes her at the beginning of Act II, she, like Othello, is clearly shown as a creature beyond humanity: 'in the essential vesture of creation / Does bear all excellency' (II.i.64-65).²⁵ The monstrous nature of Desdemona, her strange kinship with Iago, is revealed in a symbolic way in the transition from well-ordered Venice to hellish Cyprus:

Now, who has put in?

Second Gentleman. 'Tis one Iago, ancient to the general.

Cassio. He has had most favourable and happy speed:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,

The gutter'd rocks and congregated sands,

Traitors ensteep'd, to clog the guiltless keel,

As having sense of beauty, do omit

Their common natures, letting go safely by

The divine Desdemona.

(II.i.65-73)

The mortal seas have omitted the divine Desdemona and Iago as well. The passage clearly indicates that both Iago and Desdemona are beyond death, and the end of the play will prove it. Desdemona resurrects to speak after death and Iago is the only one of the main characters who does not die in the end. Desdemona is also the only one for whom Iago has no word of contempt. Iago and Desdemona are the true opposites in the drama, Satan and Christ, and yet somehow akin to each other.

Desdemona is purity and naivety to the point of fanaticism and blindness. She literally refuses to accept that a woman might betray her husband even 'for the whole world' (IV.iii.78). For her, one might say, *Fiat virtus, pereat mundus*. Even when her husband has fully revealed himself as what he is, namely a brutal jealous beast, she will not change. As Iago puts it: 'she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do

more than she is requested' (II.iii.312–13). She also is a personification of abstract being. She characterises herself as 'simplicity'. But 'simplicity' as immediacy is doomed to end dialectically, that is, tragically. In this sense, Desdemona's death is the opposite of Christ's Passion. Christ's death is the death of dialectic in immediacy, Desdemona's death is the death of immediacy at the hands of dialectic. Desdemona is somehow a monster of simplicity.

From the very beginning, she is destined to die and she will be responsible for her own death; this is the immanent necessity of her fate. She sends herself to the place of her sacrifice. Her last words, stating the truth about her character confirm this:

Emilia. O, who has done this deed?

Desdemona. Nobody, I myself ...

(V.ii.124–25)

Death is her name: 'O Desdemona, Desdemona dead, / O, o, o (V.ii.282–83).²⁶

Othello and Desdemona not only die because of their own fatal abstraction, they stand in a reciprocal dialectical relationship in which each sublates the other. Desdemona and Othello are obviously constructed as exact opposites: a very young, inexperienced, white, Christian woman versus the experienced, mature, black, pagan man of war. But their marriage is not the simple abstract opposition of good versus evil. They are both monsters, both are radically different and at the same time identical. As true opposites, they do not simply stand next to each other in abstract opposition; they both attract the other, are united with their opposite, destroy it and are destroyed in this destruction. Both are the nothingness of the other as abstract being.

Othello attracts the simple and fair Desdemona on account of his inhuman sufferings, his symbolic blackness. She does not love him for what he is, but because she finds his fate 'passing strange', that is, the exact opposite of hers, and because she would want to be 'such a man' (I.iii.160, 163), that is, become the exact opposite of what she is. This attraction to her opposite destroys her as she succumbs to the very principle she was attracted to and it destroys him at the same time. On the other hand, Desdemona the fair lady first attracts the black Othello because she pities him. His love is not love as the wish to be one with a person one admires and desires, but rather loving the reflection of himself in his opposite. But because this being is his exact opposite, he does not recognise himself in it. Her simple fairness that attracted him as a reflection of his own simplicity is at the same time the symbolic

term stating that she is everything that he is not, a pure soul in a pure body, and hence a total rejection of him. Consequently, the cause for the unleashing of his violence is nothing but her own fairness, the purity of her soul symbolised in the purity of her beauty. Othello's words say it very clearly at the beginning at the wake of the murder: 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars: / It is the cause' (V.ii.1-3). The tautological repetition powerfully suggests that there is no cause at all, no objective outside cause for his jealousy and violence, no other cause than his soul, his very nature, and hers, his blackness and her fairness, and the destructive reunion of the two opposites. He will kill her but will not 'scar that whiter skin of hers than snow' (V.ii.4), because that white is the very reason for his love and hate.

This dialectic wrangling of two opposite principles is the basic logical, symbolic, poetic and dramatic structure of the play. The play is entirely built around the axis of opposition and sublation of the opposites into one another: good and evil, day and night, black and white, Christian and pagan, male and female, old and young, master and servant, indigenous and foreign, here and there, and so on. Shakespeare suggests dialectical conflict in many powerful poetic images. The play opens with the fight between light and darkness. Iago and Roderigo, two creatures of the night, wake up Brabantio 'with like timorous accent, and dire yell, / As when, by night and negligence, the fire / Is spied in populous cities' (I.i.75-77). Torches are brought. Light is made over the treachery of Desdemona. But Iago's evil plans will again change light into darkness: 'it is engender'd! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light' (I.iii.401-02), a wonderful characterisation of dialectical process. The description of the tempest at the beginning of Act II depicts this monstrous change in nature itself: the sea and the sky are reunited in an inversion of genesis, the monstrous birth of evil. The opposite symbols of heaven and earth are drawn to each other and destroy everything and each other. When Othello enters the scene of murder, he carries a candle and when the murder has been completed, the curtains will be drawn. The climax in the play's violence, Desdemona's death by strangulation, is the place where the destructive intertwining of the two opposites is visually represented on stage. Othello the black man on top of the white woman. Love is hate. To kiss is to kill (V.ii.360).

The logic of fate is immanent for all other characters as well. They all fail because of their own internal deficiencies. However these characters

are representations of spirit. Their finitude is that of forms of consciousness. For each of them, there is a moment of truth in which they have a clear free choice between good and evil. Iago does little to convince them. He need only tempt them, and they follow. It is always a deliberate choice on their part that brings their downfall and conspires to Desdemona's death. Cassio is persuaded by Iago to drink with complete strangers: 'I'll do't, but it dislikes me' (II.iii.43). One wonders: if Cassio is on duty and knows the effects of alcohol on him, why does he accept? Why do it if it dislikes him? Where is evil, in Iago or in himself? The answer comes after the wrong has been done: 'O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!' (II.iii.273-75). The devil is in the spirit, devil is spirit in its negative moment, the power to see good and say 'No' to it. When devil speaks, Cassio has the power to say no but only says no to the moral alternative. It is Cassio's own spirit that is revealed as evil in this experience. This is an experience in the true phenomenological sense of the term. Out of it, a more mediate truth emerges. This is the only positive result of all the negative dialectic processes in the play. Cassio, the only one to match Iago in the mastering of language, has discovered the truth about his own spirit: 'to be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast!' (II.iii.296-97). He has seen the evil nature of spirit, experienced it and survived it; from now on he will be the strongest character. He will not be killed by Roderigo, he is the only one not to be hurt or die, and at the end of the play, he becomes the new commander of the Island.

Emilia is also put to the test of temptation. Confronted with the choice between good and evil, she makes the fatal choice that will produce her mistress's and her own death. This is the moment in Act III when she picks up the handkerchief and gives it to her husband. Just like Cassio, she enumerates all the reasons why she should not do what she does. She is a clear spirit. She understands by which monstrous means Othello has been transformed into a wild beast; she will be the one who will make the truth known to Othello. And yet she chooses to do wrong and as she does it, sees exactly that she is doing wrong: 'poor lady, she'll run mad, / When she shall lack it' (III.iii.322-23). As for her death, the wife of the devil is killed by the devil. In terms of simple dramatic logic, Shakespeare did not need to kill that character. In terms of logical necessity, she had to die. Very interestingly, she dies when she speaks true: 'So speaking as I think, I die, I die' (V.ii.252).

Even minor figures like Brabantio or Roderigo follow the same logic. They both have the devil's letters in their names. Desdemona's

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father, Brabantio, is also named the 'magnifico', a possible adjective for the 'diablo' himself. He is the first to speak words of violence and distrust and the first to die.

All characters fail on account of their internal abstraction and the presence of evil in them. Accordingly, they all take part somehow in the sacrifice of innocence. They are all guilty. Innocence itself is responsible for its tragic end. This suggests a certain truth about the nature of spirit in human beings, about the nature of dialectic.

Shakespeare gives a terrifying account of spirit: the monster lurks and acts in the heart of every character, of every human being. As spectators who reconstruct and acknowledge the necessity of Desdemona's sacrifice, we ourselves are monstrous and villainous. Devil is that speculative moment in which the power of negation in us is revealed in all its might. This is the terrifying power of freedom.

The spiritual logic at work in *Othello* is truly terrifying because it remains a radically negative dialectic. Nothing can stop the work of evil, even chance is on its side, but after the destruction it brings into being, no reconciliation is achieved. The only process bringing some relative positive result is the minor Cassio experience. All other characters die, evil has left nothing unsoiled and sublation has only meant pure destruction. Nothing positive remains from the entire experience. Friendship, love, civic virtue, military virtue have not been better defined.

Symbolically, the end of the play is not the end of the night. No transfiguration takes place after the death of the Christ-like figure. Curtains are drawn on the bed of horror; no light has come after Golgotha is plunged into darkness. The actors are spectators of the horrible sight before which the bed curtains are drawn; horror is swallowed by oblivion and thus left unreconciled. The *mise en abyme* suggests that we as spectators of the actors are actors ourselves on the stage of life. The curtain is drawn before our eyes but no reconciliation has taken place either. We leave the theatre with the consciousness that evil is in our heart and that nothing good will arise from its necessary misdeeds.

It is very important to note that the opposition between Venice and Cyprus, like all oppositions in the play, is not the simple opposition of good versus evil. A superficial reading could argue that Cyprus under the command of Othello is the negative image of Venice. Several passages in the play suggest this contrast. But the night, as night of hell, starts in Venice. The interaction between opposites, the

opposition of light and darkness starts in Venice and continues in the same logic in Cyprus. The first signs of sacrificial violence against the innocent being were expressed in Venice by one of the leaders of the City, the father of Desdemona. The reconciliation that takes place in the first act is a fake one, as Brabantio does not hesitate to sneer about it. It is Venice itself that gives violent Othello all powers in Hell. The Duke describes the law of the City as 'the bloody book of law' (I.iii.67), introducing in Venice the bloody double vowel. Cyprus is indeed the anti-Venice, but not in abstract opposition. Venice produces Cyprus as its own perverted reflection, and therefore is itself the other that it produces.

That the outcome of the play is totally negative is obvious if we reflect on its conclusion. One of the main morals of the *mythos* should be to take heed of male and military violence, that male love in its abstraction and self-devotion is fundamentally destructive. But instead of this truth being spoken out in a way similar to the reconciliation of the first act, what we have is simply a continuation of violence. The dramatic detail that only the devil does not die means that the spirit of destruction, the negative moment in freedom remains unchecked: 'I bleed, sir, but not kill'd' (V.ii.289). The new violence to come is announced in the last words of the play. Already before the death of Othello, Lodovico had called for the infinite pursuit of violence: 'For this slave, / If there be any cunning cruelty, That can torment him much, and hold him long, / It shall be his' (V.ii.333-36). This is repeated at the very end. After the economic and political succession of the Moor has been settled: 'to you, lord governor, / Remains the censure of this hellish villain, / The time, the place, the torture' (V.ii.368-70).

One could argue that it is only logical that the infinite spirit of the devil should be given the infinite punishment of eternal torture. This is, after all, the dogma of eternal punishment for the damned. As such, it is reconciliation. Desdemona has gone straight to heaven, Emilia has repented and will also be saved: 'So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true' (V.ii.251). Othello, although he seemed to repent, will go to Hell, sharing the fate of Judas: 'Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!' (V.ii.280-81). Iago as the untamed spirit of evil will suffer a long torture on earth, the symbol of eternal damnation in Hell. On a theological level, the conclusion means reconciliation and perfect observance of the dogma.

But from the dialectical point of view, this is only a finite resolution of the conflict; the germ of destruction is still very much at work. The

true reconciliation when the order of the City has been disturbed should not be vengeance but a formal trial. Vengeance can only duplicate violence, is violence itself and calls for more violence, in a good example of bad infinity. Instead of being judged, Iago is promised a long torture. Injustice continues. As long as true reconciliation through trial has not taken place, there is no end to violence. Torture is the very reflection of the torture imposed by Iago on his victims. It will call for more torture. The law of Venice is the 'bloody book of law' and somehow it is Venice that sacrificed the being that did not deserve it, just as the World crucified Christ before recognising his divinity.

I would like to conclude this study by referring to the etching by Goya, 'The Sleep of Reason produces Monsters' and a possible adjacent commentary by Hegel: 'The Human being is this night, this empty nothingness that contains everything in its simpleness, the richness of an infinity of representations and pictures. This is the night, the interior of nature, which exists here—pure Self. In phantasmagoric representations, it is night all around; a bloody head suddenly shoots out here, another white shape there, which disappear in the same way. This is the night we look into when we look the human being in the eyes—into a night which is horrible; here one is faced with the night of the world'.²⁷ *Othello* is the dramatic performance of that Night.

Notes

- 1 For discussion, see Andrew Cecil Bradley, in Susan Snyder, ed., *Othello, Critical Essays*, New York, 1988, p.47.
- 2 Robert Heilmann, 'Wit and witchcraft: Thematic form in *Othello*', in *Othello, Critical Essays*, p.189–200.
- 3 For greater simplicity, quotations are given in the body of the text. All quotations are from the seventh Arden edition by M. R. Ridley, London, 1958, repr. 1962. This is an 'eclectic' edition of the play, based on the First Quarto edition (1622). For an excellent review of the debates still surrounding the different versions of *Othello*, see Ernst Honigmann, *The Texts of 'Othello' and Shakespearian Revision*, London, 1996.
- 4 The fields of *Sittlichkeit* correspond to the *spoudaion* of Aristotelian tragedy. More generally, Hegel's dialectic has a lot to do with Aristotle's conception of tragedy. See the definition of *peripeteia* in the *Poetics*: 'the change from one state of things to another'.
- 5 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, 1977, p.402.
- 6 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, 1991, para 139, p.167.

- 7 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, para 140, p.170.
- 8 Heilmann, p.190.
- 9 G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwerfe* III, eds Rolf Peter Horstmann and Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1987, p.193.
- 10 The reading 'soft' is that of the First Folio; Ridley prefers 'set', the reading of the First Quarto.
- 11 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.320.
- 12 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, para 139, p.167.
- 13 F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic intellect and the Noble Hero: or, The Sentimentalist's Othello', in *Othello, Critical Essays*, p.103.
- 14 Giraldi Cinthio, *Hecatommithi*, Venice, 1566.
- 15 James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, London, 1992, p.41.
- 16 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, with Claus Melchior, London, 1986, p.463.
- 17 Cf. 'Good Iago', spoken by both Cassio (II.i.97) and Othello: (II.i.207).
- 18 Also Iago: 'I am glad of it' (III.iii.197).
- 19 Iago. Will you think so?
Othello. Think so, Iago? (IV.i.1)
- 20 The Folio gives 'loading' instead of 'lodging'. Innumerable verses contain the IAO sequence, for example: 'I ha' no wife; /O insupportable! O heavy hour!' (V.ii.98-99).
- 21 Ridley provides the First Quarto reading: 'Speak of them as they are'.
- 22 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen, über die Philosophie der Religion*. Teil I, eds Walter Jaeschke and Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1983, p.172 (1824 lectures).
- 23 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, para. 327, p.364.
- 24 'See also O! O! O!' (V.ii.199). 'O fool, fool, fool!' (V.ii.324).
- 25 A very difficult passage for editors. Ridley notes that 'excellent' for Shakespeare often has 'a sense much stronger than ours, not just "very good", but "surpassing all rivals" '; see his note on Act II.i.64-65, p.51 of his edition.
- 26 This is the First Quarto reading. Ridley supplies '... Oh, oh, oh'. The First Folio reading is more explicit: 'Oh Desdemon! dead Desdemon: dead. Oh, oh!'. See Ridley, p.193, for variants.
- 27 Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwerfe* III, p.187.