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## Time, History and the Folk: Miguel de Cervantes, Virginia Woolf and Aimé Césaire

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**Time, History and the Folk:**  
**Miguel de Cervantes, Virginia Woolf and Aimé Césaire**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Literary Studies  
of Bard College  
by  
Layl Andary

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## Dedication

For my mother, Taghrid Al-Ghadban, and for my father, Nezar Andary.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all professors who have helped me refine and articulate my ideas, and who have devoted so much of their time and energies to their students. My conversations and weekly meeting with Alys Moody have immeasurably enriched my thinking about many things in this world: I am greatly indebted to her, and thank her deeply. I thank Professor Matthew Mutter for listening to my sometimes incoherent ramblings, and offering honest feedback at my midway board. I thank Professor Marina Van Zuylen for our conversations, and for her support and inspiring enthusiasm. There are many other names to mention– I thank them all.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a section of his *Le génie du christianisme* (1806) titled “*Devotions populaires, harmonies morales*,” the aristocratic vicomte de Chateaubriand descends from the conventional loyalties and attitudes of his social station into the embrace of a mythical community formed by the French “*peuple*.” It is on behalf of this entity that he upbraids the project of Enlightenment for its potential to erode immemorial pieties and traditional moral frameworks: “il faudrait nous plaindre si voulant tout soumettre aux règles de la raison, nous condamnions avec rigueur ces croyances qui aident au peuple à supporter les chagrins de la vie.”<sup>1</sup> What is significant here is how Chateaubriand marshals the variegated inhabitants of French agrarian communities, together with their rustic and pious lifeways, into a single rhetorical figure— “la foule,” a unified subject (“*il*”) amenable to certain verbs, certain predicates, and not others:

Il faut placer au premier rang ces dévotions populaires qui consistent en de certaines croyances et de certains rites pratiqués par la foule... ce ne sont, en effet, que des harmonies de la religion et de la nature... Quand le peuple croit entendre la voix des morts dans les vents, quand il parle des fantômes de la nuit, quand il va en pèlerinage pour le soulagement de ses maux, il est évident que ces opinions ne sont que des relations touchantes entre quelques scènes naturelles, quelques dogmes sacrés de la misère de nos cœurs... les vents, les pluies, les soleils, les saisons, les cultures, les arts, la naissance, l’enfance, l’hymen, la vieillesse, la mort, tout avait ses saints et ses images, et jamais peuple ne fut plus environné de divinités amies que ne l’était le peuple chrétien... A force de déclamer contre la superstition, on finira par ouvrir la voie à tous les crimes...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vicomte, de Chateaubriand. *Le Génie Du Christianisme*. 1866. Tours A. Mame, 2007. St. Michael’s College, Scholastic Library. Pg. 242

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 243

Among writers and thinkers in the early nineteenth century, non-urban and illiterate populations had come to be symbolically yoked to an immemorial past, to tradition, and to a humble faith that preserved a “*harmonie*” with “*la nature*” which was felt to have vanished in the secular and disenchanted environment of the modern city. Against the universal yet bloodless reason of the Enlightenment, this “*foule*” came to represent the particularism of irrational but vigorous sentiment; against the cloistered and elite status of neo-classical art, with its refinement and technicality, it came to offer the possibility of a naïve “art” which encompassed the whole of existence, bodying forth the essential and therefore sacred aspects of human life and nature (“les vents, les pluies, les soleils, les saisons... la naissance, l’enfance...” etc.) in thronging, “auratic” images (“saints et images”) lying outside the vagaries of commercial society; and finally, against the *anomie* of this latter, it seemed to retain its situatedness in a stable, moral universe in which the “devil” could at least be recognized as such, and so dispelled through ritual practice. An age of restorative nostalgia had commenced.

In his *New Science*, Giambattista Vico posits an unbreakable kinship between metaphor and historical metamorphosis.<sup>3</sup> Where one is present, the other is afoot; where one is afoot, the other invariably follows on its heels. If by the nineteenth century the folk—Chateaubriand’s “*foule*”—had become a metaphorical structure, a rhetorical figure invested with moral and spiritual value, then this was the culmination of a long, overdetermined historical metamorphosis by which the erosion of so-called traditional societies revealed itself as one of the most salient historical trends in the modern period. Indeed, the aesthetic, moral and spiritual ideas that we now readily associate with the “people,” the “folk,” and “life in the country” have not always

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<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science*. Cornell University Press, 1948 pg. 97

existed. On the contrary, these ideas were called into being precisely at that historical moment in which their putative objects (agrarian communities and internally-bound societies), seemed, if not on the verge of disappearance, then atleast on the verge of absorption into a socio-economic structure which would deprive them of a supposedly immemorial authenticity. Far from a comprehensive sociological study, the following pages are addressed first and foremost to these ideas, and to the cultural, intellectual and historical processes through which they emerged and continue to proliferate to this day.

Our discussion will proceed against the broad historical backdrop provided by three interrelated cultural phenomena. First, we can identify a dynamic, beginning around the fifteenth century, whereby modern print-culture at once suppressed and enabled the recuperation of “folk” cultural forms and their correspondent modes of thought and sensation. It is this, for instance, which allows Mikhail Bakhtin, in the early twentieth century, to associate Rabelais and Cervantes (pre-eminent symbols of the new possibilities for literary art and authorship opened by the printing-press) with the popular traditions of “folk laughter.” But it is also this which transformed the folk and its “popular devotions” into a repertory of mythical and aesthetic images accessible through the printed word, representing now the primordial underbelly and “repressed other” of an increasingly mechanical civilization, now a utopian alternative to a social world riven by the mimetic strife, *anomie* and rootlessness often associated with the capitalist mode of production.

Relatedly, we can observe the development, amidst accelerating processes of rationalization and mechanization during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of a philosophical and intellectual preoccupation with the concept of “organic community.” Though it

certainly had its forerunners in the Abrahamic myth of Eden and the pastoral idea of the “Golden Age,” the idealizing notion, as Robert Knapp puts it, “of an unfallen... age without moral uncertainty, personal anomie, or economic alienation” in which people were bound together harmoniously through shared religious sensibility and physical ties of kinship began to establish itself in this period on a new, rational basis, and tended moreover to draw material from ethnographic observation of actually existing rural and “folk” communities.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most stimulating– but also some of the most dangerous– sociological thought has been produced under this rubric, which culminates not only in the work of Marx (prefeudal “primitive communism”), Weber (lost “enchantment”), Tönnies (*Gemeinschaft* and *Gessellschaft*), Simmel (free sociability) and Lukacs (integrated civilization of antiquity and “transcendental home”), but also in the conservative philosophical turn of the inter-war period which will provide the basis for National-Socialist, Fascist and a wide range of other traditionalist ideologies.

Finally, we can discern, among predominantly bourgeois intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a burgeoning intellectual tendency that has now become all too familiar– namely, a philosophical and aesthetic critique of the modern teleology of progress and the conception of linear historical time, one which often had nostalgic recourse to the sensibilities and modes of thought associated with those cultural entities thought to exist outside the forward movement of modern history– the “folk,” or the “people.” This last tendency can in fact be seen to incorporate the others which precede it, and harbors the overarching question that this discussion will pursue: the relationship between the aestheticization of “folk-culture” on the one hand, and conceptions of history and temporality in the modern age on

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<sup>4</sup> Knapp, Robert S. *Shakespeare: The Theater and the Book*. Princeton University Press, 2014. *Open WorldCat*, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781400859962>, pg. 92

the other. As Svetlana Boym points out, “nostalgia, like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time.”<sup>5</sup> As a general disaffection with the “clocked, calendrical time” of modern society grew, writers and thinkers turned increasingly to images of the folk and the “traditional society” in order to imagine a world outside of objective time and the onslaught of “progress.” As hinted at above, it was first during the twilight of the “Age of Reason” that this turn was made: in response to the Enlightenment and its ideal of universal reason, nineteenth century thinkers began to valorize the local, the particular, and the “organic” as an entrypoint into a more authentic mode of temporal being. Yet I argue that modern writers’ relationship to the folk was far more ambiguous than one of mere nostalgia. As “folk-culture” and the “organic community” of which it was supposed to be an expression were constituted as objects of study and reverie over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writers began to grapple with the philosophical, aesthetic and ethnographic discourses surrounding them in order to articulate profoundly ambivalent visions of what it means to exist as an historically determinate and finite being under duration.

Our discussion begins, however, not in the romantic moment of the nineteenth century, but in the early-modern and late Renaissance moment of the seventeenth. In order to confront the origins of modern conceptions of history and time, it was necessary to return to a point in the past in which this conception had not yet established itself on stable ground, and during which it can be seen to vie with other, communal and religious forms of figuring “that which has been.” Our inquiry opens with Miguel de Cervantes’ most famous work, *Don Quijote*, if only because this novel has, over the past two centuries, accrued interpretations which cast it not only as an

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<sup>5</sup> Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2008. *Open WorldCat*, pg. 13

embryonic container of all subsequent novels but also as a text which marks the rupture between the “medieval” and “modern” worlds. In a famous section of his *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault claims that it represents “the first modern work of literature, because in...in it language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature...” Traditionally, however, critical works on *Don Quijote* have, with greater or lesser degrees of historical grounding, been preoccupied with the old philosophical theme of illusion and truth, “seeming” and “being,” and related thematics. Such meditations with respect to Cervantes' novel have tended to culminate in claims about the precarious divide between what we take to be “real” and what we take to be “imaginary,” proceeding to deduce therefrom either evidence of Cervantes' proleptic “modernism” (insofar as he “foregrounds the artifice”) or of his status as the pre-eminent initiator of novelistic discourse, encapsulated in Lionel Trilling dubious claim that “all prose fiction is a variation of the theme of Don Quixote... the problem of appearance and reality.”<sup>6</sup>

My probing of the novel retains an interest in such phenomenological problems, but further traces ways in which they can be reconceptualized in relation to the hermeneutic and mimetic logic of particular kinds of medieval and early-modern spectacle. One of the means by which Cervantes' novel achieves its “modernity,” and thus its sense of temporal awareness, is its active yet ultimately negative relation to the folk-culture of early-modern Spain. More specifically, I argue that the sense of “disenchantment” or *deseñgano* which prevails by the end of this novel is best accounted for through examination of the novel's engagement with popular and religious forms of figuring history that, even during Cervantes' time, operated according to a

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<sup>6</sup> Wicks, Ulrich. “Dulcineated Dons.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1972, pp. 84–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345043>. Pg. 84

mimetic and hermeneutic logic radically foreign to our own. These cultural forms are displaced and derided within Cervantes' text, giving way to what we can recognize as the modern secular conception of history. Under this conception, historical events are increasingly severed from cosmological vision as the past ceases to be sensuously and aesthetically repeatable and is rather submitted to an abstract order of representation. As a result of this shift, time itself becomes an increasingly menacing figure, heralding only fragmentation and decay insofar as it bears no vital link to a coherently-designed cosmic order. In a word, *Don Quijote* sets the stage for modernist confrontations with time and history precisely through its engagement with popular and religious reenactments of the past.

The second chapter serves as an exploration of the aesthetic and philosophical notions that gathered themselves around the "folk" in the modern era. Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, provides us with a frame for this investigation. I offer an account of how in her last novel Virginia Woolf negotiates between recuperated "theological" visions of extra-historical plenitude that came to be associated with the folk on the one hand, and the fragmentation wrought by the forward movement of "empty, homogeneous time" on the other. I explain how during the interim between Cervantes and Woolf a cultural process unfolded whereby folk societies and cultures came to be viewed as organically bound to a "timeless nature" and therefore themselves outside the flow of time. As we shall see in our discussion of Woolf's late essay (at one point the projected first chapter of *Between the Acts*) on the "communal playwright," Anon (1940), the writer's adaptation and repurposing of the folk pageantry will seem arbitrary only if we ignore what Peter Burke has called "the discovery of the folk": a discursive process stretching back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries whereby the cultural

remnants of pre-capitalist, agrarian communities came to represent, for the world-weary intelligentsia of Europe's metropolises and urban centers, a nostalgic refuge from the decay and fragmentation wrought by "modern society." This internal, Romantic tradition of rehabilitating a European "folk" culture undefiled by the forces of modernity gained momentum, moreover, in the context of the unprecedented expansion of European empire and capitalism in the 19th century— a world-historical development which, by uprooting colonized peoples and subjecting them to the logic of the market, rendered their cultures, mythologies and life-ways accessible as so many aesthetic objects to be pressed into the service of European thought and cultural production. Running parallel as it did to an outward-facing drive to appropriate artistic material seen as "exotic" from colonial territories, the internal orientation towards "folk" art might be understood as another variant of "aesthetic primitivism." Moreover, I show how this process culminated in the thought of J.G Hamann, J.G Herder, and the brothers Grimm, who accorded the german *volk* an almost transcendental status, and from there went on to condition a great deal of cultural production in nineteenth-century Europe.

Woolf received this anti-intellectualist and romantic tradition with ambivalence. While *Between the Acts* owes a great deal of its texture to the pastoral lyricism of Woolf's prose, and consistently draws attention to how the perceived "timelessness" and organic unity of the English folk might serve as a counterpoint to the disenchanting time-consciousness of the "rootless" modern individual, it is also profoundly marked by the recognition that organic unity and airy totalization can only ever exist on the distant horizon of thought, and that the uncritical acceptance of such forms of thought as models for living can be as harmful as it is sense-bestowing. Here, too, a folk-cultural form is at stake: over half of *Between the Acts*



consists of a “village-pageant,” and it is against the backdrop of its proceedings that Woolf becomes able to hold together the twin principles of mythical timelessness and abyssal temporality of which we have spoken. It is a question of reconciling the dream of timelessness with the knowledge of Time’s tyranny over the living. To this end, Woolf arrives, I claim, at a counter-intuitive understanding of transience that locates in it the only possibility for real transcendence. Just as some “unity” or other necessarily precedes “fragmentation,” so it is perhaps only through fragmentation that unity may emerge. Yet far from merely repeating the tired dialectics of creative destruction and destructive creation *in abstracto*, I claim that the folk-pageant furnished Woolf a means by which to concretize this dialectic in the *actual experience* of lived time.

Finally, chapter three provides an ambivalent postcolonial perspective on these questions, expanding our sense of how aesthetically-mediated images of the “folk” operate both in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and in Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête* (1969). Here I attempt to read Césaire not polemically and *against* Shakespeare— rather, I suggest an affinity, or at least a dialectical relation, between the two writer’s respective visions, demonstrating how the masque-form (a medieval and early modern form of royal and popular entertainment with ritualistic underpinnings) functions in both their works as a site for political, social and historical imaginings which draw upon a mythologized folk. For Aimé Césaire, this latter contains the promise of a naturalized culture, and a cultural nature. The promise bears directly on the meaning we attach to historical unfolding. For if Giambattista Vico inaugurated the by now common idea that “we make our own history,” and if Karl Marx added, “but under conditions we do not choose,” then Aimé Césaire mobilizes African folklore in his *Une tempête* to suggest that

it is history itself (conceived as something like Spinoza's *natura naturans*) which "makes history," and that human agency does not dominate, but in fact *expresses* a chaotic "nature" seeking no predetermined end.

The following discussions pursue the broader question of the role of literature in the modern age, and how it has defined itself and its visions of history through and against "pre-modern" cultural forms. As we shall see, the "folk" plays a crucial role in literature's own project of self-definition. If for Cervantes the Spanish folk and their popular religious sensibility seems to have represented a set of attitudes to be superseded, for Woolf and Aimé Césaire the "folk" has become an ideological structure that must be grappled with, forced to reveal its meaning, and assimilated to the experience of the world in all its vagaries and aporia.

## CHAPTER ONE

**Figura, Mimesis and History:  
Popular and Religious Spectacle in *Don Quixote***

*Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths— ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and their own. The world is wide and yet it is like home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars.*

- György Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel* (1916)<sup>7</sup>

“Far away, alone on the open Manchegan plain,” Jose Ortega y Gasset writes, “the lanky figure of Don Quixote bends like a question mark, like a guardian of the Spanish secret, of the ambiguity of Spanish culture.” If Cervantes’ avowed intent in writing *Don Quixote* was a relatively practical one— to “demolish the ill-founded apparatus of chivalric books”— then an intriguing fate has befallen this literary battering-ram. Over the past century the two-part novel and its protagonist have indeed been shaped into great, towering question marks, well-nigh indispensable touchstones for grand narratives of rupture elaborated in the fields of intellectual and literary history. What is now thought to dwell in its near one thousand pages is far more than the “Spanish secret.” It is, according to some, the secret of the modern world itself.

Extending Michel Foucault’s famous argument in *Les mots et les choses*, I argue that *Don Quijote* is a literary event marking not only an early-modern epistemological rupture whereby

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<sup>7</sup> Lukacs, György. *Theory of the Novel*. 1920. 1971, <https://analepsis.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/georg-lukacs-the-theory-of-the-novel.pdf>. Pg. 29

“language br[oke] off its old kinship with things,” but also a deeper rupture in the experience of time and history that will eventually furnish the basis for the modern, Enlightenment notion of historical progress, and for what Walter Benjamin calls the “empty, homogeneous time” of industrial civilization. This shift in historical consciousness is to be found in an unexpected region of the novel’s terrain. If, in the words of Alban K Forcione, Cervantes’ work undermines “the traditional mode of apprehending the universe as a stage for miracles,” then it is precisely against the backdrop of the world of the medieval “stage” that the novel’s modernity is brought into relief. Don Quixote’s adventures unfold, that is, in the shadow cast by popular and religious forms of spectacle which, even in Cervantes’ day, maintained a vital link to the medieval past. Following Erich Auerbach and Benedict Anderson, I trace Cervantes’ engagement with these cultural forms of the European “folk” in order to show how they involved radically different *hermeneutic* and *aesthetic* relationships to history. As against the modern scientific view of “that which has been” as an arbitrary chain of cause and effect, in the world of medieval drama the past, and specifically the sacred past, could be perceived as a sensuous *presence* by an audience steeped in what Erich Auerbach terms “figural interpretation”-- an historical hermeneutic that considers past events *sub specie aeternitatis*, “from the perspective of the eternal,” as opposed to *sub specie saeculi*. Still dominant in the popular and folk religious sensibility of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this hermeneutic was increasingly confronted, in the early-modern era, by a burgeoning secular consciousness for which history was to be accessed abstractly rather than sensuously, and for which past events were to be submitted to a quasi-scientific grid of interpretation presided over by rational subject. Concomitantly, as in the famous line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, artistic representations of historical events had begun to be conceived as

“a mirror [held] up to nature, to show... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” as opposed to a *reality* of which nature itself was a mirror. Since this complex shift in historical awareness was itself an historical event, I offer a sketch of its general causes, locating the rising secular attitude towards history in the birth of the printing-press and the subsequent yet slow erosion of what Benedict Anderson calls the “divinely-ordained hierarchical realm.” Don Quixote’s sallies and misadventures emerge not only as windows into Foucault’s “reorganization of signs,” but also into an early-modern ambivalence towards history, a state of affairs in which older, communal attitudes towards the cultural past coexist with a novel secular historical consciousness enabled by the efflorescence of humanist learning together with the dissemination of “histories” by means of the printing-press.

#### DON QUIXOTE IN THE FOLK WORLD OF EARLY-MODERN SPAIN

At the beginning of Chapter IX, Cervantes tells us that

no podía inclinarme a creer que tan gallarda historia hubiese quedado manca y estropeada, y echaba la culpa a la malignidad del tiempo, devorador y consumidor de todas las cosas, el cual, o la tenía oculta, o consumida”

[I was not inclined to believe that so gallant a history had been left maimed and crippled, and I blamed the malignity of Time, the devourer and consumer of all things, who had either hidden it away or consumed it).]<sup>8</sup>

He remembers, however, that “su historia debia de ser moderna y que, ya que no estuviese escrita, estaría en la memoria de la gente de su aldea y de las a ella circunvecinas” (his history

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<sup>8</sup>Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quijote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005. Pg. 79-80; Miguel, Cervantes de Saavedra. *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2015., pg. 85

also had to be modern, and though it might not be written down, it had to live on in the memories of people from his village and from other villages nearby). Subtle though it is, Cervantes' passing invocation of the "living memory" of the village in which he hopes to find the "history" of Don Quixote unmarred by Time— that devourer and consumer of all things— points to a dimension of the work that is of vital importance to our discussion. From within this most novelistic of novels, Cervantes gestures for a brief moment to a mode of organizing and transmitting experience which stands in direct opposition to that of the novel:

“The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times... What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature— the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella— is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience— his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual.”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the *Storyteller* (1936), Walter Benjamin sets “experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth” against those “secular productive forces of history” which, to this 20th century observer, seemed to have “removed narrative from the realm of living speech.” Citing Valery, he evokes the old “accord between soul, eye and hand” that once determined the practice of the storyteller, an accord which, he adds, has long since been forgotten as a result of the devaluation of experience under the conditions of late modernity. While the problems thrown up by the latter state of affairs will be the focus of another discussion, here Benjamin’s observations might offer us a new perspective on the cultural contradictions that can be seen to play themselves out in *Don Quixote*.

If new forms of figuring human experience and history were in the ascendant in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, there still persisted then, as there persists now,

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<sup>9</sup> Hale, Dorothy J., editor. *Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller; Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" from The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pg. 364

symbolic forms tied to the life of internally-bound societies little affected by the socio-economic and cultural transformations seething about them. The life and artistic activity of such communities can be seen to play an active, structuring role in *Don Quixote*. Contained though they are within a literary mode which is “symptomatic” of the decline of oral, communal traditions and their attendant modes of figuring history, the wanderings of the knight-errant nonetheless trace a cultural topography replete with those very symbolic forms which the novel-form would seem to have had a role in displacing. Reading Bakhtin, Manola Antonioli notes that

Il s’agit... du premier grand roman de la route et de la rencontre : la grande route permet la rencontre dans le même point spatio-temporel d’une quantité de personnes, normalement séparées par une hiérarchie sociale ou une distance géographique... ‘Cette route-là est profondément marquée par le cours du temps historique, par les empreintes et les signes de son écoulement, par les indices de l’époque.’”<sup>10</sup>

A stage for encounters between disparate socio-economic elements, disparate “chronotopes,” *Don Quixote* is, as Antonioli affirms, “profoundly marked” by the cultural “indices” of the early-modern epoch, an epoch in which a vibrant folk and popular culture still pulsated through the life of peasant and pastoral communities.

The cultural world of bucolic, pre-industrial Europe rises from the pages of *Don Quixote* with a surprising frequency, furnishing one of the principal backdrops against which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza move. In Part I, Chapter XI, for instance, Don Quixote and his squire are treated to a supper of dried goat meat and roasted acorns at a “rustic table” prepared by four “goatherds.” Exceedingly hospitable, these *cabreros* turn a blind, if winking, eye to the gluttonous Sancho’s incessant “visits to the wineskin” as they listen, uncomprehending, to Don Quixote’s “long harangue” on the virtues of knight-errantry. After Don Quixote has finished his

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<sup>10</sup>Antonioli, Manola. « Don Quichotte : le réel et son double », *Chimères*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2008, pp. 275-285 and Mikhaïl Bakhtine, « Formes du temps et du chronotope » in *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, op. cit., p 385

comical oration, the goatherds, wanting to please the chivalric duo (*darle solaz y contento*), invite Antonio, a young *muchacho*, to sing an amorous ballad and accompany himself with a rebec or *rabel* (“*instrumento rústico de tres cuerdas que se tocaba con arco*”). Contrary to what might be expected, Cervantes does not stand aloof from such minstrelsy, but interpolates them in their entirety over the course of roughly two pages. In so doing, he imprints upon his narrative the mark of a popular, musical experience whose “naïve” register lies at several removes from the “official culture” of the Renaissance. At another point Don Quixote and Sancho are brought by a young bachelor to attend the wedding of a farmer and farm girl, Camacho and Quiteria. Here all manner of festive dances and customary performances unfold before the knight and his squire. Cervantes’ description of them deserve to be quoted at length, if only to show his preoccupation with the vivacious, sensuous form taken by such folk *fiestas*:

...it consisted of eight nymphs, divided into two lines: at the head of one line was the god Cupid, and at the head of the other, *Interest*, the former adorned with wings, a bow, and a quiver of arrows, the latter dressed in richly colored silks and gold. The nymphs who followed *Love* had their names, written on white parchment in large letters, on their backs. *Poetry* was the name of the first, *Discretion* the name of the second, the third was called *Good Lineage*, and the fourth *Valor*... At the head of all of them came a wooden castle, drawn by four savages dressed in ivy and green-dyed hemp and looking so natural they almost frightened Sancho. On the main facade of the castle, and on all four of its sides, was written *The Castle of Caution*. Their music was played on the timbrel and flute by four skilled musicians.



The players proceed to act out a drama allegorical of the trials of wedlock, with *Poetry*, *Discretion*, *Good Lineage* and *Valor* dancing figures and edifying the audience with soliloquies while *Interest* and “the savages” “seize and subdue” the maiden, dragging her out of the “castle of caution.” The dance concludes with the triumphant restoration of the maiden to the inner sanctum of the castle-prop, performed “to the sound of the timbrels as they [the nymphs] danced and twirled in harmony.” What is significant here and elsewhere is Don Quixote’s status as a *spectator* of popular and folk-cultural proceedings. It is in this recurrent space, this situation repeated throughout the novel, that a complex shift in the cultural experience of time and history is registered by Cervantes’ ludic narrative. Don Quixote’s repeated encounters with the world of the popular and religious drama form a space in which an older, magical relationship to dramatic spectacle finds itself caricatured, and with it a whole attitude towards the cultural past.

#### FIGURAL INTERPRETATION AND MEDIEVAL SPECTACLE

While it would be overly schematic to attribute a definite temporal *weltanschauung* or time-consciousness to the European Middle Ages, there have been numerous scholarly attempts to arrive at an understanding of the ways in which European communities experienced and conceived the passage of time prior to the sixteenth century. In his *Feudal Society*, Marc Bloch writes, for instance, of the “vast indifference to time” evident in this period, while Matei Calinescu describes medieval society as one “dominated by the ideal of stability and even quiescence— a society wary of change, in which secular values were considered from an entirely theocentric view of human life.”<sup>11</sup> This absence of historical sense should not be taken as a sign

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<sup>11</sup>Bloch, Marc. *Feudal Society*. Routledge, 2014, pg. 74; Călinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke University Press, 1987, pg. 14

of medieval “backwardness.” From the mid-fourteenth century moment when Francesco Petrarco christened this period the “Dark Ages” to Burckhardt’s coinage of the concept of the “Renaissance” in the nineteenth century, accounts of the so-called pre-modern era, and its difference from the era which purportedly succeeds it, have been largely self-serving. To arrive at an understanding of what may well have been a radically different consciousness is not a question of marking it off from our own negatively, in terms of what it “lacked,” but of entering an historical *gestalt* in which contemporary categories were effectively inconceivable, and perhaps needless. What seems to us to have been an “absence” might then be conceived as a presence, an internally consistent mode of thought that satisfied the same metaphysical and explanatory urges which move us today.

Popular and religious spectacle in the early modern era offers a privileged entry-point into such a *gestalt* to the extent that it preserved, even during the time of Cervantes, a relationship to time, history and objective reality radically foreign to our own. In his discussion of the genesis of modern “time-consciousness,” Benedict Anderson reconstructs the way in which, prior to the rise of secularism, the figuring of “history,” as yet indistinguishable from “imagined reality,” was “overwhelmingly visual and aural,” forming a sensuous plenitude, a complete sensorium.<sup>12</sup> French Medievalist Paul Zumthor writes of how the truths of sacred history were often

signified... by way of a complex play offered to the auditory (music, chants, reading) and visual (by way of the splendor of the building; by the actors, their costumes, their gestures, their dance; by the decor), and even tactile perceptions: one touches the holy

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<sup>12</sup> Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. 1946. Princeton University Press, 1974, pg. 122

wall, one poses a kiss on the foot of the state, the reliquary, the bishopric ring, one breathes the perfume of incense, of the candles' wax<sup>13</sup>

Anderson offers the mystery play in particular as one among many symbolic forms through which “Christendom assumed its universal form through a myriad of specificities and particularities.”<sup>14</sup> Since there was as yet “no conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separation between past and present,” mystery plays in the Middle Ages tended towards an anachronicity that is strikingly alien to the modern observer. Indeed, we must exfoliate the layers of a relativizing and secular historical consciousness to imagine how sacred communities in the Middle ages could have taken as wholly natural the dramatic depiction of “shepherds who... followed the star to the manger where Christ is born... [as] Burgundian peasants”; or how the Virgin Mary, alive at the end of the 1st century B.C, could be figured in the 14th century as a “Tuscan merchant’s daughter.”

In an effort to explain this phenomenon, Anderson turns to Eric Auerbach’s work on the representation of reality in Western literature, *Mimesis*. The German scholar there treats the *Mystere d’Adam*, a 12th-century cycle of mystery plays depicting the Fall, as revealing of a form of “mimesis” specific to the Christian religious sensibility of the Middle Ages. Here medieval representational convention is inextricable from a specific attitude towards history. For Adam appears in this cycle not as a mysterious, primordial or exotic forebear of the human race, but as a surprisingly ordinary contemporary of the audience, a “good man, a French peasant or burgher.” He stands as a figure directly transposed from the “simplest everyday reality” to the elevated realm of biblical history, “talk[ing] and act[ing] in a manner any member of the

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Egginton, William. *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity*. State University of New York Press, 2003, pg. 46

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983, pg. 23

audience is accustomed to from his own or his neighbor's house."<sup>15</sup> It is indeed strange, Auerbach muses, that the "first man-woman dialogue of universal historical import" should be thus played out in an entirely banal register, brought to the level of a domestic scene such as could be readily observed in an average household: "things would go exactly the same way in any townsman's home or on any farm where an upright but not very brilliant husband was tempted into a foolish and fateful act by his vain and ambitious wife who had been deceived by an unscrupulous swindler."<sup>16</sup> Auerbach ascribes this unselfconscious anachronism, this curious style of rendering the sacred past, to what he calls the "figural interpretation of history":

The ancient and sublime occurrence is to become immediate and present; it is to be a current event which could happen any time, which every listener can imagine and is familiar with; it is to strike deep roots in the mind and the emotions of any random French contemporary... the scenes which render everyday contemporary life... are fitted into a Biblical and world-historical frame by whose spirit they are pervaded. And the spirit of the frame which encompasses them is the spirit of the figural interpretation of history. This implies that every occurrence, in all its everyday reality, is simultaneously a part in a world-historical context through which each part is related to every other, and thus is likewise to be regarded as being of all times or above all times.<sup>17</sup>

In his essay *Figura* (1984, [1938]), Auerbach further discusses the "spirit" which animated this peculiarly Christian historical consciousness. In "figural interpretation" concrete happenings in the stream of time are construed *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the form of eternity) as opposed to

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<sup>15</sup> Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. 1946. Princeton University Press, 1974. Pg. 151

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 156

*sub specie saeculi*. Rather than being, as in the modern paradigm, mere arbitrary events pointing only to themselves and to the causal matrix from which they sprung, “figural” events stand in for a timeless reality already comprehended and consummated in the Divine intellect. The “figura” therefore represents two things at once: on the one hand a worldly, temporal thing drawn from a fragmentary life, and on the other a prefigurative sign of an event that is ever present to the Mind of God. If the modern scientific view generally proceeds from a putatively “complete” historical occurrence, treating it as a positive, incontrovertible fact that must pass through the crucible of several tentative “interpretations” if it is to be causally intelligible, the figural mode regards precisely this latter process of “interpretation” as already forged and complete in the Divine intellect; it rather descends *from* an already “secure” and total interpretation *into* the stream of history, enfolding an otherwise arbitrary string of events in its timeless mantle. “Whereas in the modern view the (historical event) is always self-sufficient and secure, while the interpretation is fundamentally incomplete, in the figural interpretation the fact is subordinated to an interpretation which is fully secured to begin with.”<sup>18</sup>

In his *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson highlights how Auerbach’s “figural interpretation” involved a conception of temporal simultaneity that was not horizontal, but *vertical*. As against our contemporary understanding of two events occurring “simultaneously,” medieval Christian sensibility could not, and perhaps needed not, avail itself of such a temporal mode, such a “meanwhile,” since there had not yet emerged the conceptual means by which to think of time as an “empty, homogeneous” plane on which two events could occur

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<sup>18</sup> Auerbach, Erich, and Jane O. Newman. “Figura (1938).” *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, edited by James I. Porter, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 65–113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nxcvd5.12>. Pg. 59

simultaneously with apparently no bearing on one another. Time was conceived, Anderson suggests, as unfolding in a “full” spatiality rather than in an empty one, a total space in which every segment, every occurrence, drew its meaning from a logic of “prefiguration and fulfillment”:

If an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised and the latter ‘fulfills’... the former, then a connection is established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally— a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension... It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding.<sup>19</sup>

Under this form of thought, the “present” is no longer a discrete unit which emerged from the “past” and now flows into the “future.” It has become “omnitemporal,” vertically tethered to an event that is eternal in the “eyes of God.” As Anderson notes, this view of time is close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time, “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, even as he drew his gestures and speech from the quotidian rhythms of a specific parish in twelfth-century France, the peasant actor in the *Mystère d’adam* could be “interpreted” by his audience not only as “representing” Adam, but as having gathered about himself the very aura of this sublime biblical personage. Paradoxical as it might seem to our present sensibilities, it is nothing other than the medieval actor’s historicity, his finite, determinate existence under duration, that allows him to be “interpreted” in light of that durationless, Divine realm of which

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<sup>19</sup> From Auerbach, Erich, and Jane O. Newman. “Figura (1938) quoted in Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983, pg. 24

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjam, *Illuminations*, 265, quoted in *Imagined Communities*, 24

his concrete existence is at once an expression and a prefiguration. Here, as in the Incarnation, the sublime and the humble are fused. Sweating, gesticulating in his rustic manner, strutting and fretting his hour upon a stage in the French countryside, the peasant-become-Adam is nevertheless aware that he has somehow placed himself beyond all hours, beyond all measure of time, and that he rather struts and frets on the stage of “world-history” itself. He becomes, in the eyes of his audience, the “form of something eternal and timeless... something that always has been and always will be... [and] which is at all times present, fulfilled in God’s providence, which knows no difference of time... [for] this eternal thing is already figured in [him], and thus [he is] both tentative fragmentary reality, and veiled eternal reality.”

We might discern an allusion to this attitude towards history in Don Quixote’s famous encounter with Master Pedro’s puppet show. In his *Meditaciones sobre el quijote*, Jose Ortega y Gasset casts this episode as the “dividing line between two continents of the mind.” Within the frame of the show lies a fantastic world, “articulated by the genius of the impossible”; without, that empirical world which will become the stuff of literary realism. “Along a conduit of simple-mindedness and dementia emanations come and go from one continent to the other, from the puppet show to the room, from the room to the puppet show.” It becomes clear, however, that the confrontation between these “continents” is at one and the same time a confrontation between vying historical hermeneutics, vying orientations to the cultural past. If, as Auerbach claims, “for audiences of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries the heroic epic was history; in it the historical tradition was alive,” then Don Quixote’s reaction to the puppet-dramatization of a Spanish heroic epic allows us to investigate how a tectonic shift was taking place in the crust of older, communal forms of figuring history and time, forms which Cervantes simultaneously

acknowledges and derides. As with Antonio's earlier ballad on the *rebec*, Cervantes frames Master Pedro's show as a cultural event with popular roots:

Esta verdadera historia que aquí a vuestas mercedes se representa es sacada al pie de la letra de las coronicas francesas y de los romances espanoles que andan en boca de las gentes y de los muchachos por esas calles

[This true history, presented here for your graces, is taken literally from the French chronicles and Spanish ballads which are in the mouths of everyone, even children, on our streets]<sup>21</sup>

As master Pedro manipulates the puppet-figures from inside the theater, a servant interprets the "mystery" of how Don Gaiferos rescued Melisendra, king Charlemagne's daughter, from her captivity under the Moorish King Almanzor. The turning point in this drama comes as Don Gaiferos attempts to help Melisendra down from the balcony of Almanzor's palace onto his saddle. Enemy warriors are informed of his operation, and what was supposed to have been a surreptitious escape becomes a tense pursuit. The ensuing scene is of course familiar: Don Quixote's "soul" is, in the words of Ortega y Gasset, absorbed into the spectacle as a "dry leaf" into an "illusory vortex"-- he unsheaths his sword, leaps on to the stage, and in rapt fury exclaims, "I shall not consent, in my lifetime and in my presence, to any such offense against an enamored knight so famous and bold as Don Gaiferos. Halt, you lowborn rabble; do not follow and pursue him unless you wish to do battle with me!" The Knight proceeds to rain down blows on the puppets, "knocking down some, beheading others, ruining this one, destroying that one."

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<sup>21</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 629; Miguel, Cervantes de Saavedra. *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2015, pg. 729



After the carnage is over, Sancho Panza tries to reason with his master, reproaching him for having “overthrown, destroyed, and killed” not real Moors but mere “pasteboard figures.”

Now I believe,’ said Don Quixote at this point, ‘what I have believed on many other occasions: the enchanters who pursue me simply place figures as they really are before my eyes, and then change and alter them into whatever they wish. I tell you really and truly, you gentleman who can hear me: it seemed to me that everything that happened here was actually happening, that Melisendra was Melisendra, Don Gaiferos Don Gaiferos, Marsilio Marsilio, and Charlemagne Charlemagne.

If modern historical consciousness necessarily involves a measure of active “disenchantment,” resting as it does on the disinterested assessment of an irreversible yet contestable past, Don Quixote’s “madness” expresses itself here as a will to live history as story and to live stories as real history—his is rather an “enchanted” orientation toward the past, one which is meant to serve as a kind of foil to that forced upon the reader by Cervantes’ narrative technique. Though Cervantes exaggerates this “enchantment,” rendering it grotesque and simple-minded, we ought to proceed naïvely and notice how Don Quixote’s apparent lack of historical sense, his propensity to regard historical events as forms of *presence*, turns precisely on the relationship between sense-appearance and truth: for the knight, the likeness of Melisendra becomes Melisendra herself, and the wooden Charlemagne Charlemagne in flesh and blood. Like the peasant-become-Adam’s twelfth-century audience, then, Don Quixote confronts spectacle not as diversion or entertainment, but as a series of appearances or “copies” that are able, in Michael Taussig’s words, to “share in or take power from the represented.”<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, the figural

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<sup>22</sup> Taussig, Michael T. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. Routledge, 1993, pg. 13, 16

interpretation of history regards historical events as “timeless,” as above all time, precisely *through* their historicity within the Mind of God. Roughly a page before his encounter with Master Pedro’s puppet drama, Don Quixote himself voices the conception of the Divine on which this hermeneutic depends: “a solo Dios está reservado conocer los tiempos y los momentos, y para Él no hay pasado ni porvenir, que todo es presente” [“knowing all times and moments is reserved to God alone, and for Him there is no past or future: everything is present].

<sup>23</sup> If historical events are understood as already contained within a necessarily infinite Divine intellect, then this enables their enactment in the present to be perceived as exceeding the function of mere representation. This excess is radically alien to the modern, illusionistic stage, and even to our own habits of visual and spectacular consumption in the present. A modern actor or spectacular figure bears no “resemblance,” in the ontological sense used by Foucault, to his or her character; rather does he or she imprint the mere “effect” of a character on the audience’s imagination. As William Egginton notes with regard to the modern theatre, “the character exists suspended in an imaginary world created by the interrelation of all the elements on the stage, including the relation of the actor’s gestured and words to those of his or her fellow actors, and to the imaginary world of the set.”<sup>24</sup> Not so in the experience of medieval spectacle, or in that of the popular and religious dramatic festivals of the early modern era. For these cultural forms involved the “reenacting of a timeless truth by means of an imitation of it, thereby making that truth present to a community of participants.” Far from suggesting that medieval audiences had not the conceptual means by which to distinguish copy and original, puppet and person, what I

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<sup>23</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 626; Miguel , Cervantes de Saavedra. *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2015, pg. 748

<sup>24</sup> Egginton, William. *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity*. State University of New York Press, 2003, pg. 48

mean to point out here is that Don Quixote's apparent "folly" might be read as nothing other than an exaggerated form of an actual, historical mode of thought and being, one which expressed itself most powerfully in the popular and religious spectacle of the European middle ages.

### MIMESIS AND PRESENCE

In his *How the World Became a Stage*, William Egginton elaborates a distinction between the "material efficacy" of mediaeval spectacle and the purely "symbolic efficacy" that we now tend to associate with theatrical proceedings: "it is not that words, gestures, similarities, and proximities... become effective in a symbolic way; rather, such purely formal interaction as we would take to be 'merely symbolic' is experienced in the Middle Ages as physically, materially effective."<sup>25</sup> That is, symbols, gestures and images present on the medieval stage were seen not to "replace" or "represent" things but rather to partake of their very essence, bodying forth their real, material presence.<sup>26</sup> Aberrant and comical though it is, Don Quixote's conflation of Melisendra-as-puppet with the "real" historical Melisendra relies on a mimetic logic that would still have governed popular religious festivities during Cervantes' time. Egginton traces this peculiar logic to the liturgical origins of popular religious drama in the "sacrament of the Eucharist," a sacrament which provides "the prototypical instance of mimesis as production of presence that characterizes both the magical worldview and the medieval experience of spectacle."<sup>27</sup>

Here it is worth remembering the seminal shift in the notion of appearance that would emerge in the seventeenth-century work of René Descartes. Though steeped in scholasticism and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pg. 40

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pg. 42

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pg. 43

continuous in some respects with Medieval philosophy, Descartes' thought was crucial to the reconfiguration of the relationship between sense-perception and truth, and therefore to the rise of the modern "disinterested" sciences. In his *Meditations* he gives us the example of a common thing: wax. It has all the attributes of a body: "its color, shape, and size are apparent; it is hard and cold; it can easily be touched; and, if you knock on it, it will give out some sound."<sup>28</sup> However once exposed to heat, the solid structure of wax gives place to a liquid form that does not feature any of the aforementioned attributes. Although the wax has not changed in itself, its formal mutability evinces, for Descartes, the deceptive nature of the original sense-impression it elicited-- "the truth of the matter... is that this wax was neither that sweetness of honey... nor that shape, nor that sound, but only a body which a little while ago appeared to my senses under these forms and which now makes itself felt under others."<sup>29</sup> From this it is deduced that "perception is not a vision, a touch... but is solely an inspection by the mind."<sup>30</sup> That is, the wax becomes intelligible only insofar as it is "comprehended... by the faculty of judgement which resides in my mind."<sup>31</sup> In Descartes' system, one must abstract from sense-experience in order to arrive at a true conception of a thing; one must meet it on the rational plane lying behind its sensuous appearance in order to get at its essence.

Such a metaphysics, whereby "the physical world [is] deprived of all sensible qualities" which now come to be "conceived as secondary qualities existing only as perceived by the

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<sup>28</sup> René, Descartes. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy*. 1641. Translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, 1911 from *Yale Learning: Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy*. Yale University [https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665\\_Descartes%27%20Meditations.pdf](https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665_Descartes%27%20Meditations.pdf). Pg. 11

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pg. 12

senses,”<sup>32</sup> stands in diametrical opposition to the “doctrine of Real Presence” which governed the Catholic ritual of Communion. In contradistinction to the Cartesian notion whereby the sense-impressions received from an object (a piece of bread or wine in this context) remain a mere screen concealing an essence to be arrived at rather through the rational activity of the subject, Egginton explains that

It is central to the doctrine of Real Presence that ‘the entire substance of the bread and wine is changed into the whole substance of the body and blood of Christ, while the appearance of bread and wine remain... In other words, without some notion of substance as substantially unique, and of appearance or species as belonging to the substance, the miracle of transubstantiation threatens to dissolve into pure semantics.’<sup>33</sup>

The whole event of transubstantiation is predicated on the assumption that a given “substance” (the thing-in-itself) is inextricably bound to its sensuous, phenomenal “attributes” (the way it appears) as opposed to being separate and distinguishable from them (as Descartes would have it), and that it is therefore possible to invoke the “presence” of a substance *through* its likeness, even if the substance of which the likeness is an attribute is radically different from the substance invoked. In other words, as against the Platonic idealism which animates the scientific and analytic world-picture, in the ritual logic of communion appearance and essence partake of one another, such that to produce an appearance is necessarily to produce an essence—the imitation or “copy” of a thing in this way becomes the thing itself. The bread and wine of the Sacrament are not “signifiers” of Christ, do not “represent” Him, but rather draw Him into themselves, rendering Him “present” precisely through the *sensuous* relation of likeness or resemblance they

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<sup>32</sup> Egginton, William. *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity*. State University of New York Press, 2003, pg. 44

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 45

bear to His body and blood. This miraculous transformation takes place, moreover, “at the level of real, lived experience, an experience of magical, salutary impact, and one that inspired awe and excitement among the masses who came to bear witness.”<sup>34</sup>

Just such a ritual logic plays itself out in Chapter XI, Part II, following Don Quixote’s meeting with a troop of strange figures *en route* to a nearby village. These figures, we learn, are actors in a mystery play performed for the festival of Corpus Christi, a celebration of the ritual of communion:

The first figure that appeared to Don Quixote’s eyes was that of Death himself, with a human face; next to him was an angel with large painted wings; to one side was an emperor wearing a crown, apparently of gold, on his head; at the feet of Death was the god called Cupid, without a blindfold but holding his bow, quiver, and arrows. There was a knight in full armor except that he had no helmet or sallet but wore a hat with many plumes of diverse colors; accompanying these persons were others with various outfits and countenances. All of which, seen without warning, agitated Don Quixote somewhat, and put fear in Sancho’s heart.<sup>35</sup>

So as to avoid unnecessary tedium, the actors have decided to stay in costume as they are transported to the town where they are due to perform in the afternoon. A pleasant conversation is had between the knight and the “devil,” during which Don Quixote admits that “ever since I was a boy I have enjoyed the theater, and in my youth I was a great lover of plays.” Suddenly, however, one of the “demon dancers” descends upon Sancho’s donkey, hitting him with his “bladders,” and “the fear and the noise, more than the pain of the blows, made the donkey fly

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pg. 45

<sup>35</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 524

across the countryside to the town where the festival was to be held.” Agitated, Don Quixote enters into a scuffle with the phantasmagorical troop, and it is here that a telling slippage occurs in the language he uses to refer to them. No sooner does Don Quixote “touch appearances with [his] hand,” recognizing the “peculiar personages and figures” to be nothing more than the actors of a mystery play, than this consciousness is reversed: he merges with the plane of reality which they represent, dissolving the barrier between “what seems” and what “is.” It is Sancho who first lapses into speaking about the “devil” as though he really were the devil himself: “there’s no need to go to all that trouble, Senor... your grace should calm your anger, for it seems to me the devil has left the donkey and gone back to his lair.” To which Don Quixote responds that “even so... it would be a good idea to punish the discourtesy of that demon by chastising someone in the cart, even the Emperor himself.” The duo thus vacillate between awareness of the group of actors *as actors* (“never... interfere with actors, for they are favored people”) and a comical conflation of these *dramatis personae* with the figures they are meant to represent.<sup>36</sup> Advising his master against engaging in combat with the increasingly bellicose troop, Sancho seems to forget entirely that they are no more than “players”: “you should also consider that there is more rashness than courage in a single man attacking an army that has Death in it, and emperors fighting in person, and the help of good and bad angels.”<sup>37</sup>

Again, Don Quixote and Sancho’s “folly” in the above scene might be understood as a direct allusion to the dramatic and historical sensibility of the European middle ages. Anne Righter begins her *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* with a brilliant evocation of the visceral, cosmological power that the mystery cycles exercised over medieval audiences. Whereas the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 525

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

modern, secular theater tends to call attention to its own status as self-contained artifice, the “mediaeval stage,” according to Righter, “urged [the audience] to associate illusion with [its] own life and Reality itself with the dramas enacted before [it]”:

“In a theatre dealing with Creation and Apocalypse, with Incarnation, and the story of Mary and Joseph, the ordinary concerns of those merers, weavers and riotous apprentices who followed the pageant wagons on the feast of Corpus Christi could have no more substantiality than the shadow shapes in Plato’s cave.”<sup>38</sup>

Righter stresses that to conceive of events unfolding on the mediaeval stage as mere “imitations” is to think anachronistically. For there was an “awesome immediacy pervad[ing] most of the mysteries” by which the plays became fully identified with their subject-matter.<sup>39</sup> The popular, religious theatre was a means for achieving “an actual communion with the events of the Old and New Testaments,” a communion that could only be effected through a sense of participation in a temporal order altogether different from that of the secular world:

even among the tumult and sunlight of the market-place a memory of church walls surrounded the pageant and its audience. Shadowy buttresses and towers still defined the boundaries of a world which participated in Eternity, a meeting-place of God and man where time future and time past resolved into an infinite Present whose duration no dial or calendar could mark.<sup>40</sup>

The ritual world created thereby, “drawing its boundaries between a fragmentary, secular environment and the cosmos of the play,” absorbed the audience into itself and stretched to encompass the whole of existence and history, often staging “the entire history of the earth, from

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<sup>38</sup> Righter, Anne. *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*. T. and A. Constable Ltd, 1962, pgs. 14-15

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 16

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*



Creation to Last Judgement.” Thus, “year after year,” audiences would see “the Magi bring their gifts to the Christ Child for the first time, *and hear Herod himself*, not an actor in splendid robes, command the slaughter of innocents.”<sup>41</sup> Don Quixote’s vacillation with regard to the status of the actors would have been an altogether common phenomenon for audiences within the context of the mediaeval drama, for this latter was regarded not as an “imitation,” but as an “accomplishment” of action. Among the instances cited by Righter in which illusion was mistaken for reality, there is one that directly recalls Don Quixote’s above encounter with the devil: in a 16th century play by John Heywood, *The Four PP* (1521), the “Pardoner” claims to be acquainted with the devil at the gates of Hell: “For oft, in the play of Corpus Christi, He hath played the Devil at Coventry.” Righter explains that,

only on that ritual stage to which Heywood’s pardoner refers could it always seem both possible and terrifying that an actor who discharged his diabolic rôle with particular cunning and skill *actually was the character he played*.<sup>42</sup>

Don Quixote’s encounters with popular and religious spectacle thus instantiate a form of mimesis radically foreign to the modern paradigm of representation, one that involves a concomitant relationship to the historical and sacred past. Much like the Pardoner in John Heywood’s play, or like “people watching a mystery play” who “recognize Christ on the Cross as the local cobbler and still believe that they are witnessing the actual Crucifixion of the Son of God,”<sup>43</sup> the knight’s comical mishaps acquire new significance when read in terms of an older, sensuous relationship to spectacle animated by the figural interpretation of history and the Christian ritual logic of communion.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, emphasis mine

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, emphasis mine

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 19

Although this form of experiencing and understanding history and the sacred past was still very much current at Cervantes' time, it was eclipsed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by what Alban K. Forcione calls, with a certain degree of anachronism, the "rationality, skepticism, and materialism of the new bourgeois culture."<sup>44</sup> Forcione contends that "one of the numerous elements that make Cervantes' novel a literary monument to the birth of the modern world is its relentless depiction of the inadequacies in the traditional mode of apprehending the universe as a stage for miracles, a coherently designed order replete with mystical correspondences, as if it were, in the traditional theological parlance that continued to echo in Cervantes' age, inscribed ciphers written by the hand of God."<sup>45</sup> Forcione echoes Michel Foucault, for whom Don Quixote's adventures "mark the end of the old interplay between resemblance and signs and contain the beginnings of new relations."<sup>46</sup> What Foucault observes in his study of consciousness of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the passage from an "episteme" in which meaning is immanent in the world, legible as "the prose of the world," to one in which "words wander off on their own, without content, without resemblance to fill their emptiness..." If up until the sixteenth century language was felt to bear direct resemblance to things,<sup>47</sup> the tragedy of *Don Quixote* corresponds, Foucault suggests, to a modern cultural moment marked by a rupture whereby "language broke off its kinship" with them.<sup>48</sup> In these "new relations," the "peculiar existence and ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in

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<sup>44</sup> Alban, Forcione. K "Cervantes's Secularized Miracle: La Fuerza de La Sangre." *Cervantes and the Humanist Vision: A Study of Four Exemplary Novels*, Princeton University Press, 1982, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1m3nxg4.8>. Pgs. 344

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 345

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. 1970. Vintage Books, Random House, 1994, pg. 46

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 47

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 47, 49

the fabric of the world [are] dissolved in the functioning of representation.”<sup>49</sup> Before considered an ontological emanation of things themselves, words now begin to act as so many mirrors and screens mediating access to the external world through their “organization of representative signs.” The “prose of the world,” an immanent sensorium in which the macrocosm could be incarnated within a given microcosm, thus gives way to what Leo Spitzer, in his *Linguistics and Literary History*, calls the “autonomy of the word”: “the power of wielding the word as though it were a world of its own between reality and irreality.” According to Spitzer, it is precisely this belief in the autonomy of words

which made possible the whole movement of Humanism, in which so much importance was given to the word of the ancients... it is this belief which will in part explain the extraordinary development of mathematics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries— i.e. of the most autonomous languages that man has ever devised.<sup>50</sup>

The idea that truth was written into the very fabric of the world by Divinity was increasingly eschewed in favor of an equivocal and ambivalent scientific approach to worldly phenomena, an approach that was to become the prerogative of a rational “subject... responsible for apprehending the correct” meaning of things.<sup>51</sup> As we saw in the philosophy of Descartes, the truth of things was beginning to rest upon a pure “inspection of the mind,” upon the operation, that is, of an “autonomous subject” which could penetrate appearances by its rational faculty. A similar process might be observed at the level of historical consciousness. For just as Don

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>50</sup> Spitzer, Leo. “LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY HISTORY.” *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*, Princeton University Press, 1948, pp. 1–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pzt4>. Pg. 21

<sup>51</sup> Lima, Luiz Costa., and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988. p. 5 [quoted in Egginton, William. *The Man Who Invented Fiction: How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World*. Bloomsbury, 2017. Notes, p. 208]

Quixote appears to us as the anachronistic presence of “writing itself,” a slender “grapheme” floundering about in hope of finding itself reflected in the things of this world, so too do his misadventures articulate the collapse of a medieval historical hermeneutic and correspondent mimetic logic by which historical events could be felt as *alive*, as embodied in sensuous presence and therefore situated in a coherently designed cosmic order consummated by human artifice. It is to the intellectual modernity behind this shift in historical consciousness, and to the “secular productive forces” identified by Walter Benjamin at the beginning of this discussion, that we now turn.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Towards the end of part II the Don Quixote encounters just such a “secular productive force,” one that not only eclipsed the forms of living memory and history of which spoke earlier, but also rendered possible that very literary form of which *Don Quixote* has emerged as the pre-eminent symbol. Strolling about on the streets of Barcelona in a “simple manner and on foot” lest he be harried by the mischievous urchins who, a day earlier, had performed “caracoles” around him on account of his chivalric accoutrements, the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, as he calls himself, happens upon a building above whose door is written, *Books Printed Here*. “Very happy because he had never visited a print shop,” and “wish[ing] to know what it was like,” he beckons his entourage to follow him. No sooner has he entered than he is arrested by a strange scene: “he saw them printing in one place, correcting in another, typesetting here, revising there, in short all of the procedures that can be seen in large printing houses.” The din of machinery, the stir of hands, the mundane rhythms of a rationalized labor process— how

remote this all is, we realize, from the elevated realm of mythical encounters and pastoral fantasies to which Don Quixote's "madness" has accustomed him, and how incongruous he seems in the midst of it. If Cervantes' masterpiece is often credited with being the "first modern novel," then it is in this scene, in which the self-appointed knight errant's anachronism reaches its zenith against the commercial hubbub of the city of Barcelona, that the meaning of this modernity begins to disclose itself.

For it was the advent of the printing press that, perhaps more than any other development, ushered in the modern world as we know it. The "Gutenberg Revolution" of 1450, whereby the process of book-making was liberated from its status as the preserve of a scribal class attached to the clergy and aristocracy, was pregnant with historical forces that would lead to the disintegration of what Benedict Anderson has called the "unself-conscious coherence of the great religious imagined communities."<sup>52</sup> Inaugurating a state of affairs in which "universal bookishness [would] become the core of western secular religion, and schooling its church," the printing-press laid the groundwork for the rise of peculiarly modern forms of selfhood, social organization, and political imagination.<sup>53</sup> As one of the "earlier forms of capitalist enterprise," it introduced aristocrats and commoners alike to the printed book, eroding the hierarchical structures that had defined intellectual life since the Middle Ages and initiating Benjamin's "age of mechanical reproduction."<sup>54</sup> The cultural ferment generated by this technology was tremendous, for by consolidating the rise of vernacular languages in Europe (among which was Castillian, the language of *Don Quijote*) it at once heralded the collapse of the unified Latin

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<sup>52</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983 pg. 16

<sup>53</sup> Illich, Ivan. *In the Vineyard of the Text*. The University of Chicago Press, 1993, pg. 1; Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983, 16

<sup>54</sup> Febvre, Lucien, et al. *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450 - 1800*. Repr, Verso, 2000, pg. 332

culture that had prevailed since late antiquity and worked to establish knowledge on a new, secular basis, one that was to be indispensable to the edifice of thought built by Renaissance humanism.<sup>55</sup> “Printing,” John Man writes in his study on Johannes Gutenberg, “changed things so utterly that it is hard to imagine a world without it.”<sup>56</sup>

Man’s comment is telling. The productive force of the printing-press, along with other technical and cultural developments, so transformed the way that Europeans living at the time of the Renaissance thought of themselves and their environment that it becomes a question not only of a major technical or informational shift, but of a shift in how the world itself was conceived, and of the very possibility of such a conception. If, as Man says, it is hard for a modern to “imagine a world without [the printing press],” Cervantes’ novel bears witness to the vertigo caused by its irruption at a moment when the very relation of communities to their world was being reshaped. The new realm opened by the “coming of the book” crystallized as a site of contestation for the great cultural movements of the era— on the one hand an optimistic humanist movement which saw itself as staging a rupture with the immediate, mediaeval past through a revival of the culture of classical antiquity; and on the other a project led by the Roman Catholic Church to establish an unbroken cultural continuity with mediaeval christendom. In Chapter V of *Don quixote* the priest and barber, old friends of the *hidalgo*, “sprinkle this room [his library]” with holy water so that “no enchanter, of the many in these books, can put a spell on us as punishment for wanting to drive them off the face of the earth”<sup>57</sup>-- an allusion to the moral fervor and irrationality with which the Catholic Church, following the Council of Trent

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<sup>55</sup> Man, John. *The Gutenberg Revolution: The Story of a Genius and an Invention That Changed the World*. Bantam Books, 2009, pg. 291

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>57</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 45

(1545-63) and the promulgation of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, undertook the prohibition and burning of books deemed heretical by the papacy.

As a result of these developments, the intellectual and cultural life of the Renaissance of the latter half of the 16th century was profoundly turbulent. It tended to oscillate between a sense of liberation from the constraints of yesterday and a pessimism as to the promises of tomorrow. Addressing a nineteenth century Russian audience similarly torn between the Old and the New, Fyodor Dostoevsky dramatizes the state of agitation generated by these contradictions in the famous episode of the *Grand Inquisitor*. Here a miraculous event unfolds in a Counter-Reformation Seville with which Cervantes would have been familiar: “didst Thou forget,” the inquisitor reproaches a returned Jesus Christ, “that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.”<sup>58</sup> Poised between the twin gravitational pulls of a traditional, theocentric order and an increasingly secular humanist order, the cultural and social sphere of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can be characterized as “a kind of prolonged crisis, in the original sense of the term crossroads.”<sup>59</sup> It was at this time that a train of scientific discoveries seemed to explode the old epistemic order. If to some the foundation provided by the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic conception of the cosmos appeared obsolete and erroneous, others grappled with the consequences of its dissolution, asking whether there was not an abyssal confusion lurking behind the promise of intellectual freedom.<sup>60</sup> Even Galileo Galilei, who had boldly challenged many of the traditional

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<sup>58</sup> Fyodor, Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Edited by Komroff Manuel, Translated by Garnett Constance, The New American Library, 1957. Pg. 235

<sup>59</sup> Bouwsma, William J. *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550-1640*. Yale University Press, 2002, pg. 113

<sup>60</sup> Philosopher and ecologist David Abrams offers an anthropological perspective on the collapse of this cosmology and notes the “dramatic disorientation” caused thereby: “Conceptions of [the cosmos] as an immense interior or

conceptions, wrote (referring to himself) that a man lucky enough to escape the “dark and confused labyrinths” in which he would otherwise have been “ever more entangled” might then be lost in a “boundless sea” and never get back to port.<sup>61</sup>

The vertigo of the infinite, of being “adrift in limitless space,” was mirrored in an equally infinite set of questions. Chief among these was the question of time and change. As the cultural ramifications of the state of affairs described above continued to deepen, the problem of history emerged as central: “anxiety... lay more fundamentally in a concern with time and change, with the unknown terrors of the future.”<sup>62</sup> For the “recognition of change in the heavens” pioneered by Galileo, Kepler and Copernicus had led to a “growing consciousness of change in human affairs,” one which nourished a novel historical perspective central to humanism.<sup>63</sup> The “increasing awareness of time and change” inflated the readership of histories of every kind which, churned out *en masse* by new printing technologies, claimed to present facts about the human condition “no longer understood as an element in a systematic and coherent world-picture but in all its temporality, variety and unpredictability.”<sup>64</sup>

This nascent secular and relativizing orientation towards history insinuates itself into the very formal architecture of Cervantes’ novel. One of the central paradoxes of *Don quixote* is that it presents a set of signifieds ostensibly tethered to the historical, posing as “objective,” in the

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enclosure seems to have been common to a large majority of human cultures... the cosmology of Aristotle and Ptolemy, which held sway in Europe until the 17th century, was itself a refined instance of this same notion—ordered spheres enveloping the earth, cradling this world in their grand embrace. When Copernicus and his followers wrecked this Aristotelian image of the cosmos, Western Civilization suffered the dissolution of the last, long-standing version of that huge interior... Europeans soon found themselves adrift in limitless space, a pure outside.” (Abram, David. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. Vintage Books, 2010, pg. 154)

<sup>61</sup> Galileo, Galilei. “The Assayer.” <https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/Certainty/Readings/Galileo-Assayer.Pdf>, translated by Drake Stillman, Stanford University Press, 1632.

<sup>62</sup>Bouwsma, William J. *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550-1640*. Yale University Press, 2002, pg. 121

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, 53

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 62-63



space of a “fictional” sphere of signifiers— a paradox that has become the hallmark of certain types of fiction. While the “moorish chronicler” Cide Hamete Benengeli’s account of the adventures of “Don Quixote de la Mancha” claims to be “historical,” a chronicle of real events (“in its telling there is absolutely no deviation from the truth”), it is subject to a three-fold mediation: first by the figure of the unreliable translator who emerges in chapter IX, then by the narrator-proper who assumes an attitude of uncertainty towards the veracity of the tale, and finally by a playful discourse which circumscribes these layers in a paratextual frame that readers recognize to be fictional. By enveloping Don Quixote’s adventures in an atmosphere of skepticism, Cervantes forces upon the reader a modern attitude towards history that lies in diametrical opposition to that expressed in the world of the popular, religious drama. Whereas this latter integrates historical events into a timeless and mythical frame by which they can be *repeated* in the present, the modern attitude expressed in the novel treats the past as a series of objective, empirical events corresponding to a specific point in an irreversible temporal continuum and accessible through a quasi-scientific methodology.

In the prologue to Part I Cervantes refers to the “archives of La Mancha” in which Don Quixote “is buried” and into which he, “stepfather of Don Quixote,” must plunge in order to excavate for us a faithful record of the deeds of this “paragon and model of all knights errant.”<sup>65</sup> This was, of course, a fictional conceit quite popular at the time, and Cervantes likely borrowed it from the chivalric romance itself. Throughout the novel, we are reminded that what we have before us is not merely a “story,” but a “history.” While our awareness that the tale being spun before us is archivally mediated— that Cervantes, far from being the “progenitor” of Don

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<sup>65</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 5

Quixote, is in fact an archivist collecting, assessing and organizing information culled from historical documents— seems to recede for a short period of time, it is reactivated in chapter IX as Cervantes again reveals himself to have been but an editor or commentator perusing the annals of La Mancha. Having wrested our attention away from a now suspended narrative event (“in part one of this history, we left the brave Basque and the famous Don Quixote with their swords raised and unsheathed”), Cervantes-as-narrator confides to us that he has suffered a “good deal of grief,” for “at that extremely uncertain point, the delectable history stopped and was interrupted, without the author giving us any information as to where the missing parts could be found.” Yet the wheel of fortune turns favorably for the narrator: lacking the material which would allow him to continue his story, he chances upon a boy selling “notebooks and old papers” in the “Alcaná market.” Quite miraculously, the merchant-boy is found to have among his wares an Arabic manuscript recounting Don Quixote’s exploits: “*La Historia de Don Quijote de la Mancha, escrita por Cide Hamete Benengeli, historiador arábigo.*” Creating a rupture in the narrative fabric into which the figure of “Cervantes-as-narrator” inserts himself, the brief gap in the adventure serves to establish this narrator’s indebtedness to an Arabic source outside his direct hermeneutic grasp: “I saw that it was written in characters I knew to be Arabic... I recognized but could not read it.” The narrator, anxious to “please the attentive reader” and suture this gap, frantically seeks out a Moorish interpreter, and, finding him by chance (*por suerte*), goes so far as to “(bring) him to my house, where, in a little more than a month and a half, he translated the entire history, just as it is recounted here.”<sup>66</sup> Setting the novel’s machinery back into motion through the efforts of this serendipitously discovered translator, Cervantes cements our

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid

consciousness of the equivocal nature of an historical discourse subject to multiple mediations, inviting us to assume a critical stance with respect to the events recounted in the novel. If in the first eight chapters the textual mediations sustaining the *historia* went unremarked, being referred to only in passing, here Cervantes-as-narrator explicitly establishes himself in a relation of dependence upon the authority of a *morisco* atop whose translative foundation his entire narrative has come to rest. The narrator's relation to Hamete is not without a certain chauvinistic resentment—the ethnicity of the translator is, to his mind, cause for suspicion:

if any objection can be raised regarding the truth of this one, it can only be that its author was Arabic, since the people of that nation are very prone to telling falsehoods, but because they are such great enemies of ours, it can be assumed that he has given us too little rather than too much.”<sup>67</sup>

Following Chapter IX Cide Hamete Benengeli, together with the “moorish translator” who mediates the narrator's access to Benengeli's manuscripts, become figures whose looming up throughout the novel casts a shadow of doubt upon the narrative events. Just as Don Quixote comes to be embroiled in a play of “appearances” and “enchantments” of which he is eventually disabused, so we, the readers, are made to suspect the textual machinations of these mediators and the equivocality of the “truths” they present to us. Threaded as it is throughout the novel, the commentary provided by the narrator on the merits and shortcomings of the historical manuscript compels our awareness of the wide margin of error and inaccuracy opened by rigorous new forms of quasi-scientific historical truth, and of the judiciousness and interpretive suspicion indispensable to a critical historical consciousness. Cervantes, that is, forces on us the attitude of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pg. 68

“doubt” essential to the modern intellectual world-picture, establishing *la historia* as an approach to the past defined by an ethos of circumspection with regard to others’ historical claims along with a duty to distinguish between how things are “mediated”-- how they “seem”-- and how they really “are.”

If in Castilian (and other Romance languages) *historia* denotes both “story” and “history,” Cervantes actively works to disambiguate its twofold meaning, consigning the epic, mythical past which prescribes the pattern for Don Quixote’s confrontations with the world to the realm of “story,” and erecting “history” as a mode of apprehending the past defined by an epistemology of skepticism. While by the end of Don Quixote history has become, as Cervantes puts it, “the rival of time, repository of great deeds, witness to the past, example and adviser to the present, and forewarning to the future,” it has also been deprived of its status as an inhabitable plane of being, an embodied and spatialized presence.

As the “present” comes into focus as a discrete, equivocal “moment” in a causal chain, the passage of time becomes ever more pronounced, ever more menacing. From the outset of the third sally to its unfortunate end, the world that rises from the novel’s pages is increasingly marked by a sense of the irreversibility and arbitrariness of temporal existence: Sancho’s governorship “ends, evaporates, dissolves, and disappears in shadow and smoke,”<sup>68</sup> Cide Hamete Benengeli affirms that “to believe that the things of this life will endure forever, unchanged, is to believe the impossible,” and Don Quixote’s “anachronism,” his out-of-jointness with the times, grows more acute, culminating in the city of Barcelona, here the emblem for a new, commercial mentality and “el mundo de la tecnica moderna.”<sup>69</sup> In Barcelona the knight finds himself in an

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pg. 804

<sup>69</sup> Miguel, Cervantes de Saavedra. *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Real Academia Española, Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2015, footnote 1, pg. 1036

entirely “disenchanted” environment. First privy to a maritime “guerra racionalizada” against the Turks, then estranged from city-dwellers who enjoy artifice and spectacle as no more than “entertainment” or as a way to “astound the ignorant common people,”<sup>70</sup> he finally stumbles into the print shop of which we spoke just a moment ago. Here he witnesses the transformation of that sacred thing which organizes his life— the printed book— into a commodity, a mere material object with exchange value “(I don’t print my books, to achieve fame in the world... I want profit: without it, fame isn’t worth a thing,” one of the men says),<sup>71</sup> produced not by any magic but by the clangorous movements of impersonal machines.

Time, released from the bonds of a “coherently-designed order,” has begun to present itself as a medium in which the modern individual is adrift. It has become, that is, “empty, homogeneous”— like a liquid rather than a solid edifice to be inhabited. History, too, has been divorced from the integrated world of “story,” from the world of “imagined reality,” and now becomes a linear plane which admits of no folding, no repetitions. This is a structure of feeling and thinking central to the experience of modernity. Don Quixote, become Alonso Quixano the Good, *dies into* his historical epoch, is resynchronized with his age. In his death throes, he turns to Sancho Panza and says, “Forgive me, my friend, for the opportunity I gave you to seem as mad as I, making you fall into the error into which I fell, thinking that there were and are knights errant in the world.” As Michel Rolph-Trouillot reminds us, modernity involved a general shift in “regimes of historicity”— at the conceptual level, that is, it involves “the perception of a past radically different from the present” accompanied by a new “geography of imagination” peopled by cultural entities who are viewed as either “ahead” or “behind”: “...as soon as one draws a

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<sup>70</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005, pg. 871

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 874

single line that links past, present, and future, and yet insists on their distinctiveness, one must inevitably place actors along that line. Not everyone can be at the same point...<sup>72</sup>” Don Quixote emerges as a sign of an older historical consciousness for which everyone could “be at the same point,” and in which the temporal world was perceived to maintain an unbreakable link with a timeless order beyond it. This shift in consciousness, Trouillot also reminds us, is quite inextricable from those colonial and civilizational encounters by which Europe was forced to redefine itself against what it considered to be its pre-modern, primitive “Others.” This latter will furnish one of the major themes of chapter three. Before investigating the colonial encounter however, we move into a catastrophic moment in the twentieth century in which the “emptiness” of time and the desire for a recuperated sense of timelessness articulated themselves precisely in relation to that “spirit of the folk” which Cervantes’ novel displaces.

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<sup>72</sup> Trouillot, M., 2007. *Global transformations*. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 37, 8

## CHAPTER TWO

**Pageantry and Plenitude:  
Virginia Woolf's *Affair with the English Folk*  
in *Anon* and *Between the Acts***

*One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant... Here in the centre is a knot of consciousness; a nucleus divided up into four heads, eight legs, eight arms, and four separate bodies. They are not subject to the law of the sun and the owl and the lamp. They assist it. For sometimes a hand rests on the table; sometimes a leg is thrown over a leg. Now the moment becomes shot with the extraordinary arrow which people let fly from their mouths— when they speak.*

- Virginia Woolf, *The Moment: Summer's Night* (1927)<sup>73</sup>

In a literary-historical essay that Brenda Silver identifies as “provid[ing] an historical ancestry for the mid-summer village pageant in *Between the Acts*,”<sup>74</sup> Woolf develops a sweeping account of the fragmentation of English folk traditions as it is reflected in the gradual “death” of her avatar of the English folk, “anon” the communal playwright. An exercise in imaginative historical reconstruction, *Anon* (1940) is nourished on a melange of pastoral, Rousseauian, and ethnographic tropes: the naïve simplicity of pre-modern communities in harmony with the timeless rhythms of an ultimately benevolent nature; the ritualistic functions of poetry, singing and performance; and the organic, pre-individual social and linguistic bond enjoyed by participants in such rituals. The following pages investigate how these images are at once

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<sup>73</sup> Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, et al., editors. *The Moment: Summer's Night* in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. 1927. The University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pg. 392

<sup>74</sup> Silver, Brenda R. “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, 1979, pp. 356–441, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441326>.  
Pg. 380

celebrated and undermined in Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, and function as a means to articulate a new vision of temporal and historical experience under modernity.

As a cultural site charged with romantic and pastoral imaginings, the pageant in *Between the Acts* provides Woolf a privileged *topos* in which to reflect both on the disintegration of the English folk, and on the ways in which its "anonymity" and joyful relation to the world may be continued in the modern present. As we will see, the writer steers a course between what might be called a recuperated theological sensibility on the one hand, which would find in the folk a "timelessness" tied to the rhythms of nature, and the onslaught of "objective," mechanical time on the other. Yet by the end of the novel she arrives, I argue, at a counter-intuitive understanding of temporal existence that circumvents both secular, "empty" time and theological time alike. As in Walter Benjamin's concept of the "transient totality of experience," for Woolf it is precisely through the immanent passage of time that totality can be reached. Time does not unfold towards a predetermined end, and nor does it open out onto a perfect and total "timelessness"; rather, Woolf suggests that this end, and this "timelessness," are to be found in nothing other than the Sunderings and divisions of temporal experience itself, in the experience of transience. *Between the Acts* thus works to reconcile the fragmentation wrought by the movement of history and the restorative "folk" unities offered as a response thereto. Before examining *Anon* and *Between the Acts*, it is first necessary to sketch the conceptual transformations regarding the folk which occurred in the interim between Cervantes and Woolf.



## THE DISCOVERY OF THE FOLK

In *The Country and the City* (1973), a *longue durée* study of the shifting idealizations of country-life in pastoral and neo-pastoral poetry, Welsh academic and literary historian Raymond Williams vindicates his narrow focus on the national literary history of England by reminding us that

“the English experience is especially significant, in that one of the decisive transformations, in the relations between country and city, occurred there very early and with a thoroughness which is still in some ways unapproached. The Industrial Revolution not only transformed both city and country; it was based on a highly developed agrarian capitalism, with a very early disappearance of the traditional peasantry.”<sup>75</sup>

Woolf was thus favorably situated to inherit, in her thought and cultural background, a freight of historical shifts that lay, according to some, at the very origins of capitalism. It is these agrarian origins that Williams takes as a point of departure for a series of fascinating analyses of the dialectic of urban and rural, modern and pre-modern. The pastoral literary modes that preceded the period in question are certainly complex and variegated, stretching back to Hesiod’s *Work and Days* in the ninth century B.C, the bucolic poets of Greece in the third century, and Virgil’s *Eclogues* written during the Augustan period of the Roman Empire.<sup>76</sup> It was during the “historical transition from a feudal to a bourgeois world,” however, that English pastoral literature “underwent... an extraordinary transformation,” exhibiting a “renewed intensity of attention to natural beauty, but [one that] is now the nature of observation, of the scientist or the tourist rather than of the working country-man.”<sup>77</sup> Such evocations, Williams notes, tended to “excise the living tensions” of labor and class-power that structured the relation between city and country, maintaining the “visible reality” of country life at an “arm’s length” from the idyllic,

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<sup>75</sup> Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. 1. issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback, Repr, Oxford Univ. Press, 1975, pg. 2

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 14

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 20

“enamelled world” that had begun to rise from the page. Sir Phillip Sidney, for example, whose *Arcadia* (1593) “gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral,” drew a great deal of the raw-material for his images of a tranquil, natural order from a “park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants.”<sup>78</sup>

Such aesthetic “excisions” or sterilizations were conditioned in large part by the demands of an ancient trope at the very heart of the pastoral tradition: “it is retrospect as aspiration, for such an idea (a laborless nature without discord) is drawn not only from the Christian idea of the Garden of Eden– the simple, natural world before the Fall– but also from a version of the Golden Age... that of a magically self-yielding nature.” To the latter corresponded, beginning in the Renaissance, a vision of “primitive community, a primitive communism,” in which “Mine, and Thine, were then unused, All things common, Nought abuse, farely earth her frutage bearing.”<sup>79</sup> On the other side of the English Channel, Cervantes himself echoes this pastoral version of the Golden Age when he has Don Quixote exclaim,

Fortunate the age and fortunate the times called golden by the ancients... because those who lived in that time did not know the two words *thine* and *mine*. In that blessed age all things were owned in common... The heavy curve of the plow-share had not yet dared to open or violate the merciful womb of our first mother, for she, without being forced, offered up, everywhere across her broad and fertile bosom, whatever would satisfy, sustain, and delight the children who then possessed her. In that time simple and beautiful shepherdesses could wander from valley to valley and hill to hill, wearing... but a few green burdock leaves and ivy vines entwined... In that time amorous concepts were

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 42

recited from the soul simply and directly, in the same way and manner that the soul conceived them, without looking for artificial and devious words to enclose them.<sup>80</sup>

We can distinguish in the knight's vision (which, according to Martin de Riquer, stands as an exemplary one) a set of themes that will become central to subsequent imaginings of "organic community," even when they do not specifically invoke the "Golden Age." What is stressed throughout the passage is the essentially pre-subjective, and hence pre-objective, quality of life in this most "blessed" of ages. While Nature "satisfies, sustains, and delights the children who... possess her," this "possession" is altogether different from that promised by modern science, e.g. the rational "ownership and mastery of nature" envisaged by René Descartes or Sir Francis Bacon. It is, as we have said, a "possession" without labor, void of the collision of human agency with the material world. There is no question here of an industrious, rational subject (say, Robinson Crusoe) navigating a hostile nature so as to bend nature to his will, appropriate nature's fruits, and make nature produce for him. Rather, being Nature's happy "children," the inhabitants of this idyll are as much possessors as they are possessed; "wandering from valley to valley and hill to hill" clad in "leaves and ivy vines," they revel in this mutual possession, in this almost erotic unity, not as subjects in relation to objects, but rather as vessels expressing the essence of Nature itself as an undifferentiated vital force. It should be noted that the corollary of such an absence of distinction between inside and outside, between "thine and mine," is nothing other than the absence of *historical process*, since, as George Steiner reminds us, "the dissociation of subject from object is," for many systems of thought, "the very infirmity of the temporal world."

<sup>81</sup> If this "dissociation" can be taken to represent something like the beginning of the "dialectic of

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<sup>80</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. 1st ed, Ecco, 2005. pg., 76

<sup>81</sup> Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. 1975. Oxford University Press, 1992, pg. 92

history,” then we might read such idylls of pre-individual and pre-subjective harmony precisely as flights from history into an imagined timelessness, symbolic resolutions of tensions inherent to a time-bound world.

Starting around the late eighteenth and culminating in the early twentieth century, this symbolic configuration, originating in the pastoral tradition, of a “self-yielding nature” accommodating an essentially ahistorical, “timeless” existence, came to exert a profound influence on scholarly and ethnographic accounts of local rural life and communities.<sup>82</sup> As this was also the age of industrial revolution and of great social and cultural transformations, the attribution, to “traditional,” bucolic communities, of an unmediated relationship to the “timeless rhythm of agriculture and the seasons” was increasingly accompanied by lamentations over the “disturbance and destruction” of such organic societies, lamentations which, indeed, presupposed an immemorial fixity which these societies could not be said to have.<sup>83</sup> In their *Culture and Environment* (1932), for instance, Leavis and Thompson wrote that “a whole culture that had preserved its continuity from earliest times had now received its quietus”: the “organic community” of “old England,” they suggested, was on the verge of disappearance. Williams inveighs not so much against the perception that the country-side was undergoing irrevocable changes (British Historian Eric Hobsbawm affirms that “de-agriculturalization” was one of the most salient trends of the “long-twentieth century”) as against the tendency to imagine that the time before these changes had been, so to speak, “changeless,” that rural life had been insulated

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<sup>82</sup>Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. 1. issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback, Repr, Oxford Univ. Press, 1975, pg. 9

<sup>83</sup> Williams asks where in the historical record this ‘timeless rhythm’ is to be found: “In Domesday, when four men out of five are villeins, bordars, cotters or slaves? Or in a free Saxon world before what was later seen as the Norman rape and yoke? In a Celtic world, before the Saxons came up the rivers? In an Iberian world, before the Celts came, with their gilden barbarism? Where indeed shall we go, before the escalator stops?” p.11

from an historical process (the rise of industrial civilization and its attendant modes of social organization) that was only now beginning to “impinge” upon it. On the contrary, Williams argues, the emergence of the “bourgeois mode of production” would have been impossible (as Marx sought to demonstrate) without a long period of “primitive accumulation,” an interplay, a “double process,” by which town and countryside were progressively welded together in a relation of mutual economic dependence:

“As the moneyed order of the city extends in importance, where does much of the new capital go, but back to the land, to intensify the exploiting process? The greed and calculation, so easily isolated and condemned in the city, run back, quite clearly, to the country houses, with the fields and their labourers around them. And this is a double process. The exploitation of man and nature which takes place in the country, is realized and concentrated in the city. But also, the profits of other kinds of exploitation— the accumulating wealth of the merchant, the lawyer, the court favourite— come to penetrate the country, *as if, but only as if, they were a new social phenomenon.*”<sup>84</sup>

So much, then, for the exemption of the English countryside and its inhabitants from that historical process which has shaped the modern world. What is crucial for our purposes, however, is that it was just when a general clamor was being raised in Europe, at the turn of the nineteenth century, against the sundering of these “timeless rhythms,” that the surviving cultural and artistic productions of country-dwelling people came to be seen as vessels of precisely that pre-individual, extra-historical authenticity which we have discussed.

If the “social reconciliation with nature,” the state of mutual possession, was nowhere to be found in actually existing rural communities, perhaps it had retreated into the sphere of popular cultural expression where it now led something like an afterlife. Such was the conviction held by a coterie of late-eighteenth century German thinkers famous for their impassioned, often vituperative, critiques of the abstract rationalism and hubristic civilizational discourse then fashionable throughout Europe as a result of the French Enlightenment. The work of J.G Herder,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 48

J.G Hamann, and the Grimm brothers emerged as the foremost intellectual expression of the Romantic rejection of prevailing classical tastes in favor of the vigorous, earthy culture of the “people,” the “folk.” Following the efforts of this trio, a lexicon of novel cultural terms was forged first in the German intellectual sphere before being exported to the rest of Europe:

“ There was *Volkslied*, for instance: ‘folksong’... *Volksmarchen* and *Volkssage*... *Volksbuch* (chapbook)... *Volkskunde*, another early nineteenth-century term which might be translated as ‘folklore’ (a word coined in English in 1846)... *volkspiel* and *volkschauspiel*... [And] equivalent words and phrases came into use in other countries, usually a little later than in Germany. Thus *Volkslieder* were *folkviser* for the Swedes, *canti popolari* for the Italians, *narodnye pesni* for the Russians, *nepdalok* for the Hungarians.”<sup>85</sup>

At a time when bewildered “craftsmen and peasants” found their “homes invaded by men and women with middle-class clothes and accents who insisted they sing traditional songs or tell traditional stories,” J.G Herder was working to establish such *volkpoesie* not only as an aesthetic curiosity to be consumed as a palliative for the anemic sophistication of city-dwellers, but also as ‘treasury of life’ (*Schatz des Lebens*) invested with transcendent, almost religious value.<sup>86</sup> If J.G Hamann proclaimed, in a now famous dictum, that poetry is “the mother-tongue of humanity,”<sup>87</sup> Herder imagined it as the very lifeblood of traditional folk society (*Gemeinschaft*)-- that “happy childhood” of the human species. Giving voice to the spirit (*Geist*) of a whole people as opposed to the desires and ailments of a few refined yet melancholic individuals cut off from their public-- modern authors-- the poetry of the folk possessed a sensuous, ontological “effectiveness,” an almost “Divine” vocation, that was now felt to be lost. Burke explains that for Herder “only folksong retains the... effectiveness of early poetry because it circulates orally, is recited to music, and performs practical functions, whereas the poetry of the educated is poetry for the eye,

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<sup>85</sup>Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Harper Torchbook, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1978, pg. 3

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, pg. 4

<sup>87</sup> Cassirer, Ernst, and Ernst Cassirer. *Language and Myth*. Dover ed, Dover Publ, 1953, pg. 34

cut off from music, frivolous rather than functional.”<sup>88</sup> Goethe would write of Herder that “[he] taught us to think of poetry as the common property of all mankind, not as the private possession of a few refined, cultured individuals.”<sup>89</sup> Developing these views further, Jakob Grimm stated that “every epic must write itself” (*jedes Epos sich selbst dichten*). That is, the “communal authorship” of ancient, unattributed poetic works is not to be thought of as an act of creation, of artifice, but rather as a process of organic generation— “these poems were not made; but like trees, they just grew.”<sup>90</sup> The poetry of the folk was beginning to be conceived, then, as fundamentally different from poetry in the conventional sense. It was, as Grimm called it, “*Naturpoesie*,” an emanation of Nature rather than a mere representation thereof.

As such ideas became orthodox among writers and cultural historians, the “discovery of popular culture” in Europe further articulated itself as “part of a movement of cultural primitivism in which the ancient, the distant and the popular were all equated.”<sup>91</sup> For since “nature” was now understood in Romantic terms, namely, as a fundamentally unified, self-engendering and infinite agency (an immanent divinity), it followed that its emanations in *volkspoesie* were of a universal and timeless order, stretching back to the ancient past, to pre-history and finally (as we shall see) to something like what Woolf, in *Between the Acts*, calls “that which was before Time was.” Thus in 1818 Polish writer Adam Czarnocki could intone: “we must go to the peasants, visit them in their thatched huts, take part in their feasts, work and amusements. In the smoke rising above their heads the ancient rites are still echoing, the old

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<sup>88</sup>Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Harper Torchbook, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1978, pg.4

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Burke, *ibid*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*. Again, we are reminded of Don Quixote’s Golden Age: “In that time amorous concepts were recited from the soul simply and directly, in the same way and manner that the soul conceived them, without looking for artificial and devious words to enclose them.”

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 10

songs are still heard.”<sup>92</sup> “Going to the peasants,” “visiting them in their thatched huts” much as the pilgrim visits a shrine, the disaffected, world-weary intellectual could now imagine him or herself to be breathing the air of a virgin, immemorial past. Again, this quasi-mystical faith rested upon a series of homologies tethering Nature, the folk, and *volkspoesie*. Not unlike Don Quixote’s evocation of a Golden Age in which “thine and mine” were unknown, nineteenth century accounts of folk-culture tended to draw their conclusions on the basis of an imagined state of organic undifferentiation in which the individual, the “autonomous subject” of modernity, was effectively non-existent: as the Swedish poet-historian Erik Gustav Geijer wrote, ‘the whole people sang as one man.’ To the extent that this literal “univocity” was considered a reflection of the monadic unity of that Nature in whose “bosom” the folk was embedded, a conceptual link was drawn between the absence of the individual and the transcendental, timeless status of popular linguistic artifacts. And it was in just this context that early-nineteenth century Romantic writers and artists were seized by a veritable fever for popular theatrical traditions, often valorizing them as counterpoints to those neo-classical conventions and doctrines which had worked to sever playwright from public, actor from audience. A mass of critical volumes, adaptations, and artistic revivals streamed forth as hitherto unheard-of pageants and theatrical forms were recuperated as bearers of an authentic folk spirit:

“the ‘folk-play’, a category which included the puppet-play about Faust which inspired both Lessing and Goethe; the traditional Swiss play on William Tell which Schiller studied before writing his own; the Spanish *autos sacramentales*, which the German romantics discovered with enthusiasm; [and] the English mystery plays published by William Hone... etc.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 6



The social art-form *par excellence*, theatre— especially its older, “pre-modern” forms which combined performance, song and dance— could offer fertile ground for the reimagination and resuscitation of a lost communal sense in the face of an acutely felt “tragedy of individuation.”

#### ANON THE COMMUNAL PLAYWRIGHT

Inscribing her thought within the pastoral and Romantic traditions of which we have spoken, Woolf ends her essay on the communal playwright, *Anon*, with an appeal to precisely this fertility. Here again it is a question of restoring, if only for a brief instant, that “nameless,” primordial undifferentiation often attributed to the folk: “the anonymous playwright has like the singer this nameless vitality, something drawn from the crowd in the penny seats and not yet dead in ourselves. We can still become anonymous and forget something that we have learnt when we read the plays to which no one has troubled to set a name.”<sup>94</sup> Over the course of this essay, Woolf invokes many of the tropes that we have been tracing in an effort to bring alive for us a lost, “anonymous” tradition of “minstrels... jugglers, bear leaders, singing their songs at the back door to the farm hands and the maid servants in the uncouth jargon of their native tongue.” She begins in a primeval scene provided by historian J.M Trevelyan:

For many centuries after Britain became an island... the untamed forest was king. Its moist and mossy floor was hidden from Heaven's eye by a close drawn curtain woven of innumerable tree tops.’ On those matted boughs innumerable birds sang; but their song was only heard by a few skin clad hunters in the clearings.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Silver, Brenda R. “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, 1979, pp. 356–441, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441326>. Pg. 398

<sup>95</sup> *Anon*, 382

Desiring to emulate the singing of these birds, the voice that “breaks the silence” of this “untamed forest” is the voice of a mythical, protean entity: “Anon is sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of doors, he has no house. He lives a roaming life crossing the fields, mounting the hills, lying under the hawthorn to listen to the nightingale.” Just as the wandering shepherdesses in Don Quixote’s Golden Age recited “amorous concepts...from the soul simply and directly, in the same way and manner that the soul conceived them, without looking for artificial and devious words to enclose them,” so Woolf’s Anon begins to sing naïvely, almost unconsciously, giving voice to the stirrings of his soul and the timeless cadences of an enveloping Nature: “[he] sang because spring has come; or winter is gone; because he loves; because he is hungry, or lustful; or merry: or because he adores some God.” Here, too, there is no question of an “audience” in the conventional sense of the term, since, according to Woolf, there was as yet no isolated “artist” endowed with self-consciousness who could address him or herself to such an audience. Rather, there could exist only a spontaneous, unmediated bond of collective expression: “the audience was itself the singer; ‘Terly, terlow’ they sang; and ‘By, by lullay’ filling in the pauses, helping out with a chorus. Everybody shared in the emotion of Anon’s song, and supplied the story.”<sup>96</sup>

Moving from the mythical setting of “pre-history” to the Norman invasion and domination of England in the Middle Ages, Anon finds himself “pressed into the service of the church. He was to be found acting the Mass in the church; but, as he acted more and more his own art, he left the church, and staged his pageant in the churchyard, or later was given a pitch for his drama in the marketplace.” Here the medieval drama is born; behind it, Anon, seemingly

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid

impervious to history, has remained the same— “nameless, often ribald, obscene.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, despite the shifts in their social and political landscape, Anon and his folk continue to narrate the rhythms of nature through their ritual performances:

At Christmas the mummers acted Anons old play, and the boys came singing his wassailing song. The road led to the old graves, to the stones where in time past the English had done sacrifice. The peasants still went that way by instinct, in spring and summer and winter. The old Gods lay hidden beneath the new. It was to them led by Anon that they did worship, in their coats of green leaves, bearing swords in their hands, dancing through the houses, enacting their ancient parts.<sup>98</sup>

These timeless rhythms of the folk, Woolf announces, were irrevocably interrupted by the birth of the “printing press” in the Early Modern period. In a deeply suggestive passage, Woolf states that

the printing press brought the past into existence. It brought into existence the man who is conscious of the past, the man who sees his time, against a background of the past; the man who first sees himself and shows himself to us. The first blow has been aimed at Anon when the author’s name is attached to the book. The individual emerges.

These developments were finally to “kill” Anon. Again, the “nameless vitality” of the communal playwright is inextricable from his timelessness, his atemporal existence; as namelessness passes into the realm of the named, so too does timelessness coagulate into past, present and future— the very concept of history itself, she seems to suggest, is now “brought into existence.” That towards which Woolf can be seen to gesture, then, is precisely that familiar “reifying” process of creative destruction. Through this process, Anon’s song is wrested from its timeless medium, expressing the whole of nature, and reorganized as the linguistic creativity of finite, individual

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 383

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 384

selves. The anonymous voice, that unbounded, collective poetic medium of the “folk,” is finitized into so many “atoms” separate from the audience, “atoms” that now come to define the literary history of England-- Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare are but a few of the figures that begin to rise from the “depths of anonymity,” “no longer join[ing] in the song and add[ing] their own verses to the poem.”<sup>99</sup> As we have shown, this fragmentation is, to Woolf’s mind, accompanied by the emergence of a discriminating temporal consciousness: “Anon is losing his ambiguity. The present is becoming visible.”<sup>100</sup>

As the sixteenth century rolls on, the Elizabethan theatre becomes Anon’s last bastion: “the [Elizabethan] play is still in part the work of the undifferentiated audience, demanding great names, great deeds, simple outlines and not the single subtlety of one soul.”<sup>101</sup> By the time the curtain rises upon Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, however, the organic, sensuous immediacy of a collective theatrical activity in which the folk “enacted its ancient part” amidst the timeless rhythms of nature (the “uncovered theatre where the sun beats and the rain pours”) has finally given way to the detached “theatre of the brain.” At the very end of the essay, Woolf’s staccato-like prose hammers the last nail into Anon’s coffin: “the “playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead.”<sup>102</sup> While Woolf seems to have been intent on aesthetically revitalizing this sense of timeless anonymity associated with the old English folk, of “sinking” back into “the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return,”<sup>103</sup> she is also aware that this

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 389

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 385

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 394

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 398

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 385

“world” has become increasingly elusive under the conditions of modernity. At one point in her essay, she writes that

“now and then, by choosing a view carefully to shut out a chimney or a factory, we can still see a fragment of what they saw— a flat fen, reed whispering, water-logged; or a down still covered with turf only. On the down is the green scar still, to mark the road along which the travellers came, past the circle where they were buried; past the stone that marks the meeting place or the burial place.”

Not a whole sensorium, but only fragments of Anon can be seen, recuperated. If Anon has, for Woolf, been silenced by the upheavals of modernity, her last novel meditates on the “fragments” of his “nameless vitality”-- attempting to “see what he saw” and “hear what he heard”-- not in order to stage a nostalgic restoration of Anon’s world, but in order to demonstrate how such an ontological completeness, if it is to be viable, must be reconceived and reconstructed in terms of the lived experience of the modern individual .

#### BETWEEN UNITY AND DISPERSITY

Indeed, although Woolf’s last novel extends and develops many of the themes and preoccupations elaborated in *Anon* (which was, as we have said, the projected first chapter of this novel), it nevertheless sees her introduce several complexities into her otherwise mythical imaginings of the English folk. Her desire for a timeless and organic unity tied to the rhythms of this mythical entity is continually tempered by a concern for how lived temporal experience under modernity belies precisely these ideas. Throughout the novel we find an interplay between two stylistic and thematic principles: on the one hand, a theological or synthetic one, which would see in the variegated things of this world a secret concord and timeless harmony; on the other, an “analytic” principle, which acknowledges the ways in which all phenomena, and even human relations, are subject to an irredeemable decomposition under time. In other words, what plays itself out across the pages of this novel is, as the pageant’s gramophone itself repeatedly

suggests, a conflict between “unity” and “dispersity.”<sup>104</sup> Woolf’s figure for the former is nothing other than an idealized pastoral world tied to the rhythms of the English folk and to a certain folk “piousness”; for the latter, it is the regime of mechanical reproduction and “clocked, calendrical time” embodied most pronouncedly in the “chafings” and “tickings” of the pageant’s gramophone, together with various stylistic conceits that render palpable the inexorable passage of time.

As I mentioned above, Woolf deploys the village pageant as a way to explore how these two principles (timelessness and organic unity on the one hand, fragmentary temporality on the other) may be reconciled through a counter-intuitive understanding of temporal and historical experience. What Woolf aims at is indeed something like a mystical *coincidentia oppositorum* of these principles, but one that is tied to *this world*, and which therefore offers a novel form of transcendence conceived *through* the secular experience of living as a finite, discontinuous self under duration. Before examining how Woolf arrives at this counter-intuitive understanding, it is first necessary to discuss the ways in which the aforementioned principles articulate themselves in *Between the Acts*. While the desire for a “timeless” organic unity nourished on idealized images of English rusticity emerges as one of the strongest stylistic and thematic impulses in *Between the Acts*, it is simultaneously undermined by an ironic and disjunctive narrative technique that compels our awareness of the facile and deceptive nature of such flights of fancy. Through a wide range of rhetorical devices and subtle narrative shifts, the authorial voice persistently introduces elements of bathos and irony into the totalizing and harmonizing visions of the characters and the villagers (and even into its own romantic and pastoral evocations),

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<sup>104</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. 1941. Edited by Stella McNichol and Gillian Beer, Penguin Books, 2019 pgs. 60-63; 117;119

reminding us that organic plenitude can only exist on the horizon of thought, and is always belied by the lived experience of time and necessity.

This is made clear early in the novel: it is morning, and “George,” the protagonist’s young son, is “grubbing” and “grouting” in the grass under the nurses’ supervision. The boy discovers a yellow flower under a tree. Woolf inhabits his subjectivity through a kind of phenomenological free-indirect discourse, merging his perceptual faculty with vibrant and colorful sense-impressions received from this flower:

The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling, of yellow light.

With a rather endearing naïvete, George sees that “the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire.” However no sooner does the boy intimate a sense of ontological “entirety” than this contemplation is violently shattered by “a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair” rushing between him and the flower and ruining his tranquil vision— “up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.”<sup>105</sup> While the “stream of coarse grey hair” and the “terrible peaked eyeless monster” are revealed to be nothing more than a prancing Afghan hound and a jocular Mr. Oliver holding a newspaper to his nose, this brief episode might be read as condensing the broader tension between completeness and fragmentation which expresses itself throughout the novel. Woolf’s paratactical construction of the boy’s vision (“the tree was beyond

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 8

the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire”) creates a sense of temporal suspension that is forced out of joint by the following line, which by contrast contains a series of powerful nouns strung together by the conjunction “and.” This overwhelming sequence of nouns, together with the abruptness of the “then” which breaks George’s vision, suggests the fleetingness of any perceived unity. It is as though George’s reverie of ontological completeness were fragmented by the inexorable sequentiality of time itself. This dynamic, by which a sense of timeless, organic unity gives way to one of fragmentation and disjuncture, carries over directly into the performance of the village pageant. It is here, in this dramatic festivity associated with the English folk, that Woolf sets the two principles with which she is preoccupied fully into motion, and eventually unites them.

At a tense point in the pageant, the villagers' song “dies away” in the wind, and Miss la Trobe (the director) laments that “illusion had failed. This is death... death.” Suddenly, however, the natural, organic world intervenes to save the pageant, “annihilating the gap, bridging the distance, filling the emptines”:

as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. Then the whole herd caught the infection...<sup>106</sup>

Here Miss la Trobe’s illusion is indeed “saved,” but only to be replaced by another illusion to which Woolf calls our attention: precisely that of an organic plenitude. For the “song” of the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 84



cows seems to reprise the theme of the English folk's unmediated harmony with nature to the extent that it picks up precisely where their chanting left off— rising as if from the bosom of nature itself, the cows' bellowing becomes a "primeval voice" that tethers the present to a timeless, immemorial past. Yet Woolf offsets this vision of a timeless concord between the human and natural orders with subtle bathos, as what was meant to be a sublime, apotheosis-like scene immediately passes into a banal image: "the cows stopped; lowered their heads, and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read their programmes."<sup>107</sup>

Just as the pageant points to the changeless, extra-historical status of the English folk and the changeless "rhythms" of the country-side, so too does it subject this idealization to the realities of temporal change and fragmentation, revealing them to be vaporous. Woolf actively undermines such images of harmonious organic unity by contrasting the thoughts of the audience members with an increasingly fragmentary environment and temporal texture. In a typical instance of free-indirect discourse, Woolf shows us how the above scene echoes within the psyche of the devout Mrs. Swithin, who muses

Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves— all are one. If discordant, producing harmony — if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus— she was smiling benignly— the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so— she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance— we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. Well, if the thought gave her comfort, William and Isa smiled across her, let her think it.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 104

Here Mrs. Swithin's "seraphic beaming" at the thought of a Divine theodicy, in which all suffering is justified to the extent that it is harmonized in a divine Intellect, is immediately followed by the mechanical "ticking" of the gramophone. Her reverie is in fact circumscribed fore and aft by this mechanical noise, which will become all the more prominent as the pageant goes on. The onomatopaeic motif of "ticking" begins to enact formally a sense of the inexorable passage of objective, quantified time, introducing an element of discord and fragmentation into the "harmonies" expressed on stage: "Tick, tick, tick, went the machine in the bushes... tick, tick, tick, the machine reiterated."

At the end of the pageant, the disjunctions and gratings of the gramophone come to dominate the proceedings ("the tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged... what a jangle and a jingle.. What a cackle, a cacophony!"). Here the audience is invaded by the players-- "leaping, jerking, skipping... flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping"-- and sees itself reflected in a set of mirrors: "What's the notion? Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably ourselves?" As the audience is forced to behold "itself," it comes to realize that it is composed of nothing other than "orts, scraps and fragments." Wrested from images of timeless harmony that have been torn asunder by the "jangle and the din," the audience confronts its fragmentation, its discontinuity with the world. Its reaction is one of violent resistance: "But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume... and only, too, in parts... that's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid, 109

It is here that Woolf begins to suggest that the twin principles which we outlined above (synthesis and analysis, unity and dispersity) are not irreconcilable, but must in fact be understood as interpenetrating forces:

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending, all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it: but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: to part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united.

Through a series of musical metaphors and rapidly delivered conceits, Woolf suggests that the only possible "unity" is to be found in the process of fragmentation itself-- "from chaos and cacophony measure." A vast panorama, a procession of all existence unfolds itself in this passage: if at first the "distracted united," this unity is quickly broken, only to reconstitute itself in the "flocking" population of the mind, "the unprotected, the unskinned." This second unity is in turn torn apart by the "warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder"-- yet even in their straining against one another, even in their "crashing," these warriors seem to resolve into yet another harmony: "compelled from the ends of the horizon: recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united."

In the above passage Woolf approaches, perhaps, what Annika Thiem, reading Walter Benjamin, names the “unity of transient experience.” Diverging sharply from Kantian and Hegelian frameworks, Benjamin formulates this “transient unity” not as a pre-established, abstract order to be arrived at by reason, but rather as an *immanent* experience of existence in the world. This unity or totality of the concrete experience of transience is paradoxically marked by incompleteness: it can be seen as a “fragmentary totality,” a totality that remains inconceivable as such. It is “grounded... neither psychologically, empirically nor epistemologically. Indeed, to be precise, transient experience cannot be grounded at all, but must be elaborated on historically.”<sup>110</sup> That is, historical existence in this world always amounts to an immediate “experience of transience in the world,” one which cannot be captured in an epistemic totality, but which materializes instead as a kind of “nonsubjective, suprapersonal” plenitude.<sup>111</sup> This involves a reconfiguration of the very meaning of temporal fragmentation and decomposition, since it posits redemptive unity (Mrs. Swithin’s harmonies) neither fully in *this* world nor beyond this world (in a transcendental realm), but rather in the very experience of passing, of transience and “demise.” This circumvents both the timeless organic unities provided by the folk, and the “empty, homogeneous” time tied to the modern teleology of progress:

Viewing history under the idea of progress subsumes all suffering in history into this account of progress, which... reveals suffering as the cunning providence of nature to coax humans into an effort to overcome adversity and thus make progress by inventing solutions... against this... idealist theodicy of history and the elision of the experience of transience, Benjamin introduces the Messianic as redemption in worldly demise.

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<sup>110</sup> Thiem, Annika. “Benjamin’s Messianic Metaphysics of Transience.” *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by Colby Dickinson and Stephane Symons, Fordham University, 2016, pp. 35

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*

This counter-intuitive understanding of temporal change and historical becoming might be seen to express itself in the relationship between Isabel and her husband Giles Oliver at the end of the novel: “alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.”<sup>112</sup> Only through strife, through enmity, Woolf suggests, can there be “love” and unity (“another life”)-- yet these things too can only reach completeness in their transience, in their passing, in their immanence. Always will a force be “born in opposition,” and always will these forces “diverge”-- but it is only in their divergence that they become able to form a whole, a totality, a plenitude. In their temporal existence as “orts, scraps, and fragments,” Giles Oliver and Isabela become whole.

As Saint Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, “not all the parts exist at once, but some must come as others go, and in this way together they make up the whole of which they are the parts. Our speech follows the same rule, using sounds to signify a meaning. For a sentence is not complete unless each word, once its syllables have been pronounced, gives way to make room for the next.”<sup>113</sup> The novel closes precisely with the “speech” of Giles and Isabela: “It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke.”<sup>114</sup> In the strife of their separateness and discontinuity, here emblemized by the act of “speech,” Isabela and Giles seem to be lifted up into what Woolf calls the “time before time was”-- but this is not the “timelessness” of a pre-mature totalization, as evoked by nostalgic images of the folk, but the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 129

<sup>113</sup> Augustine, Saint. *Confessions*. A.D 397-400. Penguin Classics, 1961. Pg. 80

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 130

“timelessness,” the eternal being, of time itself. In their existence as “orts, scraps, and fragments,” they seem to become whole. In philosophical terms, Woolf is preoccupied, perhaps, with precisely this paradoxical “Beingness” of temporal becoming. She shows us that far from constituting irreconcilable opposites, becoming and being (dispersity and unity) mutually reinforce one another— difference can be subsumed into the Same. This means that if *Was and will* are forms that “came to be” only within the space of eternal Being, then they are unchanging realities; they *are* insofar as their inner principle of coherence is itself anchored in and dependent upon Being. While at one level change is no doubt responsible for violent differentiation within the order of appearances (as seen in the musical passage we have just discussed), it simultaneously maintains itself as Same within and as a result of this very eternal Difference— *change* as such is changeless, time is timeless because it is never subject to itself. There cannot be a state of affairs in which time itself is superseded. As Plato writes in his *Timaeus*, Time is “an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity.”<sup>115</sup>

The fact remains, though, that Woolf’s work lends itself to such hermeticism (all of which is perhaps meaningless) because it is first and foremost concerned with the fate of the self in modern times. This question involves the question of time and history insofar as it is concerned with the differentiation and separateness of phenomena. As we have seen, her affair with the timeless, organic unities of the English folk is also an affair with the meaning of the individual, its relation to a community, and its ultimate failure to relate to the world around it. If the restorative unities associated with the English folk provided Woolf a “foil” against which to

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<sup>115</sup> Plato. “*Timaeus*.” *Perseus, Tufts*, Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0180%3Atext%3DTim.%3Asection%3,37D>

offer a new form of plenitude *through* the temporal dissolution and decay of concrete selves, it remains to be seen how images of the “folk” have functioned as a way to bind an individual to an historical community, and to offer a renewed sense not only of temporal existence, but of historical existence as well. It is to this which we now turn.

## CHAPTER THREE

**The Tempests of History and the Masque Form:  
Images of the Folk in Shakespeare's play  
and Aimé Césaire's Adaptation**

Aimé Césaire's rewriting of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1605) stands as a watershed in the history of postcolonial cultural politics. Compelling our awareness of "the potency of appropriations of earlier works in the formulation of political critiques against existing power structures," it has occasioned, over the past three decades, intense debate on the efficacy of such critiques, and on the possibilities and pitfalls of cultural resistance on the aesthetic plane.<sup>116</sup> While the intertextual dynamics of Césaire's reinscription of Shakespeare have been studied extensively, if not exhaustively, giving rise to a wide range of charged opinions and interpretations, the following pages will argue that *Une tempête's* (1969) engagement with Shakespeare's world can in fact be seen to go beyond those frameworks which have hitherto determined its critical reception.

In a survey of the extant responses to Césaire's "creative and iconoclastic translation," Russel West identifies two critical tendencies that acquired prominence in the years subsequent to the publication of *Une tempête*: on the one hand, those who would read Shakespeare as a mere ideological foil to Césaire, preserving the Bard's text "intact as an exemplar of Western cultural hegemony"; and on the other, those who would situate Césaire's work in a chain of similar reappropriations, privileging the diachronic perspective of a "contestatory tradition" over the

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<sup>116</sup> West, Russell. "Césaire's Bard: Shakespeare and the Performance of Change in Césaire's 'Une Tempête.'" *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2007, p.3



specificities and topical resonances of Césaire’s confrontation with Shakespeare in the late 1960’s. In both tendencies, West observes, the Shakespearean text “remain[s] curiously inert”-- an unexamined and static backdrop. Such an inertia necessarily impoverishes our understanding of the surprising textual and ideological links between the two writers. Indeed, to treat the social, political and historical contexts of Shakespeare’s original in a reductive manner is to “fail to address one half of a dialectical relationship.” Challenging the ways in which postcolonial politics and cultural activity have traditionally been conceived, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe invites us, in his *Provisional Notes on the Postcolony*, to reconsider the legitimacy of interpretations that would cast postcolonial relationships as necessarily partaking either of “resistance or absolute domination, or as a function of the binary oppositions usually adduced in conventional analysis of movements of indiscipline and revolt (e.g. counter-discourse, counter-society, counter-hegemony, ‘the second society,’ etc.)”<sup>117</sup> While here Mbembe refers specifically to the changing methodological demands of concrete sociological analysis, the study of literary texts associated or directly engaged with anti-colonial politics would equally benefit from Mbembe’s suggested non-binarizing approach. For to exclusively foreground the subversive potential of Césaire’s rewriting, to “displace shakespeare from the analysis altogether,” is indeed to abet “a sort of Bloomian patricide which, paradoxically, simultaneously confirms the universal status and authority of the literary Father to the extent that no alternative reading of paternity is offered.”<sup>118</sup> The opposite inclination is of course to be regarded with no less suspicion: those jealous guardians of the “Father” who, precisely in decrying the so-called

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<sup>117</sup> Mbembe, Achille. “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1992, pp. 3–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1160062>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022. p. 4

<sup>118</sup> West, Russell. “Césaire’s Bard: Shakespeare and the Performance of Change in Césaire’s ‘Une Tempête.’” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2007, p.3

school of resentment and its supposed textual iniquities, enshrine an ethos of unabashed intellectual parochialism nourished on a form of *ressentiment* arguably more pernicious than that imputed to the “resenters” themselves. Harold Bloom himself epitomizes this style of cultural guardianship, writing in his impressive tome on Shakespeare that “of all [his] plays... *The Tempest*... [enjoys] the sad distinction of being the worst interpreted and performed... Caliban, a poignant but cowardly (and murderous) half-human creature... has become an African-Caribbean heroic Freedom Fighter. This is not even a weak misreading; anyone who arrives at that view is simply not interested in reading the play at all. Marxists, multiculturalists, feminists, *nouveau* historicists— the usual suspects— know their causes but not Shakespeare’s plays... *The Tempest* is neither a discourse on colonialism nor a mystical testament.”<sup>119</sup> If Bloom can be applauded, as he so wants be, for having “read the play” and “only the play” with great critical acuity and elegance, he is nevertheless reproachable for neglecting to consider how Shakespeare’s works unfold within a political and historical frame of reference the understanding of which by no means diminishes, but necessarily enriches our knowledge and appreciation both of the Bard’s “unparalleled” art and its subsequent reworkings. In other words, it is not a question of “extraneous” or “paranoid” readings suffocating some “universal essence” and “profound revelation of the human condition” otherwise given breath by immanent analysis and adulatory rhetoric; rather is such a historical frame of reference as we have just mentioned the indispensable ground for the formal comprehension *and* aesthetico-philosophical enjoyment of Shakespeare. John Gillies has shown, for instance, that far from offering itself to Shakespeare as a mere ornament (as Bloom would have it), the trope of the “New World” and the ambivalent

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<sup>119</sup>Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998, pg. 662

fantasies and power-relations surrounding it served on the contrary to generate a great deal of *The Tempest's* profoundest poetic meanings and insights.<sup>120</sup>

Yet quite apart from its reimagining of the early modern colonial situation with which *The Tempest* is undeniably engaged, Aimé Césaire's work allows us to investigate the complicated relationship between Shakespeare and a strand of the modernist imagination oriented towards folklore. *Une tempête* articulates a peculiar relation to ritualistic dramatic forms which prevailed in Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, forms which exercised a visible, structuring influence on Shakespeare's original. Here, too, we find an aesthetic project in the twentieth century interacting with the folk-culture of early modern Europe in an attempt to open new horizons of historical action and thought. Not unlike Woolf's enlistment of the village pageant in her philosophical and aesthetic project, Aimé Césaire can be seen actively reckoning with the ambiguities of the masque which erupts in act IV of *The Tempest*. By reconfiguring the symbolic and mythical elements latent within it, Césaire rechannels the potentials of the masque form into his own modernist and revolutionary project of uniting word and world, culture and nature.

Northrop Frye affirms that Shakespeare's late comedies are unlike his earlier pieces precisely to the extent that they openly affiliate themselves with pre-modern, quasi-ritualistic dramatic practices. In them there is an unmistakable "emphasis on moral and spiritual rebirth which suggests rituals of initiation, like baptism or the ancient mystery dramas, as well as of festivity."<sup>121</sup> Following the work of Enid Welsford and more recently Stephen Orgel, it is now well established that among Shakespeare's late comedies *The Tempest* is by far that most marked

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<sup>120</sup> Shakespeare, W., Hulme, P. and Sherman, W., 2004. *The Tempest*. New York: W.W. Norton, p. 256.

<sup>121</sup> Shakespeare, W. and Frye, N., 1970. *The Tempest*. New York: Penguin Books. P. 23

by the medieval and early modern masque, a dramatic ritual performed both in royal courts and by early-modern commoners.<sup>122</sup> Besides the “recognisable influence of Jacobean court entertainment and the monarch himself on the dramaturgy of *The Tempest*,” the link to the masque-form is corroborated by the play’s early performance history, which includes “presentations at the Banqueting House at Whitehall (where most masque performances took place), first on Hallowmas night 1611 and again in anticipation of Elizabeth’s marriage to the Elector Palatine in 1613.”<sup>123</sup> Characterized by a porousness between spectacle and audience so foreign to modern theatre, the masque worked to establish a continuity between the distanced, mythical past it represented and the concrete community in the present to which it was addressed. In the context of the Jacobean court, the performance of masques served to “transcend... the boundaries between play space and audience space... reveal[ing] the masque world as a mythical revelation of the court’s hidden identity and the king’s transcendent authority.”<sup>124</sup> Propagating a “messianic vision, with King James and his family at the centre of it,” the masque can be apprehended as a dramatic ritual that symbolically sutured the human and natural orders, enacting an organic unity of language and body, artifice and nature. It represents, in this sense, a medieval and early modern distillation of that ideological operation *par excellence*: the identification of the potency (*puissance*) of an historical social order in the realm of Spinoza’s “*Natura naturata*” with the potency of Nature itself– Spinoza’s “*Natura naturans*.”

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<sup>122</sup> See Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A study in the Relationship between Poetry and the Revels* (1927); Stephen Orgel, *The Johnsonian Masque* (1961)

<sup>123</sup> Topping, Judith E. “‘LIKE THIS INSUBSTANTIAL PAGEANT, FADED’: ESCHATOLOGY AND THEATRICALITY IN ‘THE TEMPEST.’” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2004, pp. 371–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23927261>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 372

<sup>125</sup> Not only, then, did Césaire turn to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a way to reckon with colonial and postcolonial realities. As we shall see, his rewriting was no less conditioned by the numerous points of affinity between his vitalist and Nietzschean aesthetic and the ambivalent feudal ideology undergirding the masque in Shakespeare's original. If Césaire was oriented towards African folk traditions as a repository of Dionysian energies, the masque-form in *The Tempest* offered him fertile imaginative ground to the extent that it, too, drew upon mythologized images of folk rusticity in order to accomplish its symbolic ends. Yet whereas Shakespeare's Prospero presides over folk festivities as a way to body forth a traditional social order sanctioned by an ethically and culturally-inscribed Nature, Césaire's insertion of folklore in *Une tempête* projects a revolutionary vision in which Nature is not a condition to be overcome, but a subversive historical force. By recasting Prospero's masque as a celebration of the modern teleology of progress whereby human agency conquers and subdues nature in its ascent towards Absolute Knowledge and Freedom, Aimé Césaire is able to mobilize the animistic energies of African folklore not only as means to challenge the subject-object divide on which this vision is premised, but also as a way to reimagine history precisely in terms of the *tempête* with which the

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<sup>125</sup> Here I introduce Spinoza's two-fold concept of Nature not arbitrarily, but precisely because it exerted a tremendous influence on the 19th century imagination through which Shakespeare's works were filtered. The Spinozian vision of Nature conditioned the Romantic and Counter-enlightenment reception of Shakespeare from J.G Herder to Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

In Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), *Natura naturans* ("Naturing nature") emerges as the active source from which the chain of worldly causes unfolds. It is identical with what Spinoza calls "Divine substance"-- a "free cause," constrained by none, and endowed with an infinity of attributes each expressing an eternal essence (pr. 29. sch). The essential difference between these two "Natures" lies in their ontological status as either self-generating or self-external. That is, *Natura naturans* is "in itself and conceived through itself," while *natura naturata*, corresponding to the chain of finite, determinate existence, is "out of itself and in another." We can critique the ideological operation mentioned above by noting that in if in Spinoza "Divine intellect" is an attribute of an eternal productive agency from which an infinity of products follow, then human culture and artifice, being but one among an infinity of other products, must necessarily be related first to these other products ("natured nature") and not directly to the productive agency itself ("naturing nature").

play opens— that is, as a cyclical, tumultuous forcefield in which nature subsumes human agency into the unfolding of its own immanent logic while seeking no predetermined end.

### THE MASQUE AS POLITICAL RITUAL

That which was at stake in the medieval and early modern masque was nothing other than the “myth of the king’s body as eucharistically omnipresent, parcelled out among his subjects yet miraculously present.”<sup>126</sup> Drawing on a wide range of sources and archival documents, in his *How the World Became a Stage* William Egginton sketches for us how up until the end of the 16th century dramatic performances functioned according to a ritualistic logic that refused to distinguish between artifice and nature. Until the end of the fifteenth century, when “autonomous theatrical spaces became truly autonomous,” communal locale and “stage” had been largely identical: “the pieces of scenery, little tents or houses often referred to as mansions, would either be facing spectators, arranged in a circle, or detached and scattered around town.”<sup>127</sup> Such staging practices, baffling to our modern sensibilities and expectations, indicate, according to Egginton, that “from its inception... spectacle in the Middle Ages occurred in... ‘full space,’ in contradistinction to the popular notion of “the empty space” associated with modern theater.” The “fullness” of medieval theatrical space was constituted by the physical presence of bodies, “testify[ing] to the incapacity of a culture to evacuate space, and to its need and enjoyment of the constant impact of presence.” This obsession with presence and the body was particularly marked in medieval political spectacle, of which Egginton offers a stimulating account: entering Paris in 1431, King Henry is received by a troupe of actors— a procession of “goddesses”

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<sup>126</sup>Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Blackwell, 1986, pg. 94

<sup>127</sup> Egginton, William. *How the World Became a Stage: Presence, Theatricality, and the Question of Modernity*. State University of New York Press, 2003, pg. 53

followed by “eighteen warriors (*preux*) from classical history and mythology, nine male and nine female, all ceremoniously armed and mounted on chargers.” Surprisingly, here it is not only pomp and exuberant symbolism, but precisely the spirit of “play” that serves to consecrate King Henry’s authority:

... ahead of this goddess and these warriors trotted a herald dressed in a vermilion robe and blue vestment, over which he wore a tunic displaying the arms of the city of Paris, and he guided and led the said mystery play. And as soon as he saw the king, he jumped to the ground and did him reverence three times; and this done he presented to him the goddess and the warriors.<sup>128</sup>

The king’s sovereignty is “enacted in full view of all” such that the “symbolic space of the performance and the real space of the city are effectively fused.”<sup>129</sup> The space of his governance is at once symbolically represented and *constituted* by a performance undertaken not only by inhabitants of the city but also by “real officials with real roles in the governance of the city.” Egginton reminds us that such performances, exhibiting a strange “permeability of the boundary between what we would distinguish as symbolic... and real,” were a “constant aspect of courtly life in [the] fifteenth century, particularly as concerns one of the most popular forms of entertainment, the masques.” The lives of medieval and early modern monarchs were consumed, Egginton claims, by a “practically unbroken sequence of masques, so that the boundary between the play and daily life couldn’t have actually been visible.”<sup>130</sup>

Fusing quotidian existence and the realm of literature and myth, the masque served to “bring into existence a space” in which the authority of the monarch “could be established and

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*

<sup>130</sup> *ibid*

[his or her] power experienced sensually, rather than merely at an intellectual or conceptual level.”<sup>131</sup> The masque’s “sensuous” incarnation of sovereignty involved, moreover, an identification of the king’s power with that of “Nature,” a projection of his power as partaking of the natural “order of things.” This identification was made palpable through the structure of the masque itself. Judith E. Topping explains that the typical masque would open with what is called an “anti-masque,” performed by professional actors, in which “hybrid creatures” such as “satyrs and goblins” capture and imprison “masquers” played by members of the court. Forces of disorder and representations of the violation of Nature and Divinity, these “hybrids” would then be “displaced, subdued or converted” by the masquers, “arrayed in splendid costumes and accompanied by music.” Now the masque itself would begin, “a triumphant celebration of order and concord comprising processions, songs and dances.” These celebrations would culminate in what was called “the Revels”: stepping down from the stage, the masquers would dance and sing with the spectators until, after a protracted bout of “revelry,” they “discarded their masks, revealed their actual identities and resumed their place among the courtiers.” Topping stresses that

the link that connected the world of the masque and that of the audience and permitted their fusion in the Revels was the authority of the king, which transcended the boundaries between play space and audience space and revealed to the former to be at once an extension and mythical counterpart of the latter.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid, 59

<sup>132</sup> Topping, Judith E. “‘LIKE THIS INSUBSTANTIAL PAGEANT, FADED’: ESCHATOLOGY AND THEATRICALITY IN ‘THE TEMPEST.’” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2004, pp. 371–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23927261>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022., pg. 372



Insofar as the masque fused spectacle and audience, “sign” and reality, it served to link the symbolic powers of the court with a divinely-ordained hierarchical order sanctioned by nature itself. The content of the Revels, that is, was often dominated by evocations of a bucolic social order in harmony with the natural world, signalling the unity of the social structure and that external realm on which it sustains itself. Prospero’s masque in *The Tempest* demonstrates how this dramatic form, besides “transcending” the boundary between illusion and reality, also provoked a sense of the “unity of body and language” precisely through idealized images of the “organic society” of the folk. Before examining how Aimé Césaire brings his own vision of African folklore to bear on the masque in act IV of *The Tempest*, we would do well to understand how the masque functions in Shakespeare’s original, and how mythical images of the folk play a central role therein.

#### ORGANIC SOCIETY BY THEATRICAL MACHINATION

Following Terry Eagleton, we can affirm that *The Tempest* is structured by two opposing principles which Prospero seeks to subdue and reconcile: ideality and materiality (or language and body), represented by Ariel and Caliban respectively. Prospero attempts to achieve their reconciliation by fashioning the island into an enchanted landscape on which the turmoil of his past is “restaged.” The masque performed by the magical Ariel in act IV can thus be read as an attempt to “excise” the strife of the two aforementioned principles together with the political turmoil which landed him on the island. Employing commonplace theatrical metaphors, the treacherous usurper Antonio seems to intuit something of his condition when he whispers: “[we have been] sea-swallowed, though some cast again, And by that destiny, to perform an act,

whereof what's past is prologue, what to come, in yours and my discharge." Not so, Prospero will soon make clear, for the "acts" to come are wholly in the former duke of Milan's "discharge," not theirs. The very tempest by which they have been "sea-swallowed," forced aground and "dispersed... 'bout the isle" is no natural occurrence— it is Ariel, that immaterial entity, who is ventriloquized by Prospero to create the "direful spectacle" of the storm, and it is he too who has arranged the subsequent situation on the island in conformity with Prospero's will:

**Prospero:** Hast thou, spirit,  
Performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?

**Ariel:** To every article...

**Prospero:** But are they, Ariel, safe?

**Ariel:** Not a hair perished.  
On their sustaining garments not a blemish,  
But fresher than before; and as thou bad'st me,  
In troops I have dispersed them 'bout the isle.  
The King's son have I landed by himself,  
Whom I left cooling of the air with sighs  
In an odd angle of the isle, and sitting,  
His arms in this sad knot.

As Prospero "bad'st" him, so he has disposed it— and "to the point." What becomes apparent over the course of the interaction between Prospero, man of flesh and blood, and his playful "airy spirit" is the extent to which Ariel represents the active exteriorization of Prospero's intellect, an overcoming of his corporeal finitude and subjugation of nature by his imagination: "It goes on," Prospero muses, "as my soul prompts it. Spirit, fine spirit, I'll free thee within two days for this."

<sup>133</sup> Responding to the very "promptings" of Prospero's "soul," Ariel shapes the island on which the company finds itself into an insubstantial, oneiric realm: "we are asleep, With eyes wide

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<sup>133</sup> Shakespeare, W. and Frye, N., 1970. *The Tempest*. New York: Penguin Books, pg. 48

open; standing, speaking, moving, And yet so fast asleep.”<sup>134</sup> After the invisible Ariel descends to play an eerie tune on the “tabor and flute,” Caliban feels compelled to evoke the island thus:

Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,  
 Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.  
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices  
 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
 Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
 The clouds methought would open and show riches  
 Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,  
 I cried to dream again.<sup>135</sup>

Oscillating between sleep and wakefulness, and not knowing which to desire, Caliban languishes in a kind of somnambulism, impotent to resist Prospero’s fancy as it is put into effect by the “fine apparition.”<sup>136</sup> Here we might recall a set of brilliant lines from *Hamlet*, in which the banterings of Guildenstern, Rosencrantz and the eponymous hero suddenly wax expansive:

**Guildenstern:** ...Dreams are indeed ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

**Hamlet:** A dream itself is but a shadow.

**Rosencrantz:** Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow’s shadow.

We can use the language above to note how Ariel, “shadow of a shadow” though he be, nonetheless possesses “so airy and light a quality” as to be able to bring the whole island under the dominion of Prospero’s “dreams.” Unlike prince Hamlet’s, Prospero’s “soul” is unrestrained by the straitjacket otherwise placed upon it by bodily limit and vacillation. Ariel emerges, then, as that medium by which Prospero’s “ambitions” attain material fulfilment, converting Prospero’s internal “shadows” into material reality and ventriloquizing those whom the play

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid, II, i, L207-209

<sup>135</sup>Ibid, III, ii, lines 132-140

<sup>136</sup>Ibid, I, ii, 317

identifies with this reality: “I must obey,” laments Caliban, “His art is of such pow’r, it would control my dam’s god, Setebos, and make a vassal of him.”<sup>137</sup>

It is apparent throughout, however, that Prospero’s relation to Ariel is not without tension. The spirit on whom the magus depends for the material effectivity of his Word is openly antagonistic in the second scene of act I, demanding his “liberty” and making clear that whatever he may do for the magician, it is on the understanding that he will soon be freed: “Remember I have done thee worthy service, Told thee no lies, made no mistakings, served without or grudge or grumblings. Thou did promise to bate me a full year.” Thus Prospero’s power over the spirit is tenuous, and by the end of his play he must set him loose into that ethereal realm from which he came: “My Ariel, chick... to the elements, be free and fare thou well.”<sup>138</sup>

Ariel’s bondage parallels that of Caliban, who is nevertheless bound in a radically different sense. In his *Shakespeare* (1986), Terry Eagleton observes that “if Ariel needs to be tied down to the life of the body, the creaturely Caliban needs to be cranked up to the level of language. Ariel and Caliban symbolize, respectively, pure language and pure body, a freedom which threatens to transgress all restraint and a sensuous enslavement to material limit.”<sup>139</sup> In contradistinction to Ariel, Shakespeare paints Caliban as a being of pure materiality that must be lifted into the realm of the mind, of reason and speech. What is important to note here for our reading of Césaire’s rewriting is that Caliban, an amphibious half-man begotten by the witch Sycorax, is bereft of all spiritual and intellectual heritage. While he knows “the fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile,” he is at first neither capable of expressing himself nor of describing the world around him. Miranda famously excoriates Caliban for his ingratitude,

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid, I, ii L372-374

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, V, i 316-18

<sup>139</sup>Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Blackwell, 1986, pg. 94

reminding him that once he did not even know his “own meaning” and would “gabble like a thing most brutish”-- it was she and her father who worked to “endow [his] purposes with words that made them known.”<sup>140</sup> His only claim to the island, moreover, is that of chronological priority; his mother arrived with him-- a “freckled whelp, hag-born”-- long before Prospero, when the island was as yet “not honored with a human shape.” Yet it is just this claim to the island which so torments Prospero, threatening as it does to displace him from his Godlike role.

The twin claims of language and the body, pure artifice and pure nature, of which Ariel and Caliban respectively emerge as symbols, are reconciled in the wedding masque of Act IV. As an already masque-like dramaturgy and atmosphere give place to an actual masque dramatizing the meeting of a fecund, bounteous earth and a generous “firmament,” the world of the play seems to fold into itself, bringing Prospero’s white magic to the fore as the vehicle of a social order anchored in an ethically and morally inscribed Nature. Frye reminds us that “... to an Elizabethan poet “nature” had an upper level, a cosmic and moral order that may be entered through education, obedience to law, and the habit of virtue. In this expanded sense we may say that the whole society being formed on the island under Prospero’s guidance is a natural society.” The masque’s figure for this “natural society” is drawn not only from the myths of classical antiquity, but also from idyllic images of a folk-people in harmony with the “timeless rhythms” of which we spoke in the previous chapter. After the messenger of the skies Iris has summoned the fertility Goddess Ceres to “entertain” Juno, “queen o’ th’ sky,” Ferdinand exclaims: This is a most majestic vision... let me live here ever! So rare a wond’red father and a wise, makes this place Paradise.” As Frye notes, “the masque has about it the freshness of Noah’s new world,

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<sup>140</sup> Shakespeare, W. and Frye, N., 1970. *The Tempest*. New York: Penguin Books, I, ii, L355-358

after the tempest had receded and the rainbow promised that seedtime and harvest should not cease.” Ferdinand’s “Paradise” recalls Gonzalo’s reverie in act II, in which the councillor imagines a commonwealth with “no sovereignty” save that of Nature itself:

Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
 No occupation; all men idle, all;  
 And women too, but innocent and pure;  
 No sovereignty...  
 All things in common nature should produce  
 Without sweat or endeavor. Treason, felony,  
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine  
 Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,  
 Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,  
 To food my innocent people.

The Golden Age evoked here is directly carried over into Prospero’s “majestic vision,” which culminates in the spectacle of an “Earthly Paradise, where, as in Milton’s Eden, there is no winter but spring and autumn ‘danced hand in hand.’<sup>141</sup> Although the performance consists of “Spirits” called forth by Prospero to “bestow upon the eyes of the young couple... some vanity of mine art,” it becomes clear that here the function of his “art,” “vain” as it might be, is precisely to body forth an organic society implanted in the ritual rhythms of the folk:

**Iris**

You nymph, called Naiades, of the windring brooks,  
 With your sedged crowns and ever-harmless looks,  
 Leave your crisp channels, and on this green land  
 Answer your summons; Juno does command.  
 Come, temperate nymphs, and help to celebrate  
 A contract of true love: be not too late.

*Enter certain Nymphs.*

You sunburned sicklemen, of August weary,  
 Come hither from the furrow and be merry.  
 Make holiday: your rye-straw hats put on,  
 And these fresh nymphs encounter every one  
 In country footing.

*Enter certain Reapers, properly habited. They join  
 With the Nymphs in a graceful dance...*

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<sup>141</sup>Ibid, Introduction, pg. 18

In staging the masque, then, Prospero transforms his Creative word into Nature, making Nature “speak” in turn and suturing the twin principles which we outlined earlier. Drawn from the folk festivities of early modern Europe, the image of “sunburned sicklemen” dancing with “nymphs” emerges as a symbol of a renewed and organic political order consolidated by the marriage of Miranda (Prospero’s daughter) and Ferdinand (son of the King who abetted Prospero’s deposition). As Eagleton recognizes, “in sexual communion, the body itself becomes communicative discourse; and if Prospero is insistent that this interpersonal communion should be publicly institutionalized, it is less because the play dislikes fornication (though it does) than because such relationship is its sole proleptic symbol of a broader political unity.” Following the symbolic realization of Prospero’s “organic society” through the masque, the chaos of Prospero’s staged “antimasque” is dispelled: the machiavellian company of Alonso’s ship is chastened and shown that its treachery was “unnatural,” Caliban’s insurrection is quelled by “divers Spirits in shape of dogs and hounds, hunting them about,” and Prospero himself vows to bury his magic books “certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound.” That “art” by which the magician sought to dominate Nature is no longer necessary; for a traditional social order, welded together by dynastic marriage, has now been ushered in, effectively uniting both Art and Nature and opening for Prospero a glorious vista of “calm seas, auspicious gales, and sail so expeditious...”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, V, i, 314-5

## CÉSAIRE'S AESTHETIC VISION

A crucial facet of Aimé Césaire's confrontation with the Shakespearean text proceeds from the thematic matrix outlined above. At the risk of obscuring irreconcilable ideological and historical differences between Shakespeare and Césaire, I venture to claim that both writers, separated though they were by some four centuries, relied on a mystification of Nature in their respective productions. If *The Tempest* already displays a preoccupation with questions of culture and nature, word and world, and turns to the mythologized world of the folk to suture this opposition, Césaire's *Une tempête* responds with its own triangulation of these terms. The fundamental difference is to be found, however, in how the Martiniquan writer foregrounds questions of time and history already implicit in the etymology of the play's title: "tempest" and *tempête* derive from Latin "tempestatas," which in turn derives from "tempus," meaning time. To those teleological visions of historical temporality which served to justify colonialism and imperialism, Césaire opposes an aesthetic grounded in the Dionysian force of African folklore, mobilizing the latter as a mode of access to an irrational Nature that unfolds its immanent logic through vying historical "wills to power." Departing from the panlogism and rationalism of the Hegelian view of history, Césaire might be seen to embrace what Nietzsche calls, in his *Birth of Tragedy*, an "aesthetic God": "an unthinking and amoral artist-God, who in creation and destruction, in good things and bad, dispassionately desires to become aware of his own pleasures and power, a God who, as he creates worlds, rids himself of the strain of fullness and superfluity, from the suffering of pressing internal contradictions. The world is at every moment the attained manifestation of God, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the person who suffers most, who is the most



rent with contradictions, the one with the richest sense of protest, who knows how to save himself only in illusion.”<sup>143</sup>

The above claim is best corroborated, perhaps, by an examination of Césaire’s earlier works. In *Poesie et connaissance*, a manifesto-like essay published in *Tropiques* in 1944, Césaire gives philosophical expression to his view of poetry, claiming that “things-in-themselves” are to be arrived at not by “la connaissance scientifique” but rather by “la connaissance poetique.” As against the former, which objectifies or “enframes” sense-experience, evacuating it of its vital content, the latter kind of “knowledge” returns us “au temps où l’homme découvrait avec émotion le premier soleil, la première pluie, le premier souffle, la première lune. Aux temps où l’homme découvrait dans la peur et le ravissement, la nouveauté palpitante du monde.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, what emerges across Césaire’s *oeuvre* is a strong Nietzscheanism, an exaltation of the primordial, world-shattering and world-creating energies of poetry in pursuit of “the revenge of Dionysus on Apollo.” As Bernard Harcourt reminds us, “Aime Césaire’s encounter with Nietzsche— in his own words, one of his essential reference points— nourished a vitality, a passion for tragedy, for art, for knowledge and politics, in sum, a will to power that would enrich his poems and plays, but also propel his anti-colonialism and political struggles.”<sup>145</sup> His poetic “will to power” found expression, however, not only in a technique heavily influenced by the violent contrasts and disjunctions of surrealism, but also in a kind of self-conscious animism which sought to fuse the poetic word with the external world.

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<sup>143</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. “The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism.” *Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51356/51356-h/51356-h.htm> pg. 11

<sup>144</sup> *Aimé Césaire: Poésie et Connaissance*. Les Chroniques de Marcel, 2022, <https://leschroniquesdemarcel.blogspot.com/2020/11/aime-cesaire-poesie-et-connaissance.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Harcourt, Bernard, et al. “Césaire, Nietzsche, and the Struggle Against Colonialism.” *Columbia Law School*, Columbia University, 2017, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/nietzsche1313/6-13/>.

In Césaire's earlier work of the interwar period, this combination is nowhere more apparent than in his famous poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Return to my Native Land) (1939). One passage in particular constitutes a turning point in this work, and a close analysis thereof will provide us with a framework in which to compare *The Tempest* and *Une tempête*.

“Je retrouverais le secret des grandes communications et des grandes combustions. Je dirais orage. Je dirais fleuve. Je dirais tornade. Je dirais feuille. Je dirais arbre. Je serais mouillé de toutes les pluies, humecté de toutes les rosées. Je roulerais comme du sang frénétique sur le courant lent d'œil des mots en chevaux fous en enfants frais en caillots en couvre-feu en vestiges de temples en pierres précieuses assez loin pour décourager les mineurs.”

[I want to rediscover the secret of great speech and of great burning. I want to say storm. I want to say river. I want to say tornado. I want to say leaf, I want to be soaked by every rainfall, moistened by every dew. As frenetic blood rolls on the slow current of the eye, I want to roll words like maddened horses like new children like clotted milk like curfew like traces of a temple like precious stones buried deep enough to daunt all miners.]<sup>146</sup>

If at the beginning of the poem Césaire's Martiniquan “pays natal” was presented as sterile and moribund (“une ville incapable de croître selon le suc de cette terre”),<sup>147</sup> here Césaire seems to offer the Word itself, the very material of the poem, as the vehicle of a necessary spiritual regeneration. At the heart of the poetic effect seen above is the motif of liquidity— a figure which, once announced (“je roulerais comme du sang frénétique...”), becomes the generative principle of the subsequent lines. Even before its appearance here, however, the image of “rolling waters,” of an inexorable liquid movement, had been evoked multiple times throughout the work. As early as the first lines of the poem the poetic voice speaks to us of the “fleuve” that he harbors “par précaution contre la force putréfiante des ambiances crépusculaires” (7), prefiguring the violent surging forth of language seen above. We note that, relative to the rest of the poem, the passage in question marks a strong shift in tone and verbal form. Where before the passivity of a world in decomposition had been accentuated by images expressing a sense of temporal

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<sup>146</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Présence Africaine, 2008, pg. 21; Césaire, Aimé, et al. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Wesleyan University Press, 2001, pg. 49

<sup>147</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Présence Africaine, 2008, pg. 21

suspension (the frequent repetition of “au bout de petit matin”) and ontological impoverishment (“cette ville inerte, cette foule désolée sous le soleil, ne participant à rien de ce qui s’exprime”), here we witness the sudden emergence of a poetic self, a “*je*” conscious of its proper task, namely, the retrieval of “le secret des grandes communications et des grandes combustions.” The contiguity of the two latter terms points, perhaps, to their identity in Césaire’s mind. Insofar as they involve “[des] grande combustions,” Césaire’s poetic “communications” desire above all to become a series of *physical* phenomena, corporeal events that capture and give form to the world by condensing it in vigorous and explosive sonorities: “Je dirais orage. Je dirais fleuve. Je dirais tornade.” Again, we note that this line enacts a shift from the indignant passive voice which had dominated the first quarter of the poem to a triumphant deployment of the conditional tense (retrouverais, dirais) by which the poet projects a renewed horizon of action, a vision of a future state of affairs, and firmly establishes the revolutionary character of his poem in so doing. The “seizure of the Word” (*prise de parole*) is thus for Césaire at one and the same time a “seizure of consciousness” (*une prise de conscience*), an affirmation of that insurrectionary spirit which seeks to recuperate the “vrai cri de la foule” that inhabits “quelque refuge profond d’ombre” (9).

After his political subjectivity, his “*je*,” has made its appearance, the poet proceeds to merge “form” and “content,” setting his announced desire (“je roulerais comme sang frénétique”) into motion as the animating force of the lines that follow. To the pitiable “fleuve de vie désespérément torpide dans son lit” (the condition of his “people”) Césaire opposes a linguistic paroxysm exploding geyser-like in “chevaux fous en enfants frais en caillots en couvre-feu en vestiges de temples en pierres précieuses assez loin pour décourager les mineurs.” Bereft of all hypotaxis and punctuation, the thirty-six syllable word-stream creates a deluge that is meant to

overwhelm the reader. Yet the effect of such a verbal “fleuve” lies not so much in the cumulative sense of the semantic cluster which it mobilizes (“chevaux fous/enfants frais/caillots/couvre-feu/vestige de temples etc...”) as in the unremitting intensity of a stream of arbitrary signifiers which together function to penetrate beyond sense altogether, flowing into what Césaire imagines to be “the essence of all things... the movement of all things... the play of the world.”<sup>148</sup> Taken as a whole, then, the passage stands at once as an auto-commentary on Césaire’s poetic project and a “demonstration” that puts into effect formally what the poet evokes semantically. Directed against the regime of abstraction installed by colonialism (“nous vous haïssons vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons de la démence précoce”),<sup>149</sup> Césaire establishes his poetic activity as being in excess of the representational function of language, further suggesting, at the very level of form, that the act of speech is tied not to *being*, but to *becoming* (le *devenir*), to the “interminable and undefinable” palpitations of what he later calls “la chair de la chair du monde” [flesh of the flesh of the world]. Gesturing towards a linguistic mode beyond the mimetic logic whereby the word is a mere glass reflecting its referent, such passages as the above do not seek to “represent” the world, to “paint” it, but rather to *incarnate* it in intense rivers of sound. If the scientific knowledge on which the modern teleology of progress rests is taken as the gradual domination of “object” by “subject,” the “connaissance poétique” expressed in the above technique might be understood precisely as an attempt to transcend this state of affairs by merging subject and object, artifice and nature, word and world.

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<sup>148</sup> Césaire, Aimé, et al. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Wesleyan University Press, 2001, pg. 75

<sup>149</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. Présence Africaine, 2008, pg. 27

## CÉSAIRE'S HISTORICAL WORLD-PICTURE

This vision can be seen to have retained its force in Césaire's imagination even three decades after the *Cahier's* publication. Juxtaposing the two "tempests," we note that where Shakespeare's Prospero seeks to restore a traditional social order through a unification of language and the body, Césaire's Caliban is intent on merging and joining forces with the natural world surrounding him as a vehicle for his future "*liberté*." Indeed, as we shall see, Césaire's Caliban arrives at his revolutionary consciousness through a form of *poesis* similar to that practiced in the *Cahier* by Césaire himself. No longer a deposed monarch, as in Shakespeare, here Prospero has become an overweening colonist, his "art" a "*science prophétique*"<sup>150</sup> by which he has conquered an island in the Caribbean and subjected its inhabitants to a foreign logic. Césaire makes this "*science*" the very bone over which Prospero and Caliban exchange aspersions:

**Prospero**

... Une barbare! Une bête brute que j'ai éduquée, formée, que j'ai tirée de l'animalité qui l'engangue encore de toute part!

**Caliban**

D'abord ce n'est pas vrai. Tu ne m'as rien appris du tout. Sauf, bien sûr à baragouiner ton langage pour comprendre tes ordres... Quant à ta science, est-ce que tu me l'as jamais apprise, toi? Tu t'en es bien gardé! Ta science, tu la gardes égoïstement pour toi tout seul, enfermé dans les gros livres que voilà.<sup>151</sup>

Over the course of the play, two philosophies of history articulate themselves, corresponding to the two opposing forms of "connaissance": on the one hand, that of a bourgeois civilization which would see in Nature an inert, mechanical space of pure extension over which to exercise rational, "Apollonian" mastery; and on the other, that which derives from an "organic" *poesis* incarnated in traditional folkloric images that hybridize nature and culture. Here Césaire seems to literalize his intellectual and political "radicalism," rooting his projected image of a future

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<sup>150</sup> Aimé, Césaire. *Une Tempête*. Éditions du Seuil, 1969, pg. 22

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 25

collectivity in the specific geographic locale of the Carribean. Prospero scoffs at Caliban's mention of "Sycorax, ma mère," who, according to the colonist, is "une goule" of which "la mort nous a délivrés." Yet not only is Caliban's *mère* not "dead," she is in fact the in-dwelling "spirit" of the whole island, an elemental, protean presence with whom Caliban will poetically "commune" throughout the play. Césaire thus fills precisely that cultural and spiritual void which Shakespeare had placed behind Caliban, endowing his version of the latter with a "*généalogie*" that links a living ancestral past to the present. :

**Caliban**

Morte ou vivante, c'est ma mère et je ne la renierai pas! D'ailleurs, tu ne la crois morte que parce que tu crois que la terre est chose morte... C'est tellement plus commode! Morte, alors on la piétine, on la souille, on la foule d'un pied vainqueur! Moi, je la respecte, car je sais qu'elle vit, et que vit Sycorax.  
 Sycorax ma mère!  
 Serpent! Pluie! Eclairs!  
 Et je te retrouve partout:  
 Dans l'oeil de la mare qui me regarde, sans ciller, à travers les scirpes.  
 Dans le geste de la racine tordue et son bond qui attend.  
 Dans la nuit, la toute-voyante aveugle,  
 La toute-flaireuse sans naseaux!<sup>152</sup>

As should be apparent, the style with which Caliban evokes the omnipresence of his "mother" is heavily reminiscent of the surrealist and animist images of the *Cahier*. Nature becomes a force of pure negation, all-seeing yet blind, all-smelling yet without nostrils— a veritable Dionysus whose "eternal contradictions" lie beyond rational, scientific apprehension, in the primordial realm of poetry. This figuring of Nature as a capricious, "aesthetic" force voiced at the very outset, during the "storm of history" that has drawn the colonizers to the island: "Il y en a un qui se fout de Roi comme de toi et moi, il s'appelle le Vent! Sa majesté le Vent! Pour le moment, c'est lui qui commande et nous sommes ses sujets!" Towards the end of the play, Caliban dedicates one of his many lyrical reveries to the wind as it "farfouille les halliers... son triomphe, quand il passe,

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 26

brisant les arbres, avec dans sa barbe, les bribes de leurs gémissements.”<sup>153</sup> These poetic images, by which Nature is at once anthropomorphized and deified, serve as a counterpoint to that “*anti-Nature*” of which the colonizer’s scientific *weltaanschaung* is the expression (“Prospero, c’est l’anti-Nature. Moi je dis: A bas l’anti-Nature!”). In act two of the second act, Césaire makes light of the colonizer’s extractive, “anti-natural” attitude with subtle scatological humour—Gonzalo, Sebastian and Antonio muse over the lucrative possibilities offered by the island’s overabundance of Guano, that “merveilleuse matière fécale”: “C’est dans les grottes que ça se niche... il faudrait... prospecter une à une toutes les grottes de cette île pour voir s’il s’en trouve, auquel cas ce pays, sous une sage direction, sera plus riche que l’Egypte avec son Nil.”<sup>154</sup> Césaire suggests, then, that insofar as they are intent on disemboweling Nature, the cast of mind of these “*colons*” becomes itself excremental.

If, as against Prospero’s “chose morte,” Nature is “alive” for Caliban, this is announced most forcefully in those moments in which Caliban invokes folk deities and figures drawn from Yoruba mythology. This folkloric subtext begins in the first scene of the second act: as Ariel approaches Caliban in his “cave,” she hears him singing,

*Shango Shango ho!*  
 ...  
*Ne lui offrez pas de siège! A votre guise!*  
*C’est sur votre nez qu’il prendra son assise!*  
 ...  
*Shango Shango!*<sup>155</sup>

At another point, after Prospero has sent an army of “vipères, scorpions et hérissons” to thwart the aspiring triumvirate formed by Caliban and the inveterate drunkards, the former abandons himself to “*son chant de guerre*”:

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 39

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 35

*Shango est un manier de bâton  
 Il frappe et l'argent meurt!  
 Il frappe et le mensonge meurt!  
 Il frappe et le larcin meurt!  
 Shango Shango ho!  
 Shango est l'amueuteur de pluies  
 Bien enveloppé il passe dans son manteau de feu.  
 Des pavés du ciel le sabot de son cheval  
 Tire des éclairs de feu  
 Shango est un grand cavalier  
 Shango Shango ho!*

*On entend le grondement de la mer.<sup>156</sup>*

The play explicitly links Caliban's panegyric to Shango, a Yoruba deity of thunder and storm, with "le grondement de la mer," suggesting, if not a causal relationship between the two happenings, then perhaps a relation of consubstantiality, as though Caliban's words somehow partook of the awesome natural events erupting around him. When Stephano asks about the source of this "grondement," Caliban informs him that "c'est ma copine... elle m'aide à respirer... C'est pourquoi je l'appelle une copine. De temps en temps, elle éternue et une goutte me tombe sur le front et me rafraîchit de son sel ou me benit..."

Not only are "la mer" and the wind which stirs it his "copines," his accomplices; so too are the animals and insects of the island, who he manages to subdue at a mere wave of the hand: "Mon doux petit... Qu'un animal, si je puis dire, naturel, s'en prenne à moi le jour ou je pars à l'assaut de Prospero, plus souvent!... Voyez, à ces mots, notre hérisson se hérissé? Non, il rentre ses piquants! C'est ça, la Nature! C'est gentil, en somme! Suffit de savoir lui parler!"<sup>157</sup> Caliban's rising revolutionary consciousness of his profound relatedness to the natural world of the island culminates in the third act, in which Prospero stages a masque-like celebration. This spectacle can be read as an allusion to the Enlightenment teleology of history whereby a

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 64

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 74



universal, Apollonian realm of order and freedom is to be ushered in by scientific progress and the expansion of “culture”: “Je veux leur donner dès aujourd’hui, leur inculquer le spectacle de ce monde de demain: de raison, de beauté, d’harmonie, dont, à force de volonté, j’ai jeté le fondement.” Prospero’s “world of tomorrow” recalls that promised in the Hegelian philosophy of history. In his *Lectures*, Hegel writes “that the principles of the successive phases of Spirit... are themselves only steps in the development of the one universal Spirit, which through them elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending totality.”<sup>158</sup> For Hegel the development of “Spirit” or “*Geist*” is identical with the ascent of Reason, since in his Aristotle-inflected system all beings are constituted by their rational unfolding through an antagonistic process (the historical dialectic) that culminates in unity. The point at which, after an arduous development, the concrete conditions of man’s existence attain harmony with Spirit as universal reason is also the point at which history comes to a close— the teleology of progress culminates in a grand redemptive unity after which further progress is neither possible nor necessary. It should be remembered that, contrary to Caliban’s animist consciousness, for Hegel it is only “Man”— the “image and likeness of God,” possessed of Reason-- who has the capacity to apprehend the unifying principle of Spirit and bring it to fruition in political institutions guaranteeing “freedom” and recognition-- for Hegel, this was the Prussian monarchy of 1807; for Francis Fukuyama, post-soviet liberal democracy. Césaire was no doubt familiar with the racist dimensions of Hegel’s History: Africa, for instance, appears in the *Lectures* as the “the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.”<sup>159</sup> Hayden White characterizes Hegel’s onto-theological historicism as having

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<sup>158</sup>Hegel, G.W.F et al. *The Philosophy Of History*. Batoche Books, 2001, pg. 96

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, pg. 109

furnished “little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to cultures and civilizations preceding it, but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space.”<sup>160</sup> This form of historical consciousness served, according to White, to “retroactively substantiate” the heights of progress which the imperialist powers of the West imagined themselves to have reached.

Against Prospero’s Hegelian image of a “self-comprehending” and universal order of “raison... beauté... harmonie” premised on the overcoming of nature, Césaire inserts a ludic folk-spirit that shatters all hope of a future rational unity, offering a radically different vision of history rooted in the non-totalizable unfolding of nature itself. The “trickster” archetype of African folklore, remarkably similar to Nietzsche’s “aesthetic God,” bears a carnivalesque quality that serves to disturb the imperious solemnity of Prospero’s ritual. As “Junon,” “Cérés,” and “Iris” chant the praises of Prospero and beckon the “*Naiades*” to dance, the trickster deity Eshu (also from Yoruba mythology) erupts on the scene to the bewilderment of all. Miranda wonders if this figure is in fact a “diable” rather than a “dieu,” while Prospero cries out indignantly, “qu’est-ce que tu es venu faire ici? Qui t’a invité? Je n’aime pas le sans-gêne! Même chez les dieux!” Jesting with the dancers and spectators, Eshu agrees to leave— but not before he has “poussé la chansonnette en l’honneur de la mariée et de la noble compagnie...” He raises his voice in provocative song, introducing the ludic rhythms and sensibilities of african folklore into what was meant to be a celebration of civilizational “order”:

*Eshu est un joueur de tours,  
Sacrifiez à Eshu vingt chiens  
Afin qu’il ne vous joue des tours de cochon.*

*Eshu joue un tour à la Reine,  
Sa majesté perd la tête, la voilà qui se lève*

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<sup>160</sup> White, Hayden. *The Historical Imagination In 19th Century Europe*. John Hopkins University Press, 1973, pg. 2

*Et dans la rue sort nue*

*Eshu joue un tour à la jeune mariée,  
Et la voilà qui le jour du mariage  
Se trompe de lit et se retrouve  
Dans le lit d'un homme qui n'est pas le marié!*

*Eshu! La pierre qu'il a lancée hier  
C'est aujourd'hui qu'elle tue l'oiseau.  
Du désordre il fait l'ordre, de l'ordre le désordre!  
Ah! Eshu est un mauvais plaisant*

*Eshu n'est pas une tête à porter des farceaux,  
C'est un gaillard à la tête pointue. Quand il danse  
Il danse sans remuer les épaules.  
Ah! Eshu est un luron joyeux!<sup>161</sup>*

This “luron joyeux” embodies a form of play that is serious and a seriousness that can only be playful. His “tricks” are directed, that is, at the very ordering power of human reason which produces the opposition between necessity and play in the first place. Thus he plunges a queen into “madness,” beguiles a bride to get in “le lit d’un homme qui n’est pas le marié,” and finally makes sport of the mechanical causality and “principle of sufficient reason” on which modern scientific understanding rests, claiming that the rock he threw yesterday, “c’est aujourd’hui qu’elle tue l’oiseau.” His is a power of cataclysmic paradox: “du désordre il fait l’ordre, de l’ordre le désordre!” Like Caliban’s “mother” Sycorax, Eshu is an emanation of a Dionysian nature that sunders the edifice of reason and forces binary opposites into coincidence.

The last scene of *Une tempête* does not offer, as might be expected, an unambiguous “redemption” by which the oppressive regime of colonialism is overturned. For this would have seemed to Césaire a repetition of that very thought which he sought to combat. Transfiguring the humanist notion, voiced since Giambattista Vico, that “man makes his own history,” Césaire suggests in the last scenes of the play that it is not human artifice in its opposition to nature that

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 69-70

“makes history,” but rather an aesthetic, dionysian Nature which expresses itself in the strife of opposing historical forces. Césaire stage instructions signal the passage of time, alerting us to the historical saga that the storm has produced:

*De temps s'écoule, symbolisé par le rideau qui descend à demi et remonte. Dans une pénombre, Prospero, l'air vieilli et las. Ses gestes sont automatiques et étriqués, son langage appauvri et stéréotypé*

If Prospero is, as Caliban calls him, a “grand illusionniste,” by the end of the play his “science” is put to shame by the overwhelming force of an irrepressible nature:

C'est drôle, depuis quelque temps, nous sommes ici envahis par des sarigues, Y en a partout... Des pécaris, des cochons sauvages, toute cette sale nature! Mais des sarigues, surtout... Oh, ces yeux! Et sur la face, ce rictus ignoble! On jurerait que la jungle veut investir la grotte. Mais je me défendrai... Je ne laisserai pas périr mon oeuvre...<sup>162</sup>

Overrun with opossums, peccarys, and wild boars, Prospero, who had once controlled nature through his artifice, is now impotent to resist it. He turns to Caliban's distant silhouette, and, recognizing his entanglement in a process that can have no end, laments “nous ne sommes plus que deux sur cette île, plus que toi et moi. Toi et moi! Toi-moi! Moi-toi!..” Left, at the close of the curtain, with the image of Caliban chanting “Freedom!” to the sound of the waves and the chirping of birds, the audience is by no means afforded a sense of what Nietzsche calls “metaphysical solace.” Rather, what forces itself upon us is the realization that, as suggested by the very title of the play, this is not “*the tempest*,” but only “*une tempête*”—one among an infinite series of historical maelstroms.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 92

## CONCLUSION

What is at stake in the foregoing discussions is a complex set of responses to those experiences and “structures of feeling” produced by the world-historical process commonly referred to as modernization. Following György Lukacs and Max Weber, Fredric Jameson describes this latter as “the dynamic in which the traditional or ‘natural’ unities, social forms, human relations, cultural events, even religious systems, are systematically broken up in order to be reconstructed more efficiently, in the form of new post-natural processes or mechanisms.”<sup>163</sup> If in my discussion of Cervantes I have explored how his most famous novel can be seen to define its own temporal and historical awareness against the cultural production of such pre-modern “traditional or natural unities,” in the last two chapters I have attempted to show how two twentieth century writers engage with the abiding imaginative force of the pre-modern under modernity. The last two chapters are united in their concern for how, as modern, capitalist civilization emerges and ramifies, folk-cultural forms and modes of thought become aesthetic images that serve to remedy contradictions inherent to the experience of living under this form of civilization. Specifically, the “folk” has offered these writers a means by which to rethink time and history in terms of the opposition between artifice and nature, between human social orders and the external, material realm on which they sustain themselves.

The larger question, however, is the vocation of literature in the modern world. If we can speak, as I have done here, of the “written word” as a “remedy,” then what is the real nature of

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<sup>163</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 1981. Cornell University Press. Pg. 62

the “illness”? Is it perhaps that literary-critical, sociological and philosophical “diagnoses” have continued to proliferate because they themselves are symptoms of the “illness” to which they seem to refer— happily infected with the very thing which allows them to prescribe? And how do images of the folk, of pre-modern “harmonies,” figure in this world of prophylactic discourse? In his *Shakespeare and the Book*, Robert S. Knapp speaks of the twin “myths of community” that condition modern retrospects into the literary and artistic past:

The first evokes an unfallen, preindustrial age without moral uncertainty, personal anomie, or economic alienation: this is the era inhabited by Benjamin’s storyteller or D.W. Robertson’s Chaucer, an era in which everyone’s experience was more or less public and shareable, as were the norms by which to judge it... Such conditions obtain until after the “Middle Ages”— a period which occasionally lasts until Rousseau, or 1789, or the end of some favorite “traditional” society— by which time structural differentiation has completed its so far irreversible work, putting up class barriers where there once were orderly ranks, separating productive labor from the home and poetry from its public, driving fact and value into irreconcilable divorce.

The second “myth” is formulated partly in response to this one. It is the myth, the ideology, of “art” itself. For as subject and object, fact and value, artifice and nature, are increasingly felt to have been “driven into irreconcilable divorce” during the modern period, this activity— art— begins to be held out around the nineteenth century as the last bastion of the “sacred”: “true poets breaking down time and the subject-object split, great painters being gathered into spiritual villages at the newly opened Louvre and the British Musum, and the various strains of art

engaging in discourse only with and finally about their own purified traditions.”<sup>164</sup> Though they are indeed very different writers and thinkers, Virginia Woolf and Aimé Césaire inscribe themselves within this “spiritual community” to the extent that they are both concerned with suturing what has been sundered, with elaborating ways in which to conceive of historical becoming that would retain a vital link between self and other, word and world. Michel Foucault, on whom I rely for my reading of *Don Quijote*, posits romantic and modernist literary production itself as the cultural afterlife, the ghost, of that “prose of the world” which he locates before the sixteenth century:

It may be said in a sense that ‘literature,’ as it was constituted and so designated on the threshold of the modern age, manifests, at a time when it was the least expected, the reappearance of the living being of language... From the nineteenth century literature began to bring language back to light once more its own being: though not as it had still appeared at the end of the Renaissance. For now we no longer have that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth, language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day.<sup>165</sup>

From “Holderlin to Mallarmé and on to Antonin Artaud,” Foucault claims, “literature” gained its autonomy from the realm of purely representative discourse, finding its way back to a “raw being” that had been consigned to oblivion since the sixteenth century. In a sense, this project has been animated by the idea that the primitivist and idealizing obsession with folk-cultural

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<sup>164</sup> Knapp, Robert S. *Shakespeare: The Theater and the Book*. Princeton University Press, 2014. *Open WorldCat*, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781400859962> pg. 92

<sup>165</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. 1970. Vintage Books, Random House, 1994, pg. 43

forms on the part of modern writers constitutes just such a desperate return, just such a probing of the oblivion of modernity.

Yet the “rejection of the modern” must itself be rejected. Not because “modernity” and modern social and political organization constitute an advance upon past ages (though in some areas they clearly do), but because this rejection is itself, as I hope I have suggested, built *into* the structure of modernity. The same process that breaks up “traditional and natural unities” in a very concrete sense also establishes them as aesthetic and conceptual objects in the mind of the modern individual. These mental objects have fecundated the work of some of the greatest artists, but they have also led, in some ways, to the catastrophe that we are still living. Still, to be aware of the ruins, the graveyard of ideologies that stretches behind us, is not necessarily to identify our present modernity with a sacrifice of any and all ideals that would ground themselves in some sense of the “natural.” It is still possible to reject primitive fantasies while evading the grip of that seemingly post-ideological ideology whereby we look askance at the convictions of others, and even our own, as mere symptoms of a set of base desires. It is claimed, by some, that “noble ideals” can only conceal impersonal social or political forces. That goodness is a machination of the “ego.” This style of thought is often presented as a form of enlightenment, as a way to exist “above” the world. All manner of scientific, theoretical schemata are now mobilized by the most unscrupulous of individuals in support of vaguely defined ends. I myself perhaps am guilty of using theories and ideas over which, it might be said, I have very little grasp. What is now felt to have been lost, what is now being bewailed, is perhaps what Max Horkheimer, in his *Eclipse of Reason*, calls “objective reason inherent in reality”-- “a structure accessible to him or her who takes upon him or herself the effort of



dialectical thinking, or, identically, who is capable of *eros*.<sup>166</sup> While rejecting nostalgia and the atavistic impulses that proceed from it, we can affirm that there is great value in retaining such a model for thinking— one that privileges complex yet integrated totality and rational wholeness over the futile play of difference and fragmentation; one that seeks the unity of all things but is nevertheless non-reductive. One for which, as Lukacs puts it, “the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars.”

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<sup>166</sup> Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse Of Reason*. 1947, pg. 11

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