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A

A THEATER OF ANXIETY

THE IRREPRESENTABLE IN SHELLEY'S *THE CENCI* AND IN MUSSET'S
LORENZACCIO

by
Rémy Joseph Roussetzki

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York.

1999

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December 15, 1998

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Abstract

A THEATER OF ANXIETY:
The Irrepresentable in Shelley's *The Cenci* and in Musset's
Lorenzaccio

by

Rémy Joseph Roussetzki

Adviser: Professor Vincent Crapanzano

In this dissertation I develop a comparative study of two outstanding Romantic dramas, Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819) and Musset's *Lorenzaccio* (1834), with the purpose of demonstrating that both offer a viable answer to the difficult problems facing the revival of tragedy at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. Both Shelley and Musset took into account the tragic traditions available in their time, starting with the Greek models, to the evolution and transformation of the genre during Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in England, Neo-classicism in France and the Baroque in Germany.

I argue that these plays *aggravated* in particular the Historical Tragedy created by Shakespeare. They belong to the Aesthetics of the sublime elaborated by the philosophers at the end of the Eighteenth Century (Burke, Kant, Hegel). They were designed to shock audiences by provoking in them the dominant feeling of anxiety. Indeed, the dramatic

action and the rhetoric of both plays ceaselessly address the radical fact that language has limits and that "beyond" there lurks an irrepresentable, unimaginable and undefinable "real." Both works center around *a cause for anxiety* in the central characters which language, i.e. the written text, can only approach indirectly, through elaborate linguistic constructions or sublime metaphors. Relevant analysis by Freud, Heidegger and Lacan allow me to specify anxiety among related feelings (anxiety *versus* fear). De Quincey's and Mallarmé's self-observations at the reception of tragedy confirm the importance of the feeling for modern audiences and provide concrete and personal insights into the mechanism that triggers it in the theater. My overall point is that Shelley and Musset practically responded to the question Kierkegaard was to confront in *Either/Or* by the middle of the Century (1843): what would be specific to the Romantic serious drama? They answered in strikingly similar terms to the philosopher's theory by creating what I call, A Theater of Anxiety.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to María Luisa Castañeda, my wife. Without her familiar and lucid presence, no home would have sheltered this comparative essay from the violence that rages inside and out. No family of my own would have sustained the peace of mind necessary to stay at this desk and carry on trying to fathom these darkest, most tormented of tragedies.

Acknowledgments, Debts and Defects

To whom do I owe this essay? Whom to thank, and what for? There are those with whom I have discussed aspects of this endeavor long before I ever placed a word on screen. How to limit the list to a few names?

Lucienne Serrano, Beatrice Azevedo and our small Upper West Side reading *cartel* gave me the occasion to articulate (orally) questions about anxiety, its vocabulary and its tortuous logic.

I remember our French conversations in H el ene Klibbe's ideal place, the *S eminaire* at hand resting on the armchairs and apparently forgotten. On any given day the tone may have been more comic than tragic, more about desire perhaps than about anxiety, but the freedom of intellectual movement there helped me approach my own.

No doubt, this last aspect went unnoticed: hidden within and beyond the words. But these conversations raised formidable questions concerning language(s), its limits and its diversity -- linguistic difficulties. How to translate extensive passages (of literature and of theory) written in French? How to transfer to a slightly different culture the words and the thoughts that, to confess my personal path, I had myself first read and understood in French?

In *Archive Fever* (1996), Jacques Derrida candidly asks his English-speaking audience to recognize the economical (thrifty) advantage the French language enjoys on the theoretical plane. A long note of apology from Derrida shows that more than one in his Londonian audience did not appreciate the supremacy implied. Translators are in a habit of reproducing *tel quel* segments of the metaphorical exuberance, the cavalier style, also the effective simplicity the French tongue obtains in critical discourse. They place the foreign bodies -- coinages, laconic formulas, idiosyncratic expressions -- between quotation marks and in

italics. A good enough solution. The problem is, I for one do not want to, cannot afford to *sound* French.

The work of writing would later extend these questions and answers, providing for the difficulties it raised.

Those I too easily run the risk of overquoting, or worse, of copying (Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard come to mind), I found myself underquoting obstinately, to the point of not being fair to them. At times, the reader of this essay has to grant me the right to pass certain names under silence. I have a good excuse. They are too close to home. Since my early days as a Philosophy student in France, these names have come to me charged with admiration and respect. In the Aesthetics of the late Eighteenth Century (in England, in Germany, in France), speechless admiration and mute respect were essential marks of (our reception of) the sublime. No wonder that I could never speak my own words *in their stead*.

But then again, had I not travelled thousands of miles and lived like an exile, to gain some distance and express myself on something, if need be, like the sublime?

For several years now, I have enjoyed all too brief but stimulating exchanges about tragedy with Professor Vincent Crapanzano, who seems to me to come from the school that believes the school is anywhere, anytime there happens to be a moving space where communication is unpredictable because there are two people. He welcomes the raucousness too young an idea might have at its birth.

No doubt to provoke the American scholar in him, I kept repeating in class that Jacques Lacan's extensive reading of tragedies produces abundant and rejuvenating fruits, of a pungent taste still largely unknown to this country. One day he paused, smiled and answered to me something like: "It is quite possible. Yes. At least such was Lacan's claim. Could *you* prove it now, in your own terms and in American English [these were my own words]?"

As a doctoral student, it has been for me a matter of pride to return to him the enigmatic notes in the margins, the rare advice, hoping to deliver a finished product accomplished, full-blown. I realized that, whatever the context, his answers always consisted in daring me to risk the boldest assembling of materials possible. He put me, in sum, in front of my own cherished and secret wish.

The theme of the secret was not foreign to the many walks in and about New York Michael LeCompte and I have taken over the years.

At some point in his generous conversation Michael drew my attention to the meditations on the secret one finds in recent books by Derrida. Michael was talking about Derrida's commentaries on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) in *Donner la Mort, The Gift of Death* (1992, 1995). What had interested Derrida was the series formed by the secret, crime, sacrifice, religion. What interested us was the disturbing moment, the incomprehensible lapse in time when the ethical is suspended before higher claims, as in the sacrificial gesture of Abraham. Is Abraham a murderer or a saint while he raises the knife?

I reminded myself, however, that Romantic tragedy is much darker than *Genesis*, ending so much more "tragically" than Abraham's story, for instance. When Beatrice Cenci or Lorenzo de Médicis enter the sacrificial domain, it is at their total expense. In no respect do they come out winners like Abraham and his son.

Another day, Michael insisted I read Kierkegaard's "A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor." This fragment he had found right in the middle of *Either/Or* (1843). The *Venture* was indeed fresh ground. A Romantic Antigone would have suffered another kind of pain, hardly different in appearance though radically different in essence from the one suffered by the ancient heroine. In the first half of the Nineteen Century, this philosopher brought the Romantic movement to consciousness by meditating on "modern" tragedy.

He showed that concerns about too personal a secret, the concept of anxiety, reflectivity in the character and in the actor, sublime constructs in the tirades not only belonged together but occupied center stage. Kierkegaard imagined a tragedy of the irrepresentable; but he remained rather evasive when it came to the nitty-gritty of tragic action, and left the concrete conception of a theater built on anxiety to the playwrights.

Musset's texts (Lacan's and a few others'), I have left *tel quel*, untranslated. *Lorenzaccio* is hardly known, let alone played, in English. Though its French existence is by now solid as a rock, it does not translate on this side of the Atlantic. Working slowly around the edges of the French texts, I have tried to transpose ideas into English through an *explication de texte* where my argument would not get lost. Knowing my reader to be bilingual, I granted myself the luxury of leaving the technicalities of too cumbersome a translation for another day.

Finally, I would like to thank Michael again for his systematic editing of the manuscript and his prompting me all along to say more in this language than I thought I could -- or should -- ever say.

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INTRODUCTION

Romanticism is no country
for old men...

Stuart Curran (*Shelley's Cenci*)

The Failure

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote *The Cenci* in 1819. Alfred de Musset published *Lorenzaccio* in 1834. It took a long time for these works to reach their true destination: the theater. And when they finally did, both had largely been toned down and expurgated. By all subsequent accounts and contemporary standards, each was a resounding failure, Shelley's not being staged until 1886 and Musset's ten years after that. As far as I know, the English and the French dramas have not been compared by specialists of the period, not even in passing. The connection has not been made between two of the Nineteenth Century's most problematic, most extraordinary incursions into the difficult genre of tragedy.

This absence of rapprochement is surprising, and for many reasons. The first is that the playwrights were to become major figures in their respective traditions, reaching maturity once the Romantic movement had already been established by a preceding generation of critics,

thinkers and artists. Once they had proved their worth as lyrical poets, Shelley and Musset were prepared, better perhaps than any of their contemporaries, to answer the challenges inherent to "the highest species of the drama," as Shelley wrote in the *Preface to The Cenci*, the only tragedy he was to complete (Poems, II, 71).¹ In addition to the traditional questions and challenges of the genre, they had to face the necessity of its radical modernization at a time when, after the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars and the Restoration on the continent, it must have seemed that European literary traditions, along with so many other institutions, had gone up in flames. Choosing to write for the contemporary stage, Shelley and Musset had to confront conditions of theatrical reception less favorable than ever to the full realization of so highly complex and searching a tragedy as each intended to present to his public.²

¹ Shelley's dates are 1792-1822; Musset's 1810-1851. The first became a tragedian at twenty seven years old, the second at twenty three.

² George Steiner is right when he remarks, in *The Death of Tragedy*:

Drama is the most social of literary forms. It exists fully only by virtue of public performance. Therein lies its fascination and its servitude. That means that one cannot separate the condition of drama from that of the audience or, in a larger yet strict sense, from that of the social and political community (1961:113).

What would be specific to Romantic tragedy; that is to say, to a serious, profound and effective tragic drama in the early 1800's? What would distinguish a "modern" tragedy from the Classical but also from the Neo-classical, Elizabethan or Jacobean dramas the two young men had studied and seen performed? Should not the fate of the tragic hero still move the public to tears of pity -- the famous *eleos* Aristotle had written about in the *Poetics*? But how? With what type of mythic or legendary character would the urban crowd of Paris or London feel in sympathy, at least enough for compassion? And should it not also terrify the democratic men and women of the day (*phobos*, fear, being the other ingredient proper to the tragic mood, according to Aristotle)? But what kind of atrocity could impress people who, though they may not have personally witnessed the French revolution, the Terror or the Napoleonic wars, could still hear as it were the after-shocks, the tremors and the anxiety these devastating events and symbolic catastrophes had left in the memories of men?³

³ At the beginning of *La Confession d'Un Enfant du Siècle* (1836), Musset describes Napoleon's military enterprise in cosmic terms and intentionally confuses it with the Terror:

Comme, à l'approche d'une tempête, il passe dans les forêts un vent terrible qui fait frissonner tous les arbres, à quoi succède un profond silence; ainsi Napoléon avait tout ébranlé en passant sur le monde; les rois avaient senti vaciller leur couronne, et, portant leur main à leur tête, ils n'y avaient trouvé que leurs cheveux hérissés de terreur (Prose:70).

The explosive growth of science and technology raised other questions and difficulties. What would qualify for the *terribilita* associated with tragic performance since ancient times when unfathomable, potentially unlimited energies (as in the steam engine or the electricity) were being systematically unleashed and made to work for booming economies? What frightening representation could catch the spectator off-guard at a time when science was revealing that contaminating microscopic bodies, the bacteria, are the universal source of diseases; when doctors were experimenting with vaccines and injecting into humans the proper dose of death designed to save them?

In the very difficulties the age posed to their efforts to re-create and rejuvenate tragedy, Musset and Shelley each found inklings of a solution. The point of this essay is to show that they reached comparable answers regarding what should define the Romantic tragedy. The great conflicts, the *agon* of heroes and gods that the Greeks had performed in the open, under the objective light of day, Shelley and Musset located within the psyche, inside the self of their central characters. It appears to me that they profited from and pushed to its extreme consequence a tendency to subjectify tragedy already present in the theater of Seneca in Rome, of Shakespeare in Elizabethan England, of Corneille and Racine in seventeenth century France. They expected the audience to sit through what we would call today traumatic

affairs, intimate, shocking confessions of stories that were so dark, improper and obscene, so charged with ignominy that the hero, infected as it were by such a secret could only keep its ultimate content secret as well, revealing its nature only partially, while lifting a corner of the veil and having "us" peep anxiously in turn into its bottomless depths.

In sum, the two would-be tragedians produced what the philosopher of *Either/Or* was to consider the inevitable "development" of the ancient concept of tragedy in "modern" times. They gave precedence over any other type of speech to the confession, that is, to the reflective stance of the character, placing the personal secret at the center of the plot and of the dramatic technique. They intended anxiety to be the "feeling" that not only evinced, but carried the tragic message. To use another of Kierkegaard's titles, they intended to instill fear and trembling in the public by shocking it with the reflections of a hero whom they hoped we would sympathize with and hear *through*, thanks to the emphasis placed on the personal and on the confidential, thanks to this proven theatrical fact: a group of men and women invited to share the elusive content of a dire secret would above all want to know more.

Mutatis mutandis, Shelley and Musset made sure that the incidental parts of plot, as well as the roles their heroes played in it, belonged to the legendary, that is to say, to

the ambiance of their time, to a widely shared Pop culture. Beatrice's rape by Count Cenci, her father; her planned response and parricide; her arrest by the soldiers of the Church; her imprisonment, trial, torture and the final decision by the pope to send her to the scaffold were accessible at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, either in popular form, through word of mouth, or in the Italian chronicle Mary translated for Shelley. And so were available in the *Storia Fiorentina* George Sand pointed out to Musset: Lorenzo's plotting against his cousin, the Duke Alexander of Medici; the secret murder accomplished by Lorenzo alone against the tyrant; and finally, the failure of the republican insurrection he had hoped to precipitate by his action. The outlines of the tragedies we are going to read came from the Italian Renaissance, a place and a time with which, for all its disorder, its benign climate and violent passions, as for its freedom and creativity, intellectuals from the North, and behind them the new century as a whole, could easily identify.⁴

It seems, therefore, that Shelley and Musset disposed of all the elements required for the completion of a

⁴ In the *Chroniques Italiennes* (1837), on the first page of his own version of *Les Cenci*, Stendhal, lover of Italy if there was any, writes "en ce beau pays, au XVIIe siècle, au début de la civilisation renaissante" (1977:239). It must have seemed as *début*, aurora, the one precedent period in modern history when intellectuals could see reflected their own turbulent era.

successful Romantic tragedy. Reception of a tragic play, however, was far from assured at the turn of the Nineteenth Century, especially if it were a demanding masterpiece. His tragedy achieved on paper, the young playwright faced another set of objective difficulties which laid, if not outside his conscious choices, at least outside his evident talent.

Steiner notes a "sharp diminution in the role the theater played in the community" of British and French peoples at the exact moment when *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio* were ready for performance (1961:115). The causes and the effects of this decline are diverse and multiple. Let me limit myself to a sweeping comparison. The theater, of course, was of much less importance to the Parisians and Londonians of modern Europe than it had been to the young and the old of Athens, the Greeks who fulfilled interconnected ritual, political and educational obligations by attending tragedies. In the 1800's, one came to the theater house, Steiner adds, with "a newspaper in his pocket. In it might be facts more desperate and sentiments more provocative than many a dramatist would care to present" (1961:117). One would find in it also the latest episode of the *roman-feuilleton* that the entire city was reading avidly and talking about. The connection between artist, artistic product and public was not a predestined affair anymore. Theater had started to become what it is

today when desultory individuals can pick among many pastimes or means of entertainment. Even for the aficionado and the critic, the stage drama ran the risk of being rapidly eclipsed by the novel.

After the fiasco of the comedy *La Nuit Vénitienne* in 1830, Musset remembered the humiliation at La Comédie-Française and thereafter published his dramatic output in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. Shelley contacted Covent Garden after the redaction of *The Cenci*. The failure was immediate, the rejection severe and *sans appel*. Neither Shelley nor Musset had any professional experience in the theater. They had learned the requisites of drama from books, and created on paper tragedies that satisfied their highest intellectual pursuits. As a result, and depending on their bias, critics have either emphasized the concrete failure, the unstageability of *The Cenci* and of *Lorenzaccio*, or they have argued that their authors, free by inexperience and temperament from the limitations of the contemporary stage, wrote for the future, for a stage which was (and may still be) *à venir*. I will try in the Conclusion to reconcile and defend these two perspectives at once. These tragedies have defects, in regard to the expectations of the theater-goers of their time, and perhaps of any time. But the fact is that Shelley and Musset responded to difficult and problematic conditions of reception by compounding the difficulties: they foregrounded the impossible, focusing on

the place where representation fails. They each answered the *status quo* (Political and Aesthetic) with a work of art intended to hurt, to shock the sensitive and intellectual faculties of their eventual addressees.

Eventual failure is inscribed in advance of the institutional contact let us say, in the written content of each drama and beyond, in that there is something it cannot contain, it being a tragedy of the irrepresentable. Two apparently conflicting points or clashing statements must be stressed from the start. The conditions presiding over tragic output were perilous. And perilous, aggravatingly so, were the responses of Shelley and Musset. Neither could be said to have been unconscious of the adversity (alienation would be a more Romantic term). They reacted decisively to the conditions governing the presentable (moral connotations included), the public and official definitions of the (re)presentable at their historical moment. They would later complain to their feminine company and to their friends about the failure; but first, they had decided to provoke the public; they had wanted to infiltrate and explode its expectations. The result in each case is a work of art that is not so much an address and a message as already a response, a reaction, perhaps a retaliation. There would befall a (double) failure, but it was one (each time) that had been concocted, designed, concerted. Anxiety was to be the price the audience would have to pay for

giving at least that much credit to Shelley and to Musset, that each was a master in making *them* feel anxious. When has a group of people felt sufficiently at ease with *their* anxiety to acknowledge the means and the cause, let alone to thank the authors of the feeling in them? When has a group of human beings taken the time to think about the "object" of their anxiety instead of resorting to the usual attitudes of avoidance, rejection and forgetfulness?

The Shock and the Crowd

There had been only recently more favorable conditions for tragic drama in England and in France. But no more: in going to the theater, one did no longer participate in festivities, as was still the case in Elizabethan England; nor did one accomplish, among the members of one's own class, a social ceremony, as in Versailles. Although there were still drastic social differences, ostensibly marked in the theater by the class of seats (high in the balconies or low in the orchestra), what the playwright tried to address, shape and direct *via* some emotional reaction was the crowd of dispersed men and women who had been walking (and working) feverishly during the day. The public as a random group of women and men -- the crowd -- ready in principle for anything, and in point of fact in serious need, if anything, of a surprise and a shock, was born.

My bringing the crowd to describe conditions of reception in the second and third decades of the Nineteen Century might seem premature. But in reality, long before E.T.A. Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, who each were to evince a fascinated horror at the new phenomenon, the crowd had appalled Wordsworth. Describing London in *The Prelude* as early as 1805, he wrote about the "monstrous ant-hill on the plain/ Of a too busy world!" and of men and women:

Living amid the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning and no end
(1971:292).

How to interest such an indefinite mass, "reduced" to triviality and "low pursuit" by its very number, in high tragedy? Not everybody in the crowd was uneducated of course, but in its mass a more democratic audience had less acquaintance with the classics, fewer literary models to contend with and judge from, less critically or academically-rooted expectations. It did not care about the three unities derived from Aristotle, nor about the strict rules of bienséance and verisimilitude which had involved Corneille and Racine in serious quarrels with their contemporaries, and forced John Webster, for instance, to justify in 1612 the license he took with the usual "sententious tragedy... the critical laws... height of style, and gravity of person" when writing *The White Devil*

(1996:3).⁵ The crowd wanted something exciting and new. This allowed the playwright to mix any or all of the available models in the genre, and in effect break with national, i.e. exclusive tradition, something Shelley and Musset felt free to do, as we will see in Chapter 3: Traditions of Violence. But the obverse side of this unpreparedness was that the seated multitude might not crack the verbal difficulties, artistic references and involved rhetoric *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio* harbored. The crowd might not care to grasp the depths of thought impacted in the style. Had the tragedies of Shelley and Musset been presented immediately after their births, the public might not have absorbed *the real* shock each tragedy held in store. Steiner expresses this well but with somewhat too much contempt when he goes on to say:

... the spectator of the romantic period... was not prepared to take the risks of terror and revelation implicit in tragedy. He wished to shudder briefly or dream at ease. When coming from the street into the playhouse, he was not leaving the real for the more real (as does any man who is willing to encounter the imaginings of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or Racine); he was moving from the fierce solicitations of current history and economic purpose into the repose of illusion (1961:116).

The most enigmatic aspect of the lack of communication that frustrated our playwrights is rather that they *and* their prospective audiences were not after all so foreign to each

⁵ Webster forestalled the objections that he knew would assail his tragedy in a note *To the Reader*.

other. In a sense, the two writers made all possible efforts to seduce the audience. The crowd, for its part, might have reacted to "the gross and violent stimulants" by awakening at least for the time of an evening from "its savage torpor," as Wordsworth wrote contemptibly in *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads* of 1802 (1994:436). The plays, we might suppose, may have been successful if the administrators and directors of the day had tried to stage them -- or would they have failed, in any case?

Steiner's main point is well taken. An intractable gulf had split the tragedian from his potential audience. The reception, that is to say, the existence, the survival of tragedy as such was in question. It is said that Shelley wrote *The Cenci* in two months.⁶ Musset, it appears, wrote *Lorenzaccio* in just five, from August to December 1833.⁷ The enthusiasm of inspiration was followed, however, in both cases by ominous self-interrogations; the failure to be staged brought self-doubts and depression concerning their talents and judgement. The self-questioning and the doubts would, in fact, never quite disappear. Although more and more scholars admire today the fact that their nascent

⁶ E.g., by Dharni Dhar Baskiyar in *The Inextinguishable Flame* (1977:243).

⁷ See Simon Jeune's *Notice* in the most recent edition of Musset's *Théâtre Complet* in the Pleiade (1990:961). I will refer to this edition henceforth, as Theatre.

careers had so soon reached a peak of accomplishment, it is clear that Shelley and Musset felt otherwise.

Notwithstanding the intellectual energies and intimate concerns invested in the most demanding of their works, tragedy turned out in each case to be a personal disaster.

On the 15th of August, 1819, Shelley wrote a letter to his friend Leigh Hunt stating that he was "on the eve of completing another work, totally different from anything you might conjecture that I should write; of a more popular kind; and, if anything of mine could deserve attention, of higher claims" (Letters,II,108). By 1821, Shelley admits in a letter to Thomas Peacock that he is still "devising literary plans of some magnitude," only to add: "But nothing is so difficult and unwelcome as to write without the confidence of finding readers; and if my play of 'The Cenci' found none or few, I despair of ever producing anything that shall merit them" (Letters,II,262).

Four years after the conception of *Lorenzaccio*, in an article called *De la Tragédie*, Musset asked his French public:

Ne serait-ce pas une grande nouveauté que de réveiller la muse grecque, d'oser la présenter aux Français dans son atroce grandeur, dans son atrocité sublime?... Ne serait-ce pas curieux de voir... cette muse farouche, inexorable, telle qu'elle était aux beaux jours d'Athènes, quand les vases d'airains tremblaient à sa voix?
(Prose:901).

What had then happened with *his* answers, so powerfully stated in *Lorenzaccio*? Nothing had happened, evidently.

Far from trembling at the voice of Lorenzo, the French had not even heard it. In May of 1834, Musset acknowledged in a letter to George Sand: "*Je ne puis rien faire de bon. Je vais publier ces deux volumes de prose de Lorenzaccio. Cela ne peut que me faire tort.*"⁸ He was so depressed that what everybody considers today his greatest work amounted to two nondescript volumes of prose whose publication could only further tarnish his literary reputation.

The play was not in fact performed before the end of the century (1895), when the actress Sarah Bernhardt played the principal role in a very simplified version (one Act in one scene for a five Acts drama of thirty eight scenes). Gérard Philipe, one of the first men to play the part and play it well, received a triumph in 1952. But the director Jean Vilar preferred to cut intricate passages, in particular the sublime images in Lorenzo's confessions. The same happened to *The Cenci*, which hardly reached British spectators before 1886, when the fervent Shelley society dared to stage the infamous text in a private, closed performance, only to compress and simplify it drastically the next year in order to avoid scandal.

It is true that literary scandal and lack of reception were not exceptional in the Nineteenth Century. The function, indeed the place of art in the community was

⁸ Quoted by Jeune in his *Notice* (Theatre:961).

becoming increasingly problematic, making the distinction between works deserving our attention and works undeserving of our critical efforts then, as today, not so easy to establish. Among lovers of Romantic poetry, few are aware that, except for Blake, all the major British poets tried a hand at serious drama. We may consider that these works have died a deserved death on the ground that there is little trace of them on the twentieth-century stage or in the critical thinking about theater; little trace of Coleridge's *Remorse*, Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, Byron's *Cain* or Keats *Oto the Great*. But Shelley's play is notoriously, surprisingly alive. Outstanding among subsequent versions inspired by *The Cenci*, Antonin Artaud's *Les Cenci* (1933) testifies to a vital presence among us today. For if Artaud, to repeat Stuart Curran's tribute in *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire*, "is the most significant theatrical force on Western Theater in the third quarter of the twentieth century," it is due in no small part to his scenic treatment and re-creation of Shelley's tragedy (1970:280).

Les Cenci cuts Shelley's lengthy tirades; snips away many flowers from the rhetoric of old Cenci and Beatrice. But I will show in Chapter 4: The Cause of Anxiety, that *Les Cenci* also heightens their breathtaking encounters both on and off stage. The French director has brutally simplified the romantic text while amplifying its intended effects. He

highlights the premonitions and the afterthoughts, in other words, the anxiety of Beatrice before and after the traumatic rape. It is clear that Artaud is only responding to what he thinks are Shelley's intentions, keeping the plot, the sets, the dramatic sequence and the principal characters of *The Cenci*. Certainly he would not have decided to re-stage the cruel saga of the family Cenci, had he not received the blow of some obscure, irrational but incontrovertible "force" from the reading of Shelley.⁹

Going back to Musset and his compatriots, I would not call Casimir Delavigne's *Louis XI* nor Alexandre Dumas père's *Lorenzino* surviving tragedies, though they at least encountered their immediately intended publics, not failing to arouse scandalous premières.¹⁰ Such scandals, however, belong to the past. To understand how Hugo's *Hernani* could have made such a fuss requires considerable efforts of the contemporary reader. Regardless of its brio and knack for the theatrical gesture, *Hernani's coups de théâtre* and

⁹ The idea that the institution of the theater should deal with incomprehensible, but eminently real and dangerous forces concealed to men and women in conscious life is central to *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938). Artaud's "deep" reasons for electing Shelley as a precursor and a master in *Théâtre de la Cruauté* should appear progressively.

¹⁰ In *The Theater of Solitude*, David Sices shows that such plays -- dominated by the local color, the picturesque, the violent action and the bravura that made historical reconstitutions fashionable at the turn of the nineteenth century -- do not compare with *Lorenzaccio*. They present today little interest (1974:172-174).

tirades seem now as lost on the scholars as they have been to the French public. Comparing Hugo's thematically related *Le Roi S'Amuse* to Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, Bernard Masson has demonstrated in his important book called *Musset et le Théâtre Intérieur* that the latter was a more rigorous and, for us today, more interesting dramatist (1974:98-100). There is no emphatic gesture in Musset, no bombastic verse, but a vivacious prose, "*une franchise du style*" which speaks directly to the most democratic ears.¹¹ Musset may evolve sublime devices and Dantesque similes, and then, in the same breath and with the same ease, send "you" (preferring the post-revolutionary "*tu*" to the traditional "*vous*") dirty and grinding jabs in Parisian street-slang. As for the *coup de théâtre*, it is indeed *intérieur*, for it happens between Lorenzo and the audience only when his self-disclosing psyche is gaping on stage, unravelled by the confession. In more than one way, Lorenzo says it: the very soul of the romantic self is visited by some abominable real; not a real thing but *das Ding* -- that bottom where expression, definition, figure, representation all fail by falling, endlessly. Lorenzo explicitly points to the radical fact that "there" language, including the vocabulary of contamination in his sublime metaphors, no longer works.

¹¹ The expression is Musset's in *De la Tragédie* (Prose:901).

Therein lies the cause of anxiety conjured by Musset's dramatic artifice.

No wonder that since World War II, particularly since the 1970's, an intense interest rages around *Lorenzaccio*. It is not on account of the lyrical poetry that made him famous in his youth, but for this one play that the name of Musset stands at the forefront of French scholarship. Comparable fortune, admittedly, has not befallen *The Cenci*. To borrow a word from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, scholarship has been eerily "unprolific" about this tragedy. Earl Wasserman wrote a subtle but disputable analysis in a chapter of his *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (1971). To help us counteract his attacks on Beatrice which, I believe, miss, like many other such attacks, the point of *her* tragedy, there is the impassioned defense by Curran in the very useful monograph quoted above. Both critics, however, wrote in the 1970's. Shelley was, in fact, writing two masterpieces during the year 1819-1820; it is about time to uphold *The Cenci* and wrest its obscurities from the shadow cast by the too visible and triumphant *Prometheus Unbound* (which attracts scholars not unjustly, of course, but inequitably).

Tragedy had been placed at the summit of literature since Aristotle, and little had changed in this respect with the advent of Romanticism. But the conditions of work for a tragedian proved unfavorable to the extreme. The purpose of

this essay is to establish that Shelley and Musset each succeeded, and only once, in their difficult enterprise to shape a viable solution to the "modern" problem of tragedy. It took more than one hundred years for their re-awakening tragic muse, that *grande nouveauté*, to reach "us" readers, spectators, playwrights, directors and critics. In a typically "modern" fashion, they created what emerges today as an avant-garde, a vital and still promising, yet problematic theater. For reasons that will perhaps deepen the obvious, I will call the result a surviving tragedy.

A Note of Method

Tragedies of the irrepresentable, theater of anxiety -- what is the exact relationship between irrepresentability and anxiety? When does anxiety start in the theater? How does it function in the dramatic text? Why does it become the dominant mood and singular vehicle of the Romantic tragedy? I seek answers to these questions in Shelley's and Musset's prose and poetic writings, as well as in the works of De Quincey, Kierkegaard and Mallarmé. One can be inspired by theories developed in distant fields and respect the singular (here doubly singular) literary text. Whenever I leave literature and Romantic studies *per se* to borrow from the anthropologist Mary Douglas, the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe or the psychoanalyst Lacan, I want

to come back to the play at hand and reap the fruits of digression.

Neither Curran nor Masson mentions Lacan, whose influential *Séminaire* was opened to the public in 1950 and closed in 1980. How is one, however, to avoid some kind of vague (or dated) psychological discourse while treating works that so obviously focus on the psyche? Lacan, privileging the interpretation of tragedies, has demonstrated that his categories can be productive of insight when freely adapted to ancient and modern dramas.¹² This does not mean that we are going to resort to a psychology of the deep -- deep meanings, deep ideas -- nor produce wild, or even "profound" interpretations. On the contrary, Lacanian theory puts the emphasis on the *signifier* rather than on the *signified*. It looks at the effects produced on given subjects by concrete frameworks of representation (the mirror, the screen, the stage) and by language. In person, Lacan has carefully avoided falling under such stringent accusation as Derrida levels on *applied* psychoanalysis:

¹² In addition to the dispersed but insistent remarks everywhere in his *Ecrits* (1966), half of his *Séminaire VI* (1958-59) turns around "*Le Désir d'Hamlet*." The next year, in *Séminaire VII* (1959-60), Lacan is reading Greek tragedies and showing, like Freud, and like the Romantics, a marked preference for Sophocles. *Séminaire VIII* (1960-61) is about Claudel's tragic trilogy of the Coûfontaine. Lacan reads tragedies to his audience of psychoanalysts because, as he states, they offer the most transparent illustration of his own *tragic conception of desire*.

... malgré quelques tentatives de Freud et de certains de ses successeurs, une psychanalyse de la littérature respectueuse de l'originalité du signifiant littéraire n'a pas encore commencé... On n'a fait jusqu'ici que l'analyse des signifiés littéraires, c'est-à-dire non littéraires (1967:340) [Derrida's emphasis].

If I rely, especially in Chapter 4: The Cause of Anxiety and Chapter 5: Certainty and Dramatic Action, on the Lacanian perspective, it is in order to illuminate the dramatic signifier. In any case, I would hardly have mentioned Lacan, had it not been for *Séminaire X* (1962-63), this circling and meandering, yet *in fine* amazingly clear-minded speech on the volatile topic of anxiety.

One more word on the method followed here. Although I believe the line between the two to be elusive, this is an essay in Comparative Literature, not on the Theatre *per se*. As Mallarmé wrote in *Crayonné au Théâtre*: "*A la rigueur, un papier suffit pour évoquer toute pièce: aidé de sa personnalité multiple, chacun pouvant se la jouer au dedans*" (1945:315). Any reader is a stage director of sorts. Like performances, there are readings that work and others that do not. Nevertheless, compared to a poem or a novel, a dramatic text is much more dependant on the local and temporal institutions designed for public representation. One cannot address the problems dramas specifically raise without studying, in addition to their various readings, their stage histories (or lack of such). In the case of *The Cenci* and of *Lorenzaccio*, the details of that (ir)reception

have been well documented, respectively by Curran and Masson. For the sake of an argument about a theater which foregrounds what exceeds representation, we will look at the principal sources of resistance to staging already present *in the texts*. The comparison will use for the most part what any reader can verify alone and at home, in his/her *intérieur*, on a private stage, for these dramas do, in any case, elicit a stage.

PART ONE
THE INSPIRATION

The most sublime act is to set
another before you.

Blake (*The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell*)

CHAPTER 1: THE FEMININE COMPANY

O créatures qui portiez le nom de femmes et qui avez passé comme des rêves dans une vie qui n'était elle-même qu'un rêve, que dirai-je de vous? Là où il n'y eut jamais l'ombre d'une espérance, est-ce qu'il y aurait quelque souvenir? Où vous trouverai-je pour cela? Qu'y a-t-il de plus muet dans la mémoire humaine? Qu'y a-t-il de plus oublié que vous?

Musset (*La Confession d'un Enfant du Siècle*)

Restoration and the Abyss of the Present

The British crown had sustained its power and place through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. A restored kingship was instated in France that would outlive the last attempt at revolution by the Parisians in July of 1830. But the legitimacy of Royal power, its secular and sacred roots, had suffered fatal blows in both countries, especially in the eyes of intellectuals who had immediately championed the ideals of 1789. Musset describes this symbolic catastrophe tersely in *La Confession d'Un Enfant du Siècle* (1836). Addressing what Hegel called the *Weltgeist*, the present and objective state of spiritual matters in this world, Musset mixes the pope, God and Napoleon in a mock-coronation:

Napoléon mort, les puissances divines et humaines étaient bien rétablies de fait, mais la croyance en elles n'existait plus... Le pape avait fait trois cents lieues pour le [Napoleon] bénir au nom de Dieu et lui poser son diadème; mais Napoléon le lui avait pris des mains. Ainsi tout avait tremblé dans cette forêt lugubre de la vieille Europe; puis le silence avait succédé (Prose:70).

Sacred or profane, power had not simply been discussed and destroyed but, what is worse, parodied, restored "*de fait.*" From top to bottom, the social system, including what gave validity to social distinctions, had become a mockery of itself, an empty show brutally imposed on people -- at the cost, Musset makes plain, of their silence.

The intuition that power is the more despotic for being impotent and essentially empty is everywhere in the writings of Shelley. On the first page of his *Preface*, Shelley claims that the manuscript which is the source of his tragedy had been "until very lately, a matter of some difficulty" (Poems,II,69). It was kept secret because the "Papal Government" which ended up sending Beatrice to the scaffold, "took the most extraordinary precautions against the publicity of facts which offer so tragical a demonstration of its own wickedness and weakness" (*idem*). These last two words may be consonant, but the rapprochement is semantically striking. They are not equivalent, except in Shelley's world.

Undoubtedly then, at some point Shelley and Musset had cherished fervent republican dreams. They believed (with

the German philosophers and the Romantics in general) that History swept everything up into a spiral of progress towards equality and freedom. What is notable, however, is that they woke up in their precocious maturity and in the aftermath of historical catastrophe with a parallel feeling of utter disillusionment. The opening of *La Confession* is filled with "*la désespérance... un sentiment de malaise inexprimable*" (Prose:73 and 75). The symbolic fabric of society had been stripped off and then falsely reinstated, leaving room for nothing but "*l'abîme du doute universel... l'affreuse mer de l'action sans but*" (*idem*:72 and 74). How to effect a change in any direction that would not bring out the worst, as did the Terror, tangible consequence though it was of the best of intentions? In the silence that succeeded, Shelley and Musset suspected the worst, that below the surface of a world of empty words, beyond its makeshift appearance, the real was radically evil. Beatrice cries out at the end of her tragedy:

Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,
In deeds a Cain (V, iv, 108-109).

Not only political power, but the organization, the system of distinctions that supported human society came out looking like "a sad reality" without the least anchorage or foundation.¹³ Hence the insistent metaphor of the abyss or

¹³ Famous expression in the *Dedication* to Leigh Hunt of *The Cenci* (Poems, II, 67).

chasm which is at the center of the tragedies and everywhere in the prose and poems of our authors. It may belong by now to the series of commonplaces or tired *topoi* we have inherited from Romanticism, but it was still young in their time; and as part of a theatrical message, placed at a crucial juncture of an unfolding *drama* (in the etymological sense of action), the figure acquires fresh resonance. It plays a significant role in the furthering of tragic plot. It becomes performative in that it attempts to perform certain aesthetic effects on eventual addressees, effects which are the object of this comparative study.

Both authors testify that everything around them felt unsettled, adrift, floating like debris on the surface of a "shoreless" and "inhospitable" ocean. In the poem *Time*, Shelley writes:

Unfathomable Sea! Whose waves are years,
 Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe
 Are brackish with the salt of human tears!
 Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow
 Claspest the limits of mortality,
 And sick of prey, yet howling on for more,
 Vomitest thy wrecks on its inhospitable shore;
 Treacherous in calm, and terrible in storm,
 Who shall put forth on thee,
 Unfathomable Sea! (Poems, IV, 85).

In *La Confession*, Musset compares his century to:

*...quelque chose de semblable à l'Océan qui sépare
 le vieux continent de la jeune Amérique, je ne
 sais quoi de vague et de flottant, une mer
 houleuse et pleine de naufrages, traversée de
 temps en temps par quelque blanche voile lointaine
 ou par quelque navire soufflant une lourde vapeur;
 le siècle présent, en un mot, qui sépare le passé
 de l'avenir... où l'on ne sait, à chaque pas qu'on*

fait, si l'on marche sur une semence ou sur un débris (Prose:69).¹⁴

Let me reserve the "*semence*" as promising sign for the next chapter where it will, associated with the "spark," be linked to the source of creation. The happy shock that gives life is here opposed to the traumatic shock which ends up drowning its victim in the wreckage. Notice on the horizon the heavy, black steam of the boat contrasted by the light white sail(s) now receding, perhaps far into the past -- unless it is from the future on the contrary that young America beckons and moves her veils. In a world adrift, "Who shall put forth" -- who knows what wreck is going to materialize "*à chaque pas qu'on fait*"?

Lorenzo and Beatrice share the premonition, then the conviction that to act, no matter how morally upright the intention, results in the *nefas*, which in English translates as nefarious. Action entails havoc because the seemingly flat reality of the present is limitless and treacherous. The Ocean of Time, this voracious Neptune, surrounds the "limits of mortality" in its senseless movements back and forth. Like Prometheus, "humans" are exposed defenseless to the fury of the elements. They have no home. They are at the beck and call, literally in the claws of an insatiable and disgusting god.

¹⁴ When not otherwise indicated, all emphases are mine.

Comparing life to a hideous and anxiety-provoking ocean, Musset had, for his part, developed early on the poetic and dramatic resources of the figure. He wrote in the dramatic poem *La Coupe et les Lèvres* (1830):

*Quel hideux océan est-ce donc que la vie,
Pour qu'il faille y marcher à la superficie,
Et glisser au soleil en effleurant les eaux,
Comme ce fils de Dieu qui marchait sur les flots?
Quels monstres effrayants, quels difformes reptiles
Labourent donc les mers sous les pieds des nageurs,
Pour qu'on trouve toujours les vagues si tranquilles,
Et la pâleur des morts sur le front des plongeurs?*
(Poesies:197).

The vast metaphors and large sceneries should not blind us, however, to what Musset learns from the naturalists of monstrosity happening, as well, in the infinitesimally small, "*lorsqu'ils vous montrent à travers un microscope des animaux dans une goutte d'eau*" (Prose:104).

The Feminine Link

In the eyes of our authors important social distinctions had collapsed. To start with, nothing justified gender distinctions, i.e. the drastic difference of status still commonly enjoyed by men and women of their time. Steiner observes that women had come out of obscurity (the family, the home) during the French Revolution, appearing in crowds at historical events (1986:6). More than ever before, European women were striving to assume a public (political, cultural) role. In point of fact, both

Shelley and Musset were abroad, in the South, in Italy of course, the first with his wife Mary, the second in the midst of a stormy affair with George Sand, at the time of inspiration. The "spark" would spring for each of them from old Italian manuscripts his exceptional feminine company had translated and started to use for her own purpose.

In her *Note on the Cenci*, Mary reveals that Shelley at first considered himself "too metaphysical and abstract, too fond of the theoretical and the ideal to succeed as a tragedian" (Poems, II, 156). Shelley thought that the author of a Gothic novel such as *Frankenstein* had, on the contrary, what it took to make a tragedy out of the tale of familial abuse, parricide, trial and death found, not without "some difficulty," in the portion of Muratori's *Annali d'Italia* (1599) she translated as *Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci*.¹⁵ But even when Shelley took up the task and "triumphed in the discovery of his new talent" as tragedian, husband and wife still worked together at what would become *The Cenci*.¹⁶

George Sand not only discovered Benedetto Varchi's *Storia Fiorentina*, but in 1833 handed Musset six scenes regrouped in one splendid "*scène historique*" based on

¹⁵ "Shelley urged the subject on me as one fitted for a tragedy," she writes (Poems, II, 156).

¹⁶ "This tragedy," she writes, "is the only one of his works that he communicated to me during its progress. We talked over the arrangement of scenes together" (*idem*).

Varchi's chronicle and called *Une Conspiration en 1537*.¹⁷

Following popular demand, it seems, for picturesque and violent reconstructions of historical events, Sand produced something redolent of the Italian Renaissance, sufficiently exotic for the French yet familiar, grand and old and bloody as tragedy should be, yet loose in style and in content. In a letter to a friend while at work on *Une Conspiration*, Sand writes:

Je travaille à une sorte de brimborion littéraire noir comme cinquante diables, avec conspiration, bourreau, assassin, coups de poignard, agonie, râle, sang, jurons et malédictions... ce sera amusant comme tout (Theatre:960).¹⁸

Evidently, the jest itself must be taken with a grain of salt. All is not so pleasant in Sand's version. She read in the Italian chronicle the story of the assassination, in 1537, of the depraved and tyrannical Duke of Florence, Alexandre de Médicis, by his cousin from another branch of the Médicis, Lorenzo. What interested Sand was the way Lorenzo had insinuated himself into the confidence of his Lord, serving as panderer the insatiable and degrading lust of the Duke, so as to kill him. Whereas in Varchi, Lorenzo was clearly a libertine who took advantage of his name to

¹⁷ The text is available in Paul Dimoff's *La Génèse de Lorenzaccio* (henceforth *Genese*), along with excerpts in Italian from Varchi's *Storia Fiorentina* (*Genese*:83-146 and 3-80).

¹⁸ Letter dated from 1831, quoted by Jeune from the *Correspondance de George Sand* (Theatre:962).

engage in universal promiscuity without regard for the sex or the age of his victims, Sand makes it clear that his abjection is only apparent, temporary and part of a heroic scheme (Genese:48-49). The murder accomplished with the help of the mercenary Scoronconcolo in a brutal last scene, Sand emphasizes the regained innocence of her hero. Covered with blood and sweat but elated, Lorenzo claims his purity at the end of *Une Conspiration*:

*Ah! Je me sens bien maintenant! ma poitrine
s'élargit, mon âme se dilate. Souillures,
infamies, disparaissent! Ce sang vous a lavées.*
(Genese:139-140).

There is a similar moment of happiness following a much less violent murder in Musset's version.¹⁹ In the fourth Act of *Lorenzaccio*, at the end of a very brief scene, Lorenzo "s'appuyant sur le bord d'une fenêtre," looks outside: at Florence for the sake of whose freedom, honor and decency the tyrant has just been struck with a sword; and beyond, at nature, with which Lorenzo feels now reconciled:

*Que la nuit est belle! Que l'air du ciel est pur!
Respire, respire, coeur navré de joie!*
(IV,xi,236).

¹⁹ Much less violent also than in Varchi where the Duke resists and fights back, forcing Lorenzo and Scoronconcolo to wrestle with him and slash open his face. I translate: "After the death of Alexandre, they stabbed him again several times. There was so much blood in the room that it was like a lake" (Genese:64). Musset, in one strike of the pen ("*il le frappe*"), has Lorenzo kill the Duke alone, even before Scoronconcolo enters the bedroom (IV,xi,235).

But this moment of communication with "pure" nature will be short-lived. Musset adds the appalling conclusion of Act V during which not only the republican insurrection fails to happen but Lorenzo is surrounded by the mob and drowned in the Grand Canal of Venice. Musset's Lorenzo, like Sand's, has lost his innocence in the service of Alexandre; but, unlike hers, he will not regain it. Once indulged, corruption works as inexorably as a virus. Abjection is everlasting in the world of Musset.²⁰ The infamy, the impurity cannot simply disappear because they reach *inside*, contaminating the soul. We are meant to understand this during the (self)revelations of Lorenzo to Philippe Strozzi in the central scene iii of Act III. The mask of perversion has glued to the skin, Lorenzo says: "*Regarde-moi un peu! J'ai été beau, tranquille, et vertueux*" -- which means that he is neither beautiful, nor composed nor virtuous anymore (III,iii,204). It is too late for me, he confesses:

*Je suis perdu... Il est trop tard, je me suis fait
à mon métier. Le vice a été pour moi un vêtement,
maintenant il est collé à ma peau* (III,iii,203).

²⁰ In *La Coupe et les Lèvres*, Musset writes:

*Ah! malheur à celui qui laisse la débauche
Planter le premier clou sous sa mamelle gauche!
Le coeur d'un homme vierge est un vase profond:
Lorsque la première eau qu'on y verse est impure,
La mer y passerait sans laver la souillure,
Car l'abîme est immense et la tâche est au fond*
(Poesies:190).

In short, Musset has displaced the locus of horror present in *Une Conspiration*. He has reduced the staged violence to a minimum and blown the horrified self-perception of the character to vast proportions. The terrible (the *to phoberon* of the Greeks), the cause of fear, issues forth from the tragic hero's internal world. The center of gravity of the play has moved to his anxious confessions.

Shelley submits his source to an even more drastic reduction and a comparable displacement in favor of the inner torments of his central character. Stuart Curran remarks that the source of Mary's *Relation*, Muratori's *Annali d'Italia*, "was already something of an idealization of the legend, prejudiced in favor of the oppressed family and against an unchallenged Papal authority" (1970:42). Twentieth-century research suggests that Beatrice, who "bore an illegitimate child," and Cenci's sons, her brothers, may have been, in reality, hardly less deserving of damnation than their infamous father, Count Francesco (*idem*). The manichean divide, so discernable in the opening of Shelley's tragedy, between the Count and his powerful allies in the Church on the one hand, and the sequestered and persecuted family on the other, was already the result of a tendentious writing process begun by Muratori, fostered by Mary and achieved by Shelley.

Furthermore, Curran adds, "practical consideration demanded that the legend, sordid even in the account used by

Shelley, be extensively altered before it was suitable for the stage of that time" (*idem*). Shelley deemed unsuitable the violence that permeated the chronicle and survived in Mary's translation: "This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable" (Poems, II,70). Not that Mary herself had not cringed before the perverse practices of the Count and ostensibly refused to publish certain details. A look at Stendhal's own translation and short comments in the *Chroniques Italiennes* (1837) confirms that another sensitive author in the Nineteenth Century tried to spare the sensibility of the reader from excessive shock -- or, at least, endeavored to make it look so. In the *Relation*, after such "sordid" details as:

Francesco carried his wicked debauchery to such an excess that he caused girls (of whom he constantly kept a number in his house), and also common courtezans, to sleep in the bed of his wife, and often endeavoured, by force or threats, to debauch his daughter Beatrice, who was grown up, and exceedingly beautiful (Poems,II,160).

... there is a pause, then a couple of lines filled with suspension points and a note at the bottom of the page: "The details here are horrible, and unfit for publication" (*idem*). Stendhal, on the contrary, does not translate this passage, noting in parenthesis: "*Ici il devient absolument impossible de suivre le narrateur romain dans le récit des choses fort obscures par lesquelles François Cenci chercha à*

étonner ses contemporains"; but he publishes a couple of lines which teach us no more than what Mary, by her very silence, strongly suggests of attempted incest: "*Cenci tenta avec des menaces, et en employant la force, de violer sa propre fille Beatrice, laquelle était déjà grande et belle*" (1977:251).

Obviously, a certain dramatization based on explicit omission and tactful suggestion was at work in the prose accounts of the Cenci legend before Shelley took up pen. Still, Mary, as Stendhal would later, makes mention of old Cenci's pederasty. She notes how the assassins of Francesco "drove a nail into his head with a hammer, making it pass by his eye, and another they drove into his neck" (Poems, II, 161). She does not recoil from describing the "torture of the hair" that the Pope inflicted on "the beautiful body" of Beatrice to make her confess participation in the crime.²¹ She details the movements of the "populace" during her execution; how people died around the scaffold when an overcrowded balcony collapsed; how, finally:

...the executioner raised [Beatrice's] head to the view of the people, and in placing it in the

²¹ At which point, Stendhal cannot help but add a footnote: "*Il y a des détails horribles dont notre sensibilité du XIXe siècle ne supporterait pas la lecture et que supporta fort bien une jeune Romaine âgée de seize ans et abandonnée par son amant*" (1977:259). Beatrice was twenty-one years old, according to Mary. Anyhow, Mary and Stendhal admire how Beatrice withstood the torture "without having confessed," proof that during the Renaissance Italian creatures had a stronger body and a different sensibility to cruelty.

coffin... the cord by which it was suspended slipped from his hold, and the head fell to the ground, shedding a great deal of blood, which was wiped up with water and sponges (Poems,II,165).

This exotic (since foreign in space and in time) display of violence will not appear in Shelley's tragedy. He draws the last curtain right before Beatrice is sent to death, i.e. seconds before she is to step out of prison and face the crowd (V,iv). Shelley's Beatrice, "a creature formed to adorn and be admired," never suffers torture (Poems,II,69). Marzio, her mercenary, does so in her stead. As for the incestuous attempt on the part of old Cenci, "it" will of course be relegated to the wings. The public will be made aware of "its" highly enigmatic nature through the devastating consequences in the psyche of Beatrice, *via* her looking deep into her "contaminated" self and confessing her "poisoned" soul at the beginning of Act III. Finally, when "snatching the dagger" from Marzio in Act IV, Beatrice gets very close to killing the old man in person. But the bloodless strangling actually occurs off-stage, in the nearby chamber where *he* peacefully sleeps, like Duncan in *Macbeth*. Meanwhile, what we witness are *her* reflections about the deed: the sudden strength of her attitude, the expressions of relief in her posture, her certainty that she was right in the decision. Here again, *the terrible* will emerge at each important step on the way from within the character. Shelley warns his audience in the *Preface*: the

drama should focus on the psychological responses of its protagonists. The legend of the Cenci is for him but a pretext, in both meanings of the word; his intention is to have us look *inside*, as far as we can go:

Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings... would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart (Poems, II, 69-70).

Versions

Shelley was influenced by the Gothic novel when he conceived *The Cenci*. He and Mary loved to visit caves and tunnels and dismal architectural structures of all sorts. As a matter of fact, he made sure to visit the Cenci Palace in Rome. He notes in the *Preface*:

One of the gates of the palace, formed of immense stones, and leading through a passage dark and lofty, and opening into gloomy subterranean chambers, struck me particularly (Poems, II, 74).

The play unfolds behind thick walls and gloomy vaults, first those of this palace in Rome, then in Act IV, those of the Castle of Petrella, and finally in Act V, those of the prison Beatrice and her step-mother Lucretia leave only to die.

Lorenzaccio owes much less to the tradition of the Gothic novel, called *roman noir* in France, which began in the second half of the Eighteenth Century. Musset creates

open sets, and when the action takes place in a room, he multiplies the vistas and opens the windows. His characters may at least look freely, if yearningly, outside. Shelley's cannot.

The staged exteriors and the dramatic style of the two plays differ starkly in this respect. There is much more flexibility of movement in the decor created by Musset, since it keeps changing within and between the thirty-eight scenes of *Lorenzaccio*. But the dramatic focus, what I called the center of gravity, is the same in both tragedies. The "most dark and secret caverns" that most interest Musset and Shelley are those "of the human heart." The exotic stories handed-over by Sand and Mary have become pre-texts for self-exposures. Stageable violence is reduced by Musset, altogether screened and suggested by Shelley. What prevails in each case is the reflective stance assumed by the central characters, uncovering the fact that, below the surface, the Romantic self is like the universal "present": an ocean of confusion and contamination.

We should not be misled by the apparent modesty with which Shelley offers his contribution in the *Preface*. Noting the popularity "among all ranks of people" in modern Italy, not so much of the Cenci story as of Beatrice's part in it, Shelley explains that hers is a tragedy which has sustained for two hundred years "the sympathy of men,

approbation and success."²² He continues: "Nothing remained but to clothe it to the apprehensions of my countrymen in such a language... as to bring it home to their hearts" (Poems,II,70). We know that his "bringing home" goes much further than a translation of the same story in English. Shelley turns the tragic away from "the dry exhibition of violence" toward where he expects the horror will most deeply move his contemporaries. Since Musset realizes a comparable displacement, the question I need to answer is -- Why has *the horror within* become the essential trait of the Romantic tragedy? Of this process of interiorization, we will observe the recurrence at another level, in the inter-text where *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio* "remember" the horrors they borrow from Sophocles and Seneca and other masters in the genre, giving them new emblematic and metaphorical dimensions.

In line with his implicit ambition, Shelley reminds us that tragedies have always found their source in tradition; that is, in preceding versions:

The deepest and the sublimest tragic compositions, King Lear, and the two plays in which the tale of Aedipus is told, were stories which already existed in tradition, as matters of popular belief and interest, before Shakespeare and Sophocles

²² "On my arrival at Rome, I found that the story of the Cenci was a subject not to be mentioned in Italian society without awakening a deep and breathless interest; and that the feelings of the company never failed to incline to a romantic pity for the wrongs, and a passionate exculpation of the horrible deed to which they urged her" (Poems,II,70).

made them familiar to the sympathy of all succeeding generations of mankind (*idem*).

In Athens, tragedy had its source in the *epos*, the legend of the heroes, the myth. Sophocles' tragic version of the story of Oedipus is indeed but one version among many. Shakespeare borrowed from his predecessors, simple folks and tragedians. He did not feel, as would his Romantic successors, that such borrowings required justification. Shelley needed to remind his contemporaries of the obvious: art, no matter how great or original, feeds on tradition.

This is why I begin this essay on two Romantic tragedies by acknowledging the existence of a mediating feminine link, and by reading other versions. Besides, if *Lorenzaccio* offers the masterful and definitive version of the legend of Lorenzo -- it arguably develops to the full Sand's *Une Conspiration* -- nothing of the sort is so evident with *The Cenci*. The myth of which it presents the Romantic version is more alive presently than it ever was. In order to compare Shelley and Artaud I will have to leave aside other twentieth-century versions of interest, such as Frederick Prokosh's *A tale of Midnight* (1955) and Alberto Moravia's *Beatrice Cenci* (1958).²³ Among the operatic versions, I take into account only the magnificent score Berthold Goldschmidt composed on a libretto by Martin

²³ This I will do on the ground that, as Curran said in 1970, Shelley's work "stands in essence today where Artaud left it in 1935" (1970:280).

Esslin. Called *Beatrice Cenci*, the opera was created in 1951, and performed to the acclamation of the German public in 1994.²⁴

The Personal Truth

We would not do justice, however, to the feminine dimension presiding over the conceptions of *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio* by limiting it to exterior sources only. The feminine link is at the core of each play, interior to its inspiration, and pervasive throughout the text. It is inscribed within the very private, overwhelmingly personal note each tragedy strives to send its audience.

As women climbed, so to speak, onto the stage of History, something of the difference known in the *Ancien Régime* between public and private spaces disappeared. Politics invaded the homes, or vice versa.²⁵ There is a singular combination of the private and the public, the personal and the collective, the intimate and the political in the two tragedies we are going to read. The obscure,

²⁴ For a list of musicians inspired by Shelley's tragedy, see Curran (1970:181).

²⁵ Steiner notes: "There is scarcely a recorded life or body of experience in the 1790's, in the Napoleonic era, in the decades of explosive urbanization, technological change and social challenge that followed, which does not bear witness to the irruption of the political into the private" (1986:11).

secret and domestic saga of the Cenci family did not become the material of a closet drama, but provided Shelley the means to teach his contemporaries a political lesson on a grand scale. The time was ripe for a demonstration of the *inner* roots of patriarchal power. Conversely, the motif of the failed insurrection of 1537 allowed Musset to have representatives of "*le peuple*" vituperate on stage against the Court, haunt the suburbs of the city from which they were banished and clash with military forces of occupation; but it also afforded him an intimate look at the subjective side of historical failure.

Musset did not find in Sand the interview between Lorenzo and Philippe Strozzi that occupies the center of *Lorenzaccio*. As he developed the personally and politically catastrophic fifth Act, he felt it necessary to add, earlier in the play, devastating self-revelations on the part of Lorenzo, information without which the last act cannot make sense. In other words, Musset wanted his public to worry about the abyssal truth, to suspect in advance the worst -- a good definition of anxiety -- and to be prepared, if not to assimilate, at least to receive the shock of his final debacle. By the place it occupies in the tragic sequence, Lorenzo's confession works as a magnifying glass, a way for Musset to have us witness, from the inside, the subjective truth (but is not truth always subjective?) of an unfolding political situation.

Lorenzo exposes to the republican leader Philippe Strozzi alone the painful beauty of his project. He articulates the grandeur of his secret political agenda, along with the prediction that his act will remain, once known, useless to the community -- the republican families and the people of Florence at large will fail to carry his message; they will misunderstand and fail to respond to the tyrannicide for which he is already paying, personally speaking, a staggering price:

Tout ce que j'ai à voir moi, c'est que je suis perdu et que les hommes n'en profiteront pas plus qu'ils ne me comprendront (III,iii,203).

Meanwhile, Lorenzo and Philippe are in nobody's home. They are in the street. Lorenzo cannot be *chez soi*, feel the security, reliance and communication the reality of a home and family entails. He cannot confess his "sublime" yet degrading project to his closest of kin, his mother Marie and his aunt Catherine. Lorenzo is nowhere at home. The bonds of innocence (and of childhood) have been cut, sign of his alienation. But again, this trait is not to be reduced here to a cliché of Romantic discourse. It is there in the set and the props and acted out on stage: both Philippe and Lorenzo sit alone (alone together) on a street-bench and talk (of their solitude). Two of Strozzi's sons have just been arrested by the soldiers of Alexandre, and so the father "*seul, s'asseyant sur un banc,*" laments the dispersion of his family (194). Looking around and pointing

at himself, Lorenzo declares: "*Et me voilà dans la rue, moi, Lorenzaccio?*" (201). Musset demonstrates on stage that if his character is ever to say the truth it will have to be furtively, in the middle of nowhere, and to the one friend that remains. The truth is rarely disclosed because it is so personal. It takes a persevering "*je*" to get a glimpse at so shameful and covert an affair:

J'ai vu les républicains dans leurs cabinets, je suis entré dans les boutiques, j'ai écouté et j'ai guetté. J'ai recueilli les discours des gens du peuple, j'ai vu l'effet que produisait sur eux la tyrannie... J'attendais toujours que l'humanité me laissât voir sur sa face quelque chose d'honnête (III,iii,202) [my emphasis].

The causes and the effects of the tyrannical *status quo* are not only political. Corruption does not simply gush from the tyrant, spilling down from the head of state, as idealists such as Philippe believe. It works *within* individuals and at all levels. It grows psychological and physical roots in men and in women who conceal their desire behind hypocritical tears: "*j'ai avalé entre deux baisers les larmes des plus vertueuses.*" It finds strength in the dissolute habits of the Florentines; in their cowardly and ineffectual tendency to drink themselves drunk on mere words: "*j'ai bu, dans les banquets patriotiques, le vin qui engendre la métaphore et la prosopopée*" (*idem*).

Alexandre's vicious power thrives on people's vicious penchants, on their weakness in the face of evil. People like to do evil. Whenever appearances allow, they go for

the worst. Thanks to his own mask of corruption, Lorenzo has had the leisure to observe this monstrous truth lurking beneath the many masks of innocence:

J'avais commencé à dire tout haut que mes vingt années de vertu étaient un masque étouffant -- O Philippe! j'entrais alors dans la vie et je vis qu'à mon approche tout le monde en faisait autant que moi; tous les masques tombaient devant mon regard; l'Humanité souleva sa robe et me montra, comme à un adept digne d'elle, sa monstrueuse nudité. J'ai vu les hommes tels qu'ils sont, et je me suis dit: Pour qui est-ce donc que je travaille? (III,iii,202).

I underline the word "en" for its power of suggestion. It means, in effect, whatever you, the listener, may imagine of perverse sexual practices fleeing at your approach, always deeper into darkness. It means what people do without exception, though shamefully, one by one and behind the masks of convention.

Notice the importance of vision: "*je vis... me montra.*" Lorenzo recalls the story of his going underground, masked and his true intention concealed, as a general unmasking ("*tous les masques tombaient*"); an unmasking which starts, paradoxically, by lending the mask to everybody. His own virtue (twenty years of youthful innocence before he entered the service of the Duke), has become a "*masque étouffant,*" at least that is what he says "*tout haut.*" What did he think *tout bas*, inside? As soon as he dons the mask of secrecy, plunging into the realities of adult life, he sees all men and women doing the same; sees them as they really

are underneath; that is, he observes the split contaminating everything. The estrangement spreads between his past and his present, between his false and his true self. We may even reel under the vertiginous question -- was there, from that day on, any such thing as a true self left "inside" Lorenzo? Don't we know, by his words to Philippe, that the false mask has stuck to his bones, that he has lost youth, beauty and honesty?

It is as though we are given a glimpse from the perspective of Satan himself, of how the satanic undoes individuals, in this "je" of Lorenzo the seducer: "*Je vis qu'à mon approche tout le monde en faisait autant que moi...*" People exhibit to him what it is that fascinates them -- this "en" which, in fact, cannot be seen, nor defined, beyond the qualification that it is monstrous. Notice also how furtive and exclusive is the exhibition of the universal truth. The conniving gesture that lifts the veil is addressed to "you" personally. "You" have to be an "adept," an insider half-steeped in monstrosity, to be granted a full view of the unbearable.

That the human species be a woman and truth feminine is not what should startle us most in this figure of the dressed truth, which comes from tradition. What is striking is that the unveiling process ends with a grotesque and impossible revelation. Traditionally, the stripping of the truth was metaphorically associated with that of the good

and of the beautiful.²⁶ Musset takes the image literally, then reverses its direction, obscenely locating the site of revelation in the nakedness underneath the dress. He evolves the trope into the same grotesque and painful construct in *La Confession*. As the narrator Octave recalls his years of debauchery, he also relates his libertine reflections:

Cette idée funeste, que la vérité c'est la nudité, me revenait à propos de tout: "Le monde, me disais-je, appelle son fard vertu, son chapelet religion, son manteau trainant convenance. L'honneur et la morale son ses femmes de chambre; il boit dans son vin les larmes des pauvres d'esprit qui croient en lui; il se promène les yeux baissés tant que le soleil est au ciel; il va à l'église, au bal, aux assemblées, et le soir arrivé, il dénoue sa robe, et on aperçoit une bacchante nue avec deux pieds de bouc
(Prose:133).

The world is dressed in the garb of morality, religion and etiquette. It walks discreetly during the day (as women were instructed), not looking, not being seen. At night, the world reveals to libertines ready for pleasure the distorted truth, which they reach when they get underneath, to the bottom: "*la vie ordinaire a une surface plane, les débauchés, dans les courants rapides, à tout moment touchent le fond*" (Prose:247). Those who are driven by "*la curiosité*

²⁶ The figure we find in Plato is folded in the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*. The soul must climb the skies, lift the veil of *lethe*, forgetting, to remember its origins and accede to the divine and dazzling perfection of a good which is also the origin of truth and the model of all beauty (e.g., *Phaedra* 246e).

du mal" and who "*travaillent ainsi à voir ce qu'ils désirent*" grasp what we may call the evil real hidden behind the dainty show of reality (Prose:248). They want to peep behind the good, Musset writes, in a formula not exempt from vulgarity: "*le bien, ils veulent voir derrière*" (*idem*).

The Portrait and the Feminine Victim

In confidence to the prelate Camillo, in the first scene of *The Cenci*, Count Cenci expresses the same insight. People evince disgust for what "they call crime," but the truth is all men (the word including, it seems, women) are cruel. They enjoy evil. They only conceal the truth or stop short of it in pursuit, because they are weak, submissive and easily frightened:

All men delight in sensual luxury,
 All men enjoy revenge; and most exult
 Over the tortures they can never feel;
 Flattering their secret peace with others' pain.
 But I delight in nothing else. I love
 The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
 When this shall be another's, and that mine.
 And I have no remorse, and little fear,
 Which are, I think, the checks of other men
 (I,i,77-85).

The words "peace," "love," "joy" have been snatched out of their traditional contexts, detached from their original (in any case customary), domains of the beautiful and of the good. Beyond the superficial pleasures yielded by altruism, there is a "secret peace," a personal "delight" in pain and

death, a dark exultation each one feels inside (*à part soi* the French would say) at the sight of destruction.

The amazing energy and almost supernatural puissance Shelley grants the old man derives from his fidelity to this obscene truth.²⁷ Cenci lives consequentially according to a secret and abominable real. He takes advantage of a duplicitous and conniving world which prefers not to know (for it knows too well), prefers not to interfere with what the libertine is doing at home. Shelley makes plain in the very first line pronounced by Cardinal Camillo, the Pope's envoy, that the world of men is hypocritical and split; that social reality tolerates, indeed demands double standards and that the political status quo functions by a conspiracy of silence:

That matter of the murder is hushed up
If you consent to yield his Holiness
Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate
(I,i,1-3).

In his long career in evil, Cenci has committed crime after crime, and they have all been "hushed up" because he is rich, can buy "impunity" from the church, and is dangerous to his enemies (I,i,6).

Stendhal thought that Christianity as such, and not only the corrupt church of the Italian Renaissance, was

²⁷ Cenci was seventy years old, according to the chronicle. His hair was white, traditionally the sign of wisdom, here the sign that every sign is perverted. Camillo remarks: "How hideously look deeds of lust and blood/ Through those snow white and venerable hairs!" (I,i,38-39).

responsible for the existence of persons like Cenci, whom he compares to Don Juan and to the libertines of Marquis de Sade. Ancient religions did not deny men sensuous celebrations, and so they did not have to hide their pleasures in a cloak of shame, nor create diffident philosophies:

... il faut qu'il y ait de l'hypocrisie dans le monde [pour que] l'on trouve des libertins qui aiment la corruption pour elle-même, c'est à dire pour braver les opinions raisonnables de leurs contemporains (1977:240).

Stendhal, however, remains superficial in that he hardly indicates what is so unsettling in the character of Cenci. Shelley delves into the matter. He has the old libertine address at length the difficult question -- how is it possible for a human being to love corruption precisely for itself?

Camillo

Art thou not
Most miserable?

Cenci

Why miserable? --
No. I am what your theologians call
Hardened; which they must be in impudence,
So to revile a man's peculiar taste
(I,i,92-95).

What is the nature of the enjoyments Cenci confesses to Camillo? -- pleasures in pain and at the sight of pain, pleasures of un-pleasure. He says that there is in all men a desire for the negative pleasures that are to be had

beyond "reasonable opinions" about the pleasurable. All of us have a taste for distorted beauty, for what emerges in the very destruction of the peaceful and harmonious forms traditionally considered beautiful.

... I the rather
 Look on such pangs as terror ill conceals;
 The dry, fixed eye-ball; the pale, quivering lip,
 Which tell me that the spirit weeps within
 Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ
 (I, i, 106-113).

Count Cenci's tastes, perverse as they are, were not unknown to the popular literature of the period. In *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz shows that the taste for the "horrid" was widespread at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. The Gothic novel was successfully exploiting the vein of literary delights provided by descriptions of terror. Whereas for centuries the horrible and the grotesque had belonged to the margins of an aesthetic tradition centered on the beautiful, in the Romantic era the taste for painful pleasures became such that an element of horror and distortion was required of any depiction intended to move its audience.²⁸ We need only read the first pages of a seminal Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), to find the motif of dishevelled beauty

²⁸ Praz notes: "The discovery of Horror as a source of delight and beauty ended by reacting on men's actual conception of beauty itself: the Horrid, from being a [marginal] category of the Beautiful, ended by being one of its essential elements" (1956:27).

combined with another dominant theme of the literature of the period, that of the persecuted maiden.²⁹

Among specters, bats and irrational phenomena, the young, beautiful and virginal Isabella is rushing down "that long labyrinth of darkness... the subterraneous regions" which sprawl beneath the castle. She is fleeing Manfred, the tyrannical lord who has decided to rape her because he needs a son. As she is desperately looking for the "secret passage" that could save her, Walpole writes:

...it was not easy for someone under so much anxiety to find the door... She shuddered and recoiled a few paces. In a moment she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled... every suggestion that horror could inspire rushed into her mind (1968:61).

The situation is exactly the one we face in the first two Acts of *The Cenci*, until Beatrice appears actually to have been raped (which is not the case with Isabella).

Interestingly enough, Isabella has lost any connection with a home and a family. She is alone and persecuted by an older man gone wild. Beatrice has brothers, a step-mother and a father. But the apartment in the Cenci palace where she lives in constant fear and trembling is hardly a home either. There is no love coming from Francesco but the obverse -- perverse version perhaps of care -- a refined torture. Lucretia is not even up to the role of surrogate

²⁹ See, chapter 1 and chapter 3 of *The Romantic Agony* (1956). Praz researches these two themes in different chapters of his book. I think they have to be connected.

mother. She is unjustifiably weak, to the point of relying on Beatrice alone to defend them, brothers included, against his tyranny. Against this "desolate" backdrop, it is from outsiders, the guests in the Banquet scene, that Beatrice asks for a home:

I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;
 What, although tyranny and impious hate
 Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair?
 What if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs
 Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we,
 The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,
 His children and his wife, whom he is bound
 To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find
No refuge in this merciless wide world?...
 Take us away! (I,iii,99-129)

No doubt, Shelley was fascinated by Beatrice Cenci because she was the perfect victim. He had seen in Rome not only the popularity of her story but her portrait. At the end of the *Preface* there is a beautiful and touching description of the painting he saw in Colonna Palace. The passage is pure fantasy on his part. Since it was falsely attributed to Guido Reni, Shelley imagined that "it was taken [by the famous painter] during her confinement in prison" (Poems,II,73). It is revelatory of the kind of imperilled, solitary and suffering beauty he thought would move an audience, as it had moved him:

There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness... In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic (*idem*).

The view of distraught beauty inspired Shelley to other poems. *On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci* describes, not a person, but a female head severed from the body of a woman. Again, Shelley sees the Medusa in the archetypal situation of Prometheus. Homeless, forlorn, persecuted and terrified, the female head "lieth, gazing on the midnight sky/ Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine" while "below, far lands are seen tremblingly;/ Its horror and its beauty are divine (Poems, III, 297-299). Before reaching the conclusive "'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror," the poem even adds elements of transformation ("Hairs which are vipers") and contamination ("a poisonous eft/ Peeps idly into these Gorgonian eyes") which are absent from Shelley's description of the portrait but dominant in the second half of the tragedy.

Women were emerging from historical obscurity; it should not surprise us that they were perceived by sensitive and scrupulous men as victims. The same thing would happen with the working class later in the Century, as intellectuals became conscious of the massified force of labor, and felt morally compelled to defend the struggling and suffering multitude. Notwithstanding their disillusionment, Shelley and Musset responded to what they felt were blatant social injustices. They identified and

personally took side with those women who came out and fought against the powers of darkness.³⁰

The grotesque and distorted images of women we have seen in this chapter ought not to be cited as evidence of misogyny on the part of their authors. "*Femmes... Qu'y a-t-il de plus oublié que vous?*" says the narrator of *La Confession*, while explicitly remembering poor women paid to entertain the rich young man he describes himself to be (Prose:137). Octave recalls his years of debauchery as a falling into pandemonium. But beauty is not absent from the series of grotesque and macabre masks he encounters. For instance, there is this "girl" he calls "the disease of the century" ("*C'était la maladie du siècle... cette fille l'était elle-même*"). She is extremely beautiful, polite and clean on the outside. Her face is that of a rose; but when she talks her voice sounds hoarse and disconnected, as if she were an old woman (Prose:111-112). The grotesque image says that she has no voice; at least, not *her* own voice.

³⁰ Some commentators even see a resemblance between the portrait of Beatrice and the delicate portrait of Shelley by A. Clint in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Albrecht DÜmling writes: "Shelley acquired a copy of her portrait, and discovered in it a rare combination of gentle beauty and strength of purpose. He was himself a gentle, extremely sensitive rebel, so that he must have seen -- as did later observers -- a resemblance between his own visage and the face in the portrait" (1995:12). But is this resemblance not a matter of fashion?

Octave never forgets the price paid by his victims, the objects of his lust, nor his own "*désespération*." He insists on the vacuity of sensuous abuse and on the deadly boredom of sexual contacts without love. Masters and slaves of sensuality are together in Hell. In a passage kept out of the definitive text, Musset notes how minds and bodies are estranged from each other, split:

La prostitution n'est pas autre chose que l'esclavage. Que voulez-vous donc qu'il y ait de commun entre ces jeunes gens [Octave and his distinguished companions] et leurs maîtresses? Le corps, et rien de plus. Et que fait la pensée pendant ce temps là? (Prose:1062).

That Musset was *on the side* of women is apparent in the kind of things his female characters (when they have a voice to speak with) pronounce.³¹ In one of the sub-plots of *Lorenzaccio*, the Marquise Cibo is presented as a free spirit who fights for the republic.³² She approaches the Duke and

³¹ And men as well... The companion in revelry, Desgenais, explains to Octave: "*N'accusez pas les femmes d'être ce qu'elles sont; c'est nous qui les avons faites ainsi*" (Prose:97). Moreover, if truth is feminine, men need to visit the shadow of this bright world and transform into women: "*La vérité!... Celui-là la sait qui se fait femme lui-même et que sa bassesse initie à tout ce qui s'agite dans l'ombre!*" (Prose:264).

³² The other sub-plot has to do with the aborted rebellion of the Strozzi family, rapidly smashed by the Duke. These sub-plots multiply the lessons about failure to be drawn from the central plot of the play. What is most troubling is that they do not reinforce each other but disperse. This will be made more explicit when we read Act IV in Chapter 6: Responsibility in the Romantic Tragedy. Otherwise and in order to simplify this study, I have for the most part limited myself to the role of Lorenzo in the central plot.

is ready to serve him in person, like Lorenzo; even more of an idealist than Philippe Strozzi, she thinks it is possible without a *coup d'état* to change the mind-set of the bestial despot. She believes that one could talk the Duke, under the influence of love, into becoming a great leader and the liberator of Florence. When she starts understanding that the tyrant will not budge, since he is not even listening to her and cannot love, the Marquise has a remarkable exclamation:

... à quoi bon écouter une femme? une femme qui parle d'autre chose que de chiffons et de libertinage, cela ne se voit pas! (III,vi,208).

Thus do I think it important that Lorenzo be *also* a woman. He not only expresses compassion, as does Octave, for his feminine victims; Lorenzo is placed by Musset in a feminine position throughout the play. The question of his alleged "weakness" recurs insistently. The narrator of *La Confession* does not pander, does not serve anybody; but the tragic character Lorenzo does. He is, in the first Act, "*l'homme sans épée*" who faints at the prospect of a duel (I,iv,154). The people of Florence call him, despicably, Lorenzaccio or Lorenzetta; and the Duke "*une femmelette*" (I,iv,152). This may be, as we discover later, part of his scheme, but it is certainly not his design to occupy the place of the fated victim, nor end his short life

(apparently, at twenty two) in an ignoble drowning, victim of popular wrath.³³

For Musset and for Shelley the difference between genders was no longer written in stone. They tended to confuse what more traditional societies had considered manly, deserving of a man, and feminine, proper for a woman. Shelley's Beatrice defends her family like a man; like a man she confronts Cenci, speaks up to him and, alone and after long deliberation, makes the decision to kill him. This is not the case in Mary's and Stendhal's versions, where "the unhappy women [Beatrice and Lucretia], finding themselves without hope of relief, driven by desperation, resolved to plan his [Cenci's] death" (Poems,II,160). Shelley's Beatrice discovers in herself the urgency to commit parricide, before inner confusion spreads too far, before it is too late and contamination claims her body, her soul and her name. Alone, she gathers the "masculine" strength necessary to form and carry out such resolution.³⁴ In the Chasm speech, she even pictures herself solid and erect as a rock on the brink of an abyss (III,i). There is a troubling and interesting gender contamination at work in the central characters of *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio*.

³³ I count the twenty years of innocence, and the two years Lorenzo spent serving the Duke: "*Songes-tu que je glisse depuis deux ans sur un rocher taillé à pic*" (III,iii,205).

³⁴ Quite to the opposite, in Goldschmidt's operatic version, it is Lucretia (logically, in voice alto) who "shields" Beatrice (soprano) from the *bass* attacks of Cenci (1995:54). It is also Lucretia who first raises the idea of murder (1995:92).

CHAPTER 2: DAS DING AN SICH

The cistern contains; the fountain
overflows.

Blake (*The Marriage of Heaven and
Hell*)

*...est sublime la présentation
(de ceci) qu'il y a de
l'imprésentable.*

Lacoue-Labarthe (*La Vérité Sublime*)

Force "Itself"

Another momentous revolution occurred during Shelley's and Musset's lifetimes. The volume of knowledge was exploding; new fields of experimentation were proliferating, the technological consequences of which seemed unlimited; and yet, what Michel Foucault calls the *episteme* that might otherwise have structured this vertiginously expanding knowledge had already reached its limits.

In the extended metaphor of the present we read earlier in *La Confession*, white sails contrasted with the near presence of a boat puffing heavy black smoke. Musset's contrast did not simply mark a change or even a progress of past to future -- it evoked opposing relationships to

matter. Looking at the marines of Turner, the British painter who achieved mastery in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, Michel Serres notes that the difference between the one mode of locomotion and the other was not relative; it was absolute. In Turner, the very perspective of the ocean bearing majestic sails is often warped by the strange presence of hard-angled metallic steam boats. Musset, for his part, had only noticed the existence of these machines. Shelley was so interested by the phenomenon that he invested some money in one of the first commercial steam boat ventures on Mediterranean waters.

The French physicist Carnot worked-out the theory of the steam engine in 1824. Remarking on the contemporaneity of Carnot and Turner, Serres explains that sails take "force as it is," while the steam boat "produces it," generating within itself the force it needs (1982:56). This floating machine that thrusts nearby and smears the colorful elements in its wake does not take the wind; it works by producing winds of its own. Matter inside its hull is in a state of incandescence. Turner makes this palpable, Serres adds, by engulfing the skies, the seas and the debris in a swirl of furious particles -- "Turner entered into the boiler" (1982:57). Inside and outside, matter was on fire.³⁵

³⁵ Carnot published his theory in *Reflexions sur La Puissance Motrice du Feu et sur les Machines Propres à Developper cette Puissance*. See Serres' "Turner Translates Carnot" (1982:34).

What is the Industrial Revolution? A revolution operating on *matter*. It takes place at the very source of dynamics, at the origins of force... Force is in the flash of lightning, the ignition. Energy exceeds form; it transforms. Geometry disintegrates, lines are erased; matter, ablaze explodes (1982:56). [Serres' emphasis]

For millenia, the world had been understood in terms of idealized geometrical surfaces, lines, forms and given forces. With Turner and Carnot one witnesses the eruption into this static world of furious energies in ceaseless transformation; henceforth the world seems precariously balanced on the edge of chaos; birth of thermodynamics, sciences that study the potentially unlimited energies produced (in the etymological sense of *producere*, brought to light) by men. For the first time, art confronts the machines destined to release and channel these wild new industrial forces.

The revolution was not, however, simply a question of new sciences, although it is worth mentioning the advent of new bio-technologies, like the experimental vaccine which so fascinated Shelley and could not leave Musset indifferent because it epitomized the ambiguous logic of infection. Both the most common diseases and their cure by inoculation appeared to belong to a larger and unavoidable category that could be called: contamination.³⁶ In 1816, the doctor

³⁶ Shelley followed anxiously the latest developments in medicine. In *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, Nora Crook and Derek Guiton remind us that he had once wanted to be a doctor and that he was obsessed during his entire life with syphilis, "the type of all diseases from which Shelley sees man and nature suffering" (1986:181).

Southey wrote in a specialized magazine: "It might be supposed that the vaccine infection secures our system against a stronger poison."³⁷ Disease is the cure, the doctors said; there is no other cure but the disease itself. Translated in ethical or philosophical terms, as Shelley and Musset were prompt to do, it means: the Good cannot happen without Evil; the Pure is not *wirklich* (effectual, real), without the Impure. We need to apply to Musset what Crook and Guiton qualify as Shelley's "most paradoxical cast of mind among the Romantics." They shared the conviction, reinforced by developments in modern medicine, that "Good and Evil spring from the same sources" (1986:136). I will point to various aspects of the logic of contamination at work in these dramas, until it becomes clear that in its extended consequences and its multi-faceted dimensions, it controls not only the details of the imagery, but the overall pattern of the plots and the tragic conclusions of *The Cenci* and of *Lorenzaccio*.

From Immunology to incipient Demography to fundamental Physics, the *episteme* was rapidly expanding at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Foucault shows, however, that knowledge as such was in question. "*D'une façon plus fondamentale,*" he writes, "*le rapport de la représentation à ce qui est donné en elle,*" the relationship of scientific

³⁷ See the entry for *Vaccine* in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1911, 11th edition.

knowledge to what it knows has changed at the end of the Eighteenth Century (1966:251). What scientists are able to represent of their object is superficial in the proper sense. It is man-made, man-produced and man-perceived.³⁸ Beyond the laws they establish, within the data they observe and manipulate, scientists know (and if they do not Berkeley, Locke and Kant tell them so) that there is a force which, bringing phenomena to light, nonetheless itself stays *an sich*, in reserve. The real remains "*à l'extérieur de la représentation, au-delà de son immediate visibilité, dans une sorte d'arrière-monde plus profond*" (252). It escapes observation. Be it in Geology, in Psychology or in Economy, *das Ding an sich* remains outside scientific representation:

C'est du fond de cette force qui les fait naître et demeure en elles comme secrète et encore vibrante, que les choses viennent se donner, bien partiellement, à la représentation... L'être même de ce qui est représenté va tomber hors de la représentation (1966:252 and 253).

The Electrical Shock and the Monster

The force is *in* electricity as it is *in* life. Mary Shelley does not tell us how Victor Frankenstein cracked "the secrets of heaven and earth;" how he succeeded in "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (1965:37). This

³⁸ Shelley notes in the prose fragment *On Life*: "I confess that I am one of those who am unable to refuse my assent to the conclusions of those philosophers, who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived" (1977:476).

only makes the method more frightening. It stays a secret and should remain so, absolutely, for publishing *the real*, metaphysical "cause of generation and life" would be lethal to mankind (1965:51).³⁹ Nevertheless, the readers of *Frankenstein* (1816) guess that Victor's "workshop of filthy creation" at one point or another involves electricity (53).

I stood fixed... A flash of lightning illuminated the object... The deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy demon to whom I had given life (73).

Young Victor went too far in his "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" (39). He left the field of positive knowledge, isolated himself and studied disreputable sciences. As though he were a machine working around the clock, he was soon torturing the secrets out of life and death:

I pursued nature to her hiding-places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate lifeless clay? (53)

No love, no sensitivity, no emotion is left in this overly ambitious adept of *das Ding an sich*. As the Promethean enterprise of Victor goes rapidly awry, the reader comprehends the fate of that "frozen" and exhausted old man

³⁹ "My inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or in the highest sense, the physical secrets of the world" (1965:37). "My friend... you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be" (1965:51).

who boarded Walton's boat, as though emerging "from the brink of destruction" (24). Pursuer pursued, Frankenstein is about to be destroyed by his own production, the "being" (139).

Nevertheless, as if there were no stopping its vital thrust, life issues forth from under the sepulchral vaults of Victor's attic, among the pieces of dead bodies he dragged from graveyards. Whereas in Musset we saw Octave and Lorenzo spy on the living to discover the dirty and deadly truth *underneath*, Victor Frankenstein pores over the progress of death to surprise life:

My attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings. I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life (50-51).

Victor brings the news of an incendiary knowledge, a very dangerous fire. It is better not to force matter, Mary Shelley could be read to say, better not to study certain books, better not to awaken the dead from their apparent quiet -- unless one wants the unsettling, transforming, monstrous aspect of the force which is life "itself" to arise. Frankenstein confesses to Walton: the secret of secrets is unbearable. The mind has fragile limits which the vital force shatters:

I paused, examining and analyzing the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in

upon me -- a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple. I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it illustrated, I was surprised that among so many men of genius... I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret (51).

Like all the revelations we have encountered, Victor's is something of an *aporia*, a contradiction and a dead end. It is highly subjective, personal and secretive ("I alone"). It is also universal (it potentially concerns every human on the planet). Is Victor's discovery true? Perhaps, but it cannot be divulged. It cannot because it should not become common knowledge. It is related to real, absolute changes having to do, not so much with the ordinary passage from "life to death," as to the "wondrous," "immense," and yet incomprehensibly "simple" passage from "death to life." When, as in *Frankenstein*, there is no afterlife and no saving grace anymore, the discovery of life-*in*-death gives *hic et nunc* access to the supernatural and to the sublime; but it is a lonely and impracticable route taken by rare travellers. What the *aporia* gives life to, if anything, is no viable creature. To *be* the being is impossible! In fact, and for the pursuer and for the pursued, it is unendurable to have touched, and so *to be* the very nerve of life. Victor is destroyed by his progeny.

We are told of the moment of inspiration, the discovery of life's secret, that it "broke in upon me," mentally and physically. It exceeded the *ego* "in me," its capacity of

assimilation. Is not this kind of shock what psychoanalysts today call trauma? In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud considers traumatic "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" of the mental apparatus (1920:33). The "prospect" of *das Ding an sich* knocked-out Frankenstein's faculties; he collapsed as he would have under a brutal blow:

But the discovery was so great and overwhelming that all the steps by which I had been led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result (*idem*).

The Invisible Influence

In *A Defense of Poetry* (1820), Shelley says of "the mind in creation" that it is "as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (1977:503-504). By the time the poet puts on paper the burning encounter that was inspiration, it is cooling off: "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline" (*idem*). Whether in prose or in verse -- Shelley pointedly denies any difference in this respect (484) -- poetry visits the writer the way the tides of the ocean crash against "the limits of mortality." Inspiration is unpredictably violent because poetry is energy: "Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it" (491).

Or rather, Poetry is essential production, since it brings energy to light.⁴⁰ While at work composing, the intellect channels and screens, protecting itself from the shock of inspiration; reason calculates the effects it may communicate from such red-hot material. But the "inspired moments" are beyond will and reason. Without the breath of some unknown Other, they fade. The "conscious portion of our natures" is unable to predict either the "approach" or the "departure" of inspiration:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal... (503).

The same shock and invisible influence characterize literary inspiration for Musset. The poem *La Coupe et les Lèvres* opens with a vibrant description of the inspired poet:

*Au moment du travail, chaque nerf, chaque fibre
Tressaille comme un luth que l'on vient d'accorder.
On n'écrit pas un mot que tout l'être ne vibre.
(Soit dit sans vanité, c'est ce que l'on ressent.)
On ne travaille pas, -- on écoute, -- on attend.
C'est comme un inconnu qui vous parle à voix basse
(Poesies:153).*

As though the Unknown had chosen "you" again to absorb the good, harmonious tremor of inspiration, it is *in your ear*, from secret being to secret being, that the Other whispers

⁴⁰ "Poetry ascend[s] to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar" (503).

the tune. Of course, things look different seconds later or the day after, when the hung-over writer faces the page:

*Et puis, -- et puis, -- enfin! -- on a mal à la tête.
 Quel étrange réveil! -- Comme on se sent boiteux!
 (idem)*

Always welcome, inspiration is still excessive; it hurts. Insofar as it is great, it will break its feeble vessel. Besides, the results are always unsatisfactory, doubtful and weak compared to the sheer force of the intimation radiating from the Unknown. Shelley notes this most emphatically:

Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results... and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet (1977:504).

Nevertheless, something of *the real* by which a great writer has been marked survives in the work. No matter how deferred, veiled or cooled, his written word persists in communicating something of the primal shock. "*On n'écrit pas un mot que tout l'être ne vibre.*" "His every word is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought" (500). The work will in turn vibrate in the ears of other writers, and forever. At times, Shelley sounds as if one needed only to scratch the surface of the poetic signifier for the signified to reveal "a fountain forever flowing of wisdom and delight" (*idem*). Indeed, "All high poetry is infinite. It is as the first acorn which contains all oaks potentially" (*idem*). The problem is that such optimism is

undercut by the excess unleashed in the word "infinite," complicating his Romantic theory of interpretation and his Romantic view of the "genius" of the past as a life-giving force forever prolific. Infinite resources of meaning are surely bountiful and plenty; yet, they might also be all too much and never quite enough.

On this page of *A Defense*, Shelley takes up the trope of the veiled/naked truth to specify what enables a great text to survive the ages. Somewhat in spite of his avowed intention, the image shows that it is what insists in evading exposure, what baffles understanding and remains stubbornly beyond the reach of interpretation which gives lasting, that is, surviving power to a text:

Great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised (498). Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed (500).

Present in the text but hidden, the core of meaning is forever veiled or asleep. And so it must be if "generations after generations" are to read "new relations" in a poem and never "exhaust its divine effluence... the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight" (*idem*).

After Coleridge and Wordsworth, Shelley calls the imagination the creative faculty. It brings to light the material on which the other faculties work. It is itself, nevertheless, essentially obscure. Shelley defines it as "that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the

invisible nature of man" (483). What Lacan in our century has elaborated under the expression "*le réel*" is in us; and yet, in us human beings, it is paradoxically absent.⁴¹

Shelley recognizes in the fragment *On Love*: "we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void." He adds in *On life*: "How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being" (1977:473 and 475).

Hence Shelley's ambiguous portrait of the poet: because of his encounter(s) with and proximity to *das Ding an sich*, he is at once the Promethean bearer of light, the chosen one who defies the "limits of mortality," robs the good news from the divine being and passes after-shocks down to mankind -- and the one solitary voice which, in this too busy world, remains forever behind, eminently obscure and not understood:

A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why (486).

⁴¹ Lacan evolved and transformed this notion throughout his career; but he worked on it especially in the year 1962-63, at a moment when, and it is no coincidence, he centered his *Séminaire* on anxiety. As opposed to *reality* and in synonymy with the meta-physical, it might prove very useful in Romantic Studies. For a closer look at how Lacan arrived at the concept, see Chapter 4: The Cause of Anxiety.

The Sublime Encounter

I have used or quoted the word "sublime" several times already. It belongs to the aesthetics of the Romantic era; one finds it at every turn in Shelley and in Musset. As a superlative, it usually means grand, great and a little more, but not much more, than beautiful. It is in this sense that Philippe Strozzi, once he has heard Lorenzo's secret, retorts: "*Si je te comprends bien, tu as pris, dans un but sublime, une route hideuse*" (III,iii,201).

In *Frankenstein*, for instance, in a scene comparable to a painting by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), Victor recalls the "solemn" mountains and "ever-moving glaciers" of the Alps. He describes how "these sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving" (1965:92). In "the solitary grandeur of a scene" where man is no bigger than a speck, Victor forgets his "littleness of feeling," his worries and his obsessions (93). As much as he is "capable of," he feels respect, admiration and awe. He enters into communication with "the silent working of immutable laws," where neither his life nor his death count anymore (92). As always concerning the emotions Shelley attributes to the reception of poetry "by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination," Victor's "self appears as what it is, an atom to a Universe" (1977:505).

Fleeing the Revolution, Chateaubriand travels in the New World. Back in France in 1800, Chateaubriand recalls how, facing the Niagara's Falls, he was "*saisi d'admiration et de crainte*" and made aware of his "*petitesse*," his solitude in the lap of the infinite:

La grandeur, l'étonnante mélancolie de ce tableau ne sauraient s'exprimer dans les langues humaines... En vain, dans nos champs cultivés, l'imagination cherche à s'étendre... mais dans ces régions sauvages, l'âme se plaît à s'enfoncer dans un océan de forêts, à planer sur le gouffre des cataractes... et, pour ainsi dire, à se trouver seule devant Dieu (1966:184).

Beautiful objects, in nature or in art, can be observed with pleasure and described; the experience of the sublime, however, stretches human faculties too far. It tends to surpass and forbid linguistic expression. When elation and enthusiasm and admiration border on fear and awe, one does not feel the ease of pleasure anymore. "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough," Blake quipped in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) -- "Excess of joy weeps" (1988:36).⁴²

Actually, *the real cause* of the sublime feeling in a human subject is not an object, no matter how expanded or great, and that is why it evades possible description. In a passage of *A Defense* not yet quoted, Shelley qualifies the

⁴² In fragmented sentences, Blake, the prophet of energy, declares: "The raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man" (*idem*).

shock of inspiration as a sublime "visitation" which may be triggered from within by the "mind alone."

We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling... sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond expression (1977:504).

In *De la Tragédie*, Musset marvels at the same conjunction of baffling incomprehension and shocking delight a propos of Mlle Rachele, a star actress who is sixteen years old and already pronounces the simplest verse in Corneille or Racine with a "sublime" intonation: "*un frémissement électrique court toute la salle... chose incompréhensible dans une si jeune fille*" (Prose:889).

From wherever it comes, the sublime encounter with *das Ding an sich* tends to explode the facile and phenomenal subject-object opposition within which boundaries the aesthetic experience traditionally takes place. As Blake was probably the first to clearly formulate, "Energy is Eternal Delight." If objects and subjects are infused with "fierce" energies, "One thought. Fills immensity" as much as the smallest grain of sand. "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite" (1988:36 and 39). Every thing would yield the same "delight," an idea that in Blake assumes apocalyptic proportions for the individuals who must lose their separate and limited selves in its reception. The pleasures afforded by contained objects give way to a forceful experience whose

enjoyment is as ineffable as it is excruciating, and potentially destructive. Opposed to the beautiful, the concept of the sublime integrates the monstrous, the incomprehensible, the painful into modern aesthetics, admitting all that is shocking to common perception.

Appearing mad at the opening of Act III, Beatrice offers to our synesthetic appreciation, not only her confused state of mind and "glued" body but the disgusting smells that "pollute" in her the "inmost spirit of life," producing sensations which were unheard-of in high tragedy. These "thick" sensations are sublime.

... The air
 Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
 In charnel-pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps
 A clinging, black, contaminating mist
 About me -- 'tis substantial, heavy, thick;
 I cannot pluck it for it glues
 My fingers and my limbs to one another,
 And eats into my sinews and dissolves
 My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
 The subtle, pure, inmost spirit of life!
 (III, i, 14-23).

I can think of one among the Classical tragedies where the sensation of smell thus comes to the fore.⁴³ A *miasma* (defilement) spreads diseases, sterility and death in the Thebes of *Oedipus the King*; but Sophocles does not emphasize its smell and, besides, this source of horror is presented as objective. The robe that Euripides' *Medea* sends as a

⁴³ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi is right: "The most intimate of senses, smell invades the body even more so than hearing does" (1992:240).

gift glues together the flesh and the bones of her rival; but the sense that perceives the progress of this deadly confusion is sight (1985:58). Such is also the case with the poisoned Robe of Nessus that Deianira gives to Hercules, whose muscular forms melt and putrefy at the end of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* (1957:100). Only in *Philoctetes* does the hero have a purulent foot which greatly offends his enemies and friends alike, not only because it is ugly and formless but for its fetid smell (1957:222). But still, Sophocles describes the infection as objective. It does not spread *within* as in *The Cenci*. When Musset remembers "*la robe de Déjanire*" in *Lorenzaccio*, he gives to what has become a trope the same subjective inflexion. As though the Romantic character had interiorized this tragic emblem of the dress, its pollution is said to have so penetrated Lorenzo's spiritual fabric, that it comes out (metaphorically) on his breath (IV,v,225).

The "Sublime Object"

In his *Lives of the English Poets* (1783), Samuel Johnson praised Milton's *Paradise Lost* for "the characteristic quality of his poem... sublimity." He specifies: "not elegance," which was a must in the Neo-classical tradition, but "the great;" not "grace but the gigantic loftiness" (1993:485). Johnson appreciates the

shock: "Milton can please when pleasure is required; but it is his peculiar power to astonish." This ability to stun the public, he qualifies as:

... the power of displaying the vast, illuminating the splendid, enforcing the awful, darkening the gloomy and aggravating the dreadful (1993:485).

The example of Milton was also a favorite of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1757). If the multi-dimensional "foe," "Accuser," "Tempter," "enemie" of *Paradise Lost* has "dignity" in Milton's "sublime portrait," Burke mocks accompanying drawings and illustrations of the figure of Satan because they delineate things too clearly.⁴⁴

Definitions -- delineations of the contours of an object or idea -- make the progeny of Hell look "little" and ludicrous; poetry deals the necessary blows by losing the reader. When reading *Paradise Lost*, "The mind is hurried out of itself by a croud of great and confused images which affect because they are crouded and confused" (1990:57).

⁴⁴ Clarity-obscurity in a work (literally and figuratively speaking) produce comprehension-incomprehension, which correspond to some degree of pleasure-pain in the public: But let it be considered that hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea (1990:58).

Across the series of oppositions triggered by form-formless, it is the negative term that Burke calls sublime.

Of course, the perennial debate of Poetry *versus* Painting is nothing new. The interesting point is that the excess in Poetry wins it the contest. The pseudo-Longinus' *Du Sublime* (presumably first century A.D.) attests that the notion was not foreign to the Greeks; but the tension, the systematic opposition between the sublime and the beautiful is modern. One feels, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, "*un épuisement du sens du beau*" (1988:115). Individuals can sit altogether comfortable in front of the beautiful object. The sublime is great not for being any bigger but because lack of definition pains and, by gradation, terrifies the mind: "The idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure" (1990:59).

As a surge of unassimilated (un-grasped) stimuli, pain exceeds *the pleasure principle* that, in Freudian terms, regulates psychic life. Instead of employing this normalizing principle by soothing the public, as aesthetic theory since the Greeks had always conceived its purpose to be -- the peaceful contemplation of beautiful models -- art is now required in some degree to traumatize its addressees; and that is where Burke puts the emphasis of modern Aesthetics, on the side of the addressee. Works which represent privations, and tragedies must certainly do so, are sublime to the highest degree: "All general privations are great, because they are all terrible [for the audience]; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence," to which, of

course, Burke elsewhere adds privation of life, Death (1990:65).

Under the influence of Burke, Kant (having established in his *Critique of the Pure Reason* (1781) that scientific pursuits had no possible access to *das Ding an sich*), acknowledges in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) the advantage of the aesthetic encounter with the sublime, it being accessible to any man of sensibility and taste. But the privilege is negative, does not give anything to know and, on the contrary, proves *in fine* the impossibility of representation.

In first approximation, there is beauty, Kant notes, as there is sublimity in natural objects and in their artistic imitation. "The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object," the full apprehension of which gives "satisfaction" to our judgment. "The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or *by the occasion of it*, boundlessness is represented." If I underline "by the occasion of it," it is because, *stricto sensu*, Kant denies the possibility of producing, in the mind or outside, a sensible representation of the boundless, i.e. the infinite. "We express ourselves incorrectly when we call any object of nature sublime" (1951:82). A stormy and vast scenery, a disaster at sea might evoke *the idea of the infinite*. But any phenomenon in nature, however grand, great, shocking, dark and terrifying, would have limits and

borders. Any representation of it would have a frame.⁴⁵ Building on sensations and bound as it is to the production of images, the imagination can only offer the idea "itself" indirectly and inadequately, suffering from its inborn incapacity to present *das Ding an sich*. This is where the "negative pleasure" of the sublime originates.⁴⁶ For Kant, "the sublime object" not only stretches but "does violence to the imagination" (83).

Lacoue-Labarthe summarizes the impassioned discussions recent renewal of interest in the concept has fostered by stating: "*Est sublime la présentation (de ceci) qu'il y a de l'imprésentable*" (1988:101). The "sublime object" (there is no such thing, strictly speaking) works as a sign of this radical fact (which is beyond facts) that there is a limit to representation. It indicates that there is a "place" (which is no place) where objects and their images are not possible anymore.

Now, I draw attention to the presence in *The Cenci* and in *Lorenzaccio* of such "sublime objects": strategically located, they function as dramatic devices aimed at shocking

⁴⁵ In his commentary on the *Analytic of the Sublime*, Derrida has a felicitous formula: "*Tandis que le beau a une limite par sa forme, le sublime, lui, se trouve dans "un objet sans forme" donnant à penser la totalité du sans-limite... l'infini ne se laisse pas border*" [his emphasis]. See, *La Vérité en Peinture* (1978:146).

⁴⁶ "...the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much involve a positive pleasure as admiration or respect, which rather deserves to be called negative pleasure" (83).

and, more precisely, at provoking anxiety in the public. My point is not that Shelley and Musset had digested Burke and Kant but that, one way or the other, their writings place them squarely in the aesthetic avant-garde of their time. We "believe" in objects, shapes, colors, Shelley wrote in a famous sonnet; but they are mere indulgence, projection and mimicry of what "we would" like to see. If we could "lift the painted veil" of this comfortable unreality, we would lose the beautiful with the veil, exchanging it for the terribly true sublime, that is, for the pain of seeing, of grasping no-thing underneath:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
 Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there
 And it but mimic all we would believe
 With colors idly spread, -- behind lurk Fear
 And Hope, twin Destinies, who ever weave
 Their shadows o'er the chasm, sightless and drear
 (1977:312).⁴⁷

At the dramatic center of *The Cenci*, in Act III, Beatrice insists on having "no image" of what takes place at the core of her being. After what we presume has been some act of sexual abuse by her father, she repeats that her mind cannot produce any image, nor her tongue express any word to designate the kind of meta-physical contamination that spreads *within*. All she can say is that she cannot say, precisely:

What are the words which you would have me speak?

⁴⁷ The complex figure of the "*painted veil*" is reproduced word for word in *Prometheus Unbound* (III,iv,190-192).

I, who can feign no image in my mind
 Of that which has transformed me: I, whose thought
 Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
In its own formless horror: of all words,
 That minister to mortal intercourse,
 Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell
 My misery; if another ever knew
 Aught like to it, she died as I will die,
 And left it, as I must, without a name
 (III,1,107-116).

The audience will never learn anything more specific about Beatrice's secret. Language is at a loss when it comes to the force that "has transformed" her. Undefinable, unimaginable and irrepresentable, her secret is hollow at the core. It can only stay secret, and this, generation after generation, since no woman who suffers such wrong will find an adequate name for it. As though it were a still-born child, she (any woman) will have to carry the secret into the grave.

The dramatic center of *The Cenci* and of *Lorenzaccio*, what I have called in the Introduction their *coup de théâtre*, consists in sublime figures that "lift the veil... idly spread" and inadequately but explicitly speak of what is everywhere and nowhere therein, at once present in every line and absent in every word: *the real*. Lorenzo's epicentral confession to Philippe Strozzi turns itself, as in a vortex, around the black hole of a sublime construct:

La main qui a soulevé une fois le voile de la vérité ne peut plus le laisser retomber; elle reste immobile jusqu'à la mort, tenant toujours ce voile terrible, et l'élevant de plus en plus au-dessus de la tête de l'homme, jusqu'à ce que

l'Ange du sommeil éternel lui bouche les yeux
(III,iii,203).

This oxymoron, the contradictory figure of an *apparent* veil lifted on a *real* absence, was of course not "original." Belonging to the tradition, it was, by the time Musset wrote, widespread in Romantic circles. Lacoue-Labarthe notes that the trope was circulated in the Germany of the late Aufklärung from the Schlegels to Hegel and Novalis (1988:98).⁴⁸ One may consider that it was well on its way to becoming a commonplace. In *Les Filles du Feu* (1854), Gérard de Nerval will revisit the *topos* one more time and, in a spirit very close to that of Musset, write:

O nature! O mère éternelle! Les mortels en sont-ils venus à repousser toute espérance et tout prestige, et, levant ton voile sacré, déesse de Saïs! le plus hardi de tes adeptes s'est-il donc trouvé face à face avec l'image de la Mort?
(1987:300).

In Musset, however, the figure acquires a dramatic function. In terms of the unfolding plot of *Lorenzaccio*, of what pertains to Lorenzo's secret scheme, the interview with Philippe Strozzi serves the purpose of dissuasion. Before moving to an intimate dialogue, Act III, scene iii starts with an open confrontation between the German soldiers and "*le peuple*" of Florence, leading to the arrest of Pierre and

⁴⁸ It is in Kant: "Perhaps nothing more sublime was ever said and no sublimer thought ever expressed than the famous inscription on the Temple of Isis (Mother Nature): 'I am all that is, that was and that shall be and no mortal has ever lifted my veil'" (1951:160).

Thomas Strozzi (193-4). Philippe had just rushed to reclaim his two sons and make a public statement against the tyranny of the Medici (ii,192). Crushed by the arrest, he sits down on the bench and mopes: "*J'ai beaucoup d'enfants, mais pas pour longtemps, cela va si vite*" (iii,194).

Lorenzo is not surprised by this violent turn of events. In the person of the Duke who is behind the arrest, power is as unpredictable as it is violent. With something like a condescending pat on the shoulder, Lorenzo advises Philippe: "*Rentrez chez vous, mon bon Monsieur... tenez-vous tranquille*" (197). He does not want the republican to act before he has personally eliminated the tyrant (199). To deter Strozzi from political agitation, Lorenzo repeats that action is dirty: "*Je connais la vie et c'est une vilaine cuisine, sois-en persuadé, ne mets pas la main là-dedans*" (201). To act is inevitably to plunge one's hands into muddy waters: "*Laisse-moi faire mon coup -- tu as les mains pures et moi, je n'ai rien à perdre*" (204).

In *Lorenzaccio*, the sublime figure of the veil lifted on the irrepresentable is therefore a *thought* destined to shock (amaze, paralyze) its addressee. Lorenzo lifts the veil, not merely on no-thing visible, but on the paradoxical notion that *there is, it happens that*, happens so long as the veil of common reality is *not* lifted. In *the real*, no-thing happens but blindness and death, if such a thing happens. To face the truth for Musset, to act and thus to

meet in person with the *nefas*, i.e with destruction, are one and the same thing: "*toucher au malheur, autrement dit à la vérité*" (Prose:246).

CHAPTER 3: TRADITIONS OF VIOLENCE

... Slaying is the word
It is a deed in fashion.

Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*)

The Still-Born

How to qualify the status of something which somehow exists without ever appearing as such in the light of day? There are creatures, artefacts, messages, social structures that exist somehow but stay latent, implicit, folded-up in obscurity. We cannot simply say that such things are dead. But how can they live half way between appearance and disappearance, without ever reaching their *telos*, their individuality, their destination?

We have read in Chapter 1 of Musset's sympathy for the struggling multitude of women who, about to achieve the status of human beings and express themselves, fell back into oblivion. The idea of disappearing without ever having really appeared, of dying even before being born haunts Musset. A recurrent scenario of anxiety -- let us call it the fantasy of the still-born -- structures his figures of speech. In a variation on the ever-present metaphor of the ocean, Musset describes common reality as a flimsy surface under which intrepid divers (the libertines) plunge one by

one to embrace the hard core of their own abominable truths and disappear. The chasm is deep enough to swallow every body and every thing without leaving the least trace on its surface: "*l'abîme engloutit bien des chutes silencieuses sans une ride à sa surface*" (Prose:150).⁴⁹ Whereas regular folks abide by appearances and cling to the surface of things, Musset's libertines disappear at the very moment when they are about to realize who they are; on the verge of achieving singularity and, in the full sense of the word, becoming themselves. They die, leaving behind no remnants, no tomb.

In the dark comedy whose title bears his name, Fantasio introduces language into the content of the trope. On the social plane people express trivial notions. They exchange what Mallarmé will ironically term the commercial aspect of things.⁵⁰ But if you were to look underneath the surface, inside each individual, you would find secret and exquisite ideas, an entire and singular world not quite born (undeveloped, not shared, unheard of), yet about to disappear:

⁴⁹ One variation makes explicit that what fascinates the divers is some personal trauma: "*La vérité, squelette des apparences, veut que tout homme vienne à son jour et à son heure toucher ces ossements éternels au fond de quelque plaie passagère*" (Prose:246).

⁵⁰ In *Crise de Vers* (1886), Mallarmé mocks the noise his contemporaries make: "*à chacun suffirait peut-être pour échanger la pensée humaine de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie*" (1945:368).

Hélas! tout ce que les hommes se disent entre eux se ressemble; les idées qu'ils échangent sont presque toujours les mêmes dans toutes les conversations; mais, dans l'intérieur de toutes ces machines isolées, quels replis, quels compartiments secrets! C'est tout un monde que chacun porte en lui! un monde ignoré qui naît et qui meurt en silence! Quelles solitudes que tous ces corps humains! (Theatre:108).

It is not rare for Musset's heroes to die infamously and uselessly, as though swallowed by an inexistence which ends-up reclaiming the whole of their lives. It is the fate of Célio in *Les Caprices de Marianne*; and of Lorenzo when, in Act V, scene vi, he is drowned by the mob in the Grand Canal of Venice. "*Quelle horreur!*" cries Philippe Strozzi at the news, "*Eh quoi! pas même un tombeau!*" -- no, not a trace of Lorenzo re-appears on the surface of the Canal (V,vi,202). With the restoration, in the next and last scene of the play, of the tyrannical *status quo ante* in Florence, not a sign of his "*sublime*" intention, his abyssal ideas, his awful torments nor, finally, his efficient tyrannicide, lingers on the surface of the present.

When Octave visits in *La Confession* his own secret "drawers" -- the silent world which, in him and with him, is destined to remain still-born -- the disorder he finds there only adds to the vexation. Octave has read a lot; he is curious about every "*nouveauté*" in Poetry or in Politics. Like Musset, he dabbles in Painting and in Music. But all this lays crammed inside without order; his mind is in ruins:

Je m'étais fait un grand magasin de ruines, jusqu'à ce qu'enfin, n'ayant plus soif à force de boire la nouveauté de l'inconnu, je m'étais trouvé une ruine moi-même (Prose:89).

We know the attraction that the melancholy spectacle of ruins had for the Romantics. In *Frankenstein*, Mary's monster reads Plutarch's *Lives*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Volney's *Ruins of Empire* (1963:114). The ruins of the past have to do with the eclecticism of the present. Octave compares his full but formless mind to the fashionable apartments of the day:

... où se trouve rassemblés et confondus des meubles de tous les temps et de tous les pays... l'antique, le gothique, le goût de la Renaissance, celui de Louis XIII, tout est pêle-mêle (idem).

As never before, the Romantics felt the massive presence of the past, of History. Immense systems of philosophy, such as Hegel's, swept through civilizations. One read them, however, with the feeling, Hegelian indeed, of having reached the end of time. Traditions were available in all their diversity, which lay equally heavy and dead at one's feet. Whether on the level of the individual mind, or on that of an entire generation (Musset strictly superimposes the two scales) what was lacking for the proper birth of a modern humanity was a principle of order, which could only arise from the present as the mark or "stamp" of its originality:

Notre siècle n'a point de formes. Nous n'avons imprimé le cachet de notre temps ni à nos maisons, ni à nos jardins, ni à quoi que ce soit... Nous

avons de tous les siècles, hors du nôtre, chose qui n'a jamais été vue à une autre époque: l'éclectisme est notre goût... en sorte que nous ne vivons que de débris, comme si la fin du monde était proche (idem).

In spite of Octave's melancholy and apocalyptic vision, and notwithstanding his own anxious fantasy of belonging to a still-born generation, Musset put his mark on the history of tragedy; and so did Shelley. The advantage of living at the end of time was that the artistic contribution of any given moment deserved as much credit as any other. The good side of accessibility was a certain freedom from critical dogmas regarding tragedy. The crowd they wanted to address cared above all for the new; and as newcomers themselves in the business of theater, Shelley and Musset felt under no obligation to continue any specific tradition.

They picked and chose from the tragic traditions whatever suited their purpose. The result is two highly syncretic and idiosyncratic tragedies. Together they constitute a unique achievement, going *beyond* Shakespeare and Webster as they come *after* Sophocles, Seneca and Racine; a Romantic tragedy that revisits the Classical models and contradicts as well facile tendencies within Romanticism.

Choices

Among the literary influences legible in Shelley's and Musset's tragedies, we may want to distinguish those

consciously assumed from those they were hardly aware of. How can one free oneself from what is too familiar, too close? According to Hölderlin, it is much more difficult for an artist to gain consciousness of what is close to home (*heimlich*) than of what is foreign (*fremde*).⁵¹ We will see in this chapter that Shelley and Musset, each in his own way, gained freedom from the tragic tradition(s) found at home by borrowing from the foreign. Nevertheless, French critics hear in Musset more of Molière, Corneille and Racine than he would have thought. Milton's stunning English was on Shelley's mind when he wrote *The Cenci*. Especially in the mouths of Cenci and Beatrice, Shelley's involved tirades sound like the difficult poetry of his predecessor. Musset read English and knew of *Paradise Lost*, if only through Chateaubriand, who admired in Milton the character of Satan, "*une des conceptions les plus sublimes... qui soit sorties du cerveau d'un poète*" (1966:333). But Musset, a measure freer than Shelley by his linguistic distance, could more freely adapt from Milton what he wanted to.

Shelley and Musset read the same great tragedies, for there were as few specimens alive in their time as in any. They shared first-hand study of the Greeks. Since they were born and educated after 1790, we can expect from both a

⁵¹ *On the Translations of Sophocles* (1988:245).

preference for Sophocles among the Greek tragedians, and for Antigone among Sophocles' characters.⁵²

They read Seneca with rare sympathy, whose dramas, though not performed on the contemporary stage, brought interesting solutions to the modern question of tragedy. The Roman playwright had re-staged the stories of the Greek heroes Oedipus, Thyestes and Phaedra as if the objective confrontations between gods and men had happened inside isolated characters, on a subjective stage which allowed for frightening amplifications and distortions. The reflective pose in Seneca, the intimate cruelty, the self-directed violence and the rhetoric of horror worked hand-in-hand to plunge the drama into the darkest night of the soul.

Shelley and Musset were interested in these rhetorical excesses (and rhetorics of excess). The question of the stageability of such an inward drama, which had bothered many over the centuries, did not diminish their

⁵² Steiner writes: "Between 1790 and 1905 it was widely held by European poets, philosophers, scholars that Sophocles' *Antigone* was... the finest of Greek tragedies" (1986:2). In a letter to John Gisborn in October 1821, Shelley confesses: "You are right about Antigone -- how sublime a picture of a woman! And what think you of the chorus's and especially the lyrical complaints of the godlike victim? -- and the menace of Tiresias & their rapid fulfilment? Some of us have in a prior existence been in love with Antigone & that makes us find no full content in any mortal tie" (Letters, II, 668).

admiration.⁵³ Neither could have written, as would T.S. Eliot a century later, that Seneca's tragedies were "curious freaks of non-theatrical dramas" giving them "nothing to see" (1932:55). On the contrary, they probably considered that in an age already cynical about mythology and religious belief, Seneca had meant his readers-spectators to witness what most mattered -- secrets -- where it mattered most -- inside the character. Since their irreverent (this time post-Christian) and irreligious (in the sense of unorthodox) intention was to bring the dramatic focus to bear on the human psyche, Seneca's theater offered a valuable and enduring, though problematic, precedent.

It would be remiss not to mention at this point someone who had long since assimilated the reflective dimension of Seneca, Shakespeare. Hamlet's favorite pose was that of introspection. Coleridge had loved the attendant solitude and inaction, what he cleverly pointed to as Hamlet's "retiring from reality:"

This admirable and consistent character, deeply acquainted with his own feelings, painting them with such wonderful power and accuracy, and firmly persuaded that a moment ought not to be lost in executing the solemn charge committed to him, still yields to the same retiring from reality.

⁵³ Stuart Curran quotes Mary who notes in her *Journal*, May 1815: "Shelley reads Seneca every day and all day" (1970:246). In *De la Tragedie*, Musset does not forget Seneca when he lists the few great masters in the genre. Whereas tragedy was "*adoucie par Euripide*," he states, it was "*énervée par Sénèque*," given some nerve and, I suppose, punching power by Seneca (Prose:892).

which is the result of having, what we express by the terms, a world within himself (1933:378).

The first generation of English Romantic poets had rediscovered Shakespeare and used his every verse as a weapon against what they thought were two centuries of Neo-classical control over literature. We find a parallel pattern in France. For Stendhal in *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823) as for Hugo in *Préface à Cromwell* (1827), the proving ground of Romantic doctrine was not lyrical poetry but the drama; and, more specifically, that flexible, complex but wholesome form in which Shakespeare had excelled, the historical tragedy.

At war against the reductive "tyrannie" of the three unities, the decorum and the severe style which had been particularly dear to the French Neo-classicists, Hugo and Stendhal modelled the modern tragedy on Shakespeare. Musset heard the lesson. Leaving aside "le goût épuré [simplified, idealized] *de Racine*," preferring "le génie indépendant [free, varied] *de Shakespeare*," he produced a play in which the beautiful is displaced by a relentless concentration on the great and on the grotesque (Prose:899).⁵⁴ *Lorenzaccio* is complex in plot-structure, multiple in style and in

⁵⁴ In his *Préface*, Hugo wrote: "C'est de la féconde union du type grotesque au type sublime que naît le génie moderne, si complexe, si varié, si inépuisable dans ses créations, et bien opposé en cela à l'uniforme simplicité du génie antique" (1963:417). Defined as "le difforme et l'horrible," Hugo's grotesque falls under the concept of the sublime (see, previous chapter).

character, and nimble to an extreme when it comes to the representation of space. Its action and its passions unfold over more than a week's time, yet it maintains one purpose throughout by exposing "*les causes et les effets*" of one single failure.

Although it is difficult to establish how much Musset knew of it, we cannot forget the Jacobean contribution, for it indicated what serious drama could become after Shakespeare. The word "experimentation," with its ring of calculated risk and probing difficulties, appropriately describes two tragedies of John Webster, *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). As the first title suggests, ambiguity is paramount in Webster. Bosola, the personified devil in *The Duchess of Malfi* ends-up defending goodness at a moment when he has already cheated most of the characters, including the beautiful, sensitive and romantic Duchess out of their lives. Webster's vision is bleak and bloody even by Elizabethan standards; but more unsettling perhaps is the constant shifting of perspective, some critics say "indirection," that renders moral resolution of his plays problematic. T.S. Eliot was not mistaken when he described him as a "literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos."⁵⁵ It seems to me that Shelley and Musset

⁵⁵ Quoted by René Weis in his *Introduction to four of Webster's dramas* (1996:9).

share Webster's intention to baffle understanding, to lose the audience in un-ending reflections and equally unpleasant conclusions.⁵⁶ Rejections, condemnations, long delays in critical and popular reception have beset their great tragic dramas, while growing curiosity and recent reconsiderations have saved them for the present. Seneca's plays have, in fact, suffered the same fate.⁵⁷ I will discuss in Chapter 7: The Difficulty of Representation, the strange history of the reception -- or rather, the irreception -- of *The Cenci* and of *Lorenzaccio*.

Good Influence and the Obscene Within

Many critics -- Steiner, for instance, in *The Death of Tragedy* -- have considered the presence of Shakespeare in *Lorenzaccio* troubling; have found the Elizabethan tradition in *The Cenci* altogether obtrusive. They have argued that Romantic drama is worthless because it is derivative of

⁵⁶ Weis writes of Webster: "both the moral attitude and the artistic unity of his plays [are] difficult to define... But it is precisely their dramatic construction which has attracted critical scrutiny, and increasingly vindication, during the second half of the twentieth century" (1996:9).

⁵⁷ After the extraordinary favor it received in Elizabethan England, the theater of Seneca disappeared for centuries. It did not quite "drop dead," as E.F. Watling puts it, but survived underground and was studied by rare readers, until it was resurrected after World War II. It is presently undergoing a sweeping reevaluation. See Watling's *Introduction* (1966:26).

Shakespeare and Webster and lives, at best, under their shadow.⁵⁸ I would oppose this view. To start with, if overwhelming influence there was, we should expect it to have weighed more directly on the British than on the French tragedian. Yet, Musset's thirty-eight scenes, several plots, diversity of style and multitude of characters are quite close to the Shakespearean historical tragedy; closer, in any case, than Shelley's spare sets, economy of scenes, "simple" plot-line, rudimentary situations involving few characters in stark opposition -- features which are reminiscent of Greek tragedy. Of course, this does not mean that Shelley was not *under the influence* of Shakespeare; only that he had to make more of an effort than Musset to avoid the powerful example of his predecessor.

Another difference in influences consciously accepted is evidenced by their respective treatments of violence: each reacted against what the national school had, in this respect, advocated, if not dictated. Shelley did not imitate the displays of violence fashionable in Elizabethan tragedies, particularly in the kind of revenge tragedy of which *The Cenci* is the Romantic cousin, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *The Duchess of Malfi*. Reacting for his part to French Neo-classicism and taking his license from

⁵⁸ Steiner goes so far as to write of "the abdication of the romantic poets from their own voice and living speech" (1961:149).

Shakespearean precedent, Musset allowed relatively more violence to appear on his stage. The killing of Alexandre may be, as we saw in Chapter 1, neat, bloodless and more efficient in *Lorenzaccio* than it is in Varchi and Sand; but the fact is that Lorenzo strikes Alexandre with his sword in full view of the spectators (IV,xi). Several times, German mercenaries control the people of Florence with their "*piques*" and clash with the crowd: e.g. "*les soldats repoussent le peuple, qui leur jette des cailloux*" (III,iii,194). From the Nasi Palace where a ball ends, one hears laughters and shouts; bottles fall on the shoulders of the riders below, whose horses (live horses!) are then supposed to break into a galop (I,ii,146). In preparation for the killing of the Duke which, we are made to suspect, will happen in his bedroom, Lorenzo "*fait des armes*" with Scoronconcolo. This mock-fight generates much noise and delirious violence; Lorenzo's sole reasonable explanation is that he needs to accustom his neighbors so that they will not send the alarm when the serious fight occurs (III,i).

In order to measure the freedom Musset was taking with such stage-actions, one should remember that in France the rules of *bienséance* had been so strict that Corneille had to justify in the *Examen* of 1660 the famous "*soufflet*" old Don Diègue received in *Le Cid*. Musset thought that Racine's tragedies, despite their beauties of language, no longer

filled the stage. They were like splendid objects of art frozen in the immobility of a museum:

Et d'où vient maintenant qu'au théâtre, les tragédies de Racine, toutes magnifiques qu'elles sont, paraissent froides par instant, et même d'une froideur bizarre, comme de belles statues à demi animées?... Ne serait-il pas temps de prouver que la tragédie est autre chose qu'une statue qui déclame...? (Prose:897 and 901).

Lorenzaccio requires a constant animation from the actors. Its varied and animated diction breaks with the regular cadence of Alexandrines. It calls for movements in the mise-en-scene which were unheard-of, presenting staging difficulties that only the best directors working in the most modern theater-houses after World War II would overcome.

There are bursts of violence in Musset which could not have breached Shelley's immaculate stage, despite the horrors for which *The Cenci* is (in)famous. Cenci vituperates on stage; he hurls execrable curses; speaks of abominations. But for all the abuse and inner torment Beatrice's speeches strive to exhibit and define, her body stays untouched. As noticed a propos of the Trial scene, it is the servant Marzio who is "warped," forced to confess in her stead participation in the crime. But Marzio's torture is relegated to the wings: "*Judge. Drag him away to torments...*" (V,ii,160). On the stage of *The Cenci*, exactly as in front of the *skene*, on the high platform of the

proscenium where masked actors declaimed in ancient Greek, violence occurs nowhere else than in language.

Playing on the word, Ana Vicentini has regrouped under the category of the "ob-scene" (*ob-skene*) things and actions that could not be shown to the Greek audience, but had to be reported, usually by messengers coming ostensibly from behind the *skene*:

... murders (sometimes also called sacrifice), suicides, adulteries, incest, treason, abductions, wars... events which form the core of the tragic fabula (1997:103).⁵⁹

To this prohibition, Aristotle added in his *Poetics* a series of commendations regarding the high style and diction, the serious tone appropriate to tragedy. Since then, the question of what may be staged versus what should only be suggested, and in which kind of language, has always been at the heart of critical debate concerning the genre.

While the French Academy was at work explaining and tightening Aristotle's *Poetics*, the British playwrights, competing as they were with each other for the favors of the public, felt the contrary urge to accumulate "obscenities" on stage. Shakespeare and Webster exacerbated the Elizabethan tendency to show violence. In the gruesome and

⁵⁹ Vicentini gives the definition of the adjective "obscene" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Something offensively or repulsively indecent, esp. by offending accepted sexual morality." She adds: "The obscene is endowed with the power to offend the moral well-being of a certain group, that is, to destabilise certain codes or norms of social behavior" (1997:99).

unrelenting *Titus Andronicus* (1594), the young and inexperienced (some critics write "experimental") Shakespeare cuts his characters in pieces.⁶⁰ Children's truncated members are exchanged as gifts and tokens of peace between their parents. The chaste, proud and beautiful Lavinia stands "ravished" on stage after a rape, her tongue "cut out," her hands "cut off," her entire body made the visible emblem of the "wilderness of tigers," the unrestrained violence that invaded decadent Rome (II,iv and III,i,54).

Titus Andronicus can be seen as an extreme case in the British theater. Generally considered imperfect, it waited until the Twentieth Century for critics to take it seriously.⁶¹ However, Walter Benjamin's study in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* shows that Shakespeare's early tragedy was not unique in this regard. The staging of the obscene (mangled, cut) body, emblem of the progress of death, dominates the German Baroque theater. As opposed to the "Aesthetics of reticence" that characterized ancient tragedies, there is in modern European tragedies, Benjamin writes, a propensity to "mime" or allegorize violence, to

⁶⁰ For example, Eugene Waith, in his *Introduction* (1994:63)

⁶¹ Waith notes: "Recognition of its merits and of its close ties with other works by Shakespeare was slow to come. It has been more characteristic of the twentieth than of preceding centuries" (1994:1).

have it inhabit the center of an "Aesthetics of ostentation" (1977:117-119).

What is important for us is that Shelley thought highly of *Titus Andronicus*. In a letter to Peacock, he compares it to (no less than) Michelangelo's *The Day of Judgement* (Letters, II, 81). This admiration, expressed during the year he worked on *The Cenci*, did not compel him, however, to follow Shakespeare's unabashed show of violence. Lavinia's rape contrasts sharply with (Shelley's depiction of) Beatrice's.

Place Lavinia's cut-up body next to Beatrice's unassaulted physical presence: Beatrice's forms are beautiful from the beginning to the end, whereas Lavinia's body "speaks" for her condition (she says nothing from Act II, scene iv of *Titus Andronicus* and on to the end, having no tongue left to speak). Beatrice abundantly describes, not so much the wrong she has suffered as its *real* effects spreading inside her mind, eating away at her very being. Having interiorized Lavinia's outrage, Beatrice exhibits spiritual formlessness. She repeats that there is "no word" capable of producing a definite idea of *her* horror; yet she struggles to verbalize a metaphysical and irrepresentable violence.

This is why, far from imitating the open displays of violence characteristic of the golden age of English theater, Shelley opts for the distant restraint of the

Greeks. It is not only that "a dry exhibition" of the Cenci saga would be "insupportable" for his audience, as he states in the *Preface* (Poems,II,70). Shelley distinctly prefers that the obscene be told, reflected *in* language; confusion, violence, horror put off-stage but re-appearing, threatening the stability (the sanity) of the character *from within* the psyche better conforms to his theater of anxiety.

After and before the facts, which remain a matter of endless and therefore anxious guessing on our part as well, Beatrice reflects on *her* traumatic encounters with her father. What happened "in reality" between Cenci and his daughter does not concern Shelley, who wants, as we know, "to make apparent" to his audience "the most secret caverns" of *her* heart (Poems,II,69). Beatrice carries on stage the ravages of her tattered *ego*, the smells of her contaminated self, just as Lorenzo exposes on stage the vertigo of his split identity. In *The Cenci*, the obscene, irrepresentable "things" around which tragedy has revolved since its origins, happen right in front of the spectator, under (so to speak) his and her very nose, though they are screened, deferred, referred to by language. Shelley thought that the most dramatic display and best vehicle of anxiety is to be found in a linguistics of indirection. His syncretic drama succeeds in placing violence at once on center stage and in the abyss of invisibility *within* the isolated subject.

Lorenzo's Desire

Shakespearean by deliberate choice and strategy, Musset adapts to his needs, not only Hamlet's "retiring from reality," but also and mostly the conspiratorial mood of *Julius Caesar*.

Lorenzo compares himself and is compared by others several times in the course of *Lorenzaccio* to Brutus.⁶² The name recurs in the interview of Act III.⁶³ However, as Weis wrote of Webster, Musset aggravates the tragic vision he found in the master. The French playwright renders impossible any positive conclusion to his play by undoing the last (and least) glimmer of hope left in the English masterpiece. He works at "a deliberate deconstruction of the pious side of Shakespeare's achievement" (1996:14).

Let us briefly compare the ends of the tragic heroes in *Lorenzaccio* and in *Julius Caesar*. In the last scene of the latter, the defeated conspirator Brutus, who has just committed suicide, is given personal tributes and honors of state by his enemies:

⁶² Already in Act II, scene iv, Lorenzo asks his aunt Catherine: "*Lis-moi l'histoire de Brutus*" (175).

⁶³ Lorenzo confesses to Philippe, "*Quand j'ai commencé mon rôle de Brutus moderne, je marchais dans mes habits neufs de la grande confrérie du vice, comme un enfant de dix ans dans l'armure d'un géant de la fable.*" Philippe hails him: "*Tu es notre Brutus, si tu dis vrai*" (III,iii,200-2).

Antony

This was the noblest Roman of them all...
 He only, in general honest thought,
And common good to all, made one of them...

Octavius

According to his virtue let us use him,
 With all respect and rites of burial (V.v,69-78)

The instigator of civil strife in Rome is finally the one who reunites the Romans around his corpse. In his brilliant book on Shakespeare, René Girard wrote: "Someone had to end up carved as a dish fit for some god, and Brutus is the one, sacrificed to the very god [Caesar] whom he had refused to worship" (1991:221). At the end of this "happy day" (last words), the republican leader of a failed conspiracy against the would-be emperor becomes the founding hero of the new scheme of things in the Roman Empire.

To Philippe's dismay, Lorenzo does not even leave a corpse behind. At the end of Act V, Lorenzo is surrounded by the mob, but the ensuing violence is not redeemed by political and religious acknowledgements. Not only does Lorenzo disappear without leaving a trace on the seamless surface of the political status quo; but this atheist can, with bitter irony, scoff in advance at his annihilation from this world and beyond. Seconds before the servant Pippo brings news of his drowning, Lorenzo retorts to Philippe, who had advised him to hide and flee Italy:

*Si je sortais de l'Italie, je serais bientôt sonné
 à son de trompe dans toute l'Europe, et à ma mort,
 le bon Dieu ne manquera pas de faire placarder ma*

condamnation éternelle dans tous les carrefours de l'immensité (V,vi,250).

His sacrifice at the hands of the crowd will serve no purpose, unless one considers that the community of the living finds some sort of implicit, awkward, unspoken reconciliation around the very forgetting and disappearance of all that the name of Lorenzo stood for, even around the disappearance of his disappearance. In Girardian terms, the sacrificial mechanism, already quite twisted, mocked and exposed in Shakespeare, no longer works and itself has to be forgotten, repressed, swallowed by the deep. The book closed or the curtain drawn, Lorenzo's end will remain for us ignominious, unjustified, purposeless violence.

The rapprochement between Lorenzo and Hamlet has been made. It seems obvious; a little too obvious perhaps not to harbor an essential difference. Both are one step removed from power, to which they could pretend by birth. Driven by "*une même quête de la pureté de l'enfance et un profond désarroi devant la sexualité,*" as Marcel Ricci puts it in his comparative article, they are horrified by the ambient sexual degradation, especially when it comes from women (1994:120). They share the secret decision to kill, in the tyrant of the state, a close parent. They hope in so doing to purify themselves, their people and their country (or city-state).

Their initial motives to act, however, come from different places. Suffering the pains of Hell, the Ghost of his father appears to Hamlet in "a questionable shape" (I,iv,22). He reveals obscene secrets and, father to son, calls for revenge. In terms familiar to us, Lorenzo remembers the inspiration that sealed his destiny as an electrical shock visiting him in the middle of the night among the ruins of the Coliseum in Rome. It is from within his own self that the Unknown addresses Lorenzo:

Pendant vingt ans de silence, la foudre s'est amoncelée dans ma poitrine; et il faut que ce soit réellement une étincelle du tonnerre, car tout à coup, une certaine nuit que j'étais assis dans les ruines du Colisée antique, je ne sais pourquoi je me levai; je tendis vers le ciel mes bras trempés de rosée, et je jurai qu'un des tyrans de ma patrie mourrait de ma main (III,iii, 198-199).

Lorenzo assumes a voice which compels him to kill "un des tyrants" of his country. It is not for reasons of personal need or ambition, nor of domestic wrong, as was the case for Hamlet, that Lorenzo must eliminate a tyrant. The closer Lorenzo gets to the date assigned for the murder, the more he recognizes with a strange foreboding or uncanny feeling that, given his doubts about the republican insurrection, he has no clear or rational motive whatsoever to eliminate *this* tyrant. Whereas Hamlet has every reason in the world to kill Claudius but procrastinates, Lorenzo finds fewer and

fewer reasons to kill Alexandre but never wastes a chance to bring his plot to fruition.⁶⁴

Lorenzo reminds me of Brutus who, in *Julius Caesar*, admits: "for my part,/ I know no personal cause to spurn at him [Caesar],/ But for the general: he would be crowned" (II,i,10-2). But it is doubtful whether "the general... cause" alone would be sufficient to push or force Lorenzo into action, since he disdainfully deems the people of Florence unworthy of his efforts.

Nonsensical in its wording, his inspiration was nonetheless traumatically intense and violently intrusive, giving birth, in effect, to a new Lorenzo:

Pour comprendre l'exhaltation fiévreuse qui a enfanté en moi le Lorenzo qui te parle, il faudrait que mon cerveau et mes entrailles fussent à nu sous un scalpel. Une statue qui descendrait de son piedestal pour marcher parmi les hommes sur la place publique, serait peut-être semblable à ce que j'ai été, le jour où j'ai commencé à vivre avec cette idée: il faut que je sois un Brutus (III,iii,199).

A demand coming from some anonymous Other and addressed to one's singular being in total disregard of one's needs, motivations and reasons -- such is Lacan's definition of

⁶⁴ "Que m'avait fait cet homme?" Lorenzo wonders, "Quand je pose la main sur mon coeur et que je réfléchis, -- qui donc m'entendra dire demain: 'Je l'ai tué,' sans me répondre: 'Pourquoi l'as-tu tué?' Cela est étrange" (IV,iii,219). Later, Philippe will ask Lorenzo why he did not take advantage of his crime by showing the corpse of the tyrant to the people: "Pourquoi n'es-tu pas sorti la tête du duc à la main? Le peuple t'aurait suivi comme son sauveur et son chef" (V,ii,242). Lorenzo never had such ambition.

desire. For instance, in his *Séminaire X* on Anxiety, Lacan says: "*Ce quelque chose qui est un désir, c'est-à-dire une demande qui ne concerne aucun besoin, ni ne concerne rien d'autre que mon être même*" (1962-63:204). Lorenzo does not understand the fever that takes hold and transforms him: "*il m'est impossible de dire comment cet étrange serment s'est fait en moi*" (III,iii,199). Furthermore, his desire is supported by a signifier whose associations are unconscious. He is apparently unaware of a vexing ambiguity in his identification with Brutus. He repeats: "*Il faut que je sois un Brutus*" -- but which one? The one whose triumphant story Lorenzo asks Catherine to read in Livy, this Brutus who, by avenging Lucretia and killing Tarquin the Superb, founded the Republic in Rome; or the other Brutus, the one whose disastrous story inspired Shakespeare, the republican who, four hundred years later, would crown a dynasty of Emperors by killing Caesar and dying ignominiously? Commentators have noticed that this ambiguity is permanent.⁶⁵ Lorenzo is tragically split by identification with two contradictory narratives. At the time he enthusiastically received the shock of inspiration, even when the new Lorenzo came to life, the signifier "Brutus" already inscribed in the Other his failure. Playing on this

⁶⁵ Simon Jeune quotes Bernard Masson, who remarks: "*Chaque citation de Brutus renvoie à l'un ou à l'autre, selon les exigences du contexte*" (Theatre:1020). But is it sufficient to leave the ambiguity at that?

name is a subtle way for Musset to insinuate that his tragic hero, caught in the self-defeating spiral of his own desire, is doomed.

Unlike Hamlet's, Lorenzo's calling has no apparent objective origin. He has no obligation but to himself: "*J'ai voulu être grand*" (III,iii,199). The growing horror he experiences and struggles to contain as his project develops is also subjective. There is no Rozencrantz or Guildenstern, no Polonius or Laertes in *Lorenzaccio*. While gathering the elements of his scheme, Lorenzo fights with nobody but himself.⁶⁶ As he explains to Philippe, the only meaning he can give to his dutiful, secretive and somewhat compulsive scheme is that it might keep him in touch with his former innocence and halt the progress of corruption which, visible on his face, is devouring his being from within:

Philippe

Si tu crois que c'est un meurtre inutile à ta patrie, pourquoi le commets-tu?...

Lorenzo

Veux-tu donc que je sois un spectre et qu'en frappant sur ce squelette (il frappe sa poitrine) il n'en sorte aucun son? Si je suis l'ombre de moi-même, veux-tu donc que je rompe le seul fil

⁶⁶ He battles his own disgust at serving the pleasures of Alexandre: "*Pour plaire à mon cousin, il fallait arriver à lui, porté par les larmes des familles; pour devenir son ami, et acquérir sa confiance, il fallait baiser sur ses lèvres épaisses tous les restes de ses orgies*" (III,iii,200).

*qui rattache aujourd'hui mon coeur à mon coeur
d'autrefois? Songes-tu que ce meurtre, c'est tout
ce qui me reste de ma vertu?* (III.iii. 204-205)
[stage direction by Musset].

Inspecting the empty "world within," Lorenzo suffers in his own self the pains of hell. He *is* the specter or Ghost of *Lorenzaccio*. There you have a radical aggravation of Hamlet's situation. The French playwright further interiorizes the plight of the tragic hero, whose "retiring from reality" is more thorough than it is in Shakespeare. We do not, Musset implies, have to meditate, like Hamlet, about "the undiscovered country" of a future death "from whose bourn/ No traveller returns": the route to no return is open inside, deep down in the Romantic *ego* (III.i,80).

Depicting a political and personal crisis in a world without after-world and without future, Musset finally eliminates any lingering sign of positive outcome. Lorenzo does not receive the honors of a "soldier," borne by "four captains" as was Hamlet *post-mortem*. Nobody arrives to count the dead, clean the bloody stage and ask men to "speak loudly for him" (V.ii,348-353). The present will have sucked all the debris and memory of events under its surface by the time another Duke, Côme de Médicis, reads his official document in the cold distance (and silence) that surrounds tyrannical power.⁶⁷ The solitude of Musset's

⁶⁷ Musset spells this out in one stage direction: "*On entend Côme parler dans l'éloignement*" (V.vii,252).

hero is more disturbingly complete than Shakespeare's ever was.

Bad Influence and False Originality

Shelley and Musset faced the daunting prospect of working after Shakespeare. The possibility of failure was inherent to the task. There is a long sentence in *A Defense* where "spark," "burning atom" and "unextinguished thought" coexist. Beyond what critics report of the biographical fact that he and his wife had lost two infants during the years 1818-1820, this passage attests to a specifically textual anxiety that Shelley shared with Musset -- the anxious fantasy of the still-born work:

[In the Poet each word] is a spark, a burning atom of unextinguished thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning that has yet found no conductor (1977:500).

Musset was perhaps freer than Shelley, but both had to emulate Shakespeare. The "genius" in them took from Shakespeare, whose linguistic, yet *real* electricity, had "impregnated" them in the first place. But how is one to avoid giving birth to a work "covered in the ashes of [its] birth," in other words, to a still-born play? What is a living tragedy? What does it take for an author not to "lie" dead with the crowd of those whose "spark" never ignited for lack of an adequate means of communication

("conductor")? It would probably take another crowd, the living. It would require addressees disposed to accept and answer the address, the anxious message of art Shelley and Musset thought fit to send their contemporaries in an age of vertiginously expanding sciences, techniques and industries.

I am quite ready to admit a certain degree of self-consciousness in Shelley, who, after all, wrote a five act tragedy in blank verse when, as Steiner points out, "English blank verse seemed to carry the mark of Shakespeare in its marrow" (1961:150). Blindly following his predecessor, it seems, Shelley even spells words (e.g. "Thou... 'Tis") in a fashion that was already obsolete. This only rendered *The Cenci* more problematic, and contributed to delaying until after World War II its reception by the literate, Shelleyans included. Musset's tragic French prose was never burdened, buried ("covered in the ashes of [its] birth") by such a direct and deadly influence.

Shelley and Musset owed it to their time, their people and their "genius" to equal or surpass Shakespeare. Neither was quite young enough to believe that one could, in an age of originality at all costs, be original by forgetting the tradition(s). One received "inspiration" from the master(s). The corresponding verb is reflexive in French; its indirect object is another subject: *s'inspirer de (quelqu'un)*. Upset by the "Romantic" clichés of his critics concerning imitation, Musset puts this bluntly in the *Avant-*

Propos to Un Théâtre dans un Fauteuil (1834), the general heading under which, in the absence of performance, he at least published his best plays, including *Lorenzaccio*:

Autrefois il y avait des maîtres dans les arts, et on ne pensait pas se faire tort, quand on avait vingt-deux ans, en imitant et en étudiant les maîtres... Oter aux jeunes gens la permission de s'inspirer, c'est refuser au génie la plus belle fleur de sa couronne (Theatre:6).

PART TWO

THE SECRET AND THE ACTION

C'est au théâtre surtout qu'on sent la puissance de ces appels faits par le génie... dans cette multitude de spectateurs, dans ces acteurs qui vont et viennent, dans toutes ces pensées, il semble qu'il n'y ait qu'une pensée unique et un seul homme qui parle à un autre homme.

Musset (*Sur le Théâtre*)

the living. It is vital, he adds, that the truth about life be concealed under a "familiar" veil. If we were to face directly the "mystery of our being," anxiety in us would grow so dangerously intense as to threaten our survival:

It is well that we are thus shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions [of the observer] (1977:475).

In *La Confession*, Octave makes as explicit as he can the connection between irrepresentability and the release of anxiety:

... quand la pensée, tournant sur elle-même, s'est épuisée à se creuser, lasse d'un travail inutile, elle s'arrête épouvantée. Il semble que l'homme soit vide, et qu'à force de descendre en lui il arrive à la dernière marche d'une spirale. Là, comme au sommet des montagnes, comme au fond des mines, l'air manque, et Dieu défend d'aller plus loin (Prose:253).

In the claustrophobic depths of sweaty mines as at the top of breezy mountains, but always in confronting itself, there inevitably comes a point where the subject cannot go further. To avoid falling into its own void it must stop. Not only is there no way out after that "*dernière marche*;" not only is it impossible to proceed because already "*l'air manque*;" but religion and morality prohibit going any further. Anxiety sounds the alarm: before reaching that impossible place of lack; at one step removed from the void, "*la pensée s'arrête épouvantée*."

Octave's vision derives from a passage in De Quincey, whom Musset knew well, for he had published in 1828 -- it was his first literary achievement -- a translation of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821).¹ In order to explain his anxious opium-induced nightmares, De Quincey recalls the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778):

Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except in the depth below.

Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes and behold a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss (1971:106).

De Quincey loves the fantastically multiplied figure of "poor Piranesi" getting the more minuscule the farther into the distance he recedes, yet remaining always one step removed from utter disappearance. De Quincey warns his readers that this perception of *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Prisons of Imagination) is not his own but came from a friend, Coleridge: "I describe only from memory of Mr Coleridge's account" (*idem*). The major Romantics were especially interested in the metaphorical and pictorial evocation of what triggers anxiety in the subject *par*

¹ *L'Anglais Mangeur d'Opium* is in *Prose*:3-64.

excellence: the approach of the void, the near presence of the lack, the teasing proximity of the abyss.

Let us place De Quincey's/Coleridge's description and Musset's adaptation alongside the sublime constructions we have gathered so far. What distinguishes these sublime figures from others among the tropes traditionally listed and discussed by rhetoric? With Lacoue-Labarthe, I have defined the sublime figure as the indirect presentation (the sign) in language of this, that there is a "something" (it is not a thing) which evades language. The sublime textual construct registers the proximity of an excess or surplus; it accumulates the metaphors that indicate either *too much* presence, too compact a real to be articulated in language or, on the contrary, *not enough*.

In a sense, all the figures of speech confront the ordinarily undetectable fact that language has limits. Aristotle's definition of metaphor -- "the application to one thing of an alien name belonging to another thing" -- was soon to become (by synecdoche?) a classical definition of the trope in general (1965:61). And why do we use "an alien name" to refer to something, if not because the "proper name" does not signify the quality we intend to manifest in that referent?² The characteristically sublime

² Vicentini quotes Quintilian who, in the *Institutio Oratoria*, observed: "We call figurative the term employed when we give our language a conformation [*conformatio*] other than the obvious or the ordinary." Vicentini concludes that "The figure can be situated at the limits of language, where it performs a pulsatory movement between what is possible and impossible to be said, between the representable and the irrepresentable" (1997:17-18).

figure, however, does not require rhetoricians and linguists to make explicit that language has limits which it ceaselessly attempts to overcome; it wears the limit so to speak on its sleeve, explicitly inscribing the failure of language to surpass its limit. Ever since Longinus launched the minor tradition that grew around the word, says Lacoue-Labarthe, "*l'enjeu du sublime aura toujours été la présentation du méta-physique comme tel*" (1988:99). However sporadic and obscure its thematic treatments, the sublime will always have constituted a meta-discourse on the finite nature of human discourse. In Shelley and Musset, as in De Quincey, the sublime works as a sign that there is a "beyond," an "after" to the metaphors that represent extreme situations and that "there" *conformatio* is no longer possible: no metaphor can "step over" the irrepresentable and give it adequate figure or stable form.

The sublime passage in a text relates (indirectly) to an inexpressible real, to *das Ding an sich*; and so does anxiety in the subject. Some sign, some thing sparks anxiety in us, though no thing and no sign can strictly speaking pass for *the cause* of anxiety. In *The Problem of Anxiety*, Freud establishes a distinction between fear and anxiety: "Anxiety is undeniably related to expectation; one feels anxiety *lest* something occurs" (1936:112). In a note, the translator Alden Bunker remarks: "The German usage is: *Angst vor Etwas* -- literally, anxiety *be-fore* something,

rather than *of something*" (*idem*). In contradistinction to fear, which is fear of some-thing present in front of the subject, anxiety does not have a proper object. The word "*vor*" suggests a contorted time-frame where the future comes from the past and where *the cause* awaits. Anxiety is the expectation (*Erwartung*) of no-thing lurking *in* the object of a definite fear.

Anxiety is endowed with a certain character of indefiniteness and objectlessness; correct usage even changes its name when it has found an object, and in that case speaks instead of *fear* (*idem*).

If it is now paralyzed by anxiety *at the thought of* the worst, the subject, Freud infers, has previously experienced the worst and is now trying to prevent it, which is the function of anxiety. The subject anticipates in *this* fearful situation the helplessness (*Hilflösigkeit*) characteristic of traumatic situations it has known in early childhood. The infant *ego* had no way to avoid the stimuli ceaselessly impinging from within and without (e.g. when no adult could help). Then, "anxiety was the original reaction to helplessness in the traumatic situation" (1936:114). The child soon learns, however, to repeat actively, to master what had been suffered passively, feeling anxious before the worst happens again. Now, as soon as h/she perceives danger (say the imminent loss of a beloved object -- toy, person, part of the body), the child releases "attenuated," one

could say homeopathic doses of the anxiety that once accompanied total loss:

The crux of the matter is the initial displacement of the anxiety reaction from its origin in the situation of helplessness to the anticipation of the latter in the danger situation. There then ensue the further displacements from the danger itself to that which occasions the danger (1936:115).

Volatile, anxiety is transferable by nature and repetitive in structure. It may flare up at the remotest possibility of a loss. One does not have to step to "the very brink" of things to become anxious. The first stair on the spiralling staircase will do. One does not have to *be* "poor Piranesi," nor even personally witness his paintings to participate in the contagion of his anxiety. One can, as did De Quincey, catch it from a third party. But note: De Quincey *enjoyed* Coleridge's talk. At several "steps" removed, anxiety had become *interesting!* The paradox is that anxiety keeps the subject (at least) one "step" removed from its cause; in other words, that it protects and sustains the life it seems to threaten, enabling the subject to survive in the interim. No matter how minuscule and lost, Piranesi still had a figure to lose!

Like the shock, like inspiration, like the sublime, anxiety is at once good and bad. We meet again with the idea that disease is the cure. Lethal, since originally traumatic, anxiety is also what protects, like good magic, against the trauma. Anxiety follows the flexible logic of

the *apotropaic*.³ Jean-Pierre Vernant gives the example of the Gorgon whose petrifying gaze had to be avoided. Painted on masks and turned against the enemy, the huge eyes of the Medusa were ordinarily used by the Greeks as protection (1995:28). Freud, acutely aware of the ambivalent logic of the *apotropaic*, comments: "What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself" (1940:274). Covered with hair transforming into snakes ("hairs which are vipers," as we read in Shelley's poem), the Medusa offers Freud a graphic symbol of women's castration.⁴ The proliferation of snakes-penes on the severed feminine head horrify men (especially, Freud remarks, homosexual Greek men) because they work, by contrast, as a sign of the lack in women.

Ambivalence, indirection, lack and trauma are the key terms of this Freudian analysis of anxiety. Taking it for granted, Lacan nonetheless revises Freud's analysis on one major point. In his *Séminaire X*, he considers that it is not the eventuality of a loss, but its exact opposite, the imminence of *too much* presence and at *too close* a range,

³ *Apotropos* means detour, dis-placement. In his two-page article *Medusa's Head*, Freud explains: "The action that lifted and turned a bad spell around was called *apotropaios*" (1940:274).

⁴ See Chapter 1. Vernant does not evoke castration. For this Hellenist, the Medusa's power was all in her gaze: "*Gorgo est une puissance que l'homme ne peut aborder sans tomber sous son regard*" (1995,II:28).

that triggers anxiety in the subject. The lack, the real absence on (or around) which human beings survive as, Shelley said, "over a chasm," is essential, not only to life and sanity, but to desire. When the "at one step removed" is removed, "*si le manque vient à manquer*;" if the lack is lacking, then, instead of a desire to get closer to the real, there arises anxiety before its claustrophobic insistence. Lacan, taking Freud's example of the growing child, says this quite brutally:

... ce n'est pas la nostalgie du sein maternel qui engendre l'angoisse, c'est son imminence, c'est ce qui annonce... qu'on va y rentrer... Ce qu'il y a de plus angoissant pour l'enfant, c'est que justement ce rapport sur lequel il s'institue du manque qui le fait désir, ce rapport est le plus perturbé quand il n'y a pas de possibilité du manque, quand la mère est tout le temps sur son dos (1962-63:64).

The contradiction between Freud and Lacan is only apparent. The trauma can be understood either as absolute lack or as absolute presence. Loss (of form, of identity) and full presence (such that it prevents separate form and identity) bring about deadly indifferentiation and are equally traumatic. From the perspective of a human self, the worst that can happen is formlessness. Milton had a profound intuition of this when, in *Paradise Lost*, he describes Death as "the other Shape/ If shape it might be called that shape had none/ Distinguishable in member, joint or limb" (II,666-668). *The real, das Ding an sich*, the bottomless secret --

"it" has no form. At the slightest sign of its approach, anxiety warns the subject to keep its distance.

Lacan's correction has this advantage: it better helps us interpret the peculiar and uncanny accent, as of a feeling of invasion and suffocation of the self, that anxiety assumes in Beatrice and Lorenzo.

Old Cenci's Gaze

Beatrice first appears on stage in Act I, scene ii, and she is already anxious before (*vor*) she knows not what. She is in secret negotiations with Orsino, the young prelate who declares his love and whom she calls "my only friend!" (line 46). He is indeed her only chance that the Pope may know of her sufferings under the domestic tyranny of Cenci. In Act I, scene i, we hear the old man defend in front of Cardinal Camillo his Sadean philosophy about the pleasures of unpleasures. "I pray thee, God," he then says, "send some quick death upon... my cursed sons," referring to the two sons he has sent abroad "hoping some accident might cut them off" (lines 133-131). At the scene's end, interrupting his speech at "then, as to Beatrice --" and "*looking around him suspiciously,*" Cenci, in a whisper, orders the servant Andrea:

Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber
 This evening:-- no, at midnight, and alone.
 (I, i, 146-147).⁵

And so, without knowing why she is being summoned, we nonetheless understand better than her cunning and love-sick confidant Orsino the anxiety that invades Beatrice when, walking towards the audience and, alone, visibly wrapped in herself, she utters in a trembling voice:

I have a weight of melancholy thoughts,
 And they forebode, -- but what can they forebode
 Worse than I now endure? (I, ii, 36-38).

Beatrice has no apparent reason to fear anything at the present time, yet she foresees the worst. Again in Act I, scene iii, at the beginning of the Banquet scene, while Cenci is receiving his "noble" guests, talking of parenthood, of joy and hope, and bragging about the fact that "the great father of all" has heard his prayer and granted this father "a wish for his two sons," Beatrice, in an aside, confesses hurriedly to Lucretia:

Great God! How horrible! Some dreadful ill
 Must have befallen my brothers (lines 33-34).

To which premonition Lucretia answers:

Fear not, my child

He speaks too frankly.

Beatrice, however, fears nothing in particular. She reads in old Cenci's grotesque features the cause of her anxiety:

Ah! My blood runs cold.
 I fear that wicked laughter round his eye,

⁵ Henceforth, stage directions are italicized (English) or emphasized (French).

Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair.
(37-40).

Behind this shrivelled face and evil eye, what causes Beatrice's anxiety is Cenci's gaze. What follows, the revelation of the way Cenci's two sons have died -- unnatural events which, according to him, "show that Heaven has special care of me" -- will provide substantial evidence that Beatrice's anxiety was not groundless (line 65). And still, the gaze of old Cenci will insist in causing her anxiety. It will get closer and closer, until it literally suffocates her.

In Act II, scene i, Beatrice enters "*An Apartment in the Cenci Palace*" where Lucretia and her brother Bernardo weep over the "wrongs" they daily suffer. Lucretia has been "struck" by Cenci and the youth cries. Lucretia comforts him: "Weep not, my gentle boy; he struck but me,/ Who have borne deeper wrongs" (lines 1-2). We know that Beatrice has much more to worry about than either of them, although she has less to say in justification of her anxiety. "Did he pass this way?" she asks "*in a hurried voice*":

... have you seen him, brother?
Ah! no, that is his step upon the stairs;
'Tis nearer now; his hand is on the door
... He comes;
The door is opening now; I see his face;
He frowns on others, but he smiles on me,
Even as he did after the feast last night.
(II,i,12-21)

At this point, there should be more panic in her voice than in Act I. The cause, his presence *in* her, has come much

closer. Beatrice is desperate. She is considering suicide, and is so self-involved that she does not hear the outside world: "What is it you say? I was just thinking/ 'Twere better not to struggle anymore... 'Twere wise to die... before worse comes of it" (lines 53-56). This is not the Beatrice who, during the Banquet scene, stood up in front of her father and, accusing him publicly, asked the guests to "Take us away!" (I,iii,129). To Bernardo and Lucretia who remember her "strong words," how "the devil was rebuked that lives in him," and who entreat her now to explain what has actually happened since then, Beatrice can only repeat, "*speaking slowly and with a forced calmness*":

It was one word, mother, one little word;
One look, one smile.

[Wildly.]

Oh! he has trampled me
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
My pallid cheeks... He has made me look
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust
Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
And I have never despaired -- but now!
What would I say? (II,i,62-73).

There is nothing indeed she can say, for the cause of her anxiety is not utterable. The gaze is not a thing that can be described like an object evidencing its own proper interpretation or an action revealing its own proper intentions:

Ah! No, 'tis nothing new...
He said, he looked, he did, -- nothing at all
Beyond his wont, yet it disordered me
(lines 75-79).

The fate of the "unopened" letter Beatrice has sent to the Pope is a dramatic detail which reinforces at this point the impression that she is trapped. We know Orsino to have no intention of presenting her plea to the Pope and we are soon to learn that the Pope has no intention of siding with her anyway, afraid that he is "in aught to weaken the paternal power,/ Being, as 'twere, the shadow of my own" (II,ii,55-56).⁶ The "tottering" paternal authorities close ranks.⁷ This short piece of public business preoccupies Lucretia, who resumes private inquiries and familial confidences when she confronts the anxiety on Beatrice's face:

So, daughter, our last hope has failed; ah me,
How pale you look! you tremble, and you stand
Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,
As if one thought were over strong for you...
Are you gone mad? (II,i,28-33).

This is the first mention of Beatrice's "madness." She does sound crazy, for Cenci *in reality* has done "nothing at all" to her "beyond his wont." But we go further with Beatrice than any of the other characters do, share her anxiety as

⁶ Orsino: "Nor shall he [the Pope] read her eloquent petition: he might bestow her on some poor relation... and I be debarred of all access" (I,ii,66-71).

⁷ When Camillo defends Beatrice, he reports the Pope to have reacted with the words:

Children are disobedient, and they sting
Their father's hearts to madness and despair,
Requiting years of care with contumely.
I pity the Count Cenci from my heart...
In the great war between the old and the young,
I, who have white hair and a tottering body,
Will keep at least blameless neutrality
(II,ii,32-97).

she thinks aloud, trembles, "forebodes." We comprehend better than anybody else on stage that her growing panic is not without a cause, and helplessly alone with her, we have to assume the force and burden of its obscurity.

Artaud grasps so well the nature of this cause that, notwithstanding the evident fact that "nothing at all" has happened here, he makes the transition from Act I to Act II the turning point of his play. At the end of Act I, after the open accusations of Beatrice, we hear that Cenci plans to do something eminently destructive to her, though what exactly remains mysterious and incomprehensible to us, and perhaps, at this point, even to Cenci himself. Once the banquet guests, frightened by Cenci's intimidations, have scuttled outside the thick walls of the palace, Father says to Daughter: "I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame,/ Now get thee from my sight!" (I,iii,167-68). At this point in Artaud's play, before Beatrice leaves the stage, there is a long pause filled by a silent and suspenseful struggle between them: "*Béatrice et le vieux Cenci demeurent face à face. Ils se mesurent longuement du regard*" (1978:165).

Once alone, himself overwhelmed by the extremity of his projected violation, Cenci needs the magic of a sworn oath to seal his intentions and stop his "brain" from "swimming round" under too much apprehension:

Here, Andrea,
Fill up this goblet with Greek wine...
For, strange to say, I feel my spirits fail

With thinking what I have decreed to do.

[*Drinking the wine.*

Be thou the resolution of quick youth
 Within my veins, and manhood's purpose stern,
 And age's firm, cold, subtle villainy;
 As if thou wert indeed my children's blood
 Which I did thirst to drink. The Charm works well;
 It must be done; it shall be done, I swear!
 (I,iii,164-178).

Curran sees a parallel to Seneca's *Thyestes* where, in a banquet given by his brother Atreus, the monarch is offered the flesh of his own children to eat (1970:41). Though Artaud admired Seneca and intended *Le Théâtre de la Cruauté* to stage his plays, he does not translate Cenci's long soliloquy nor the reference to the "Greek" wine, for some reason omitting these revelatory expressions of weakness and impotence in old Cenci. The silent confrontation ends when "*Cenci esquisse le geste de passer la main sur la chevelure de Béatrice.*" Then, "*Béatrice, qui avançait la tête, la retire d'un coup violemment*" (1978:166). When Cenci -- I suppose with a large and leering smile on his face -- responds: "*je connais un charme qui te rendra douce et apprivoisée,*" a momentous but inexplicable shift occurs in Béatrice. Artaud adds a remarkable stage direction to ensure that this inner transformation strikes the audience:

Devant les dernières paroles de Cenci, Béatrice se sent saisie d'un immense affolement. A la fin, elle bondit dehors comme si elle avait tout à fait compris (1978:166).

It is *on* her that "*le charme opère.*" And when she returns at the beginning of Act II, "*affolée*" and hearing everywhere the steps of Cenci, Artaud's simplified lines stress the essential: old Cenci's triumphant gaze, his gloating presence *in* her:

Depuis hier, je le sens partout... Je n'en puis plus. Je suis lasse de lutter... Oh! ce pas qui remplit les murailles. Son pas. -- Je le vois comme s'il était là: sa face épouvantable s'éclaire. Je dois le haïr et je ne peux pas. Son image vivante est en moi comme un crime que je porterais (1978:170).

The Self as Tomb

Act II of Shelley's *The Cenci* is filled with premonitions of "the deed which shall confound both night and day," as Cenci calls "it" (II,i,183). Although sure he has gained the upper hand in their psychological warfare, old Cenci is as anxious as Beatrice:

So much as passed between us as must make
Me bold, her fearful. 'Tis an awful thing
To touch such mischief as I now conceive:
So men sit shivering on the dewy bank
And try the chill stream with their feet; once in --
How the delighted spirit pants for joy!
(II,i,123-128).

From conception to realization, there is an abyssal leap. We saw Lorenzo express this difference in exactly the same metaphorical terms. The proximity of *the real* gives an ambivalent "chill" to sadistic spirits like Cenci. They enjoy unpredictability. Or rather, what they "pant for" is

to witness the signs of anxiety "it" generates *in an other*.

Lacan remarks in *Séminaire X*:

L'angoisse de l'autre, son existence comme sujet par rapport à cette angoisse, voilà ce que le désir sadique s'entend à faire vibrer... ce n'est pas tellement la souffrance de l'autre qui est cherchée par le sadique, que son angoisse (1962-63:119).

The sadist desires to pry the other open and, as it were, see his/her subjectivity split. He forces others to exhibit and reflect upon a *béance*. Cenci early on confesses his tastes to Camillo. His withering but "subtle villainy," his refined *jouissance*, no longer consists in "happy" acts of "lust." The old man has become a voyeur:

True, I was happier than I am, while yet
Manhood remained to act the thing I thought;
While lust was sweeter than revenge; and now...
I rarely kill the body, which preserves
Like a strong prison, the soul within my power,
Wherein I feed it with the breath of fear
For hourly pain (I,ii,96-117).

Cenci enjoys *in advance*, not the deed itself, whatever "it" might be, but the horror that will visit Beatrice before and *afterwards*:

'Tis she shall grope through a bewildering mist
Of horror: if there is a sun in heaven
She shall not dare to look upon its beams,
Nor feel its warmth. Let her then wish for night
(II,i,184-187).

In light of the intensified panic Beatrice manifests on stage at the opening of Act III, we assume that what Cenci has decided to do he has already done between Acts, while

the curtain was drawn, in the lapse of representation. When Beatrice "*enters staggering, and speaks wildly*":

Reach me that handkerchief! My brain is hurt;
My eyes are full of blood... I see but
indistinctly --

... it is too late for premonition, for "it" -- the worst? -- as already been done! (III,i,1-5). Nothing left but to re-collect and re-establish distinctions, to gather together the confused and formless mass of her devastated being.

Cenci's presence is so overwhelming that she indeed sees nothing else. Suffocating, she gasps for air. She can smell him: "Pah! I am choked" (III,i,16). Artaud makes his Béatrice cry: "*Tout est éteint. Tout. Le corps est sale, mais c'est l'âme qui est polluée. Il n'y a plus une parcelle de moi-même où je puisse me réfugier* (1978:184). She feels invaded by too much, too full a reality. There is no lack in and about her; and so for her no distinction and no difference are possible anymore, no distance and no order. We have read this passage from the perspective of the sublime; we may read it again from that of anxiety:

There creeps
A clinging, black, contaminating mist
About me -- 'tis substantial, heavy, thick;
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!
(III,i,16-26).

What was articulated is now "glued." Her beautiful self, which lived on delineation and separation, has melted in a

disgusting lump -- materially, in "My flesh," and in the "inmost spirit." The vocabulary of contamination brings language to the point where it contradicts and exceeds itself. Language is made of discreet signs and requires diacritical or differential structure. Without blank space, without the lack (metaphorically speaking: without the emptiness of air), squeezed out as it were by too much "substance," the subject in her is about to go insane or die:

I am mad beyond all doubt!
 No, I am dead. These putrefying limbs
 Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul,
 Which would burst forth into the wandering air!
 (lines 25-28).

Like Antigone, Beatrice is about to be buried alive; except that, for the Romantic heroine, the tomb is her own self.

No matter how nauseating and excessive the feelings they evoke, we must not forget that Beatrice's words are but metaphors. The cause of her anxiety lurks unnamed behind them. We assume that what Cenci has done to her is sexual. The fact that Beatrice remains mute about "the deed" itself cannot be reduced to a tactful silence on the part of Shelley. If Beatrice were to talk about sex and produce, as they say "graphic descriptions," she would only address the *causa accidentalis* of her anxiety. *The real cause* escapes language, for "there are deeds that have no form, sufferings which have no tongue" (lines 141-142).

After "A *pause*" during which Beatrice gives the impression of free falling down the abyss of her mind -- "What hideous thought was that I had just now?" (line 29) -- Lucretia, the incarnate common sense of this drama, flatly asks her transfixed step-daughter:

What ails thee, my poor child? She answers not:
Her spirit apprehends the sense of pain,
But not its cause; suffering has dried away
The source from which it sprung (lines 33-36).

The Structure of the Secret: Obliquity and Reflection

Such is the strange temporality of the traumatic event: it "will be done" when "it" will have been done. Anxiety circles around an horror that will occur (in the future) and will have occurred (in the future perfect), but that, strictly speaking, cannot happen in the present of representation. "Anxiety contains a reflection on time," Kierkegaard wrote, "for I cannot be anxious about the present but only about the past and the future" (1987:155). The traumatic event that fascinates and overwhelms Cenci and Beatrice alike falls *into the cracks* of representation. Shelley wants us to share an anxiety whose characteristic it is to breach the present in reaching forth and back in time; to reflect upon a terrifying, traumatizing act which somehow cannot happen in the present time of his theater. Anxiety is triggered by an excess of pain, a surplus of violence, a

presence of the real that cannot find a place in the space and time of representation.

The audience is made to witness, obliquely, in a sort of estrangement, helplessness and solitude, the reflections of Cenci and Beatrice about their shared secret. Although he has nothing and nobody to fear, each time Cenci contemplates his "deed," he makes sure a secretive darkness surrounds him. It is to us alone that, rolling his eyes and looking askance, he anxiously reveals:

The all-beholding sun yet shines; I hear
 A busy stir of men about the streets;
I see the bright sky through the window panes:
 It is a garish, broad, and peering day;
 Loud, light, suspicious, full of eyes and ears;
 And every little corner, nook, and hole,
 Is penetrated by an insolent light.
 Come darkness! (II,i,174-181).

Curran is certainly right to notice traits of paranoia in Cenci (1970:75). This half-man, half-demon is the first one to feel persecuted by the gaze of no one in particular -- the big anonymous Other. He will declare later: "I do not feel as if I were a man,/ But like a fiend appointed to chastise/ The offences of some unremembered world" (IV,i,160-62). The Cenci Palace in Rome is not Gothic, not "dark" enough for his intimate, yet cosmic and apocalyptic project. It requires "That savage rock, the Castle of Petrella/ 'Tis safely walled, and mounted round about/ Its dungeons under-ground, and its thick towers/ Never told tales" (II,i,168-171). Shelley indicates on the front page

that it is situated in the Apulian Apennines, far away from the city and its "busy stir of men."

As for Beatrice, I have noted how lonely she seems in all her apprehensive premonitions before and her agonized recollections after this "wrong" which remains essentially "expressionless" (III,i,214). As if conceding a major defect in a play he admires, Curran writes:

Probably only an inexperienced and radically optimistic playwright would attempt to form an entire play around an event that could not be named on stage... a reader today finds the constant iteration of the unmentionable deed jejeune and tiresome (1970:90).

I cannot, of course, speak for other readers, but I could not disagree more with Curran on this. And yet one page later, Curran recognizes: "an undefined evil is of greater enormity than any crime conceivable" (1970:91). It is of the essence of a theater of anxiety that its cause be ever present to the mind of the principal protagonist(s) and never named. This propels dramatic speech into long tirades and soliloquies strewn with sublime figures revolving around what ex-ists perforce beyond its grasp. The *insistent* presence of the irrepresentable forces the character(s) to take a reflective stance, a turning inwards appropriate to conveying anxiety because, as the Romantic philosopher was to put it in *Either/Or*, anxiety is "never objective." Even common sense allows that anxiety, more so than other feelings, is entirely subjective and "a reflection category"

(1987:155). One easily understands the situation of someone who is afraid of some definite thing. But the anxious subject is less accessible, seems lost in itself, at once set aside from the community of men and itself incomprehensibly split by anxiety *before* the "object" which h/she avoids but, Kierkegaard remarks, to which h/she comes back as though "circling around it" in fascination (*idem*).

Since Musset is also engaged in working out a theater of anxiety bent on presenting the irrepresentable, it is no wonder that the dramatic center of *Lorenzaccio* consists of similar reflections. Each in his way, Shelley and Musset pushed to extremes the art of indirection, another word would be suspense. In a single scene taking almost a third of the play's length, Lorenzo reveals the secret motivations of his project to kill the Duke. But these revelations are so skillfully prepared by Musset that we wait until Act III, scene iii and the second half of the play to see this tragic Tartuffe lift a corner of the mask and enter into the confidence of an other. Until then, the audience alone is in a position to decode the oblique and rather mixed messages Lorenzo sends *over the shoulders* of the other characters. A dramatist building suspense, Musset lets us know, without our understanding too clearly either, that there is more to Lorenzo than meets the eye. This device is not unique to Romantic tragedy. Every drama revolving around a secret employs this strategy. For instance, during

Act I of *A Doll House* (1879), Ibsen insinuates that Nora is not the shallow character she seems at first sight to be. While talking to Mrs Linde, Nora lets us know that for years she has kept a serious secret from her husband. There is a *bottom* to this secret, however: Nora shares its content, first with her friend, then with her enemy Krogstad before it is fully exposed to her husband, Torvald. What is characteristic of the Romantic tragedy is the character in possession of a bottomless secret, who stands alone with what remains structurally incommunicable. The public is *there* but to witness this solitude and this incommunicability. Even during his confession to Strozzi, we who are comfortably seated in our armchairs are the only *true* addressees of Lorenzo's shocking message; "we" alone are destined to bear its weight.

Pejoratively called "Renzaccio," "Renzo," "Lorenzaccio," "Lorenzetta" by the Duke and his following, the republicans and the bourgeois of Florence, Lorenzo appears so weak that he is incapable of carrying a sword and faints at the prospect of a duel (I,iv,154).⁸ His mother Marie and his aunt Catherine believe Lorenzo has sold body

⁸ To the Cardinal Cibo, who warns him against Lorenzo, Alexandre answers, laughing: "*Renzo, un homme à craindre! le plus fieffé poltron! une femmelette... un rêveur qui marche sans épée, de peur d'en percevoir l'ombre à son côté*" (I,iv,152). Readers will measure later, retrospectively, how much strength and mimetic skill this achieved portrait of "feminine" weakness required of the hero.

and soul to the degenerate Alexandre. In so doing, he has lost in their eyes any definite identity, gender included.

Marie cries:

Quelle femme voudrait s'appuyer sur son bras pour monter à cheval? quel homme lui serrerait la main? (I,vi,160).

Musset, however, sends devious but conspicuous signals to "our" address that Lorenzo has a scheme and that his weak body may harbor the strength of a hero. This creature without backbone ("*il est glissant comme une anguille*"), this formless being (as the Duke sees it: "*ces mains fluettes et malades, à peine assez fermes pour soutenir un éventail*"), may very well end up framing everybody: the Duke, the republicans, his mother and the people of Florence (I,iv,152). There is, for example, Lorenzo's unexpected request to Catherine: "*lis-moi l'histoire de Brutus*" and Catherine's response: "*Qu'avez-vous? vous tremblez de la tête aux pieds*" (II,iv,176). To Marie, who dreamt that the specter of his innocent and ambitious youth had come back to visit her, Lorenzo retorts: "*si mon spectre revient, dites-lui qu'il verra bientôt quelque chose qui l'étonnera*" (*idem*). There is also the subtle double-entendre and dramatic irony of his mockery to Alexandre, who is surprised to see the republican Strozzi invite him for dinner: "*Si vous saviez comme cela est aisé de mentir impudemment au nez d'un butor!*" (II,iv,179). The one who is here being called an idiot and a brute to his face is the Duke. A little

later and to close Act II, the daring robbery of the tyrant's closest and dearest protection, *la cotte de mailles*, brings home exactly what Lorenzo has in mind, the risks he is ready to take and the consistency of his purpose (II,vi). The Duke praises contrary qualities in his protective undergarment: "*c'est du fil d'acier; la lime la plus aigue n'en pourrait ronger une maille, et en même temps c'est léger comme de la soie*" (185). Meanwhile the painter Tebaldeo, whom Lorenzo has met and recommended several scenes earlier, draws the portrait of Alexandre, who needs to be half-naked for this purpose (II,ii). Lorenzo pretends to have but recently discovered the existence of the armor; he plays the guitar, leaves the stage briefly, is seen by the right hand of the Duke lost in contemplation of the bottom of the well. To other characters his activities seem desultory, directionless; to us, alert and to the point. The *cotte de mailles* has disappeared.

And so, when Act III opens on Lorenzo frantically rehearsing in his bedroom a mock-fight with Scoronconcolo, we grasp, though we may not decipher each and every word of his Dantesque delirium but certainly more than does the *spadassin*, against whom it is directed:

Lorenzo

*Ô jour de sang, jour de mes noces! Ô soleil!
Soleil! il y a assez longtemps que tu es sec comme
le plomb; tu te meurs de soif, soleil! son sang
t'enivrera. Ô ma vengeance! qu'il y a longtemps*

que tes ongles poussent! Ô dents d'Ugolin! il vous faut le crâne, le crâne!

Scoronconcolo

Es-tu en délire! As-tu la fièvre?

Lorenzo

Lâche, lâche -- ruffian -- le petit maigre, les pères, les filles -- des adieux, des adieux sans fin -- les rives de l'Arno pleines d'adieux! -- Les gamins l'écrivent sur les murs. -- Ris vieillard, ris dans ton bonnet blanc -- tu ne vois pas que mes ongles poussent? -- Ah! le crâne, le crâne!

Il s'évanouit.

Scoronconcolo

Maître, tu as un ennemi (Il lui jette de l'eau à la figure)... dis-le, et je t'en débarrasserai sans qu'il y paraisse autrement.

Lorenzo

Ce n'est rien; je te dis que mon seul plaisir est de faire peur à mes voisins (III, i, 188).

To add to the clanking of swords, violence permeates the words. We can almost hear in the *staccato* of this passage the brutality of Rimbaud's fragmented prose in *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873). Lorenzo is alone with the secret over which he trembles and raves.⁹ And he will remain so even in the presence of Strozzi, for *die schöne Seele*, the beautiful soul of the republican leader proves impermeable to the

⁹ Musset emphasizes the singularity of his hero's endeavor. Later in the scene, Lorenzo recognizes that indeed, he has an enemy. But he keeps the name of Alexandre secret and warns: "*Je compte sur toi pour lui tenir les mains; rien de plus, entends-tu? C'est à moi qu'il appartient*" (190).

frighteningly *real* in Lorenzo's disclosures.¹⁰ It could be said that Philippe is "in denial." Hegel's *figure of consciousness* aptly describes Strozzi's inveterate optimism, his inaction and his denial of the *evil* Musset depicts as the inevitable fall-out of action. Always self-conscious, Lorenzo is only too aware of his own solitude. He *sees through* Strozzi's shallow enthusiasm for the ideas of freedom and universal equality and once more uses the extended metaphor of the ocean to tell him:

Pareil à un fanal éclatant, vous êtes resté immobile au bord de l'océan des hommes, et vous avez regardé dans les eaux la reflexion de votre propre lumière... Vous trouviez l'océan magnifique sous le dais splendide des cieux... Mais moi, pendant ce temps, j'ai plongé -- je me suis enfoncé dans cette mer houleuse de la vie -- j'en ai parcouru toutes les profondeurs, couvert de ma cloche de verre -- tandis que vous admiriez la surface, j'ai vu les débris des naufrages, les ossements et les Léviathans (III,iii,200-201).

The image of "*ma cloche de verre*" is surprising. Why does Musset write this, if not to make us understand, thanks to a "realistic" detail, that the diver needs air to breathe? We notice that the difference between the false but beautiful surface and the true but ugly depth of the ocean (which is life) opposes perspective, distance and mirror-image to

¹⁰ In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel names beautiful the consciousness which, filled with exalted intentions, fails to act upon them. As particular and *wirklich*, action cannot but issue from murky motives and bring about unintended results. It is stained by "the blemish of determinateness" (1977:404-406). The beautiful soul stays beautiful so long as it does not act.

fullness and saturation (which brings death). These ambiguities are lost, however, on Philippe who, in a compassionate cliché, cries: "*Ta tristesse me fend le coeur.*" Later, after this sublime construct:

La main qui a soulevé une fois le voile de la vérité ne peut plus le laisser retomber; elle reste immobile jusqu'à la mort, tenant toujours ce voile terrible et l'élevant de plus en plus au-dessus de la tête de l'homme jusqu'à ce que l'Ange du sommeil éternel lui bouche les yeux.

... Strozzi common-sensically answers: "*Toutes les maladies se guérissent, et le vice est aussi une maladie*" (203). For us who are made to sympathize with our hero and tremble with him as he gets too full a view of the absolute, Strozzi is rather stupidly clinging to the pathological and short-sighted ethic of the superficial *reality* Lorenzo has just ripped apart. Even though Strozzi at one point acknowledges "*Quel abîme! quel abîme tu m'ouvres!*" -- he never looks down into it (204). Strozzi stays safely on the surface of things, close by the shore. At the end of Lorenzo's harrowing confession, Strozzi's last line says as much: "*Tout cela m'étonne, et il y a dans tout ce que tu m'as dit des choses qui me font peine, et d'autres qui me font plaisir*" (205).

It is exactly as if Lorenzo's abyssal revelations had not happened. For the secondary characters, the play proceeds as though nothing had been said. In *Lorenzaccio* as in *The Cenci*, the secret is disclosed in secret, while no

one is *there*, to characters unwilling or unable to hear. And the audience, compelled to listen, is mute; left in the dark, un-represented, it never appears. For us, as for the hero, the alienation, the *quant à soi*, the burden of anxiety and the inevitable guilt of the secret prevail. To be *in* the secret is to take part, and take a part, in its structure. Insofar as one effectively reads or attends these plays, one becomes involved in the dead-end confronting the protagonist. One is swallowed by the secret.

Strategies of Anxiety: Curiosity and the *Après-Coup*

The mesmerizing attraction of the secret is such that the more we are told of it, the more we want to know. Between anxiety before (*vor*) what stays hidden, and the desire to know, to see more of "it," regardless of the pain this would cause, there is a fine line, which we incessantly transgress. The cause of our anxiety is strictly identical to our desire to peep into and un-cover what by definition cannot be faced.¹¹ During the reading or the performance of a play, each one of us enjoys the exclusive privilege of

¹¹ Like *the real cause* of anxiety, the cause of "our" desire is not so much in front of as *behind* or *vor* "us." Lacan remarks: "*Pour reprendre ma métaphore, cet objet qui doit par nous être conçu comme la cause du désir n'est pas devant mais derrière le désir*" (1962-63:116) [Lacan's emphasis].

being let in on a secret the playwright seems to have inadvertently granted his audience.

In *Crayonné au Théâtre* (1897), Mallarmé writes: "*Le public apprécie une découverte par lui faite indûment.*" He is thinking about the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, whose fatal brooding takes place "*extra-scêniquement,*" before and in between scenes, unbeknownst to most of the characters, but not to us (1945:350). The passage is worth quoting at some length, for it applies word for word to our tragedies:

Vous assistâtes, sachez, par mégarde, à un complot... Shakespeare qui ne pouvait pas poser, en tant qu'auteur, sciemment, sans la réduire au degré théâtral ordinaire, l'irruption du fantastique, feint, plutôt, de dissimuler insuffisamment et laisser voir, dans un coup de vent... Cette toile qui sépare du mystère, a, selon de l'impatience, prématurément... exposé, dans une violence comme fortuite, pour multiplier l'angoisse, cela même qui paraissait devoir rester caché, tel que cela se lie par derrière et effectivement à l'invisible: chacun scrute et dérange, parmi l'éclair, la cuisine du forfait (1945:350 and 351). [emphasis Mallarmé]

The Weird Sisters never come on stage; they are already and inexplicably *there*. The audience of *Macbeth* is meant to surprise *cela qui paraissait devoir rester caché, tel que cela se lie par derrière et effectivement à l'invisible*. How close we are to the strategies of anxiety devised by Shelley and Musset! Mallarmé points out that in *Macbeth*, once the curtain separating us from the mystery is lifted, the mystery nonetheless insists in the form of some awful thing nobody was meant to see. One runs too early into the

untimely fate accumulating "*au seuil*," on the threshold of the action. One understands too late what the hurried whispers and obscene concoctions of this "*extra*" but presiding evil are all about. Nor can Shelley and Musset have their principal characters expose *directly* the contaminated and spectral condition of their *egos* without this being reduced "*au degré théâtral ordinaire*." To be shocking, in the sense of anxiety-provoking, the violation of Beatrice's "inmost spirit" and the corruption of Lorenzo's identity have to be presented in such a way that we stumble into "*l'irruption fantastique*" of a *real* that is absolutely violent. But unlike in *Macbeth*, in the Romantic plays the fiendish is hidden away *inside* and the grotesque *within* the character.

Shelley and Musset adapted to the inner world of their heroes what they had absorbed from Shakespeare of the dramatic technique of the secret. Anxiety would remain thereafter the dominant experience sophisticated addressees expect from great tragedies. Mallarmé himself was only adding to De Quincey's famous discussion of the knocking-at-the-gate effect in *Macbeth* (1945:346). What had interested and troubled De Quincey was the anxiety produced in the public by a minor detail, minute in appearance, but "prodigious" in effect. In 1823, De Quincey declared: "From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*" (1890:389).

It is important for our purpose to note the terms of his "perplexity." Affecting the style of confession, De Quincey writes about the scene just following the killing of the king in *Macbeth* (II,ii). He experienced a divorce between his sensibility and his reason at the reception of "one point in *Macbeth*." De Quincey's "intellect" could not explain the "effect" produced on his "feelings" by the apparent interlude and lowering of tragic tone accompanying the entrance of the rambling Porter in response to the repeated "*Knocking within*" indicated by Shakespeare:

The knocking at the gate which succeeds to the murder of Duncan produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was that *it reflected back* upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavoured with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect (1890:389).

There follows a typically Romantic praise of the aesthetic faculty, the one that *feels*, sensibility, and a scorn for what Shelley calls "the calculating faculty," the intellect, which is, for De Quincey: "the meanest faculty in the human mind." Confronted with this episode, "my understanding said positively that it could *not* produce any effect. But I knew better; I felt that it did" (1890:390). The solution is contained in this adage: "all action is best measured, and made apprehensible by reaction." It is only afterwards that young De Quincey could be made sensible to the work of "the devils," as he calls Lady Macbeth and her husband, i.e. to

the obscene inhumanity of their crime. In the "reflux" of the ordinary world "upon the fiendish," once the knocking had started, and with it, "the re-establishment of the goings-on" of ordinary passions and human concerns, De Quincey could sense how truly awful "the awful parenthesis" that preceded had been (1890:393).

The horror, the violence, the collapse of distinctions are felt *après-coup* in this dramatic sequence of *Macbeth*.¹² I would add that we but glimpse as eavesdroppers the secret machinations of the two Macbeths, their anxious reflections before and after the crime. One of the most horrifying evocations Shakespeare ever wrote would not have caused such anxiety in the public, had it not been for this secretive strategy or technique of indirection.¹³

Horror seeping from the cracks in representation, violence perceived inadvertently and afterwards, tales of confusion overheard and overlooked -- these bring anxiety. No matter what, *nachträglich*, ends up being perceived as its cause, the mechanism of suspense that prompts anxiety in the addressee is as such (as delayed mechanism), obscure, opaque to the intellect, even resistant to reason. The technique

¹² De Quincey recalls that Lady Macbeth is "unsexed;" as for Macbeth, "he has forgot that he was born of woman... another world has stept in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires;" that is, human distinctions (1890:393).

¹³ I say "evocation" for the murder of Duncan does not happen on stage; it is discussed between the two Macbeths.

of indirection -- to use Derrida's word, the way certain written *traces* effectively function in the theater hall -- goes unnoticed and sinks in the unconscious. Considering that it takes a lifetime for someone as perceptive as De Quincey to understand the anxiety-effect contained in a play by Shakespeare, we should not be surprised if, not the complete reception, for such a thing is impossible, but at least the critical appreciation of *A Romantic Theater of Anxiety* has been so elusive, so long in coming.

Nonetheless, the effect of the "*Knock! knock!*" in *Macbeth* was intercepted on the spot by the responsive sensibility of young De Quincey, who felt anxious from his seat in the orchestra long before he could explain why.

Anxiety from Your Seat and the Uncanny

Anxiety might be an intrinsic part of the institution called theater. Following Mallarmé, Lacan thought so: regardless of the play's genre (tragedy or comedy), the very disposition of the theater, with the curtain and its sudden lifting before a captive crowd, precipitates *une attente*, hence a certain anxiety. Before the performance starts, and especially when it starts, anxiety flares in the form of a nebulous *pre-sentiment*, an apprehension about what will appear (or not) beyond "*cette toile qui sépare du mystère.*" What if what cannot be said and must not be shown happens

somehow to be said and shown? How terribly exciting!
 There's the thrill. Beyond what is not permitted in a given culture at a specific time, beyond what ought not to be said or shown to a given audience in such and such public space, there is, and we know it somehow, what cannot be represented:

La scène qui se propose dans sa dimension propre, c'est ce qui dans le monde ne peut se dire, c'est ce que nous attendons toujours au lever du rideau, c'est ce court instant vite éteint de l'angoisse, mais qui ne manque jamais à la dimension par où nous faisons plus que venir installer dans un fauteuil plus ou moins chèrement payé nos derrières, qui est le moment des trois coups, qui est le moment du rideau qui s'ouvre (1962-63:89).

Lacan insists on the idea that "*ce temps introductif vite éliidé de l'angoisse*" relates to *ce qui ne se peut pas*, and not only because it is not allowed by the law of the land. Relying on German for the occasion, he specifies: "*Ce n'est pas de können qu'ils s'agit, dürfen se rapportant à une dimension plus originelle*" (1962-63:89).

Using complex optic devices and mathematical models, Lacan started to meditate in the 1950's about a structural remainder, "*un reste*" of human experience which, as real, that is, as opposed to the imaginary and the symbolic, does not appear in the formative mirrors of our childhood and does not *pass into* the artistic representations we love as

adults.¹⁴ With a rare clarity, he summarizes what he meant by this puzzling *real* in *Séminaire X*, particularly in the *Leçon du 12 Décembre 1962* and in that of the *19 Décembre*. There is a leftover to our pleasures (in the theater as elsewhere). Lacan jokes. The subject does not entirely translate or inscribe itself in the beautiful contours it perceives in the mirror. "My" own gaze, for instance, the subjective place from which "I" look at the image, is not reflected ahead of "me," not to mention the density of "my" flesh and the back of "my" head. There is a something undefinable which stays behind, below, beyond the mirror, the screen or the stage, *in* "my" seat perhaps. It is not a thing with contours and figure. It is no object, since it is lacking. And yet, it is not *nothing* either, not quite; it may not be visible, but it nonetheless commands "my" fascination and anxiety before any representation.

Lacan remembered Heidegger's concept of *Angst*. Like Freud, Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1926) carefully distinguishes fear and anxiety. "In *Angst*," Heidegger writes, "we do not encounter this or that thing which, as threatening, could be relevant to fear" (1996:174). The cause of anxiety is not ontic (world-bound) but ontological (related to being):

¹⁴ See, in *Ecrits*, "Le Stade du Miroir comme Formateur de la Fonction du Je" and "Remarque sur le Rapport de Daniel Lagache" (1966:93 and 647).

Thus neither does *Angst* "see" a definite "there" and "over there" from which what is threatening approaches. The fact that what is threatening is *nowhere* characterizes what *Angst* is about. *Angst* "does not know" what it is which it is anxious about. But "nowhere" does not mean nothing... what is threatening does not approach from a definite direction within nearness, it is already "there" -- everywhere... and nowhere. It is so near that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath (*idem*). [Heidegger's emphasis]

In sum, anxiety is about what the subject cannot but carry with itself wherever it goes -- its own being, the uncanny presence of which it discovers, Heidegger adds, in solitude and estrangement (alienation: *Entfremdung*) from the world (1996:175). With his own categories, Lacan analyzes this feeling of *Unheimlichkeit* which pervades so much Romantic writing and which, in his article "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud had studied in the novels of E.T.A Hoffman.

Lacan shows that it is the unexpected presence of what is ordinarily lacking inside the framework of representation that creates the uneasy feeling of the uncanny. When what is too *heim*, Lacan puns, too close to home, *trop proche de soi*, appears "there," in an image where it should not appear, it feels strange to the subject (*étranger, fremde*). Exceeding the imaginary limits of the *ego* projected by *the pleasure principle*, it appears formless, fantastically noxious, incomprehensible and grotesque (1962-63:89). In E.T.A. Hoffman or in Maupassant, it becomes the uninvited guest: the narrator's faceless or grimacing double. In front of Beatrice at the end of *The Cenci*, it materializes

as her own "dead life," as the very cause of her anxiety throughout the play. Though he is quite dead in the flesh by then, the awful face, and behind it, the terrible gaze of old Cenci continues to persecute her, awaiting *her* death. That cause, indeed, does not die. Judged and condemned to the scaffold, minutes before the curtain falls, Beatrice wonders whether the asphyxiating presence of old Cenci, and the afterworld she has been taught to believe in, do not coincide:

If there should be
No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world...
If all things then should be -- my father's spirit,
His eyes, his voice, his touch surrounding me;
The atmosphere and breath of my dead life!
If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,
Even the form which tortured me on earth,
Masked in grey hairs and wrinkles, he should come
And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix
His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down!
(V, iv, 57-67).

Musset was personally inclined to what psychologists call autoscope. According to the commentators, it is his own experience that he records in *La Nuit de Décembre* (1835):

*Partout où j'ai voulu dormir,
Partout où j'ai voulu mourir,
Partout où j'ai touché la terre,
Sur ma route est venu s'asseoir
Un malheureux vêtu de noir,
Qui me ressemblait comme un frère...*
(Poesies:310).

The editor Maurice Allem quotes Sand who wrote that, while they were traveling together in August 1833, Musset had a terrible hallucination. He saw a monstrous apparition

approaching and, upon discovering that the "spectre" was himself, he let out "un cri d'inexprimable détresse" (Prose:1075-6).

With pangs of anxiety that worsen as the tragedy nears its end, Lorenzo keeps referring to the fact that he is no longer a human being but "un spectre... l'ombre de moi-même" (III,iii,204). In the anxious monologues preceding the murder of the Duke, he says that his very breath has been invaded by a foreign body (IV,iii,v,ix):

Le Vice, comme la robe de Déjanire, s'est-il si profondément incorporé à mes fibres, que je ne puisse plus répondre de ma langue et que l'air qui sort de mes lèvres se fasse ruffian malgré moi (v,225).

Lorenzo wonders whether he will not die in the very act of discharging the obligation he has assumed:

Quand j'entrerai dans ma chambre, et que je voudrai tirer mon épée du fourreau, j'ai peur de tirer l'épée flamboyante de l'Archange, et de tomber en cendres sur ma proie (iii,220).

Musset sounds the tragic note of *terribilita* through a sublime image invoking apocalypse from the point of view of the "je" into which Lorenzo might disappear. The image evokes a fear of paralysis, a deadly transformation of the self and impotence in the act. The worst in this case would be that Alexandre come out alive and Lorenzo, "covered in ashes," be dead on arrival, his plan ineffectual, his act still-born.

Hamlet may point to himself physically. Mournful, depressed about the "stale, flat, and unprofitable... uses of this world," he briefly raises the idea of suicide: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" (I,ii,129-35). Dramatically emphasizing the gesture, we see Lorenzo beat his chest and produce an empty sound to stress the deictic "ce *squelette*," "ma *poitrine*." Lorenzo is altogether more insistent about his *interiority*. During the last moments of solitude preceding his act, he wonders again: "*Sont-ce bien les battements d'un coeur humain que je sens là, sous les os de ma poitrine?*" (IV,iii,220). In the last interview with Strozzi, he compares himself to a statue, fitting image of death: "*Je suis plus creux et plus vide qu'une statue de fer-blanc*" and finally, to a machine: "*j'étais une machine à meurtre*" (V,vi,250). All these metaphors of uncanny experience -- depersonalization, interior vacuity or, on the contrary, intrusion -- articulate Lorenzo's growing anxiety as they provoke our own.

CHAPTER 5: CERTAINTY AND DRAMATIC ACTION

... my self am Hell

Milton (*Paradise Lost*)

How will thy soul,
cloven to its depth with terror,
Gape like a Hell within!

Shelley (*Prometheus Unbound*)

The Certainty of Anxiety

Woyzeck complains that there is "Something we can't grasp, something we can't understand, something that drives us mad." Space does not permit a discussion of German tragedies of this period. But the comparison with Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1837) is particularly tempting and would further establish that the plays emerging today as survivors among the Romantic dramas indeed constitute a theater of anxiety. *Woyzeck* is the victim of an inner catastrophe the cause and nature of which remains obscure. We witness the progressive invasion of his psyche by an horror which takes personal, political and cosmic proportions, yet cannot find expression. The first proletarian hero of tragedy has a speech-impediment. He literally cannot speak the cause of his anxiety. Such a drama was bound to encounter difficulties in reception. It would, in fact, survive a

prolonged *irreception*. Unpublished in his lifetime, not staged before the Twentieth Century and hardly taken seriously by scholars before World War II, its potent store of anxiety is what has kept it alive and what makes it so interesting today.¹⁵

Why would dramatists ever take on the paradoxical task of (re)presenting the irrepresentable? Or attempt an art built wholly around the inconceivable "object" of anxiety? We have discerned anxiety's cause lurking "at the bottom" of an intimate secret, evoked by strategies of indirection that convey, not fear of any-thing in particular but anxiety *before* the looming, soon enough overwhelming presence *within*. What are we supposed to feel as we witness characters wrapped-up in themselves and terrified of no-thing they can name? We are expected, of course, to feel anxious before no-thing we could name, which does not mean that this objectless feeling is without cause in us either. On the contrary, we know for certain, along with Beatrice and Lorenzo, that our anxiety is *not without* cause. Such is the peculiar relationship anxiety entertains with its *real* object according to Lacan: "*que l'angoisse soit sans object, c'est ce que je rectifie, elle n'est pas sans object*" (1962-63:103) [Lacan's emphasis].

¹⁵ See Victor Price's *Introduction to Büchner* (1988:20-21).

This unexpected certainty lodged at the heart of an otherwise nebulous feeling explains, I believe, why the reflective and self-absorbed characters named Beatrice and Lorenzo are not irresolute. After Hamlet, one would expect the reflective hero to procrastinate; inaction, one might have thought, would become a characteristic Romantic trait. But the protagonists of Shelley and Musset, for all their intense reflection, find strength enough to act without the least hesitation. Each discovers *within* much worse to be anxious about; neither is afraid, when the moment comes, to face down the dangers his/her plan involves. By taking risks, however, both become tragic characters: their *grandeur* consists precisely in dealing with all the "dirty" particulars and sordid circumstances entailed by their murderous intentions.

Vernant reminds us that the Greek word *drama* comes from the Doric *dran*, which corresponds to the Attic verb *prattein*, to act. Tragedies represent a certain *praxis*:

De fait, contrairement à l'épopée et à la poésie lyrique, où la catégorie d'action n'est pas dessinée, l'homme n'y étant jamais envisagé en tant qu'agent, la tragédie présente des individus en situation d'agir; elle les place au carrefour d'un choix qui les engage tout entiers; elle les montre s'interrogeant, au seuil de la décision, sur le meilleur parti à prendre (1995, I:37).

Vernant cites the example of Orestes who, in Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, asks his companion Pylades: "What shall I do? Be shamed to kill my mother?" (1953:124). This *praxis*

is not limited to the factual objectivities of the heroic deed (here, the matricide that Aeschylus would not depict on this side of the *skene*). It also involves the internal decision-making process, the hero's doubts and fearful questionings, and an element of arrogance, if not outright defiance, vividly present here in the exceptional endeavor of the one aristocratic and legendary figure who, before an audience of Athenian citizens, takes the supreme risks. Vernant notes that the tragic hero does not know what the outcome of his/her action will be, for it depends on what the gods, whose oracles remain obscure, will have wanted. On the whole, the tragic action is therefore like a high gamble and a dangerous bet, "*une sorte de pari, sur l'avenir, sur le destin et sur soi-même, finalement pari sur les dieux qu'on espère de son côté*" (idem).

Even favorable critics of Shelley and Musset have tended to describe their tragedies as devoid of action. Curran writes of *The Cenci* that it presents "the structure of non-action," since for the most part the audience is made to witness what happens in Beatrice's persecuted psyche: "The realm of this play being the psyche... there is a kind of action, but it is not what traditionally passes for action on the stage" (1970:276). Her protracted reflections may indeed be difficult to stage in the realistic type of theater we have inherited from the Nineteenth Century; but in the original sense of the word, there is plenty of *drama*

in *The Cenci*. And there is action enough too, even in the limited sense of *poiein* (of producing determinate results) in *Lorenzaccio*. David Sices argues that a "meaningful act" whose concrete result would not deviate from its supporting intention by ending in disaster is "impossible" in the universe depicted by Musset; moreover, failure is what *Lorenzaccio* is "about" (1974:144). But this does not mean that Musset's stage is devoid of tragic action, his hero paralyzed, nor the failure meaningless.

Musset stated in *De la Tragedie* that his purpose was to revisit the Greek muse. He ended-up representing in its entire sequence the "*atroce grandeur*" of a heroic *praxis* in modern (Romantic) times. We have already noticed that for all his political doubts and anxious revelations, Lorenzo never ceases plotting the murder of the man in power, the Duke of Florence. The question that remains is: in what way exactly is his obscure anxiety forcing him to act?

It Was More Than Hate

Finding neither strength nor desire to act swiftly on the demand of the Ghost, Hamlet reproaches himself bitterly. After watching the First Player perform the mock-heroic "vengeance" of Pyrrhus, Hamlet looks at himself and beholds a ridiculous figure:

Yet I,
 A dull and muddy-rascal, peak
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 And can say nothing; no, not for a king
 Upon whose property and most dear life
 A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
 (II,ii,554-9).

Nothing of the sort occurs in Beatrice's tirades nor in Lorenzo's, who entertain no doubts, no waivering in their determination to act. They express self-disgust, to be sure, and more of an horror at their degraded selves than Hamlet evinces here; but it is not for the reason that they prove "dull" in the action. While *Hamlet* belongs, Girard writes, to the type of revenge tragedy "as hackneyed yet inescapable in Shakespeare's days as the "thriller" in ours," Hamlet's lack of conviction undermined the popular trend. This depressed hero feels but "weariness with revenge" (1991:273). Instead of the strength to act, he finds in himself only words:

Why, what an ass am I! Ay, sure. This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
 An fall a-cursing like a very drab,
 A scullion! Fie upon't, foh!
 About my brain (II,ii,571-6).

According to Girard, "in order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause" (1991:273). Hamlet's "problem" is that deep down he is not as certain of the rightfulness of his revenge as he would like to be. What if Claudius the usurper is no more evil than his father had been when alive? Did not the Ghost

reveal to Hamlet that he was "cut off even in the blossom of [his] sins" and must purge in Hell "the foul crimes done in [his] days of nature" (I,v,12 and 76)?

The situation is different for Beatrice and Lorenzo. The more they observe their self-degradation, the more they are convinced that they must act and promptly, for their act, though a crime according to common social and moral standards, is the only possible good against a greater evil. The spring of revenge has been broken in them as well. "*Que m'avait fait cet homme?*" Lorenzo asks himself moments before the murder of Alexandre (IV,iii,219). To the Pope's envoy Savella, who asks her when Cenci is found dead: "Is it true, lady, that thy father did/ Such outrage as to awaken in thee/ Unfilial hate," Beatrice does not hesitate to answer, and it is the most direct acknowledgement she is capable of: "Not hate, 'twas more than hate" (IV,iv,100-3). Both these post-Christian heroes carry the Christian values of justice and charity to an extreme. If they nonetheless kill, it is because they are both certain that their duty involves much more than personal retaliation. Anxiety convinces them that it involves something absolute. Should evil win in (and about) themselves? There is a spiritual, even theological, dimension to their problem. Though they are victims, and in more ways than we have so far considered, these highly moral agents are also sly, systematic, efficient and brutal heroes when the moment comes to prove it.

At This Point

Beatrice, though unbearably victimized, does not merely fall down, as it were, and repeat, horrified: "If I try to speak/ I shall go mad" (III.i,84-5). She immediately adds: "Ay, something must be done" (85). Beatrice replies to Orsino, who, expressing some doubt about the incest ("It cannot be"), demands, like everybody else, more details: "What it can be, or not,/ Forbear to think. It is, and it has been;/ Advise me how it shall not be again" (144-7).

While Orsino and Lucretia discuss the alternatives on stage, Beatrice, who "*speaks half to herself*" and retreats in the background, faces her remaining options. First, there is the possibility of suicide, which she seems to reject, like Hamlet, on religious (Christian) grounds: "I thought to die, but a religious awe restrains me..." (148). Hamlet says: "O... that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (I,ii,131-2). But in the same sentence Beatrice speaks also of a worse "dread" than death and of a type of contention suicide would not resolve. Insofar as her anxiety is about no-thing, nothing that can die, the matter of incest has ethical and theological consequences beyond the personal offence. There is the question of the legacy "the deed" will leave behind. There is "the dread lest death itself/ Might be no refuge from the consciousness/ Of what is yet unexpiated" (149-51).

Perhaps the Lacanian distinction between two kinds of death will help us here.¹⁶ The first involves the physical death of a person; the second involves the settling of symbolic accounts: properly laying the corpse to rest, along with all the symbolic matters that survive and concern the bereft community's vital interests -- all the questions attached in the memory of men to a proper name surviving the individual. Paramount in Greek culture (and insistent in tragedies, especially in Sophocles', who was personally "devoted to the cult of the hero") was concern about the proper burial of great men whose worship was designed, Bernard Knox explains, "to appease their wrath" toward the living (1964:54-5). "No reckoning made, but sent to my account/ With all my imperfections on my head," the Ghost in *Hamlet*, come back from death, laments in Christian terms (I,v,78-9). If the Ghost is to die a second time and rest for good in peace, Hamlet must avenge his father's ignominious first death and "set... right" the dis-jointed ceremonial structure of "rotten" Denmark (197).¹⁷

¹⁶ Lacan develops the notion of the second death in his *Séminaire VII* (1959-60) where he studies Sophocles' Theban Cycle and in particular *Antigone*. The following year, reading Claudel's tragedies in *Séminaire VIII*, Lacan insists: "*Pour qu'il y ait tragédie, il faut qu'il y ait inscription dans l'espace de l'entre-deux-morts*" (1960-61:120).

¹⁷ See, Vincent Crapanzano who writes about this "ritual violation" and, in a larger sense, symbolic disorder in "Maimed Rites and Wild and Whirling Words" (1992:288).

Considerations about this second death are foremost in Beatrice's deliberation. She becomes acutely concerned about her name during Act III, scene i, for her name, and withal her everlasting fame among men, happens, lethal confusion, to be the same as that of old Cenci. To Orsino, who advises her to "accuse him [Cenci] of the deed [the incest], and let the law/ Avenge thee," Beatrice angrily answers:

Oh, ice-hearted counsellor!
 If I could find a word that might make known
 The crime of my destroyer; and that done,
 My tongue should, like a knife, tear out the secret
 Which cankers my heart's core; ay, lay all bare,
 So that my unpolluted fame should be
With vilest gossips a stale mouthed story
 A mock, a by-word, an astonishment --
 (III,i,152-60).

To divulge the secret (if it were possible) would only spread the contamination beyond her own self into another realm, that of the symbolic order. The question of how to respond to the attacks of Cenci must be addressed on "holier" grounds than those which *he* controls: "gold, opinion, law, and power" (185 and 212). At his level, Beatrice argues, the accused could easily obtain impunity (silence) once again, while public display of so horrendous an accusation would inevitably spill over onto the accuser:

Think of the offender's gold, his dreaded hate,
 And the strange horror of the accuser's tale,
 Baffling belief, and overpowering speech;
 Scarce whispered, unimaginable, wrapt
 In hideous hints -- Oh, most assured redress!
 (61-66).

There is but one solution, if one can call this a solution. It requires a bold leap of faith or, to borrow Kierkegaard's notion in *Fear and Trembling*, a *suspension* of accepted morals and customary ways of thinking. The type of crime she envisions at that moment places Beatrice apart from the other characters, outside the social bond, alone before her God -- it being, as Mallarmé wrote of modern man in general, "*Le seul acte surnaturel commis à la disposition de l'homme ou tuer*" (1945:348).

Such is the *aporia* confronting Beatrice: she has got to believe that a crime, an anti-social act by definition, will mend the social fabric. While the symbolic order has been disturbed by the irruption of some real "deed" that it cannot adequately articulate, and is at risk of being forever contaminated by "it," another crime (parricide, worst of crimes), is supposed to allow the symbolic network to digest and eliminate the repeated intrusions of the toxic *real*. This indeed requires a leap of faith.

In the *Preface*, Shelley prepares his English audience for the Catholic setting of his Renaissance tragedy:

Religion coexists, as it were, in the mind of an Italian Catholic, with a faith which... is interwoven with the whole fabric of life. It is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct. The most atrocious villain might be rigidly devout, and without any shock to established faith, confess himself to be so (Poems, II, 72).

The nature of Catholicism explains how the historic Cenci could cheat his ingenuous contemporaries by displaying all the externals of religious piety. In *The Cenci*, the old man's curses are perversely filled with this *apparent* religion. But it strikes me that Shelley's Beatrice is not essentially Catholic; nor does she behave like a typical aristocratic woman of the Italian Renaissance. Her spiritual independence is anachronistic and specific to *The Cenci*. We have noticed that she is much more isolated and alone in her decision than she was in Muratori and Mary; she will again *depend on* the other characters in Stendhal and, closer to us, in Goldschmidt's opera.¹⁸ Shelley's Beatrice acts like some radical Protestant in the England of the Puritan Revolution. "*She retires absorbed in thought*" and, apart from Lucretia but also, ostensibly, from the Catholic prelate Orsino, she makes up her mind. When "*Beatrice advances*" towards us out of silent retirement, she has concluded, not without a certain arrogance, that God could not desire her eternal pollution and be *her* God (III,i,207).

¹⁸ In Artaud's *Les Cenci*, where to have a conscience is no virtue, she consults Orsino and learns directly from him what to do:

Beatrice
*Je ne peux plus croire maintenant qu'à la
 justice que je choisirai.*

Orsino
Laquelle?

Beatrice
*Je ne sais... Mais quelque chose doit être
 fait! Un acte immense qui efface jusqu'à l'ombre
 de ce forfait (1978:187).*

And so, the act designed to stop the contaminating process must be, in essence, deemed "right":

...lest I be reserved, day after day
to load with crimes an overburthened soul,
An be -- what ye can dream not. I have prayed
To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
And I have unravelled my entangled will,
And I have at length determined what is right.
(III,i,216-221).

Shelley is almost tiresome in his insistence on the radical subjectivity of her point of view. Clearly, the fundamental issue is ethical, to be decided on theological grounds. One hears in these lines the thrust of Milton's *The Christian Doctrine*. "The voice of Conscience" is the only instance this "Protestant" heroine calls upon to settle the morality of her action (1993:402). A skeptic philosopher placing common reality in parenthesis (*epoche*), she even tells Orsino that all she has learned to submit to and respect as a well-educated woman is now in doubt, no longer applies: "All the fit restraints of daily life,/ Which have been borne from childhood... would be a mockery to my holier plea" (210-12). The worldly values, the reality-checks, the superstitious moralities that will condemn her crime are suspended before a higher ethics.

Here is how the epic dimension of tragedy revisits this modern play. As in the ordeals of ancient times, her action should force the Christian God to give some sign, to appear from beyond the merely finite grave of the old man. As though suddenly inspired, she breaks silence and shouts:

"Mighty death! Thou double-visaged shadow! Only judge! Rightfullest arbiter!" (178-200). Here is the sublime dimension of her act: to enter in this life "*l'entre-deux-morts*" and place her name, her fame and her crime in invisible hands. Again, I stress that the extreme solitude of this Romantic character is not the cliché it has become in Romantic Studies. Her staged retirement is a dramatic device announcing a decisive turn in the action.

In truth, one may regard Beatrice's secret appeal to God as a mistake, the proof being that God will not respond to her ordeal. No divinity appears directly or indirectly in the universe depicted by *The Cenci* to indicate that she was right. One could quote, as does Earl Wasserman, various authoritative texts by Shelley deeming "highly suspect" the obsolete "theological model" this "Christian" heroine embraces (1971:89). But this would be to miss something essential in her dilemma. The critical question is not about the established *truth (Wahrheit)* she expects to emerge from her action. She intends to clean the symbolic of its real, criminal contamination by means of another crime, and she will not succeed. This is obvious in the denouement of the play. I am no so much saying that Shelley wrote a Protestant tragedy, as that he intended his heroine, like the Unhappy Consciousness of Hegel, to *suffer through* and overcome the most radical stage in religion. The modernity of her position is that she will, in the end, recognize that

her belief never became reality: she was wrong to rely on the Christian God. But where then, does her *certainty* (*Gewißheit*) in the act come from? What pushes her to this extreme, "*snatching*" the dagger from Marzio and Olympio and "*raising it*" on them when they hesitate to kill the sleeping old man in the next room (IV,iii,32)? What gives so young, so delicate, so anxious a woman the masculine aggressiveness to assert, "Hadst thou a tongue to say,/ She murdered her own father, I must do it!/ But never dream ye shall outlive him long!" (33-5)? Nothing else gives her such strength than the cause of her anxiety "itself."

Old Cenci is demonic. He epitomizes evil and compares with Milton's Arch-Enemy who, in *Paradise Lost*, discovers: "Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell" (IV,75). Cenci says so himself: "I bear a darker deadlier gloom/ Than the earth's shade" (II,ii,188-9). In spite of all the evidences contradicting her intention and notwithstanding the blunt accusations accumulating against her, Beatrice is convinced to the end that her crime was more than parricide, its motive other than hate, its aim something else than revenge.¹⁹ Curran expresses *her* point of view when he argues that "she murders her father not out of revenge, but imperative self-defense; not because he raped her body, but

¹⁹ When we have just seen her instigate Marzio and Olympio to the murder, she answers Savella's accusation with: "I am more innocent of parricide/ Than is a child born fatherless" (IV,iv,112-3).

because he ravaged her spirit, turning her good to evil" (1970:139). The old Cartesian body/spirit dichotomy may not, however, be sharp enough at this juncture. Beatrice's problem is to put an end to a pollution that can be called mystical or spiritual insofar as it concerns her being and more than her being: the purity of her family name, its right place in the symbolic network that will survive her. If Beatrice errs, it is in believing that such purifying action is possible when action *is* real and real *is* evil. But she *must* believe so now, in the present tense of the drama. Trying to communicate her certainty to Lucretia, she says: "Our act/ Will but dislodge a spirit of deep hell/ Out of a human form" (IV,ii,6-8). It is not a question of any specious and abstract comfort to be found in dated intellectual models, as Wasserman has it. Pressed by time, running the risk of becoming "utterly lost," she must believe that such an act is blessed because evil is not and cannot be the triumphant force in this world (III,i,176).

Hence her unshakable determination. Panicked before, she is now firm, assured, even tranquil, having weighed in the presence of her God the metaphysical logic of her decision. The Son of God in Milton's *Paradise Regained* discreetly retreated and "into himself descended" to fight Satan on spiritual grounds; likewise, she pictures herself in a religious war "Above heroic, though in secret done" (I,15 and II,111). Though Cenci outlives the bodily fall

into the chasm she had planned for him, Beatrice does not waiver. She champions her gruesome project. It is "a high and holy deed" in which "God extinguishes... the Hell within him [Cenci]" (IV,ii,33-5). All participants are but "A sword in the right hand of justest God" (iv,126). When Marzio and Olympio are gone to strangle the old man, she comforts Lucretia with the words:

We do but that which 'twere a deadly crime
To leave undone... Darkness and hell
Have swallowed up the vapour they sent forth
To blacken the sweet light of life. My breath
Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood
Runs freely through my veins (iii,40-4).

The cause of her anxiety is already receding, leaving room *in* and *about* her for the certainty that she is on the right track. If the real is inside the psyche, it is also outside the subject. It is at this unthinkable place where the most intimate, most interior part of the subject coincides with the most exterior, most foreign.²⁰ Even as they talk, Beatrice feels that "the world/ Is conscious of a change" (39-40). The fact that she is the only one to sense cosmic redemption does not discourage her in the least. Certainty is no more contingent on observable facts than is anxiety. In Act IV, scene iv, about to be arrested by Savella and sent to jail, Beatrice maintains:

²⁰ To define the *non-lieu*, literally the place out-of-place of the real, Lacan creates the word *extimate*. He speaks of "*ce lieu central, cette extériorité intime, cette extimité, qui est La Chose*" (1959-60:167).

The deed is done,
 And what may follow now regards not me.
 I am as universal as the light;
 Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
 As the world's centre. Consequence, to me,
 Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock,
 But shakes it not (IV,iv,47-52).

Beatrice's Desire

The reader of Shelley remembers that Beatrice pictured herself as a rock in the Chasm speech. Back then, the deed was not yet done, nor had the several attempts on Cenci's life accumulated their "sad reality." The act was done merely in fantasy, ideally we could say. Though firmly situated at the center of her narrative, Beatrice/the rock was far from being calm. She was desperately struggling like one more Prometheus on the brink of the abyss.²¹

As soon as Beatrice discloses her decision to Orsino and Lucretia -- "he [Cenci] must not arrive" at Petrella -- she drifts from the circumstances of the plan and aggrandizes its metaphysical essence (III,i,242). Hurling her father into an endless fall, she struggles to keep her footing, not to fall herself. The speech is too long to be

²¹ Fantasies are wish-fulfilments. Roland Barthes recalls this Freudian meaning in his *Sur Racine*: "*D'une manière générale, le récit n'est nullement une partie morte de la tragédie; bien au contraire, c'en est la partie fantasmatique, c'est à dire, en un sens, la plus profonde*" (1963:18).

read in one breath. The first part of the fall starts like a remembrance:

But I remember
 Two miles on this side of [the Castle of Petrella]
 The road crosses a deep ravine; 'tis rough and narrow,
 And wind with short turns down the precipice;
 And in its depth is a mighty rock
 Which has, for unimagineable years;
Sustained itself with terror and with toil
 Over a gulf, and with the agony
 With which it clings seems slowly coming down;
 Even as a wretched soul hour after hour
 Clings to the mass of life; yet, clinging, leans;
 And, leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss
 In which it fears to fall... (243-55).

A conflicted -- more than agonizing, agonistic -- desire animates this day-dream. The "mighty rock" is claimed by opposite forces, some aiding while others resist the fall. The struggle against the propensity to fall works up in Beatrice a powerful energy. She is "sustained" in this process by her very "terror." Anxiety procures the strength not to fall; but part of her "leans" in lassitude and abandon, perhaps fascination. Suddenly, the perspective swings, and we are offered a hint of the fact that, at bottom, the deep cannot be seen:

... beneath this crag,
 Huge as despair, as if in weariness,
 The melancholy mountain yawns; below,
 You hear but see not an impetuous torrent
 Raging among the caverns... (255-59).

The rock is not falling. Despite the fury of contending forces, it remains up there on the endless cliff, solid and firm in outline. Like De Quincey's "poor Piranese,"

Beatrice repeatedly loses form and drops out only to reappear again within the scene.

We have linked anxiety to those *apotropaic* "objects" and gestures that induce horror but displace it, transforming imminent danger into a protection. Anxiety precipitates her fall, yet it is also what protects Beatrice from it, giving her the strength to say "no" to Cenci's Hell. In *Séminaire X*, Lacan elaborates the series of concepts *jouissance*, *anxiety*, *desire*, conceiving anxiety as the mediation that allows the subject to keep intolerable *jouissance* at a distance and structure around it something like a desire.²² Pointing out the importance of the Chasm speech, Curran writes that, henceforth "the messages Beatrice sends as answers to her father's demands refer directly to this description" (1970:121). He quotes Act IV, scene i, where she dismisses the servant Andrea with: "Go tell my father that I see the gulph/ Of Hell between us two, which he may pass,/ I will not" (98-100). She separates herself from *his* horror, enough to repeat a little later, without being afraid of denouncing her project: "I cannot come;/ Go tell my father that I see a torrent of his own blood raging between us" (112-4). After the trauma and against its recurrence, Beatrice re-organizes her identity in the Chasm speech. Her desire finds in the very division

²² "... *c'est, franchie l'angoisse, fondé sur le temps de l'angoisse que le désir se constitue*" (1962-3:225).

and *agon* of her being an incipient structure, some-*thing* for her to separate from, enough to push it down there and step over the chasm:

... and a bridge
Crosses the chasm; and high above there grow,
With intersecting trunks, from crag to crag,
Cedars and yews, and pines; whose tangled hair
Is matted in one solid roof of shade
By the dark ivy's twine. At noon-day here
'Tis twilight, and at sunset blackest night
(259-65).

Not without magnanimity, Beatrice provides her father a sublime Romantic landscape for a tomb. Curran has noted the metaphoric play of "hair" in the drama: when carefully arranged, her hair evokes firmness of purpose and inner peace; when tangled, despair, disorganization, anxiety (1970:116). Here she covers him (his fall, her act) with "tangled" hair that becomes a solid "roof," making for a dark home, a shameful bower, but still a place of final rest and a lasting monument to the open wound of their endless strife.²³

The Requisites of the Genre

Had it gone according to Beatrice's wish, the consummation projected in the Chasm speech would have been

²³ The only decent home Beatrice could ever find, for which she desparately contends to the end, is a decent tomb for herself, the remnants of her family and their name. She will not get it.

the best of possible endings to the saga of the Cenci family. It is a story Beatrice sends to the future; better said: it is the one version of their story she would like to see survive *them*.

A myth, a sad romance can end like this, but not a tragedy, and especially not so anxious a tragedy as *The Cenci*. In the next scene, we learn that Cenci, having passed over the bridge "an hour too soon... has escaped" (III,ii,332-5).²⁴ To be unpredictable -- like the *real*, like the force -- and to lack fear are aspects of his power. Common death is no deterrent for a semi-devil bent on acts of destruction that, he rightly foresees, "shall soon extinguish all/ For me" but will persist in destroying her (in the flesh, in the spirit and in the symbolic) after his death (e.g. II,ii,188-9). Until Act IV, scene iii, when he is killed, Beatrice struggles to avoid Cenci. Immediately after his murder, Act IV, scene iv, she goes to jail; but there does not seem to be an end to the devastating power of his curses. We have seen that he is *there* in her very last reflections. Beatrice is a tragic character in that she remains vulnerable, exposed to evil forces, constricted in

²⁴ Contrary to Shelley, who has it briefly reported, Artaud emphasizes this failure of plan by creating a violent episode on stage:

Cenci, faisant face aux voix, crie dans la tempête: EH BIEN, QUOI! (1978:191).

Artaud's old man mocks his assassins and, through them, death.

her power of action, irreversibly assaulted without and invaded within.²⁵ I even wonder whether it was right to compare Beatrice's rock to that of the mythic and tragic hero Prometheus. To what extent does Prometheus seriously struggle in Aeschylus? Has he not given up resistance and fight altogether by forgoing hate at the beginning of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*?

Paul Ricoeur has vividly described the major characters of Io and Prometheus in the ancient play:

We must imagine the scene in its violent contrast. He, the Titan, riveted to a rock above the empty orchestra; she in a frenzy... stung by the gadfly; he nailed, she wandering; he virile and lucid, she a woman broken and alienated; he active in his passion, she pure passion, a simple witness to the divine *hybris* (1967:223).

Io represents man suffering under "a wicked god;" but Io is not a tragic character. She is merely subjected to the pursuits of a divinity revealing itself as *ictus* (hit, stab, cut, bite, sting). The one who adds an action to their common passion is Prometheus who, by his resistance and defiance (he keeps a secret), is able to say "no" to Zeus. The *agon* of ancient tragedy, Ricoeur concludes, required the

²⁵ Northrop Frye distinguishes the tragic genre in *Anatomy of Criticism* by comparing "the hero's power of action" to that of the audience. Whereas the hero of a myth or of a romance altogether lacks our limitations, the tragic character typically has "authority, passions and power of expression far greater than ours;" but h/she is constricted by the natural and social environment, and will fall during the drama "below" our condition (1967:33).

opposition of an "hostile transcendence" resulting in human pain and submission, and of an "active response" (*idem*).

It seems that Beatrice Cenci has interiorized both the feminine Io and the masculine Prometheus of Aeschylus. She blindly suffers, but she also responds most lucidly. Many critics, among whom Wasserman, feel uneasy about this response. She does, after all, commit a parricide. They deem Beatrice precipitous in her action. Quoting Shelley on moral and political issues, Wasserman writes: "It would be difficult to surpass Shelley's faith in passive resistance" (1971:97). Beatrice should have shown "patience" and the virtue of forbearance like Shelley's own Prometheus, who announces his liberation by recalling his curse against Jupiter and saying: "I hate no more... misery made me wise" (I,57-8). Instead, Wasserman argues, Beatrice regresses to revenge and retaliation, which Shelley in the *Preface* condemns as "pernicious mistakes" (Poems,II,71).

Prometheus has a secret: his foreknowledge tells him that a child will come to replace Jupiter. Beatrice does not have divine gifts. She does not have, like the Titan, thousands of years in front of her; and besides, she is not *on the same side* of the secret as Prometheus, who wields it like a weapon to control in turn the power of the tyrant.²⁶

²⁶ To the Chorus, who would like to know the content of his "solemn secret," Prometheus answers in *Prometheus Bound*:
 ... it must be wholly hidden
 For only by so keeping it can I
 escape these shameful bonds of agonies
 (1991:158).

Prometheus suffers, scorns, complains, curses; but he is not anxious. Beatrice evolves *under the spell* of her secret. Nor is she, for that matter, on a level with a character like Milton's Son of God, who needed *only* "descend into himself" to win the spiritual war against Satan. The assaults she suffers from Cenci are far more serious. There is no doubt in Milton that the place to where the Son of God retires, his own self, is "pure." But Beatrice is polluted to the core. As for her character being compared to the Titan, interestingly enough, Shelley changes two details in the myth of Prometheus. The vulture tears at the Titan's heart, not at his liver, "a change suggestive," Crook and Guiton note, "of a shift away from the organs of digestion to those of generation;" and the vulture's beak gets polluted by Jupiter's poisonous saliva, "known to be one of the body fluids which could spread syphilis" (1986:188). Still, there is no mention in Shelley of Prometheus being contaminated in his psyche: "his spiritual integrity," Curran writes, "remains inviolate" (1970:139). Crook and Guiton, in their study of Shelley's imagery in relation to the medical sciences of the time, suggest that the "clinging, black, contaminating mist" Beatrice senses inside of her is, in fact, a syphilitic infection. It is clear, for them, that when she speaks of the "blood, which art my

father's blood,/ Circling through these contaminated veins," she is using a euphemism for his semen (III,i,95-6).²⁷

Cenci, let us not forget, is about to do "it" again. Beatrice, as I have said, has to act swiftly because her being is on the verge of succumbing to an infection of evil. Wasserman considers that this perception derives from her limited point of view and is wrong in truth, for "Shelley's normative model is always the autonomy and divinity of the self" (1971:89). And indeed, in the *Preface*, Shelley writes:

Undoubtedly no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes (Poems,II,71).

The literary fact, however, as he states on the same page, is that "a drama is not a fit place for the enforcement of dogmas... about what is right or wrong," be they that of the author himself. And so, he continues:

If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character: the few whom such an exhibition would have interested, could never have been sufficiently interested for a dramatic purpose (*idem*).

A "better" Beatrice could have been the heroine of an idealistic poem like *Prometheus Unbound*. She would have

²⁷ Curran was actually the first one to think so; see, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* (1974:128).

interested the refined sensibility of "the few" in the audience. But *The Cenci*, Shelley wrote in his letters, is a tragedy "written for the multitude... partly to please those whom my other writings displeased" (Letters, II, 164 and 174).

Considering Beatrice's situation, given her perspective and her limited, rapidly diminishing powers of action, one may ask what a "wiser" (less anxious) Beatrice might have done. Would she have waited, like some modern Io, until she was "utterly lost"? Curran is not wrong to think that Shelley is embarrassed in the *Preface* and that his arguments against Beatrice do not apply to the character (1970:139). It is not revenge that Beatrice seeks but self-defense; defense of what she perceives to be what remains of her "pure" self -- defense of the family name and of a symbolic being that she envisions in terms of fame. Whether or not her response will turn out later to have been a mistake, she has no choice; more precisely, her choice is *forced*. And such has always been the choice left to tragic characters. While writing *The Cenci*, Shelley did not forget Aristotle's dictum in the *Poetics*: the greater the tragic hero (Ajax, Oedipus, Antigone), the greater the mistake (*hamartia*) and the more dramatic the fall (1965:48).

Because she is a truly tragic character, one can neither exonerate Beatrice completely, as Curran does, nor condemn her, like Wasserman, and in either case be finally finished with her. One has to acknowledge, and it is not a

pleasant or facile solution, the interminability of her *agon*. Her story has survived in many versions because of the endless sting of her anxious agony; and nobody can tell whether we have or not, by now, heard the last version. Hence the apparent "embarrassment," or rather, the mixed message Shelley sends in the *Preface*. On the first page of the work, he summarizes the story of the actual Beatrice Cenci from her point of view which, being *hers*, was neither false nor true:

This daughter, after long and vain attempts to escape from what she considered a perpetual contamination both of body and mind, at length plotted with her mother-in-law and brother to murder their common tyrant. The young maiden, who was urged to this tremendous deed by an impulse which overpowered its horror, was evidently a most gentle and amiable being, a creature formed to adorn and be admired, and thus violently thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion (Poems, II, 69).

Beatrice's heroic act is the more "tremendous" in that it goes against the grain of her great nature. Whichever way you look at it, you have to admit that she is both right and wrong:

It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which *they* contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists (71).

She survives in the conflict of statements, in the endless reflective struggle men who persist in sympathizing with her have to go through.

The Devil's Dirt

There is something exceptional in the tragic character. Extra-ordinary were the intellectual gifts of Oedipus, his might and arrogance at the beginning of *Oedipus the King*; and as extra-ordinary his fall, guilt, pain and dereliction at the end. Inhuman is the predicament of Beatrice; and so too is her response, for it places her at the limits of humanity, beyond the normal run of justifiable behavior.

The character of Lorenzo is similarly extreme in grandeur and baseness, in strength and in weakness. To recall Aristotle's formula, his behavior is at once "better than the average (man)" and much worse (1965:52). A set of inextricable ambiguities structures his action, which can be seen as great, generous, exceptional on the one hand, but also as petty, nasty and perverse on the other. Not only constricted, in the sense of surrounded, his psyche is contaminated by hostile forces. He must act quickly and, as with Beatrice, we slowly come to realize that it is anxiety propelling him into action.

We have always to keep in mind the peculiar mode of dispersed exposition through which his character is unfolded. In the first two Acts of *Lorenzaccio*, we know Lorenzo only through *the role* he plays for various others. Enveloped in his opaque secret, the opposite qualities of this man are indirectly revealed, as we work to distinguish

between what belongs to the mask and what to the "true" Lorenzo.

It is as a panderer that Lorenzo first appears on stage. His overt baseness is then extreme; but in his articulate, indeed loquacious, manner we might already detect exaggeration and irony. The Duke and Lorenzo are expecting the arrival of a girl ("*un enfant de quinze ans*"). Giving himself due credit as a go-between with a metaphysical bent, Lorenzo explains in front of Alexandre the subtle *method in evil* by which he has educated the prospective victim of his master's pleasures. Obviously, this mock-education reaches beyond ordinary sadism:

Quoi de plus curieux pour le connaisseur que la débauche à la mamelle? Voir dans un enfant de quinze ans la rouée à venir; étudier, enseigner, infiltrer paternellement le filon mystérieux du vice dans un conseil d'ami, dans une caresse au menton -- tout dire et ne rien dire, selon le caractère des parents -- habituer doucement l'imagination qui se développe à donner des corps à ses fantômes, à toucher ce qui l'effraye, à mépriser ce qui la protège! Cela va plus vite qu'on ne pense; le vrai mérite est de frapper juste. Et quel trésor que celle-ci! tout ce qui peut faire passer une nuit délicieuse à Votre Altesse! Tant de pudeur!... Proprette comme une Flamande! La médiocrité bourgeoise en personne (I, i, 138-9).

I quote this first tirade *in extenso* for several reasons. Too often, even in the most faithful performances of the play, complex passages like this one have been expunged, and

important, if subtle, matters have been lost.²⁸ For instance, instead of the correct but formal "*une propreté flamande*" which the editor Jeune found in the manuscript, Musset opted in the definitive version for the slang (Theatre:994). More direct, "*proprette comme une Flamande*" was a common expression in popular French around 1830. Like examples abound. "À tous les détours de *Lorenzaccio*," Masson comments, "*il y a une volonté de dissonance qui cherche à saper le trop beau langage... à désamorcer l'effet d'une tirade trop éloquente*" (1974:111). We may be looking at the representation of an event involving two aristocrats in the Florence of the Renaissance, but Musset's language is that of his country, his people and his time. The notion of a "*médiocrité bourgeoise*" is patently anachronistic and belongs to Romanticism.²⁹

Responding to the bittersweet irony in Lorenzo's mock-pedagogical discourse, the reader-spectator may be surprised to discover on his/her own face a conniving smile. Musset

²⁸ This is especially true of the long confession of Act III. I base this remark on the recording of a famous performance done in Paris in 1954 at the Théâtre National Populaire with Gérard Philipe as Lorenzo, admittedly one of the best actors the role has ever known.

²⁹ Masson writes with good reason: "*Le plus subtil de son alchimie dramatique, c'est dans et par le langage que Musset a choisi de l'opérer*" (1974:108). He then shows how systematically Musset intersperses in his text blatant traits of *modernism*. This affords the playwright a *critical* stance on the political events he depicts, and compels the audience to reflect on comparable events occurring in their own place and time.

is turning Rousseau's *Emile* -- the "natural" pedagogy of the Eighteenth Century -- upside-down. The *real* dimension of the abuse is quite complex. A vicious line of thought ("*le filon mytérieux du vice*"), some unmistakably sexual thing is being sown ("*ensemencé*"), inexplicably "*infiltré*" by a father-figure into the body of the girl. It is wrapped, furthermore, *inside* the word so as to upset the key-faculty of a mind which remains defenseless, not only because it is a young mind, but because the procedure is devilish. The loving touch and the paternal advice have spiritual disorder as their goal. This seducer wants to pollute an innocent soul, to denature its inborn capacity to produce suitable images, and thus force it to respond to dangerous "*fantômes*." We cannot help but recall Satan in *Paradise Lost*, crouched next to Eve:

Squat like a toad, close to the ear of Eve,
 Essaying by his devilish art to reach
 The organs of her fancy, and with them forge
 Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams;
 Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
 The animal spirits... (IV,800-5)

No less than Shelley, Musset *thought* contamination the way Milton had done, metaphysically, the "Hell within" of one lost soul communicating its perdition to another. If Beatrice describes contamination from the point of view of the contaminated, Lorenzo details that of the contaminator. The connection is even closer in the case of Lorenzo, whose

methodic abuse is, like that of Milton's Satan, strictly linguistic.

In both cases, contamination exhibits the same essential logic, that of mixing things, putting them "out of place," which is the general definition of disorder, and the one anthropologist Mary Douglas provides for "dirt": "matter out of place" (1966:36). As "anomaly" and sign of the imminent danger of lawlessness, dirt "leads to anxiety" in primitive man as in the most civilized, she writes (1966:5). The "contaminating mist" that spreads in Beatrice's "inmost spirit" is dirty because it injects matter where it should not be, blurring the line between matter and spirit. Old Cenci is dirty, even more so for what he says than for what he does, when he calls on "God" to destroy his sons and persecute Beatrice. Lorenzo is playing, as they say, a dirty trick on the girl because he is a false friend and a mock-father whose caresses are venom. In this respect, the Satan who in Milton enters the Bower of Bliss while Adam and Eve rest in peace is quintessential dirt. There and everywhere and forever, he is out of place:

Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n
(IV,75-8).

Thinking to escape material Hell and approach Paradise, Satan suddenly looks at himself. Terrified, he reflects on the infinitely "deeper" Hell in his own self. He discovers

the abyss of an absence *within*, the same *real* abyss Shelley and Musset were to reproduce in the reflections of Beatrice and Lorenzo.

Satanic indeed is the unprincipled principle that distorts and confuses places, orders and proprieties, the differences between good and bad. The danger that the Devil represents is internal to language and poses a permanent threat to order in general because it attacks language from within by borrowing its differential logic and dis-placing its structure. Regardless of how it is *imagined* (figured, personified), the demonic is to the symbolic order what a virus is to the human body it infiltrates. As a *real* principle of resistance to the order imposed by language *in* language, the demonic, Julia Kristeva writes, is but the flip-side, the very lining of symbolicity, "*l'instance d'une doublure démoniaque de l'être parlant*" (1980:126).

Of course, being a tragic hero, Lorenzo, no more than Beatrice, can be conceived as *simply* bad; nor can he dispose of the supernatural puissance of Satan. At no point is Beatrice utterly contaminated, otherwise she could not react. Lorenzo is not only a contaminator; he is also the one whose personality is most dangerously threatened by the role he plays. If the Duke remains a flat character, bent throughout on his tyrannical pleasures, Lorenzo has a depth and a subjectivity to defend. He is taking risks with each "dirty" line he pronounces.

This, however, we do not yet measure in the opening Act. Before we discover the subjective *agon* splitting his central character, Musset makes sure we understand that everything is "out of place" in Florence. When, at the end of a first Act full of portents and revelations, Hamlet says: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!" -- it is clear that he confronts an objective "spite" (I,v,196-7). It is not merely Hamlet's impression that something is wrong at the court of Elsinore. The symbolic order is out of order in *Hamlet*.³⁰ Similarly, in Musset's Florence, disorder has reached the point where inside and outside, subjectivity and objectivity correspond in evil: contamination is universal. In the most intimate recesses of each subject as well as in the remotest institutions of the state, the *extimate* real not only resists, but disturbs, perverts the regular, proper run of the symbolic.

We know *Lorenzaccio* to be less Gothic than the *Cenci*, less closed or walled-in, and more overtly political, in the Romantic sense of the word, in that it involves an entire community. It is not a court tragedy in the manner of the Greeks, Racine or even the Shakespeare of *Hamlet*. The play

³⁰ Following the "moral and ritual violation" at the center of the state, Crapanzano shows that language as such is in crisis. The very "bond of signification" is not assured. As the "semantic vertigo" spreads, nobody knows what basic words mean (1992:288-9).

is concerned with the whole Florentine public: young and old men, women and children. It shows the city suffering under the occupation of a foreign army, the Germans, typical enemies of the French. The social and professional strata of a "modern" society are represented: petit-bourgeois merchants; high bourgeoisie like the Strozzi; aristocratic parasites like the Duke and Lorenzo himself, without forgetting Church dignitaries. Musset wants us to see the contaminating influence of tyranny on the intimate as well as on the collective bodies of a people, one reinforcing the impression produced by the other. With a consummate pointillistic technique, he early provides enough contradictory information about his hero, against the backdrop of a *polis* reeking in corruption, for the abyssal and wrenching confession of Act III to feel believable, sincere and true.

Lorenzo's Split

The familial violation that the abduction of the girl constitutes is not merely discussed; it literally happens on stage. A stage indication reads: *La soeur de Maffio passe dans l'éloignement*. A brother is tricked out of a sister by the Duke, his mercenary Giomo and Lorenzo. Disarmed by Giomo, Maffio naively calls on the person in authority, the Duke, to redress his wrong:

Ô honte! ô excès de misère! S'il y a des lois à Florence, si quelque justice vit encore sur la terre, par ce qu'il y a de vrai et de sacré au monde, je me jetterai aux pieds du Duc, et il vous fera pendre tous les deux (I,i.140).

We might laugh at the expense of Maffio, for we know the Duke. There is no recourse, "no refuge" in Beatrice's vocabulary, against tyranny.³¹ The person whose function is to uphold justice in the City is the very one who perverts it. Maffio is most cruelly duped. In a fit of despair, he nevertheless shows the courage to speak out:

Oui, oui, je sais que les gredins de votre espèce égorgent impunément les familles. Mais que je meure, entendez-vous, je ne mourrai pas silencieux comme tant d'autres. Si le duc ne sait pas que sa ville est une forêt pleine de bandits, pleine d'empoisonneurs et de filles déshonorées, en voilà un qui le lui dira (idem).

Maffio, of course, does not deserve to die and so the Duke indulges in the surplus, debonair pleasure of granting him life and money:

³¹ Early on, when calling on the guests to remove her from the palace, Beatrice reflects anxiously:

What, if we [whom Cenci torments],
The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,
His children and his wife, whom he is bound
To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find
No refuge in this merciless wide world?
(I,iii,107).

The one "bound" to love and shelter his family, the father, is he who hurts. This symbolic perversion creates, recalling Crapanzano's words a propos of the court at Elsinore, a "no-exit-no-win situation" for Beatrice (1992:286). Maffio is experiencing the same situation at the level of the body politic.

Giomo, *l'épée à la main.*

Fault-il le frapper, Altesse?

Le Duc

Allons-donc! frapper ce pauvre homme! Va te recoucher, mon ami, nous t'enverrons demain quelques ducats.

Perhaps nothing in *Lorenzaccio* better establishes that everything is wrong in Florence than the ensemble scene which follows. At the break of day, a feast ends in the Nasi's Palace. Two school boys gossip about the costumes seen at the ball. On the other side of the street, two merchants open shop, talking about the political situation while a crowd of passers-by fills the stage. The Orfèvre expounds the connection between disease and tyranny. He complains that Florence used to be an aristocratic republic, democratic in that it was dominated by few but equal families:

La cour, le peuple la porte sur le dos, voyez-vous! Florence était encore (il y a pas longtemps de cela) une bonne maison bien bâtie; tous ces grands palais qui sont les logements de nos grandes familles, en étaient les colonnes. Il n'y avait pas une, de toutes ces colonnes, qui dépassât les autres (I,ii,143).

Backed by the Emperor (Charles V) and the Pope (Clement VI) who needed an ally inside the city, one of the Medici seized control. Supposed to leave when Florence capitulated, the Germans stayed to assure the Duke's *de facto* government. Since then the city has been dominated by "*un gros pâté informe fait de boue et de crachat, et on a appelé cela la*

citadelle." Indignant they may be, but the Florentines are powerless (speechless) against the abuse:

Les familles florentines ont beau crier, le peuple et les marchands ont beau dire, les Médicis gouvernent au moyen de leur garnison; ils nous dévorent comme une excroissance vénéneuse dévore un estomac malade. C'est en vertu des hallebardes qui se promènent sur la plate-forme qu'un bâtard, une moitié de Médicis [Alexandre], un butor que le ciel avait fait pour être garçon boucher ou valet de charrue, couche dans le lit de nos filles, boit nos bouteilles, casse nos vitres, et encore le paille-t-on pour cela (I,ii,144).

Alexandre is a bastard. Quite like the Néron of Racine's *Britannicus*, who was enthroned by his unscrupulous mother Agrippine, this Duke has usurped power. According to blood lines, the direct heir to the throne is Lorenzo. Marie says so in Act I, scene vi: "*Sa naissance ne l'appelait-elle pas au trône?*" (161) and Lorenzo repeats it later: "*Mon nom m'appelait au trône*" (III,iii,199). The Duke confirms it when daring his cousin to the duel.³² Traditional feature: as befits the tragic hero, Lorenzo belongs to a noble house and a kingly lineage.³³

Tyranny is parasitic. No doubt, the figure of an "*excroissance vénéneuse*" devouring the diseased stomach of a people was in use before Musset. But the figure receives on

³² "*Tu trembles, cousin? Fi donc! Tu fais honte au nom des Médicis. Je ne suis qu'un bâtard, et je le porterais mieux que toi, qui es légitime?*" (I,iv,153).

³³ On the *genos* of the hero in ancient tragedy, see Vernant (1995,I:16). Musset recognizes this Classic requisite of the genre in *De la Tragédie*: "*La tragédie a un objet élevé... et pour acteurs des rois, des héros*" (Prose:893).

Musset's stage a brutal deployment. As the Germans clear the street to usher the Duke and his company from the wedding feast, one of the merchants is hurt by a soldier. The irony is that people could not care less. The school boys continue to gossip. The crowd (of "*curieux*") only increases and presses against the door to better admire the inside of the palace and marvel at the extravagant costumes. "*Comme tout est illuminé! danser encore à l'heure qu'il est, c'est là une jolie fête,*" says a woman (I,ii,144).

One of the discreet but effective signs of disorder at Elsinore is that the difference between night and day, weekdays and Sundays, has ceased to structure the routines of life. Marcellus wonders why "the most observant watch" never stops on the ramparts; why the preparation for war, "this sweaty haste," makes "the night joint-labourer with the day" (I,i,70-8). In Musset's Florence, the excessive play, the masquerade, the orgy never end -- at least for those in power. But the result is the same: war and peace, work and leisure, day and night are in a state of utter confusion.³⁴ And there is added to the mockery of religion, a sexual confusion which was not present in Shakespeare. The Duke and Salviati leave the ball disguised as Catholic nuns. The silhouette of Lorenzo appears

³⁴ A bourgeois sarcastically declares: "*Faire du jour la nuit et de la nuit le jour, c'est un moyen commode de ne pas voir les honnêtes gens. Une belle invention, ma foi, que des hallebardes à la porte d'une noce!*" (144).

briefly, in the distance, through an open window. He is drunk and boisterous and wears "*une robe de nonne*." Then we learn an important detail: Lorenzo never smiles.

Le Provediteur *monte à cheval;*
une bouteille cassée lui tombe sur l'épaule.

A ventrebleu! quel est l'assommeur, ici?

Un masque

*Eh! ne le voyez-vous pas, seigneur Corsini?
Tenez, regardez à la fenêtre; c'est Lorenzo avec
sa robe de nonne.*

Le Provéditeur

*Le diable soit de toi! Tu as blessé mon cheval.
(La fenêtre se ferme.) Peste soit de l'ivrogne
et de ses farces silencieuses! Un gremlin qui n'a
pas souri trois fois dans sa vie, et qui passe le
temps à des espiègleries d'écolier en
vacances! (146).*

Varchi, describing his face as pale, sad and delicate, has written that Lorenzo never laughs and only smiles (Genese:20). The Romantic character has interiorized the lascivious grin on the face of the historic Lorenzo. A faint or veiled and all the more caustic irony permanently suffuses his "feminine" and melancholy features. Marie complains to Catherine that in his youth, "*un saint amour de la vérité brillait sur ses lèvres,*" whereas now there but shines "*une ironie ignoble et le mépris de tout*" (I,vi,160).

Irony accompanies reflexivity and both evince a split in the subject, a *dedoublement*. Studying irony in the context of Romanticism where it became, particularly in Germany, a major aesthetic concept, Paul de Man has

identified it with what Baudelaire, in *De l'Essence du Rire* (1855) calls *comique absolu*. The wise man, writes the latter, does not distort his face in laughter (1986:190).³⁵ Deeply human, the comic is contradictory and satanic: he has to believe in his superiority, and yet, nagged by a secret feeling of inferiority, he needs to assert that superiority by laughing *at* someone else and generally at someone else's misfortune. But this only defines *le comique ordinaire*. A philosopher, a dandy, an intellectual, "*un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement,*" may be the scorned object of his own superior self (1986:195). In this case, the contradiction and ugly convulsion of laughter are internal, wholly subjectified.

Irony, according to the traditional definition, is a mode of language which does not mean what it says. The disjunction, the split occurs in language when the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning. More than once, we have heard Lorenzo say something (to the Duke, to Strozzi, to Marie) and mean (for us) something else. De Man shows that the Romantics became anxiously aware of the existential cost of irony:

The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self... The moment the innocence or

³⁵ "*Le Sage par excellence, le Verbe Incarné, n'a jamais ri... Le Sage craint le rire comme il craint les spectacles mondains, la concupiscence.*"

authenticity of our sense of being in the world is being put in question, a far from harmless process gets under way. It may start as a casual bit of play... but before long the entire texture of the self is unravelled and comes apart (1983:214-5).

Irony is infinite. It works with vertiginous speed and leaves no corner of the world, nor of the self, untouched. Lorenzo mocks the Duke but he also scorns the republicans, the bourgeois and the people of Florence for their facility in evil and their subservience. Compassionate, he mocks the young women who so readily fall into his traps. The fact that he confesses disgust about his role as panderer certainly does not mean, for Musset, that he has recovered innocence nor suppressed the progress of perversion. De Man writes: "to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic" (*idem*). There is no coming back: "*Il est trop tard -- je me suis fait à mon métier*" (III,iii,203). The split is absolute. The role of go-between, which defines so well Lorenzo's impossible place in the city, is everlasting. When, in his last words, Lorenzo sneers at his coming death and beyond, at the "*bon Dieu*" who shall condemn and exile him in eternity, Philippe remarks: "*Votre gaieté est triste comme la nuit; vous n'êtes pas changé, Lorenzo*" (V,vii,250).

Neither/Nor

Masson has written eloquently about the weaknesses of Lorenzo, his tendency to dissociate, to split into doubles,

to be visited by his ghost. But Masson and his following among French critics, attribute the *malaise* Lorenzo incarnates to an immature *ego*.³⁶ Shall we pass judgement on this character by means of some handy psychology of inadaptation and neurosis? Even in reality, who enjoys a satisfactory personality? The critics? What if the well-rounded Self, its fine form and beautiful shape were but an *imaginary* projection thrown over a *real* precipice, as Lacan argues in his *Ecrits* and *Séminaire*?³⁷ More to the point of our readings -- should the *ego* of a modern hero of tragedy look more integrated than that of Oedipus or Ajax in Sophocles, more *in control* than that of Phaedra in Euripides, Seneca and Racine? Why -- other than for reasons of our own narcissistic gratification -- should his or her soul be more comfortable, cleaner, a better place to *be*, than the abyss of confusion, ambiguity and contamination Shelley and Musset portray?

Lorenzo suffers *le mal d'être*. And who does not? Did not Masson too fall victim to the Romantic commonplaces present in *Lorenzaccio* and of the role this hero puts on:

³⁶ Masson concludes that Lorenzo suffers "*une désorganisation de la personnalité, un déchirement de l'être intérieur, un moi en difficulté et qui n'a pas conquis son unité*" (1974:203).

³⁷ As early as 1946, in *Propos sur la Causalité Psychique*, Lacan writes about "*la faille ouverte dans son [man's] essence*." He points to a "*discordance primordiale entre le Moi et l'être*" (1966:176). Later, he establishes that the subject is fundamentally split by language.

his wan, melancholy and fragile appearance? For her part, Catherine finds Lorenzo "*encore beau quelquefois dans sa mélancholie étrange.*" She asks Marie in Act I, scene vi, what is wrong with weakness; what is wrong with being a woman? Having heard the rumor about Lorenzo's fainting in public, Marie laments that her son has become the joke of all Florence. Catherine answers:

O ma mère! la lâcheté n'est point un crime, le courage n'est pas une vertu; pourquoi la faiblesse serait-elle blâmable? Répondre de son coeur est un triste privilège. Et pourquoi cet enfant n'aurait-il pas le droit que nous avons toutes, nous autres femmes? Une femme qui n'a peur de rien n'est pas aimable, dit-on (I,vi,159).

Masculine values are under suspicion. Is it right that strength respond to strength and violence answer violence? Why should firm control of oneself and insincerity (the inevitable self-suppression by means of which this is achieved) denote superiority? Clearly, these questions did not pertain to the Renaissance. They are particularly troubling to Romantic avant-gardes.

One could list the signs of weakness (baseness) in Lorenzo, balancing them against his strengths (grandeur). This is what his mother does at the end of Act I while talking to Catherine *au bord de l'Arno*, on the outskirts of Florence. Even though beauty and youth, love of solitude, compassion for the poor and the victims, and study of the great men of the past are things of his past, Marie laments, there is still a sparkle in his eye: "...*n'ai-je pas vu*

quelquefois briller dans ses yeux le feu d'une noble ambition?" (I,vi,160). Once, Lorenzo resembled the ancient Côme de Médicis, the father Marie idealizes, the founder of the dynasty. Then, Lorenzo smiled "*le doux sourire qui rend la jeunesse semblable aux fleurs*" and everything returned his smile. He was young and promising: "*Sa jeunesse n'a-t-elle pas été l'aurore d'un soleil levant?*" Now, he is young and prematurely wasted; occasional flashes of energy still animate his tired flesh. He is like the sun of a troubled sky, threatened by the clouds, great by intermittence: "*Et souvent encore aujourd'hui il me semble qu'un éclair rapide... Je me dis malgré moi que tout n'est pas mort en lui*" (160).

And indeed what happens on stage, as always in Musset, corresponds to the word. The sun slowly falls down on the countryside around Marie and Catherine. Transparent in her dreams, the mother's desire was for Lorenzo to assume his lineage and, according to Marie-Joséphine Whitaker's sexual pun, to exercise his right *on* the city, become Florence's consecrated spouse (1990:188). This ambition, though occluded by his declared motives, is not altogether foreign to Lorenzo. From the opening of Act II until the scene of the murder when it becomes "*cette bague sanglante, inestimable diamant*" Lorenzo wears on his finger the motif of a mystical wedding with the city; the symbol of the ring is recurrent (IV,xi,235). To the painter Tebaldeo, Lorenzo

says: "*Je veux te faire faire un tableau pour le jour de mes noces*" (II,ii,169).³⁸ Lorenzo knows that the portrait will allow him, as it does at the end of Act II, to strip the tyrant naked as it were. Whitaker is right to think that there is more design, premeditation and unflagging determination to act in this hero than is dreamt of in Masson's psychology. Frivolity, inconstancy, physical weakness (femininity) belong to the fiction Lorenzo weaves around the Duke and his entourage. "*Comment, dès lors,*" Whitaker asks Masson, "*tirer des conclusions sur le 'psychisme' de Lorenzo à partir de ces notions fausses?*" (1990:185). Witty, deft, resourceful, Lorenzo puts up a show like Hamlet with his "antics." Lorenzo, however, does not await the last scene of his five Acts, nor an invitation from the outside to be ready to kill. Like Hamlet, he secretly keeps in continual practice at fencing. From the beginning of the drama, his behavior says (at least to us) what Hamlet pronounces at the end: "The readiness is all" (V,ii,169).

And yet one should not overly aggrandize Lorenzo either. Marie is not wrong to lament, strike the ground and predict her own death at the hand of her son. If only, she cries, he were an ordinary libertine, the blue blood of her family would have guaranteed a happy, if mediocre,

³⁸ Jeune lists the occurrences of the motif (Theatre:1008).

aristocratic life. But depravation *in* Lorenzo is superlative. His blood is vitiated, his soul lost: "*la souillure de son sang lui est montée au visage*" (I,vi,160).

Marie's dream has turned to nightmare:

Cela est trop cruel d'avoir vécu... bercée par son fils, et de se réveiller dans une mesure ensanglantée, pleine de débris d'orgie et de restes humains, dans les bras d'un spectre hideux qui vous tue en vous appelant du nom de mère (161).

Lorenzo's activities are satanic in the sense that we have defined: they transmit perdition to the collectivity like a virus. While Catherine remarks: "*Des ombres silencieuses commencent à marcher sur la route... tous ces bannis me font peur,*" the last rays of the setting sun are fading. Through the deepening gloom, we make out the figures of an unreal multitude issued straight from Dante's *Inferno*. Who are they? Marie answers: the victims of Lorenzo's pandering. "*Pauvres gens... tous ces bourgeois ont eu confiance en lui, il n'en est pas un parmi tous ces pères de famille chassés de leur patrie que mon fils n'ait trahi*" (161). Having used it to be received into the homes of those who trusted it most, Lorenzo has befouled even his good name and noble filiation. It is again on the perversion of the *chez soi*, on the violation of the family that Marie insists:

*Je ne puis voir une fille sans pudeur, un malheureux privé de sa famille, sans que tout cela ne me crie: Tu es la mère de nos malheurs!
Quand serai-je là?*

Elle frappe la terre.

The most pointed contradiction in Lorenzo's endeavor is the one we are about to fathom: Lorenzo has betrayed the very collectivity his project is supposed to liberate.

Not the least moving presence in this powerful scene is the figure of Maffio among the banished. In the succession of intimate and collective, in-door and out-door scenes that comprise Act I, and while the stage has been occupied by many personages of high and low standing, we have probably forgotten about Maffio and the fate of his sister Gabrielle. But not Musset, who needs continuity in the midst of dispersion and wants to teach us a lesson in tyranny. Maffio's situation has worsened. Alexandre's power, debonair in appearance, has worked like a brutal machine: the violence it generates escalates its own momentum. The way Maffio describes the revenge he obtained by knocking three teeth out of the mouth of the poor old woman who now guards Gabrielle only adds its pathetic quantum to the feeling of impotence uniting the banished (162).

The vocabulary of the banished is that of universal contamination. As two of them climb up to a platform dominating the city, they speak of Florence as of a bad mother, cursed, sterile and polluted:

Adieu, Florence, peste de l'Italie; adieu, mère stérile, qui n'a plus de lait pour tes enfants... Florence la bâtarde, spectre hideux de l'Antique Florence; adieu fange sans nom... Maudites soient les mamelles de tes femmes, le pain de tes blés, l'air de tes rues! Malédiction sur la dernière goutte de ton sang corrompu! (163).

Florence is invaded by the *miasma* that crippled Thebes in *Oedipus the King*. Pollution is far from being Lorenzo's personal problem, the subjective result of his "guilt" and neurotically distorted self-perception. Masson minimizes this hero's anxiety and notices it only as another of Lorenzo's many weaknesses. He does not look seriously into the category of contamination and is forced in turn to treat its recurring vocabulary as an "*allégorie*" (we shall not know of what), a mere exaggeration, a "*féérie*" of words, the product of Lorenzo's sickly imagination (e.g. 1974:193,203). At times, Masson recognizes that the true, objective topic of the drama is the city's perdition: "*le vrai sujet du drame, c'est Florence abâtardie s'abîmant sans remission dans la servitude et sous la tyrannie*" (1974:105). And he realizes that the confession in Act III yields, thanks to what I have called its sublime figures, the subjective pendant and correspondent: the unbearable vision of an evil real, "*la révélation insoutenable du mal*" as seen from within the hero (1974:202). But Masson does not link the two dimensions together; he does not grasp that Musset diagnoses a disorder and pollution of the symbolic, the order of language being inside *and* outside the speaking subjects. Contamination is articulated in the text as both subjective and objective because it is a *real* category. Lorenzo has *real* reasons to be anxious.

Lorenzo Misanthrope

What is the point of Lorenzo's project, finally? What is he ultimately *after*? Masson's psychological reading is insightful -- and we have followed him in Part I of this essay -- in stating that, after the shock of inspiration, his identity at stake, Lorenzo is not quite "himself" anymore:

... depuis la nuit du Colisée, Lorenzo s'aperçoit qu'il ne s'appartient plus, que sa conscience est le champ de forces obscures qui le dépassent et le dépossèdent de son libre arbitre (1974:202).

Actually, if Lorenzo is ambivalent from the start, he fragments into a series of anxious questions only in the soliloquies of Act IV. But this dispossession of self can be understood as a requisite of the genre. In the tragedies of Corneille, the hero is the one who sacrifices himself, gives himself over to his cause, demonstrates a selfless generosity. In the sentence "*mon nom m'appelait au trône,*" Whitaker stresses *m'appelait* and comments: "*On est toujours appelé par son nom*" (1990:189). Although she adamantly rejects psychoanalytically oriented literary criticism, Whitaker has evidently received the influence of Lacan. One is always at the mercy of the place one occupies, before one's birth and beyond one's death, in the discourse of the

Other and in the symbolic network.³⁹ In the case of the tragic hero, this position is exceptional and marks in advance, as Steiner aptly wrote, "the somber privilege of those who are in high places [...] those whom the gods honour [as it turns out] with their vengeance" (1961:241 and 274). Although he had lived a pure and serene life for twenty years, Lorenzo, when called upon, accepts without resistance the *dictum* of Fate: "*la Providence m'a poussé à la résolution de tuer un tyran, quel qu'il fût*" (III,iii,199). The *virtue* of the hero, in the etymological sense of force, consists in embracing his tragic election in spite of the risks involved or rather, in the modern version of Corneille, *because of* them. Whitaker quotes Horace who, about to lose his life for the sake of Rome, proudly answers the "petty" concerns of Curiace:

*Quoi! vous me pleureriez mourant pour mon pays!
Pour un coeur généreux ce trépas a des charmes;
La gloire qui le suit ne souffre point de larmes,
Et je le recevrais en bénissant mon sort,
Si Rome et tout l'Etat perdaient moins à ma mort*
(II,ii,398-402).

Beyond his personal interests and rational motives, Lorenzo engages what I have called, after Lacan, his desire through a similar sacrifice and loss of his previous self. But Lorenzo is far from being a traditional hero. He criticizes

³⁹ See, *Séminaire II*, where Lacan applies this principle to Oedipus, whose fated desire was inscribed, long before he was born, in the oracle transmitted through the generations of Labdacides (1954-5:268).

Providence -- something Horace or Polyeucte never do -- and questions the meaning of his calling, demanding sense from the contagion of nonsense. The ambition his reflections delineate in Act III is singular (solitary and peculiar):

Je voulais agir seul, sans le secours d'aucun homme. Je travaillais pour l'humanité; mais mon orgueil restait solitaire au milieu de mes rêves philanthropiques. Il fallait donc entamer par la ruse un combat singulier avec mon ennemi. Je ne voulais pas soulever les masses, ni conquérir la gloire bavarde d'un paralytique, comme Cicéron. Je voulais arriver à l'homme, me prendre corps à corps avec la tyrannie vivante, la tuer, porter mon épée sanglante sur la tribune, et laisser la fumée du sang d'Alexandre monter au nez des harangueurs, pour réchauffer leur cervelle empoulée (III,iii,199-200).

Talking to Philippe Strozzi, Lorenzo unfolds the humanistic grandeur of his enterprise.⁴⁰ But he also mocks (the irony being aimed at his addressee) eloquence and the futility of beautiful words: "*Qu'importe que la conscience soit vivante, si le bras est mort?*" (203). The image of the bloody sword and the reeking body on public display refers to *Julius Ceasar* and, in particular, to the skillful demagogy of Antony who knew so well how to speak for "Ceasar's wounds" and move the crowd of Romans to revenge (III,ii,132). After his mute, secret and personal engagement with Alexandre, Lorenzo's intention is to retreat into darkness and silence.

⁴⁰ "*Tel que tu me vois, Philippe, j'ai été honnête. J'ai cru à la grandeur humaine... J'ai versé plus de larmes sur la pauvre Italie que Niobé sur ces filles*" (198). The image of Niobé is a topos of Classical tragedy. Antigone compares herself to the "daughter of Tantalus" (1991:886). Lorenzo's feminine identification, however, is hardly Classical.

He wants the Florentines and their pompous leaders to decide for themselves what to do. Why, just when one would expect Lorenzo's open triumph, this obscurity, this secrecy and solitude?

Lorenzo knows that the community for the sake of which he sacrifices his physical and spiritual well-being despises him: "*Voilà assez longtemps, vois-tu, que les Républicains me couvrent de boue et d'infamie... que l'exécration des hommes empoisonne le pain que je mâche*" (205). Lorenzo, the easiest of targets, has become the scapegoat of the crowd's own incapacity to act directly against evil: "*J'en ai assez de me voir conspuer par des lâches sans noms qui m'accablent d'injures pour se dispenser de m'assommer, comme ils le devraient.*" Ultimately, Lorenzo's gesture is not political. It is a challenge, coming from the scapegoat, to the community's eternal tendency to scapegoat, i.e. to project its own weaknesses on a victim. Even if it is inconsequential and no republican insurrection follows the tyrannicide, even if nobody has the courage to respond, the killing of the tyrant will have been a pure act of defiance, absolute in that it will have been a message sent by one man to all men, who will have in any case answered by their very silence:

Que les hommes me comprennent ou non, qu'ils agissent ou n'agissent pas, j'aurai dit tout ce que j'ai à dire... l'Humanité gardera sur sa joue le soufflet de mon épée marqué en trait de sang... Ma vie est au bout de ma dague, et que la

*Providence retourne ou non la tête en
m'entendant frapper, je jette la nature humaine
à pile ou face sur la tombe d'Alexandre -- dans
deux jours les hommes comparaitront devant le
tribunal de ma volonté (205).*

In what Masson has termed "*une étrange parodie de jugement dernier*," the one accused and judged by his fellow men is about to return the accusation like a glove and judge, *hic et nunc*, the worth of them all (1974:205). This way of asserting valor at the expense of the rest of humanity is reminiscent of the last words of Molière's tragi-comic character in *Le Misanthrope* (1666). Leaving the stage, the self-righteous Alceste vituperates one last time:

*Trahi de toutes parts, accablé d'injustices,
Je vais sortir d'un gouffre où triomphent les vices,
Et chercher sur la terre un endroit écarté
Où d'être homme d'honneur on ait la liberté
(V, iv, 1803-6).*

The Last Drop of Pure Milk

The difference, of course, is that we do not laugh, nor do we smile. The last words of Lorenzo's confession are extremely arrogant; but they are not grandiloquent. They are not funny because they are not mere words, like those of Alceste, whose solitude was a pretense. Lorenzo is dead serious. We have no doubt that the crime will happen. The bedroom is ready. The "*cotte de maille*" has been stolen and each move duly rehearsed. When Act IV starts, Lorenzo is confident that the elements of his plot are converging. He

did not need, in fact, to deter his friend Philippe from starting a risky uprising prematurely. The old man's republicanism was crushed in the bud the moment his daughter Louise was poisoned in view of the forty members of the Strozzi family (III,vii). The tyrant is always one step ahead in the game. This "*garçon boucher*" may at times be duped by Lorenzo; but he acts promptly, more efficiently than his politically correct opponents, and there is no limit to how high he will raise the stakes. Laughing *in absentia* at the disaster of the previous scene (Louise's death, Philippe's panic), Alexandre confides to Lorenzo with an intense pleasure: "*J'aurais voulu être là, il devait y avoir plus d'une face en colère*" (IV,i,216). Alexandre does not simply eliminate people on a whim; he enjoys observing them as they discover their undoing. Like Néron in Racine's *Britannicus*, he enjoys nothing so much as to watch, hidden behind a veil, the personal results of his cruelties.

At first taken aback by the Duke's interest in his young, beautiful and chaste aunt Catherine, Lorenzo has apparently conceived the last and most dangerous twist in his career as go-between (II,iv). Assuring the Duke that Catherine is ready for a rendez-vous of love, he will exploit this lure to bolster the sense of his limitless servility and dissipate any lingering suspicions concerning his political loyalty (IV,x). The Duke must leave his German army behind and come alone to the bedroom where

Scoronconcolo will be on hand, if need be. Tonight is the night. Act IV, scene i ends with a brief aside where Lorenzo, excited and visibly proud of himself, sums up the situation:

Ainsi c'est convenu. Ce soir je l'emmène chez moi, et demain les républicains verront ce qu'ils ont à faire, car le duc de Florence sera mort... Dépêche-toi, soleil, si tu es curieux des nouvelles que cette nuit te dira demain (217).

His secret plot is at last about to spring into action. And yet, from one soliloquy to the next, anxiety invades the hero. Musset gives three snapshots of his perspective as the decisive moment approaches. Lorenzo's psyche appears progressively more confused, his speech more fragmented, his tone more feverish. At no point, however, is there any uncertainty or waivering in his resolution to act.

Lorenzo wonders what is actually driving him to kill this man who has not, at least intentionally, wronged him: "*Il a fait du mal aux autres, mais il m'a fait du bien, du moins à sa manière*" (IV,iii,219). Why did he come to Florence, looking for "*un des tyrants de ma patrie*"? Alexandre did not force him to become the panderer that he is: "*Si j'étais resté tranquille au fond de mes solitudes de Caffagiuolo, il ne serait pas venu m'y chercher.*"⁴¹ As though he were the double of himself, Lorenzo then

⁴¹ Set in the countryside outside Florence, Caffagiuolo symbolizes lost innocence. It is tranquil, vast, pure and peopled with young peasant girls who do decent work (e.g. IV,ix,232).

experiences the uncanny realization that his obscure desire, the very vocation of his life, might be a death-wish, a desire *of* or *for* death, in the sense that it is sent *by* death. He repeats "*que veut dire cela?*". Lucidly detached, eerily estranged from his own self, he ponders:

... je suis venu le [Alexandre] chercher à Florence. Pourquoi cela?... M'avait-il offensé alors? Cela est étrange, et cependant pour cette action j'ai tout quitté. La seule pensée de ce meurtre a fait tomber en poussière les rêves de ma vie; je n'ai plus été qu'une ruine, dès que ce meurtre, comme un corbeau sinistre, s'est posé sur ma route et m'a appelé à lui (IV,iii,219-20).

It would be difficult to find a clearer illustration of the Lacanian tenet: once structured, "*le désir c'est le désir de l'Autre.*"⁴² Who called on me; whose desire desired me?

"*De quels entrailles fauves, de quels velus embrassements suis-je donc sorti?*" (219). Lorenzo has in mind, not his actual birth, but that of the "new" Lorenzo, the one who descended from his innocent heights like a statue suddenly animated.⁴³ There follow several disconnected sentences in a passage which I have already partially quoted. Lorenzo looks outside, as far away as he can see: "*Tout à l'heure... j'ai entendu deux hommes parler d'une comète*" (220). Jeune

⁴² Lacan never deviated from this formula, which he started elaborating in *Séminaire I* (1953-4:178).

⁴³ "*Une statue qui descendrait de son piedestal pour marcher parmi les hommes sur la place publique serait peut-être semblable à ce que j'ai été le jour où j'ai commencé à vivre avec cette idée: il faut que je sois un Brutus*" (III,iii,199).

comments: "*Les comètes ont longtemps passé pour annoncer des calamités publiques*" (Theatre:1031). Without transition, he then points to what is nearest: "*Sont-ce les battements d'un coeur humain que je sens là...?*" and again outside: "*Suis-je le bras de Dieu? Y a-t-il une nuée au-dessus de ma tête?*" In order to limit "it" to some namable thing he can control, Lorenzo is trying to locate the *real* cause of his anxiety; there is no difference in this respect between inside and outside. Lorenzo is finally referring to the vindictive and absurd side of the Biblical God. The Archangel who put the sword in his hand, apparently the sword of justice aimed at tyranny, might very well desire him to destroy himself before he reaches his target (IV,iii,220).

But this does not mean that Lorenzo has reservations about his impending action: "*Quand j'entrerai dans cette chambre... j'ai peur de tomber*" questions the results, not the intention. The act will be done, though its agent were certain to die in the process. Lorenzo's choice involves more than his life, which he is more than ready to give, as becomes apparent in the second soliloquy. The next time we see Lorenzo alone, it is in a scene that begins in a dialogue with Catherine. His alienation from his immediate family has deepened. Catherine announces: "*Notre mère est malade...*" (IV,v,224). Marie is sick over the letter Catherine has just received from the Duke: "*Cette lecture a fait bien du mal à ta mère*" (225). This is the last drop

for Marie. She cannot bear that her son has become so perverted as to satisfy Alexandre's lust with his own family. Things are getting frighteningly close to home. Lorenzo's plot is in danger of backfiring. His face waxes pale, anxiety infusing the mask when he asks: "*Le duc t'a donc écrit? Cela est singulier que je ne l'aie point su.*" He is suddenly aware that the single-minded tyrant may move more rapidly than he, Lorenzo, can foresee.

The mask is now so glued to the "true" Lorenzo that he spontaneously starts talking to Catherine in the role of panderer: "*N'as-tu pas été flatée, un amour qui fait l'envie de tant de femmes! un titre si beau à conquérir, la maîtresse de...*" -- when something breaks in him. He sends Catherine back home: "*Va-t'en Catherine, va dire à ma mère que je te suis.*" More alone than ever, Lorenzo appears to himself a step further advanced in the progress of evil. He reflects on what has just passed: "*J'allais corrompre Catherine. Je crois que je corromprais ma mère si mon cerveau le prenait à tâche*" (225). Evil like a disease progresses inexorably once the individual is infiltrated, no matter how pure h/she was beforehand:

Catherine n'est-elle pas vertueuse? Combien faudrait-il de paroles pour faire de cette colombe ignorante la proie de ce gladiateur [Alexandre] aux poils roux? Quand je pense que j'ai failli parler! (226)

There exists no shield against linguistic contamination. In Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, when "Those Notes [turn] to

Tragic," as Milton writes modestly, Eve understands too late the dangers of "free" discussion and philosophic dialogue (IX:5). How devilish is language! How indistinguishable the good argument and the bad! Lorenzo is ashamed: "*je ne peux plus répondre de ma langue*" (225). The satanic idiom has so deeply invaded him that it comes back out on his breath. The poisoned robe with which, in the Classical tragedy, Deianira melted the fine body of Heracles has not only been interiorized but its effects have been moralized. According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew, it is not "that which goes into the mouth that defiles man, but that which comes out of the mouth" (15:10). *Lorenzaccio* is indeed a Post-Christian play.

There is a direction to evil, and this is where Musset parts with Christianity. There is a Fall; but there will be no Resurrection. Granted a margin of initial choice, which Lorenzo does not deny, the contaminated individual falls ineluctably towards the worst, just as high-quality energies are progressively degraded in the course of time according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics: "*Je puis délibérer et choisir, mais non revenir sur mes pas quand j'ai choisi*" (225). The universal inclination to evil elicits startling accents of clemency in Lorenzo's reflections. If Catherine is no better than any other woman, then no woman is worse than her:

Que de filles maudites par leur pères rôdent au coin des bornes, ou regardent leur tête rasée dans le miroir cassé d'une cellule, qui ont valu autant que Catherine, et qui ont écouté un ruffian moins habile que moi! (226).

We are far from the scorn Lorenzo once felt for the victims of his seduction, the girls (and their mothers) who laughed and asked for more (III,iii,202). Lorenzo even shows a kind of Catholic indulgence toward the man whom he has so far described as a brainless machine, a beast and his tormentor:

O Alexandre! je ne suis pas dévot mais je voudrais, en vérité, que tu fisses ta prière avant de venir ce soir dans cette chambre (226).

After Act IV, it is no longer possible to limit Lorenzo's motives to personal revenge or lofty ethical and abstract political matters.⁴⁴ Catherine is in danger of being lost forever: "*tu te laisserais tomber comme tant d'autres dans l'éternel abîme, si je n'étais pas là*" (226). But Lorenzo is going to act. The spark of inspiration has ignited in him a flame; driven by the heat of a burning coal, there is the energy of a "*tison*" inside his weak frame:

Si tous les hommes sont des parcelles d'un foyer immense, assurément l'être inconnu qui m'a pétri a laisser tomber un tison au lieu d'une étincelle, dans ce corps faible et chancelant (225).

⁴⁴ This is what Sices, under-crediting the logic of contamination, does: "Alexander's murder has become a pure act of revenge: on Alexander, for making Lorenzo what he is; on Lorenzo himself, for allowing himself to be alienated from his former purity; on the world, for disillusioning him" (1974:134). I do not grasp how an act of revenge can ever be said to be "pure"!

Moments before the crime, the "pure" motive that propels him, in spite of it all, is to save Catherine -- at least and *in extremis* one woman and one mother (one future family) in this falling world. The act is ultimately triggered by the vision of utter contamination which, in turn, arouses frenzied anxiety in Lorenzo. It is altruistic and reaches beyond his own death. It also resonates with the only personal justification Lorenzo could think-up for Philippe. Paradoxically, to kill looked then like the one gesture that could save his honor and his virtue, purifying his being in his own eyes as in that of others, men of this generation and of the ones to come:

Songes-tu que ce meurtre, c'est tout ce qui me reste de ma vertu? Songes-tu que je glisse depuis deux ans sur un rocher taillé à pic, et que ce meurtre est le seul brin d'herbe où j'ai pu cramponner mes ongles?... Si tu honores en moi quelque chose, toi qui me parles, c'est mon meurtre que tu honores, peut-être justement parce que tu ne le ferais pas (III,iii,205).

Beatrice, whose Chasm speech is *The Cenci's* counterpart to this passage, is placed in the same agonistic situation. For the heroes of these Romantic tragedies, killing the tyrant is the only way to stay pure and to give purity a wordly chance. Of that at least, when of nothing else, they are anxiously certain. So desperate is their plight, they must commit a crime in order to purify and redeem themselves from the abyss of contamination into which they have fallen. This certitude produces the one and only optimistic note

present in the five Acts and thirty eight scenes of

Lorenzaccio:

Eh! Bien j'ai commis bien des crimes, et si ma vie est jamais dans la balance d'un juge quelconque, il y aura d'un coté une montagne de sanglots; mais il y aura peut-être de l'autre une goutte de lait pur tombée du sein de Catherine, et qui aura nourri d'honnêtes enfants (226).

We should register this future perfect in one of Lorenzo's last considerations before the murder: even as he is ready to disappear without a trace on the surface, beyond his death and whether or not they ever hear a word about him, his act will have fed good children. The good side of it will have survived in secret.

PART THREE

THE FAILURE

... isolation continually gains the upper hand...[even] these numerous associations demonstrate the disintegration of the age... Has not the bond that in the political sense held the states together, invisibly and spiritually, dissolved; has not the power in religion that insisted upon the invisible been weakened and destroyed; do not our statesmen and clergymen have this in common, that they, like the augurs of old, cannot look at one another without smiling?

Kierkegaard (*Either/Or*)

CHAPTER 6: RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ROMANTIC TRAGEDY

The Sympathy of Anxiety

Musset's admiration for Aristotle was more than conventional. In *De la Tragedie*, he derides his contemporaries: "*Notre siècle est si extravagant et si puérilement railleur qu'on y hésite à nommer Aristote*" (Prose:892). Against the thirst for novelty and the mockery of tradition fashionable in his time, Musset refers back to the Classical thinker when he discusses "*les premiers principes de la tragédie, qui sont communs aux modernes et aux anciens*" (893).

According to the French playwright, there are but two masters in the genre: Sophocles and Corneille. What is the difference between them? The answer seems simple enough: in the ancient tragedy, "*l'homme tombe dans le péril ou le malheur par une cause qui est hors de lui... c'est le destin, le devoir, la parenté*" [Musset's emphasis], whereas in the modern tragedy, the cause of the hero's downfall is inside of him: "*ce sont les passions, les vices, les vertus*" (893). Does this mean that fate, kinship and duty do not wreak havoc in Corneille? In *Le Cid*, both the call of duty

and the passion meet inside the protagonists. Chimène is torn between her filial obligation to Don Gomes and her passion for Don Rodrigue who, in turn, agonizes over his love for Chimène and his sense of obligation to Don Diègue, his father. What remains of Musset's distinction is that the modern form tends to interiorize the ancient conflict of tragedy.

Polarity, however, is "*un principe*" and conflict defines the genre. Tragedy is agonistic and so is its reception:

La tragédie est la représentation d'une action héroïque... son but est d'exciter la terreur et la pitié. Pour cela elle doit nous montrer des hommes dans le péril et dans le malheur, dans un péril qui nous effraye, dans un malheur qui nous touche (893).

Translating Musset into our present vocabulary, as he adapted Aristotle to his own, we could say that the hero's plight must arouse ambivalence in the audience. Frye summed up centuries of discussion when he wrote: "The words fear and pity may be taken as referring to two general directions in which emotions move, whether towards an object or away from it" (1967:37). The tragic performance rivets us to an "object" that terrifies to the degree that it attracts. The more we are compelled to empathize with the heroic predicament, the more we also recoil horrified, repulsed, perhaps disgusted by it.

Beatrice in *The Cenci* and Lorenzo in *Lorenzaccio* certainly elicit this classical ambivalence. Nevertheless, a close reading of the way *eleos* and *phobos* function in the *Poetics* would reveal an essential difference. "In a sense," as Kierkegaard notes, "everything is the same" in Romantic and Classical tragedies. Fate and its obscure Oracles are still at work, and so are the election, the wrenching moment of decision, the defiance implicit in the tragic action as well as the preternatural efficacy of curses. The "wicked god" that Ricoeur found nagging Io in Aeschylus is still there, as absurd, vindictive and *real* as ever; only, it is eating away at the Romantic characters from within their psyches. Though remarkably intact, the conventions of tragedy have undergone a subtle but radical displacement. Kierkegaard adds immediately, "but everything is different" (1987:154).

Oedipus -- exemplary object of Aristotle's discussion, for whom his categories were tailor-made -- has committed "some great error" (*hamartia*) without knowing it. Unaware of Fate -- like any other human being -- this hero elicits "fear for someone like ourselves," fear indeed that the misfortunes befalling him might happen to us (1965:48). Crushed by the gods even though *his* fault is limited, Oedipus draws compassion from the public or "pity for the undeserving sufferer" (*idem*). The problem is that there is no room for irresponsibility -- there are no "undeserving"

characters on the Romantic stage. Good intentions notwithstanding, there is nobody but themselves to blame for the disastrous consequences of their actions -- it is altogether *theirs*. The ancient hero had more recourses. If Oedipus accuses himself at the end of *Oedipus the King*, he denies responsibility at the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, putting the fault on the gods:

What I have done
is suffering rather than doing...
Even had I done what I did full consciously,
even so, I would not have been evil.
But the truth is, I knew nothing
when I came where I did. Yet they knew --
those by whom I suffered...
It was meant to be my death (1991:91).

Looking at this notion of fault, Ricoeur explains that "the crux of the tragic vision" consisted in a dizzying circle (1967:218). In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, for example, Agamemnon is supposed to have bragged about his prowess in hunting, committing the fault of *hybris* against the goddess, who now demands punishment. But who has incited Agamemnon in the first place to forget moderation, so that he will outrage Artemis, who will in turn paralyze the Greek expedition at Aulis? And who has so skillfully weaved Oedipus' destiny that, in spite of his express intention, he will one day cross his father's path, kill him unawares and take to his mother's bed? The gods are ultimately responsible. Ricoeur shows that at the root of the tragic fear for the hero there is a theology which "could not be

thought through" and assimilated to morality by human reason. The gods are "laying violent hold on a human act. This leading astray, this blindness, this excess, is not a punishment for some fault; it is the fault itself, the origin of the fault" (1967:214). The source of the *hamartia* committed by the hero may always be traced in Greek tragedies to "a wicked god."

The Romantics no longer represent the gods. But the irrational, *real* dimension the old gods personified has not vanished; it comes from a different place. In a sense, the gods of ancient tragedy survive. They are *reflected* in the language of each play where they exist as dead, as belonging to the past.¹ There are numerous references to the ancient myths in Shelley and in Musset. These, however, function as similes and metaphors, as tragic *topoi*. Thyestes' banquet, Deianira's robe, Niobe's tears are emblems inserted in their texts to indicate that, indeed, they have not *forgotten* the stock of images accumulated by the genre in which they work.

The unexpected consequence of this apparent a-theism is an aggravation of the responsibility the isolated tragic hero assumes regarding a secret h/she cannot share, neither with the mortals nor with the immortals. Discussing the

¹ This literary process compares with *the work* of mourning. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud states that the mourner, in order to survive the loss, must bring back to life -- recall as lost -- all the details that h/she has interiorized about the dead person (1917:245).

evolution of the genre and, pointedly, the withdrawing from visibility of the sacred personified by the gods, Musset wrote in *De la Tragédie*:

La divinité n'intervient plus dans nos fables; nous n'avons plus de ces terribles prologues où un dieu irrité sort d'un palais et appelle le malheur sur ceux qui l'habitent... chez nous l'homme est seul, et ses vices, ses vertus, ses crimes lui appartiennent (Prose:895).

If only Artemis or Zeus could be counted even partially responsible for the secret that petrifies Beatrice or Lorenzo! Their psyches do not fall prey to the uncontrollable desires "*les Dieux*" visited upon the Neo-classical Phèdre. Since Racine, not only the content but the structure of the secret have changed. Neither Beatrice nor Lorenzo shares an infested interiority with the living the way that Phaedra had divulged her desire for Hippolytus to others in Euripides, Seneca and Racine.² I have stressed the solitude of the Romantic character to mark this historic difference. What Beatrice and Lorenzo painfully expose when they confide to an other (Lucretia or Strozzi) is the extent to which they are misunderstood and, given the

² The nurse's role is key to the action in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Seneca's *Phaedra* and Racine's *Phèdre*. She advises Phaedra to loosen her rigid standards and admit her love for Hippolytus (Euripides). Or else, she tells Phaedra to control dangerous *eros* while she organizes a private meeting with Hippolytus (Seneca). In Seneca and in Racine, not only does the nurse advise the overture to Hippolytus; when the scandal has become public, she orchestrates the slander of his name. In sum, Phaedra's responsibility is shared essentially by the gods and accidentally by the nurse.

irrepresentable nature of their secret, the extent to which they cannot but be misunderstood (even by us), no matter how sympathetic the addressee.

Anxiety is ambivalence at its source. It mobilizes both repulsion and fascination for its cause. It can therefore replace and integrate the polarized feelings of pity and fear with which, since Aristotle, tragedy was supposed to be primarily concerned. But in order to elicit this new and modern feeling, the solitary man burdened by some incomprehensible secret must be very close to each one of us, ordinary members of a democratic people. We have seen our heroes succeed in doing so by their very isolation from the rest of the characters. Though they are modelled on remote legends, the aristocratic figures of Beatrice and Lorenzo feel like *alter egos*. As they pour into our ears dirty secrets, each provokes the one nebulous (pre)sentiment which is best apt to communicate the whole of another person's mood in one flash of certainty. Hence the flagrant *modernity* of these re-creations. Shelley and Musset well understood that the central character had to feel familiar if his/her anxiety was to be communicative. The word that the Romantics -- Coleridge, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Shelley -- seem to have privileged to name so promiscuous a mode of communication is "sympathy."

In a passage dedicated to the theater, *A Defense* calls upon tragedy to "enlarge the imagination by a sympathy with

the pains and passions" (1977:490). Whereas in the *Poetics* Aristotle maintained that the hero "should be better than the average [man]," evolving as it were on a higher plane so that his fault (and subsequent downfall) be more palpable, De Quincey in his article *On the Knocking* subsumes the differences (historical, social, moral) between character and public under the necessary impression of their identity. In the word "sympathy... at present so general," he is at pains to distinguish between the *sympathy of pity*, which he interprets as condescension, and the *sympathy of imitation*, which places the viewers on a par with the character and able to absorb all his feelings.³ So as to impart the democratic, personal, intimate aspect of this larger notion, De Quincey defines it as "the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another" (1890:391).

We have analyzed the example De Quincey favors: "In *Macbeth*... Shakspere has introduced two murderers: and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated," that is, isolated from the rest of the characters. Now, this "discrimination" is the stroke of genius, carving out as it were and amplifying the "raging storm of passion -- jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred" *inside* the murderers. De Quincey notes how the Shakespearean technique of the

³ "I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we are made to enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them -- not a sympathy of pity or approbation" (1890:391).

secret outlines "a hell within them" that the audience is perforce ready to appropriate since "into this hell we are to look" (1890:392).

In a rarely quoted passage, Aristotle notices the peculiarity of the pleasure (*kharis*, joy, *jouissance*) humans derive from *mimesis*, even "from the most accurate representations of things which in themselves we would find painful to see, such as the forms of the lowest animals and of corpses" (1965:35). The mimetic faculty has evolved into the Romantic sympathy of anxiety. In the first half of the Nineteenth Century, playwrights could expect people to enjoy what they certainly would not otherwise have enjoyed: the representation of obscenities issuing up from the internal abysses of deeply isolated individuals. We know, however, that "the hell within" is not the last word of our two tragedies. Their last word is that there is no last word. Within and beyond "the hell within" there still insists the real, inexpressible cause that provokes anxiety. How can an audience ever enjoy anxiety *per se*? How can we relate to it enough not to reject, not to simply forget, not to repress the contagious condition of communication, the sympathy that brings it home to us?

The Bride of the Secret

According to Kierkegaard, anxiety in the hero and, by sympathy, in the audience, is the trademark of "modern" tragedy. Not without a keen irony, the philosopher notices that what spectators enjoy "nowadays," is participating in the guilt of another. What interests the critics, he asserts, is feeling anxious over a shameful secret for which someone must take exclusive responsibility, as must each of us regarding personal matters in this isolating and moralizing age.

In a very inventive "fragment" of literary criticism called *The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama* -- a title indicating first, that there is continuity in the genre, and second, that the difference is a matter of interiorization -- Kierkegaard imagines a "modern," i.e. a Romantic, Antigone who does not contradict Creon and trespass his edicts; rather she dwells, paralyzed by endless reflections, over a terrible secret:

Oedipus has killed the sphinx, liberated Thebes; Oedipus has murdered his father, married his mother; and Antigone is the fruit of this marriage. So it goes in the Greek tragedy. Here I deviate. With me, everything is the same, and yet everything is different. Everyone knows that he has killed the sphinx and freed Thebes, and Oedipus is hailed and admired and is happy in his marriage to Jocasta. The rest is hidden from the people's eyes, and no suspicion has ever brought this horrible dream into the world of actuality. Only Antigone knows it. How she knows it is extraneous... at an early age, before she had

reached maturity, dark hints of this horrible secret had momentarily gripped her soul, until certainty hurled her with one blow into the arms of anxiety (1987:154).

Between Sophocles' *Antigone* and the Romantic play bearing the same title, everything would be the same as far as the epic dimension of the story is concerned. In the sense that it had in Medieval French, *la geste*, the sequence of great and atrocious events attached to the Labdacides family would be identically transmitted from one generation to the next. And yet, the "modern" tragedy of *Antigone* would be radically different. The Kierkegaardian Oedipus would never wake up from his happy dreams, and so "in actuality," he would live and die like a king, not like a *pharmacos* or designated victim.⁴ At an early age, Antigone assumes the fatal burden of his *geste*. Now that he is dead, Antigone upholds in public, for the community of Thebans, the brilliant side of his deeds. In private, she compares to the reclining woman in Füssli's *Nightmare* (1782). At times proud and erect in her self-absorption, at others clearly anxious, a fair maiden approaches us and whispers in our ears: she is oppressed by some monster squatting (figuratively speaking) on her chest.

⁴ In his incisive essay "*Ambiguité et Renversement. Sur la Structure Enigmatique d'Oedipe Roi*," Vernant shows that two drastically opposite sets of qualities meet in Oedipus (1995, I).

The Romantic Antigone *takes on* the nefarious, all that is on the wrong side of the split in the ancient character of Oedipus. How she learns of his crimes can be arranged by playwrights and directors as they prefer. What matters for Kierkegaard is the "certainty" that accompanies the blow of revelation, soon converted into anxiety. In Sophocles, Antigone was surrounded by the chorus of Theban Elders who responded to, chiding and/or vindicating, her every move. There was sorrow (*Sorg*) in her behavior as she shared according to herself, "the fate of our race" and the sad destiny of Oedipus. But in her defiant decision to give decent burial to her brother Polineices there was very little personal pain (*Smerts*), which for Kierkegaard means guilt (1987:148). She was confident that the gods of the *oikos* (the family, the home) would not disown her action, hence her arrogance before Creon.⁵ In the version created by Kierkegaard, there is, of course, no chorus. So bad is *her* secret, she cannot share it with anybody, not her lover Hemon, not even her sister Ismene (only with us, we should add), lest she expose the truth and destroy her father *in memoriam*. She may be proud, for "nothing ennobles a person so much as keeping a secret" and she has taken on herself no

⁵ To Ismene at the beginning of the play, Antigone declares:

I myself will bury him [Polineices]. It will be good to die so doing. I shall lie by his side, loving him as he loved me; I shall be a criminal -- but a religious one (1991:163-64).

less than "to save the glory of the lineage of Oedipus" (1987:157). In a way, she cherishes her secret, since it gives her life a unique significance. But the more she reflects on its content and realizes her responsibility, the more she feels that kind of "really reflective pain that always wants to be alone with its pain, that seeks a new pain in the solitude of this pain" (151). Like her ancient counterpart, the Romantic Antigone will remain a virgin, never become a mother nor a wife. In this theater "turned inward, not outward," where "the stage is inside, not outside," she is the bride of the secret. She is *virgo mater*, Kierkegaard adds, a virgin who "carries her secret under her heart, concealed and hidden" like a child (157-8).

There is a moment -- even if it is brief, one page perhaps, it is a turning point -- where Sophocles' Antigone closely resembles Kierkegaard's. We remember that, in a letter to John Gisborn, Shelley admitted: "Some of us have in a prior existence been in love with Antigone," and that he admired above all "the lyrical complaints of the god-like victim" (Letters, II, 668). Shelley refers, I believe, to the lamentations preceding her descent into the tomb. At that moment in the ancient tragedy, Antigone is, in effect, as alone as any Romantic character. She reflects, I would say, on the still-bornness on her situation: "I go down/ in the worst death of all -- for I have not lived the due course of

my life" (1991:949-51).⁶ How lonely she is! Not only will she never become what a Greek woman is expected to become; not only will she, who has cared so much for the dead, herself not receive a proper burial; but as Bernard Knox explains in *The Heroic Temper*, "in a world which was full of signs and portents, Antigone is given no sign of approval or support... the gods she championed have failed her" (1964:106). There is figuratively (soon literally) a wall around her. She pictures herself as *meteikos*, a homeless stranger, friendless, alienated from the living and from the dead:

... alive to the place of corpses, an alien still,
never at home with the living nor with the dead
(1991:906-8).

Kierkegaard, nevertheless, insists on the difference: "our Antigone could say this of herself all her life," that is to say, not only at the moment of death but all her life. The Romantic Antigone would feel (and figure herself) *meteikos* all the time (in this world and beyond). Kierkegaard remarks that the actual truth pertaining to the lamentation of the Greek Antigone "diminishes the pain." The Greeks, he owns, never experienced a purely reflective

⁶ I cannot help but think that this still-bornness is also what has fascinated Romantics and Moderns in the character of Hamlet. Mallarmé called him the young man who suffered "*le mal d'apparaître*," who could not become, who would remain but the shadow of his achieved self: "*le seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir, juvénile ombre de tous*" (1945:299-300).

and anxious stance. They were not "fragmented" (isolated, alienated from each other) enough. A modern Antigone would mean these lines *only* reflectively, while looking down into herself and in a manner of speech, of figuration, "but in figurativeness resides the factual [real, *wirklich*] pain" (1987:159). The Romantic Antigone would endlessly speak the figures of guilt.

The Epidem(on)ic Secret

In contrast to the guilt or pain exhibited by "my" Antigone, Kierkegaard jokes, Sophocles' Antigone went about her business "free of care" (156). Oedipus or Philoctetes could turn around, shout in anger at the gods and cross the line separating guilt from guiltlessness. But there are no more innocent characters on stage when no divinity arrests our sight and reflection. Insofar as the inner abyss we glimpse at in their words is infinite, the guilt of the modern heroes is complete. Before they may fairly be regarded as responsible agents, a foul and dishonorable deed already clings to their soul. The secret whose nefarious content they cannot air intoxicates their conversation. Their good name is irreversibly stained. To Lucretia's most pointed and lucid question after the rape -- "What has thy father done?" -- Beatrice answers:

What have I done?

Am I not innocent? Is it my crime
 That one with white hair, and imperious brow,
 Who tortured me from my forgotten years,
As parents only dare, should call himself
 My father, yet should be! -- Oh, what am I?
 What name, what place, what memory shall be mine?
 What retrospects, outliving even despair?
 (III,i,68-76).

Beatrice stops short of saying what Cenci "should be" called. One cannot expect public fairness, justice, in the sense of impartiality, in so private a matter. In Seneca, Phaedra's cunning nurse argues that "When the offence is private, who shall say/ Which of us sinned and which was sinned against" (1966:127). She advises Phaedra to cover up her private wantonness by blaming it publically on her victim and son-in-law Hippolytus. But Beatrice needs no nurse to understand that outside the home tormentor and victim of familial abuse are easily confused, especially when the world has fallen under the tyrant's grasp. She does not wait for anyone else to cover up the abuse. Her father's crime is, as she takes it, *de facto* hers.

But, and this is more troubling, it is not only the corruption outside the palace walls which compels her silence -- it is some abyssal excess in the secret itself. Beatrice seems eager to assume the guilt that accompanies her secret. We have heard the elaborate arguments she finds to keep the "speechless" deed *in the family*. What Cenci has done to her, she protests, must stay between them. Cenci's "dread" would buy him impunity; and meanwhile, by attempting

to talk, one would "taint" the family name and thus destroy the only place where she may find peaceful (clean) refuge after death. Her very eagerness to cover up the incest and interiorize it, however, tells us that she is *not without* (*elle n'est pas sans*) enjoying it as secret. Nobody can deny that she enjoys the dignity implicit in the position of guardian, defender, protector of the secret.

That the secret deed remain secret is her obsession, growing ever more intense as *The Cenci* nears its end. She says, and it seems logical, that to keep the trauma hidden is the only way to limit the pollution to her own person. Once Cenci is murdered in Act IV, scene iii, however, Beatrice must hide, and for the same reason, not only *his* deed, but the decision *she* took during Act III, that "it [the incest] shall not be again" (i,147). To the Pope's envoy Savella, who is about to arrest her family after the death of Cenci, she appeals: "accusation kills an innocent name... stain not a noble house" (IV,iv,143-50). Later, to Marzio, who is about to confess the crime under torture, she implores: "Think, I adjure you, what is to slay/ The reverence living in the minds of men/ Towards our ancient house, and stainless fame!" (V,ii,144-6).

Crook and Guitton observe that "the ideas of rape and infamy are united in the words by which Beatrice comes nearest to telling her judges what really happened" (1986:201). They quote this passage in Act V:

... a father
 First turned the moments of awakening life
 To drops, each poisoning youths' sweet hope; and then
 Stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul;
 And my untainted fame (ii,120-4).

Infamy has finally contaminated her entire project, regardless of how "firm" she felt about her decision, how "rightful," "holy" and "just" she thought was the killing of the old man during Act III and Act IV. We may always be "in the present tense of representation," as I wrote earlier, but the passing and *tempo* of time has its importance in tragedy, particularly in the two tragedies we study. Valid at one point, an argument may not be quite so at another. While the hero falls further down the evil slope, there accumulates behind us a past tense of representation and a memory. As contamination gains the upper hand, we can expect toward the end, for it is also a convention in the genre, a disastrous acceleration.

By now, in Act V, contamination has engulfed the sublime fantasy, the exceptional gesture, the dreadful act designed to end contamination. For Beatrice's judges, for Savella, for the Cardinal Camillo, for the Pope himself -- for the Other on this stage -- Beatrice's great deed is nothing more than a virulent and blameable parricide. After her death, Antigone's action was vindicated in the words of Tiresias and Creon was condemned. No god ever answers Beatrice's leap of faith. What she did with religious intentions has been swallowed by the evil it was to

counteract: "No difference has been made by God or man,/ Or any power moulding my wretched lot,/ 'Twixt good or evil, as regarded me" (V,iv,82-4). In her last words, without distinguishing her responsibility from that of her father, Beatrice admits to her younger brother Bernardo that, in spite of all her protective efforts (we could say, *because of them*), she is "wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame... our common name [is] as a mark stamped on thy innocent brow" (V,iv,147-51).

Crook and Guitton think that "Beatrice is unable to accuse her father openly because if her violation is known, her good name will be irrevocably damaged" (1986:201). And that is indeed what she says. But the power of the secret and the anxiety keeping watch over it, go further. Let us not forget that saving *her* good name is *ipso facto* saving *his*. The secret is a double-edged sword which robs Beatrice of any possible "refuge." But is she not also somehow, somewhere, setting herself up for the worst? Since she does not denounce Cenci's crime, Beatrice cannot later offer justification for her decision to put an end to his (their) activities. Whatever attenuating circumstance we may earlier have thought it deserved, *her* action now gets confused with *his* and ends up becoming, since concealed, equally criminal. The secret hides the *nefas* from the world; but it inevitably makes its bearer responsible for its hidden content. Hence the uneasy feeling *The Cenci*

cannot but arouse in readers and spectators, and the persistent difficulties even the most favorable critics (Shelley included) have had to face in defending this heroine. How can *the beautiful soul* of Beatrice keep silence in the Tribunal scene and allow the servant Marzio to be tortured (V,ii)? Have we not seen her *snatch the dagger* and press him to kill with more convincing arguments than Lady Macbeth ever directed to her husband?

Whereas, in the famous expression of Phaedra's nurse, "crime must cover crime," in Beatrice's case one secret envelops another secret: lest she drag her patronymic into the dirt, she interiorizes and buries *there* Cenci's crime. Thereafter, she cannot vent the reason for an action aimed at making sure "it" does not recur.⁷ The dramatic result is that scene after scene -- before and after the rape but, even more so, after her arrest in Act IV, scene iv, and on to the end of the tragedy -- Beatrice walks on stage like Kierkegaard's *virgo mater* would have, a multi-headed and growing secret inside, as guilty as if she were pregnant with all the vicious circles of Hell.

⁷ The content of Beatrice's secret has the same abyssal structure as that of her anxiety. One anxiety-laden thought contains and protects against another thought and so forth. Sensing this, Curran wrote: "The world [of *The Cenci*] is a nest of Chinese boxes, prison within prison: the evil world, the evil castle, the evil self" (1970:132). As far *inside* as we may go, the evil *real* still insists.

Elle N'Est Pas Sans En Jouir

In the course of Act V, while Beatrice is in prison, a very uncomfortable, perhaps the most devastating of suspicions arises: is not Beatrice, now that her tormentor is dead, satisfying his every wish? The true "object" of Cenci's desire being, as we have established, *her* anxiety, we cannot but witness that what he longed for and expressed in his demonic curses, is somehow being realized *after his death*: "Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate," he said, "Die in despair, blaspheming" (IV,i,49-50). In Mary Shelley and in Stendhal, Beatrice believes in the Catholic credo until the end.⁸ In *The Cenci*, she ends up doubting and despising, not only the Church, but "men's" institutions altogether. No transcendence, no salvation, no benign religion, not even that *personal* religion Beatrice resorted to in the privacy of her conscience is left standing at the play's conclusion. To Lucretia, who still hopes against all hope and advises her to "Trust in God's sweet love,"

Beatrice replies:

O, trample out that thought! Worse than despair,
Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope...
No, mother, we must die:
Since such is the reward of innocent lives;
Such the alleviation of worst wrongs...
And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,

⁸ Stendhal writes: "*Elle se jeta à genoux devant le crucifix et pria avec ferveur pour son âme... puis elle se leva, fit encore la prière et monta sur l'échaffaud*" (1977:266).

Smiling and slow, walk through a world of tears...
 'twere just the grave
 Were some strange joy for us. Come, obscure Death,
 And wind me in thine all embracing arms! (V,iv,98-116).

Cenci wanted to reach Beatrice *beyond death*, for he knew that once the deed was done, he would die: "My death may be rapid, her destiny outspeeds it" (IV,i,27-28). His deepest design was precisely to steep her in the life of crime he inhabited, to load her consciousness with guilt and stain her everlasting fame:

She shall become (for what she most abhors
 Shall have a fascination to entrap
 Her loathing will) to her own conscious self
 All she appears to others; and when dead,
 As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,
 A rebel to her father and her God,
Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds;
 Her name shall be the terror of the earth;
 Her spirit shall approach the throne of God
 Plague-spotted with my curses. I will make
 Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin.
 (IV,i,85-95).

Cenci wants nothing less than to persecute the ghost she will leave behind among the living and to destroy her symbolic being. Beyond her resistance to his will, as in the Banquet scene, what "the fiend" in Cenci could not abide in Beatrice was her purity, her *schöne Seele*, her detachment from the grotesque, chilling *real* to which he was bound. He asked "God" mockingly and perversely to "warp those fine limbs" and "let her food be/ Poison, until she be encrusted round/ With leprous stains!" (128-33). He hoped "That if she ever have a child... as from a distorting mirror, she may see/ Her image mixed with what she most abhors./ Smiling

upon her from her nursing breast" (141-52). This is all happening now -- and it is happening figuratively, that is to say, *within* Beatrice: "Now stench and blackness yawn," she reflects, "like death" (V,iv,105). At the end of the tragedy, the public realizes as Curran states, that "in the world of *The Cenci*, evil is the only force" (1970:137). The spirit of destruction personified by Cenci has permeated both the objective and the subjective faces of the universe. Before the curtain falls, it has infected the Symbolic Order; and so, it already awaits her in the realm-between-two-deaths.

I underline the ambiguous role Beatrice's anxiety plays in supporting the old man's desire. One needs to *interpret* the entrapment of Beatrice. She is the victim from the opening to the end of the play; but *elle n'est pas sans en jouir*, she is not without holding fast to this position and finding in it what Freud calls the benefits of the disease. In Goldschmidt's opera, it is Lucretia who "shields" Cenci's children against his attacks (1995:54). In Shelley, Beatrice claims the role of defender, of purifier.⁹ Perhaps the most unbearable thing in her father is not, again, what he does but *that the father be evil*. The child, Barthes

⁹ Act II, scene i, Lucretia naively tells her: "you may, like your sister, find some husband" one day and leave us. Beatrice protests that she could not "abandon" her step-mother to such a predicament: "Shall I now desert you?" (84-94).

writes, discovers at one point that the father is bad (he has shortcomings; he errs; he is evil); yet, he or she desires to stay the father's child. There is but one issue to this dilemma: that the child somehow take on the father's fault:

A cette contradiction, il n'existe qu'une issue (et c'est la tragedie même): que le fils prenne sur lui la faute du père, que la culpabilité de la créature décharge la divinité (1963:48).

Barthes is thinking about the sense of responsibility, the guilt exhibited by Racinian characters. *Mutatis mutandis*, this thought about guilt at its birth applies to Shelley. According to Freud and Lacan, the father mediates between the mother and the child and organizes the family circle through his symbolic role. Beatrice *makes up for* the collapse of the paternal function that characterizes her fragmented family by occupying the "binding" place between its members. As it turns out, in her pursuits of a proper memory (archive, Derrida would write), in her obsession for a good memorization she has come up with makeshift answers. Beatrice holds the Family Cenci together and makes their castle or prison *look like* a home during the time that the drama lasts; at the price, of course, of a rampant secret. She becomes Barthes' son. Hence the masculine conviction with which she defends her choices. Driven by anxiety, she reacts to persecution from within the family circle; but she also becomes, by guarding the secret, the guarantor of the

purity of the name, the defender of the integrity of family. Finally, she is not without having identified with her aggressor at the moment when she has him killed; even as his uncanny presence awaits her from beyond her grave.

Destitution

The one last proof I would give of her anxious dependance on the old man is *a contrario*. However brief, obscure, folded is its appearance, at the very end there appears a new theme in *The Cenci*. Beatrice's most fleetingly enigmatic subjective transformation occurs seconds before the curtain falls. It seems that something happens to the subject in Beatrice. A few lines after envisioning death as *his* "all-embracing arms," she is calm. She does not tremble. In the final recommendations to Bernardo, she at last marks a difference between the family name and herself:

...I,
 Though wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame
 Lived ever holy and unstained. And though
 Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name
 Be as a mark stamp on thine innocent brow
 For men to point at as they pass, do thou
 Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
Of those who perhaps love thee in their graves.
 So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain
 Being subdued. Farewell! farewell! farewell!
 (V, iv, 147-56).

I was wrong perhaps when I wrote that Beatrice would never get for herself and her family a decent tomb. For so she

does, at least in this figure. At this point, she neither struggles nor hides. She is not anxious. She leaves the name to its dirty fate and goes more alone than ever but without arrogance, without pretense, without defensive stance, to hers, asking Lucretia to arrange her garment neatly and to "bind up this hair/ In any simple knot" (160-1). She has been stripped of all pride; she has lost the respect due to someone of her rank in society; and yet, she is endowed with the *atroce grandeur* that accompanies tragic destitution.

Artaud was not at all interested in this subtle and proper kind of destitution. He thought Beatrice should struggle to the very last, or perhaps give up on the good altogether. Artaud has her remain anxious at the idea of becoming, in death, as bad as *him*:

*Qui est celui qui pourra m'assurer que, là-bas, je
ne retrouverai pas mon père?...
J'ai peur que la mort ne m'apprenne
que j'ai fini par lui ressembler (1978:210).*

Shelley gives Beatrice one last chance to redeem herself, to free herself from the burden by giving up, it seems, on all belongings: real, imaginary, symbolic. Notwithstanding her future critics, Beatrice dies clean of reproaches, both those coming from outside and those from within. Abandoning all that she has heretofore defended and clung on to anxiously, she is free. In spite of all their drastic differences, Shelley's Prometheus and Beatrice compare.

Shelley wants Beatrice to relinquish her gruesome role in a touching note, in a modest but striking act of renunciation and acceptance which, at its level, compares with that, grandiose, mythic, of Prometheus when he says, in the opening of *Prometheus Unbound*: "I hate no more... misery made me wise" (I,i). Shelley's Beatrice also compares, not so much with the mighty, though soon worried Oedipus of the first play in the cycle, as with the second, the Oedipus "beyond Oedipus" -- it seems to me that, suddenly, she has exhausted the oedipian cycle and its nightmarish options.¹⁰ Beatrice briefly compares with old, blind, *meteikos* Oedipus choosing the location of his tomb and going out there to find it. Lacan says of this kind of disappearance: "*C'est une malédiction consentie, de cette vraie subsistance qu'est celle de l'être humain, subsistance dans la soustraction de lui-même à l'ordre du monde*" (1959-60:353). When the subject takes Death by the neck and chooses disappearance, this attitude merits our attention and remembrance; for Beatrice, who lives in the text, it means survival.

Beatrice then, but again only at the very end, has accepted her fate so thoroughly that she has given up on being a recalcitrant victim. Is she, in her last breath, still a victim? Does she feel guilty? Is she in pain? No doubt, she is all that. But she has gone through so much

¹⁰ The expression is Shoshana Felman's, who reads together *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Séminaire VII* (1987:99).

hell, it is as though what had agitated her, the whole storm of questions relating to symbolic death, no longer concerns her. She says "yes" to whatever *this* actual death has in store: "Well, 'tis very well" (last line). She is no longer the tortured *object* of some other's desire; at that single moment she might very well be the *subject* of her destiny.

To Be or Not to Be the Victim

At the same time that he intends his crime to be an act of universal defiance ("*l'humanité gardera sur sa joue le soufflet de mon épée en traits de sang*"), Lorenzo assumes full responsibility for it: "*Laisse-moi faire mon coup -- tu as les mains pures, et moi je n'ai rien à perdre*" (III,iii, 204-5). Lorenzo takes on a tremendous responsibility and finds a way to denounce it. He achieves a sort of ironic acceptance of his role as scapegoat of the community. And then at the very end there is a brief release of all the tensions accumulated in the play, and Lorenzo abandons the fight.

One of this hero's contradictions, and not the least fundamental, emerges in his relationship to action, in the specific sense of the Greek word *poiein* (to produce exterior, visible results). It might very well engulf Musset's entire *discourse* about action, for it is everywhere in his work. Lorenzo professes that it takes courage and

strength to act, therefore a degree of purity. If the people of Florence do not re-act to the evil that he, Lorenzo, represents it is because they are weak and impure:

Et me voilà dans la rue, moi, Lorenzo? et les enfants ne me jettent pas de la boue? Les lits des filles sont encore chauds de ma sueur, et les pères ne prennent pas, quand je passe, leurs couteaux et leurs balais pour m'assommer?... Que dis-je? les mères pauvres soulèvent honteusement le voile de leur fille quand je m'arrête... elles me laissent voir leur beauté avec un sourire plus vil que le baiser de Judas (III,iii,201-2).

In the last soliloquy of Act IV, which we have not yet read, Lorenzo proclaims: "*Si les républicains étaient des hommes, quelle révolution demain dans la ville!*" (ix,231). But they simply lack the virtue (i.e. the force) to add to the word the corresponding gesture. Musset remembers Hamlet's self-reproaches; Lorenzo turns them against mankind as a whole: "*Ah! Les mots, les mots, les éternelles paroles!... Ô bavardage humain! ô grand tueur de corps morts! grand défonceur de portes ouvertes! ô hommes sans bras!*" (231).

Pacing the town-square at night, Lorenzo rehearses the crime in his head amidst interjections and disconnected considerations. To calm himself he sits on a public bench one last time, observes the installation of a crucifix in front of a church and then spitefully mocks:

Il paraît que les hommes sont courageux avec les pierres. Comme ils coupent! comme ils enfoncent!... avec quel courage ils le clouent! Je voudrais voir que leur cadavre de marbre les prît tout d'un coup à la gorge (232).

In effect, the only one who is about to act is Lorenzo. Two scenes earlier, at dusk, the doors of the republican houses closed on him one after the next (IV,vii). Though he warned them to take advantage of the situation, nobody among the leaders of families could believe that he, "Renzinaccio," would tonight eliminate the Duke. The first addressees of his plan made fun of him: "*Tu veux tuer le duc, toi? Allons-donc! tu as un coup de vin dans la tête!*" (229).

The impression of total discomfiture is multiplied by what has happened to other characters. The Marquise Cibo, whose project never converged with that of Lorenzo, has given up on changing the mind-set of Alexandre and returned to her husband (IV,iv). Philippe Strozzi was so afraid after the poisoning of Louise that he has left Florence for Venice (III,vii). The failures and retreats of the "positive" characters in the sub-plots of this otherwise disseminated Act IV reinforce the impression that Lorenzo, even though his movements are agitated and his thoughts incoherent, is the man of the situation.

Action requires virtue. All along, this idea has been confirmed, in echo, by the soliloquies of Philippe Strozzi. Through his own self-reproaches, Philippe demonstrated that he knew himself and his entourage to be rich, lazy, full of beautiful words and impotent to act. For example, he cried during Act II:

Pauvre patrie! Il y en a bien d'autres à l'heure qu'il est qui ont pris leurs épées... ils savent qu'ils mourront demain de misère, s'ils ne meurent pas de froid cette nuit. Et nous, dans ces palais somptueux, nous attendons qu'on nous insulte pour tirer nos épées!... le malheur public ne secoue pas la poussière de nos armes (v.182).

These ratiocinations -- and he knew this as well -- did not alter his impotence an iota. It is only when his sons Pierre and Thomas were arrested, in any case too late, that this father started political agitation:

Je me suis courbé sur des livres, et j'ai rêvé pour ma patrie ce que j'admirais dans l'antiquité. Les murs criaient vengeance autour de moi, et je me bouchais les oreilles pour m'enfoncer dans mes méditations -- il a fallu que la tyrannie vint me frapper au visage pour me faire dire: Agissons! -- et ma vengeance a les cheveux gris (idem).

In order to deserve to be called a good man it is not enough to be good -- something easy to be when one is in privileged position. One has to take the risk of moving against evil: "On croit Philippe Strozzi un honnête homme, parce qu'il fait le bien sans empêcher le mal!" (idem). The problem is that to stop the progress of evil requires some evil action. Musset states this most clearly in a poem whose title bears out his pessimistic philosophy, *Les Voeux Steriles* (1831):

*Qu'est la pensée, hélas! quand l'action s'avance?
L'une recule où l'autre s'avance.
Au redoutable aspect de la réalité,
Celle-ci prend le fer, et s'apprête à combattre;
Celle-là, frêle idole, et qu'un rien peut abattre,
Se détourne, en voilant son front inanimé...
A l'action! au mal! Le bien reste ignoré
(Poesies:116).*

One has to be pure to act, and yet to act is, in essence, to become impure. Any given action implicates the agent in the evil *real* it attempts to transform, and that is what Strozzi is so anxious about. In his first appearance on stage, Musset has the old man meditate in his study about the gratuitousness of studious pursuits ("*Et nous autres vieux rêveurs, quelle tache originelle avons-nous lavée sur la face humaine depuis quatre ou cinq mille ans que nous jaunissons sur nos livres?*") and about the ineluctability of evil: "*Que le bonheur des hommes ne soit qu'un rêve, cela est pourtant dur; que le mal soit irrevocable, éternel, impossible à changer... non!*" (II,i,163-4). Strozzi's persistent optimism thereafter should sound to the audience like a *denial*, for he does suspect the worst. More specifically, what haunts the consciousness of this intellectual is the *vendetta*:

On est insulté, et on tue; on a tué, et on est tué. Bientôt les haines s'enracinent; on berce les fils dans les cercueils des aïeux, et des générations entières sortent de terre l'épée à la main (II,v,180).

The real is a chain of violence that spans the generations. Notwithstanding the beauty of intentions, the violent act (and probably any concrete act implies some degree of violence), enmeshes the community in an avalanche of vengeance and retaliation.

Lorenzo jealously assumes, revindicates the dirt that his secret project entails: "*tout ce que je te demande,*

c'est de ne pas t'en mêler" (204). Again, at the end of the play, it is in presence of the old man that Lorenzo faces the concrete consequences of the tyrannicide. They have, in fact, two interviews in Act V. Since Musset's fragmented technique builds on the timing of each scene, one needs to look closely at the concluding sequence. In Act V, scene i, Alexandre's corpse hidden in the carpet, *Les Huit*, the Doges of Florence, are in a hurry to distribute food and wine to the crowd pressing outside the Ducal Palace. The group of politicians write messages to the Pope, pretending to have taken a unanimous vote for a successor, who turns out to be another Côme de Médicis for whom the Cardinal Cibo has already sent. It is imperative that the emptiness of power not be seen outside the Palace. The transition must be smooth; otherwise, violence will proliferate: "*Si le peuple apprenait cette mort-là [Alexandre's], elle pourrait en causer bien d'autres*" (238).

When Lorenzo steps into his friend's study in Venice, he is received in triumph: "*Ô notre nouveau Brutus!*" Philippe shouts, "*La liberté est donc sauvée!*" (V,ii,241). But he knows better: the bourgeois will not even budge. They did not leave their windows when Lorenzo knocked at their doors. They are with their wives, he now sneers (242). And as for "*le peuple*," it is unpredictable. Musset has reflected over the failed Revolution of 1830 in Paris. The crowd is as dangerous as rushing water, as blind as *the*

force. It can be manipulated and its violence redirected towards any end. Some nice suburban people, Lorenzo informs Philippe, have just seized the occasion to slaughter their officials "*en plein midi, au milieu des rues*" (243).¹¹

Speaking of the crowd, Philippe observes a gathering outside the window. Lorenzo's face waxes pale one more time: "*tu deviens pâle comme un mort*" Philippe remarks. There is a moment of intense suspense. Does Lorenzo know that a price has been put on his head? Or does he still hope, against all hope, for some good news from Florence? Both, perhaps, for Lorenzo is split. It is the division of his character which generates anxiety -- in him and in us. *Les Huit* offer a handsome reward, official promotions, including ironically, the remission of all faults past and future for the one(s) who will kill Lorenzo, "*traître à la patrie et assassin de son maître*" (144).

As Sices writes, "the triumph of everyday reality over the dreams of men" is completed (1974:168). In Act V, scene v, back in the streets of Florence, we hear again, exactly as we did at the beginning (Act I, scene ii), the two merchants gossiping over recent events. While they exchange banal interpretations, the two school boys fight. It is easy to predict that they will soon renew with blood the

¹¹ We learn a little later that a handful of clear-minded students were killed before they could join the crowd (250). With extreme precision and appalling foresight, Musset is describing two centuries of failed insurrections in France.

feud of their families. And to add to the feeling of disillusionment, two pompous artists comment on their achievement, the latest craze in town, says one: a sonnet in the name of liberty! The symmetry is sickening. Time is at a standstill. Although complex, fragmented, rich in ambiguous meanings and bustling with characters, the play ends in perfect continuity. It has gone full circle.

Back in Philippe's study, Lorenzo learns without surprise that his mother is dead. Notwithstanding the growing sense of ignominy bursting in from outside the study's window, Lorenzo's last gesture does not lack a certain grandeur. As with Beatrice, it is a suicidal act, another case of tragic destitution. When Lorenzo leaves, defiance and the darkest of ironies leave the room with him; accepting his fate, in voluntary self-erasure, he goes to meet *this* death. Lorenzo sneers one last time, albeit with resilience and a sort of magnanimity, at his many pursuers, for whom he feels only pity: "*La récompense est si grosse, qu'elle les rend presque courageux*" -- and then, he swiftly walks out of Philippe's study, yielding his body to the crowd (250).

It would be possible to trace a Shakespearean antecedent to Pippo's vision outside the window: "*Ne voyez-vous pas tout ce monde? Le peuple s'est jeté sur lui... On le pousse dans la lagune.*" (251). In a scene of *Julius Caesar* long deemed unbearable and therefore not staged

before the Twentieth Century, a mob of plebeians mistakes Cinna the poet for Cinna the conspirator and, in order to avenge the death of Caesar, finishes the poet off in the wings (III,iii).¹² The bloody scar the hero intended to leave forever on the face of mankind has given way to the sad reality of retaliation and reward. It is the only language men and women understand, and Lorenzo has had the strength to accept it.

¹² See, Arthur Humphrey's *Introduction* (1984:67).

addressing some of the apparent contradictions this double reading has run into, I would like to end this essay on considerations for further study, leaving a cluster of open questions for the future.

The Obscene Father

There is an amphibology of power for the Romantics. In one of the illustrations for his short epic *Milton* (1804) Blake had the rejuvenated Milton "Annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit" in one "moment" of ambiguous creation (plate 18).¹³ Though he is the master of the world, Urizen's monumental form sags at the touch of the heroic youth. Whereas a professional army could not get to Alexandre, Lorenzo proudly tells Philippe that he can kill him by himself: "*Ce coeur, jusques auquel une armée ne serait pas parvenue en un an, il est maintenant à nu sous ma main; je n'ai plus qu'à laisser tomber mon stylet pour qu'il y entre*" (III,iii,200). And indeed, commentators have marvelled at the easy success of Lorenzo, at the sort of "feminine" softness with which the tyrant, swordless and lying on a bed, lets Lorenzo pierce him (IV,xi). Since he is weak *and* wicked, and the one because of the other, the feet of the Colossus are made of clay.

¹³ See, David Erdman (1974:234).

The troubling question is: if tyranny is as brutal as it is empty, what gives it the power that it wields? Who oils the "machine" and who nourishes the "beast"? Nothing reveals better the nature of power in *The Cenci* than the scene of the arrest (IV,iv). Savella's intervention and behind him, that of the Pope, display arcane levels of cruelty. The same Pope who, we were told, refused stubbornly to help Beatrice, has all of a sudden, for unknown reasons, decided to arrest Cenci. Since this culprit is dead, Savella finds good reasons to arrest another culprit, Beatrice. Curran described this "cruellest of [dramatic] ironies" very well:

... that Cenci should be ordered killed by the irrational command of a capricious tyrant who had refused aid to the distraught family only emphasizes again how vicious and illogical this world is... Beatrice, who had reasons to kill her father, is arrested for a crime which the Pope, who lacked any rationale, would wantonly have commanded (1970:142).

As in *Lorenzaccio*, the tyrant is a step ahead in the game. He acts by surprise and crushes his subjects, seeming to strike at random. In view of the results, however, his interventions should be called sadistic and, contrary to Curran, logical. What the engine of power extracts is the subjective material indispensable to its self-perpetuation: guilt. In one of her keen flashes of lucidity, Beatrice says so to Savella:

... power is as a beast which grasps
And loosens not: a snake, whose look transmutes

sexual abilities ("manhood's stern purpose") are in doubt (I,iii,174). The character is split and I wonder whether it is not what Lacan terms "*la refente du sujet*," his finitude, his essential castration and subjective division which provokes in Cenci his resentment, his *infinite* aggression (1966:693). In the collapse of the paternal function, which traditionally and normally socializes the family circle (directs its members towards the exterior: other families, society at large), what appears and insists and is hard to get rid of is an obscene old man bent on appropriating his family to his own aggressive pleasures.¹³ In his curses, Cenci calls Beatrice "this most specious mass of flesh... this my blood,/ This particle of my divided being" (IV,i,115-7). This father's deliriously selfish behavior (words and deeds) amounts to reclaiming the members of his family as his own flesh, bringing them down with himself unto death. In *Prometheus Unbound*, when Jupiter receives from his own child Demogorgon the message that his "brief omnipotence" is coming to an end, he has the same reaction: "Sink with me then --" (III,i,70).

I wonder whether it is not, above all else, this most troubling picture of a power essentially without power on

¹³ A more specifically psychoanalytic reading of the play would have to look into the fact that there is no mother in the Family Cenci, Lucretia being a surrogate. This central absence is filled by Cenci, who behaves like the archaic, i.e. all-encompassing and devouring mother Melanie Klein discovered in children's anxious fantasies.

the political plane, of an impotent potency at the center of the "modern" family, which has militated so much against the reception of Shelley's tragedy. How shall we otherwise explain its initial rejection?

The Rejection

Of Shelley's tragedy Curran wrote thirty years ago that it was "the most significant serious play of its century written in English" (1970:33). Coming from a scholar, this was a new and unexpected statement about a play which, since its violent rejection by Covent Garden in 1819, had been generally absent from the English-speaking stage.

I qualify the initial rejection as violent on reading Mary Shelley's *Note On The Cenci* describing how Mr Harris, administrator of Covent Garden at the time, reacted to the manuscript:

He pronounced the subject to be so objectionable, that he could not even submit the part to Miss O'Neil for perusal, but expressed his desire that the author would write a tragedy on some other subject, which he would gladly accept (II,158).

Miss O'Neil was the star actress Shelley was hoping would play the part of Beatrice. Obviously, the playwright had a practical ambition, further proof that *The Cenci* was not intended as a closet drama. Mary observes that the studious, sensitive and refined Shelley was not a theater-

goer himself, being easily disturbed by "the bad filling up of the inferior parts," i.e. the noise and probably the smells coming from the orchestra.¹⁴ But, she states, he had been:

... deeply moved by Miss O'Neil impersonation of several parts... the intense pathos, and sublime vehemence of passion she displayed (II,157).

To cover the noise, and get their message across halls that were so vast it was hardly possible to see or hear anything coming from the stage, actors had developed a sensational style. Curran writes:

Not stage whisper, but bombast; not nuances, but grand gestures captured the attention of an easily distracted gallery (1970:163).

In contrast with the youthful and "*sublime*" Mlle Rachelle, whose every intonation he admired, it is interesting to note that Musset deplored the same exaggerated acting of her French colleagues:

...elle n'emploie, pour toucher le spectateur, ni ces gestes de convention, ni ces cris furieux dont on abuse partout aujourd'hui (Prose:889).

Why is it, then, that in spite of her strong constitution, Mr Harris felt it necessary to spare the delicate nerves of Miss O'Neil? Mr Harris harbored no doubt that Shelley was a tragedian. The play's Gothic darkness and rhetorical

¹⁴ There was a marked difference in the theater houses between the inferior level where the populace stood and the higher galleries where the educated audience sat. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White show that complaints from the *sensitive* galleries were widespread (1986:69).

vehemence were designed for *his* stage. We know that there is less "blood" in *The Cenci* than in *Titus Andronicus* or *Macbeth*. Faithful to strict classical rules, Shelley had removed the "objects" of horror off-stage. If something eminently sexual in the lines of father and daughter greatly irritated Mr Harris, it was nothing porno-graphic. Miss O'Neil had to be spared even the "perusal" of the text because of the insistence therein of an irrepresentable cause of anxiety. The incest being overwhelmingly present because of its absence, it is *the real* in the subject-matter that Mr Harris could not accept.

Let us not, however, think that Mr Harris was simply one more of those narrow-minded administrators incapable of recognizing genius. I am not sure that we are any more ready, today, to embrace a theater of anxiety. A tragedy revolving around painful crimes *in the family* is (and was) nothing new -- the locus of tragedy had always been the family circle and its subject-matter the sufferings of the *chez soi*, the close-to-home. Aristotle observes:

[In tragedy] the sufferings involve those who are near and dear to one another, when for example brother kills brother, son father, mother son... (1965:50).

What is unsettling to an extreme is that the potential for pain in the family never be put to rest; that there be no social recourse, "no refuge" against the collapse of the paternal function. Thus domestic trauma becomes infinitely

consequential. At the end of the *Oresteia*, the goddess Athena proposes a solution to Orestes' plight, bringing to an end the violent pursuits of his mother's furies, the Eumenides. But when, as in our two modern plays, the symbolic organization of the family is perverted at its center, there surfaces a *real* pollution which endlessly pursues the character, for it has invaded language itself. The traumatized family is a festering wound, an inhuman and infinitely vicious circle no god -- no Other -- is there to re-organize and humanize, to clean up and close. Such is the lesson that drew Artaud to Shelley and that he drew from Shelley:

Cenci

C'est la famille qui a tout vicié.

Lucrétia

Après? Sans la famille, qu'est-ce que tu serais?

Cenci

Pas de rapports humains possibles entre des êtres qui ne sont nés que pour se substituer l'un à l'autre et qui brûlent de se dévorer (1978:173).

Since its initial rejection, it is fair to say that *The Cenci* has remained hidden. It did not altogether disappear, not quite. It stayed *there*, still-born, sore point adherent to the Poet's name, secret and shameful side to his fame. According to Crook and Guitton, "it increased Shelley's reputation for immorality" among his compatriots (1986:201). As if to justify the horrified recoil from the published

play, the objections became personal. One reviewer, editor of the *London Magazine*, malignantly suggested that the author *himself* was contaminated:

There can be no doubt that vanity is at the bottom of this, and that weakness of *character* (which is a very different thing from what is called weakness of *talent*) is also concerned. Mr Shelley likes to carry about with him the consciousness of his own peculiarities; and a tinge of disease, probably existing in a certain part of his constitution, gives to these peculiarities a very offensive cast (quoted in *The Venomed Melody*:201).

To personalize, i.e., to limit the import of the logic of contamination operative in the drama to a physical and/or psychological problem in its author is indeed an easy way out.

The Praise and the Problem

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, the rare stagings of the play amounted to mediocrities, as Curran makes plain in his chapter "Fitted for the Stage." Even for its "private" performances, the faithful Shelley Society preferred to "carefully revise, compress and adapt *The Cenci*." Until 1970, date of the publication of Curran's book, "no English production has tried to mount the play with every line that Shelley wrote intact" (1970:194).

One is led to think that Shelley's first reader and critic, Mary Shelley, was blinded by love when she praised the play. She remarks in her *Note*:

The Fifth Act is a masterpiece. It is the finest thing Shelley ever wrote, and may claim proud comparison not only with contemporary but preceding poets (Poems, II, 158).

Scholars have established that Shelley wrote *The Cenci* between the composition of the Third and Fourth Acts of *Prometheus Unbound*. It is true that the optimism of the latter flatly contradicts the despair of the former -- the eschatologies could not be more contrasted. But the style, the imagery, the stark opposition of characters and the Shelleyan assertion that religious and political powers are based on intimidation, self-contempt, anxiety and soul-poisoning, are evidently related. Curran seems to be the first to acknowledge that:

The two works pose for their readers a problem unique in literature: two masterpieces, works of literary genius and intellectual profundity, written in sequence, which attack perhaps the most difficult of philosophical problems, that of evil, and issue impassioned and totally opposed conclusions (1970:143).

I have not tried to solve the problem. As with so many things in Shelley, it knows no pleasant (complete) solution. But one thing is clear, and it is not a matter of personal belief nor of ontological musing. *The Cenci* is no more realistic than *Prometheus Unbound*. If Shelley projects in the first such a sad, hopeless picture of "reality," it is due to his severe understanding of the requisites of the genre. The fact that this tragedy has not yet found an audience -- so far, I have admitted, the public has more or

less intensely disliked it -- does not contradict this other fact: Shelley's play stands out as an exception. Not finding any other work to compare it with, Curran goes on to state that *The Cenci* deserves to be considered:

... the most significant serious play written in English, the single work capable, had conditions of the stage allowed its enactment, of serving as the focal point for the revival of the true poetic drama in the nineteenth century (1970:33).

Exactly what "conditions of the stage" would have allowed/will allow *The Cenci's* "enactment"? This is precisely the problem.

Compromise and Stage Difficulty

The same things, and at about the same time, were finally being said of Musset's *Lorenzaccio*. For David Sices, it is "the ideal Romantic drama... the one truly stageworthy French tragedy of the Romantic era" (1974:110). This work has also lived a subterranean life since its creation. *Lorenzaccio* received its first triumph on a French stage after World War II, in 1952. The appreciation among scholars came, as usual, later. Shelley did not have time in his short life, nor any hope left after the failure of *The Cenci*, to produce a second tragedy better "fitted for the stage" of his day. Musset lived long enough after first rejecting the stage to compromise, adapting his work to what

he thought would satisfy administrators and public.¹⁵

During the year 1834, Musset turned the obstacle into an advantage by creating an interior theater or theater-for-the-reader.¹⁶ He felt free to imagine "*un drame tragique*" made out of thirty eight transformation scenes. What does this technical term imply?

As spectators of *Lorenzaccio*, not only do we careen from one scene to the next, back and forth, in and out, from bedroom to public square to palace hall to open country; but sets evolve within each scene. They are seen from varying angles, now focusing on the background, now on the foreground. They even become fantastic, strictly imaginary. Masson explains:

...le décor obéit à une géométrie imaginaire
qui se modèle au gré de l'exigence dramatique
(1974:127).

For instance, in the first scene of the girl's abduction, Musset prepares the transformation by indicating "Un jardin -- Clair de lune; un pavillon dans le fond, un autre sur le devant" (Theatre:51). Right after Lorenzo's somber innuendos, Maffio comes on stage. While he is recounting

¹⁵ He spent his later years reducing his dark comedies. He did not, however, consider cutting *Lorenzaccio*. The case of the tragedy seemed hopeless. It remained at home, between the armchair and the lamp. See, Sices (1974:173).

¹⁶ The word "interior" means inside the house and inside the self. Like the secret, like anxiety, and like the difficulty of representation, it has an abyssal structure: we should be ready to understand that one range of difficulties only hides another.

sweet dreams to the public, which he approaches "sur le devant", another indication -- "La soeur de Maffio passe dans l'éloignement" -- shifts the focus of our attention to the background; the "deep," corrupt politics of Florence are revealed, not directly, but as in a sidelong glimpse.

This is the simplest of examples. Most transformations are more difficult to stage. In Act II, scene iv, the Duke enters the room where Lorenzo speaks to his aunt and his mother. As he looks outside, we are supposed to follow his line of sight. Musset leads our imagination beyond the set, towards the courtyard which suddenly bustles with servants and horses. As far as readers are concerned, the playwright only has to write: "On sonne à la porte d'entrée. La cour se remplit de pages et de chevaux" -- and we do the rest (104). But how is the director to stage this indication? Important republicans enter the room. Lorenzo, this time as a political panderer, solicits the Duke in their favor. A private scene has transformed into a political gathering. Once everybody has left, the Duke wonders:

*Dis-moi donc, mignon, quelle est donc cette belle
femme qui arrange ces fleurs sur cette fenêtre?*
(106).

He is referring to Lorenzo's aunt Catherine. We are again supposed to look outside, possibly across the courtyard, which feels strangely empty and silent, for the scene has moved to the familiar (familial) schemes the two cousins are concocting in private.

Unheard-of in the theater, such movements of the directing eye foreshadowed the miracle of long takes, jump cuts and depth of field in the cinema. From the start, *Lorenzaccio* stood apart from the rest of Musset's dramatic output. Counting on the reader's license to visualize at will, the play strained the creative aptitudes of the mind. It belonged to what critics, after Masson, have rightly called "*un théâtre imaginaire*," which they understand to mean "*un théâtre de lecture*" (1974:5).

These expressions are pertinent if they alert readers and critics to a problem. They are inaccurate, however, if they allow us to forget the difficulties of representation Musset was up against. They tend to make us believe in a comfortable and definitive solution, when the reverse is true: unfortunately for Musset, his kind of theater had to retreat into the homes, there to remain rather innocuous for a long time to come.

Masson considers in his *Avant Propos* that:

Le théâtre de Musset est, par essence plus que par accident, un théâtre non-joué, qui concerne moins le regard du spectateur installé dans sa loge que l'imagination d'un lecteur assis dans son fauteuil (1974:5).

Later, but still in the first half of his book, Masson adds: "*Le Regard du lecteur est plus libre de ses mouvements que celui du spectateur*" (1974:127). Of course, it is. But this does not prevent him from devoting the second half to discussions of the few important performances the play has

enjoyed. Is it so easy to separate the reader from the spectator in us? Do we not project a stage ahead of us when we read? Conversely, do we not read in and between the lines we hear when seated in the theater?

Readers at home are not exclusive possessors of "*l'imaginaire*." Maybe *Lorenzaccio* was asking for a kind of public representation that would not limit its flights of the imagination, not fall short of its sudden plunges into the depths of interiority. Maybe it was *in pains* for a moveable stage. Sices' remarkable conclusion is that:

The cinematic quality of Musset's drama... makes it apparent that the motion picture was not so much a device which revolutionized the concept of dramatic structure as the necessary realization of an evolving theatrical vision in search of its technological means (1974:241).

Whom did Musset expect would respond to *his* invitation? Isolated armchair readers, doubtless his most comfortable addressees -- or the community of spectators gathered in an institution such as La Comédie-Française (where national cultural events did happen back then)? Both, if possible. How could this playwright not desire massive effect and massive response in an era of emerging crowds? If the imagination was defined by the Romantics as the creative faculty, to create meant to force interaction, to provoke communication, to elicit sympathy. Without this reception and this reaction, the work could not be said to have been

created; it was still-born. On the last page of *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley writes:

The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature (1977:508).

No doubt, the ambitious playwright who designed *Lorenzaccio*, the same young man who had received from George Sand *Une Conspiration en 1537*, believed he was living in a period blessed by "an accumulation of the power of communicating," an age heavy with momentous changes "in opinion or institution." Evidently, by 1834 Musset had lost "revolutionary" hopes; but he had not yet lost the hope of shaking his audience by exposing all the reasons for disillusionment.

Obscurities

The "technical" difficulties any director would have to surmount when translating *The Cenci* into performance are of a different nature.

Shelley's dramaturgy is static. Actors may stand on the spot, gesticulating imprecations (*Cenci*) and grimacing anxious confessions (*Beatrice*) for entire scenes. Except for the ensemble scenes of the Banquet in Act I and of the Trial in Act V, there are no more than two, at most three

actors on this stage. This is reminiscent of Greek tragedy. But the Greek actors wore masks and declaimed far away from the audience. If we are to sympathize with Beatrice, she must come close -- a little too close perhaps -- to us. Shelley's tragedy belongs to a very intimate theater. The vast and noisy public hall Mr Harris managed could not have accommodated *The Cenci*. Had he welcomed the play, it is doubtful whether Covent Garden would have done it justice.

In five Acts, Shelley indicates one change of set. We move from one thickly-walled room to another. The primary difficulty, I think, is in penetrating the forbidding surface of the Shelleyan verse. It is not that his elaborate style crackles with the wit, the double-entendres and the verbal ironies of Shakespeare. Whereas it is direct and plain in the mouths of the secondary characters, the long-winded speeches of Beatrice and Count Cenci compare with the language of *Paradise Lost* -- they are packed with thoughts that require patient poring over, something we do not have the time to do in the theater. Edgar Allan Poe, whose style is similarly obscure, writes in 1849:

What in him [Shelley] seems the diffuseness of one idea is the conglomerate of many and this species of concision it is, which renders him obscure [Quoted by Crook and Guiton on the front page].

Shelley's verse needs unfolding, if not all the way, at least to the point where *you* confront "the burning atom of inextinguishable thought;" otherwise, it will strike you as

fastidiously rhetorical. The Chasm Speech will seem halted, uselessly complex and confusing. Cenci's cosmic curses will sound like all grandiloquence, vague and fuzzy.¹⁷

Wordsworth had asked poets "to adopt the very language of men" (1994:437). In his *Preface*, Shelley approves:

I entirely agree with those modern critics, who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men (Poems, II, 73).

I do not think that Shelley succeeded in this respect. Musset did. Discreet but consequent revolutions in art start from the signifier, not the signified. We should remember how daring it must have been to use the street-language of Parisians in what remained the highest of literary settings. It required some justification, which Musset provided a few years later in *De la Tragedie*:

Ne serait-il pas temps de prouver que la tragédie est autre chose qu'une statue qui déclame, de montrer enfin qu'on peut agir en parlant... Ne serait-il pas temps de ramener dans les sujets sérieux la franchise du style... (Prose:901).

Agir en parlant, this is already the leitmotif of Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son Double*: not so much to mean something or send a specific (clear, analytical) message, as to act in speaking, affecting the other and forcing him/her to respond, that is, to act in turn.

¹⁷ Crook and Guiton justly note: "It is easy to overlook how truly horrible [a] curse is, imprecation being of all rhetorical forms the one most subject to an automatic mental translation into milder terms, for it tends to be assumed that the language is always exaggerated" (1986:188).

Break, Shock and Retaliation

Even though the two final moments of release we have analyzed testify to a certain purgation (or exhaustion) of anxiety, one has to admit that the works we have read leave much undone in regard to the ancient requisite of *catharsis*. The books closed, we cannot repeat Aristotle word for word and say that we are purged of our impure feelings by means of a representation of these selfsame impure feelings -- pity and fear being condensed in one wrenching feeling of anxiety (1965:39). How can anxiety ever be purged, whose cause is inexhaustible, whose "complete" representation is impossible? After this (double) reading there *should* remain in us some uneasiness or dis-satisfaction. My point is that with works such as Shelley's and Musset's we have entered an aesthetics of un-pleasure (otherwise called pain).

Girard writes that disregarding the author's intention has had a crippling effect on the studies of drama in this century (1991:271). The intention(s) we have had to interpret do not require psychology (or even psychoanalysis), in the regular sense of the word. We have not had to plunge into "deep" psychology. The biographical elements we have used pertain to the circumstances surrounding the creation of the works. Such is the advantage of doing comparative study: we are not bound to draw conclusions from anyone's particular conscious or

unconscious life. The problems we face are trans-individual. There are patterns of failure -- strange still-bornness but also stubborn survival -- that still await explanation.

In terms of content, form, intention and reception, the serious Romantic drama turns out to be much more problematic than its Greek, Elizabethan or Neo-classical predecessors. We may now resume the argument with which this essay opened: the difficulties in reception lay outside, confronting the dramatic intentions of our authors. The conditions of artistic enunciation had shifted at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. That there was a place in public space where addresser and addressee of art could communicate was no more a simple given. The Romantic writer could not but feel separated from his community while working with the means and engine of all communication among men: language.

Lorenzo at one point observes a canvas that the painter Tebaldeo has just finished, and remarks: "*Est-ce un paysage ou un portrait? De quel côté faut-il le regarder, en long ou en large?*" (II,ii,89). The modernity of the sarcasm is astounding and warns us not to overestimate the distance separating us from the first generations of Romantics. It is as though Musset could foresee the staggered mass-reception (or rather, irreception) of myriad waves of "avant-garde art" that were to come. The democratic people to which art is now destined do not understand it. How

could they? Why should they? They are too busy and too tired for it. To wake up from their "savage torpor," they need, as Wordsworth writes, "gross and violent stimulants."

At the dawn of the industrial age, the poet perceives his audience to be asleep, if not worse, as in Blake's grotesque quip about the "vegetable life" of the "indefinite" British people. Artists wonder how to overcome the difficulty and decide, in effect, to deal blow for blow. In anticipation of the failure of an exhibition in 1809, Blake writes on top of his prospectus: "Fit Audience find tho' few" (1988:526). A quarter of a century later, Stendhal ends *La Chartreuse de Parme* with "To the Happy Few," written in English to better slight his French reader while flattering the tenacity of the few.

The crowd demands to be shocked. To respect the rules followed by the masters and imitate the models of beauty exhibited by great works of the past would not fulfill the cravings of this audience. The artist may follow the rules and imitate; h/she may know *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, but that concerns him/her alone. Since its reception has become problematic, what matters is the *effect* of the work, the nature of the feelings awakened in the addressee, not the knowledge of the addresser. Modern aesthetics was born at the turn of the Nineteenth Century as an analysis of the effects produced by the work of art. De Quincey has provided us with excellent guide-posts in the new research.

When the work *must* surprise its addressee, perfection is not of the essence. Writing about the element of shock that characterizes modern art as such, Lyotard remarks: "The very imperfections, the distortions of taste, even ugliness, have their share in the shock-effect" (1989:202). There is plenty of that type of shock (to common taste) in *The Cenci* and in *Lorenzaccio*. But there is more. As their nerve-racking, fiendish and inescapable secrets insist, we discover that these tragedies revolve, not so much around sexual abuses which are, after all, only the *causa accidentalis* of spiritual contamination -- but around sublime figures that point toward the paradoxical presence, inside and beyond polluted psyches, of a central absence.

Here is the linguistic weapon with which two first-rate authors decided almost simultaneously to counter-attack, to retaliate, to respond to the presumed indifference of their respective public. They wanted to surprise, indeed. But what is the superlative shock? What is *the* most shocking? Nothing precisely -- for any content, any figure, any word, any representation (sexual or other), however shocking at first, gets rapidly assimilated by the sleeping multitude, as we all know too well by now. Lyotard writes:

The sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening. Terrors are linked to privation... What is terrifying is that *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening (1989:204).

Irreception

The Cenci and *Lorenzaccio* inscribe complex consequences of this historical break. Beatrice and Lorenzo desperately call for witnesses to their tragic predicament. The others in the plays do not hear them. No Other responds from beyond their deaths to distinguish the good from the bad in their actions and to settle their reputations in the symbolic network that survives them.

What is truly curious, however, is that, all the while, Beatrice and Lorenzo have made every possible effort not to be heard and understood. The latter alienates allies and friends by keeping the secret. The former is anxious about spreading contamination to the legacy of her name if she tells. This contradiction or double-bind functions at another level. Shelley and Musset depict the *irreceivability* of the heroic act in modern society. The depiction is so critical, so cynical, so shocking that it is bound to be rejected by the public.

Failure in communication is the dominant theme of both plays. The several difficulties considered above harbor a *real* impossibility. Beatrice and Lorenzo hide a horrible secret. Once they unfold it, however, the secret turns out to be inexpressible. The secret contains a surplus secret that ever escapes explanatory words, exhibiting the point at which the possibility of communication breaks down. In this

indigestible *real* resides the most fundamental cause of the difficulties in reception our two tragedies were to encounter. The irrepresentable in these texts accounts for their still-bornness -- and not having been properly born, they await, like the tragic heroes whose destinies they depict, their proper deaths. The same cause that obstructs their reception also accounts for their persistent survival: once we start hearing them, writing about them, responding to them *because of* the anxiety they channel, these tragedies live today; they live on as the masterpieces of our Romantic past that they are. Despite themselves, they succeed, after all, by failing so rigorously.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard write about a state of failure inherent to modern art in general. *The Cenci* and *Lorenzaccio* conform then to this rule. It seems that the difficult works of our modern past -- the ones we, post-moderns, most appreciate -- are all bent on presenting the unrepresentable, on working around the sublime, on saying the impossible. They are first and foremost destined to baffle the public; to fail, and then, by virtue of some infinite failure lodged in the core, to survive. The French philosophers have helped us to conceive a failure which is not merely negative, not simply a defect, but also a resource; not only a stumbling-block, but also a vital excess and a cause of persistence.

After World War II

No canonical reconsiderations will alter the fact that *The Cenci* is an obscure play, in all the meanings of the word. Curran is right to remark, however, that it has as *such* commanded "the continued fascination of active minds in the professional theater" (1970:183).

While it amounted to another resounding failure upon reception, Artaud's rewriting of the play bears witness to its presence in the contemporary theater. *The Cenci* resists staging, and even when modernized, it puzzles the public -- even that French intellectual elite which gathered on May 6, 1935, ready to receive the most shocking of revelations.¹⁸ It has nevertheless become the vehicle of daring enterprises in the world of performance (as drama and as opera). Given the desire contemporary audiences manifest for the pleasures that lurk *beyond pleasure*, their taste for ever more extreme intimacies, and allowing for our uncanny thirst to get ever closer in representation to the secrets of destructive force, I suspect *The Cenci* will be read and filmed and scored in times to come. We require, it is true, stronger "excitants" with each day that passes. What was shocking yesterday hardly makes us smile today. I would venture to say that, by now, the best art is not only *about* trauma but

¹⁸ See, the editorial note to *Les Cenci* (1978:331).

that it intends to violate, to hurt and to traumatize the public in turn. This is where Shelley's play "fits" like no other. It has in store *the* shock that will not fade. No other play written in English during the Romantic era can boast of so bright a future.

Lorenzaccio needs no such defense. No other nineteenth-century French drama is so vital at the end of this one. We know that Musset ventured with *Lorenzaccio* an impracticable theater. Why is it that after World War II directors have decided to tackle its difficulties? Public presentations were, of course, hampered until theater houses (such as the Theater National Populaire in 1952) deployed the technical means to do justice to its staging difficulties. But the play's problems have never been *just* technical. The delicate question of Lorenzo's homosexual behavior with Alexandre, for example, is relevant here.¹⁹ Why did the public of 1896 wildly acclaim Sarah Bernhard's impersonation? Gender ambiguities became so complex, they probably got lost behind the "*génie*" of the actress. Sices writes:

It can only be supposed that the French were making every possible effort to prevent the normal performance of Musset's great drama (1974:177).

¹⁹ In one of the scenes he removed from his manuscript, Musset indicates: "*Chez le Duc. Le Duc et Lorenzo, sommeillant*" (Theatre:986). Musset realized that to lift the curtain on the two young men sleeping in the same bed was somewhat too direct.

Another thing is the variable of what is deemed, not so much presentable (i.e., decent, appropriate), but purely and simply representable at a given time. André Uberfeld explained recently why, in the Twentieth Century, directors took the risk of performing *Lorenzaccio*:

Le mérite de Musset c'est de s'être tourné vers des solutions dramatiques délibérément impraticables et romanesques... C'est au XXème siècle, qui sait mettre en scène le roman et "faire theater de tout" qu'est réservée la tache de refaire un théâtre concret d'un théâtre rêvé (1978:79).

The merit of Musset is his impracticability. As if the very difficulty of his theater, its intellectual demands, its non-adaptation to the reality of the stage, had guaranteed its survival. As if its non-appearance in public space had endowed *Lorenzaccio* with a secret life, a reserve of latent powers, of still-born intensities readers could enjoy in the privacy of their homes -- until the next century would want to exhibit "*tout*," the whole of the text "*concrètement*," because in the Twentieth Century, one wants to see it all.

I do not accept the words "*roman... romanesque*" which, for Uberfeld, define the nature of the difficulty. Shelley and Musset were not self-deceived novelists who got lost in the wrong genre. Their "*solutions dramatiques*" fostered their lyrical talents as poets. Here is the concrete problem for actors, directors and public. It stems from Shelley's and Musset's sublime poetry, which gives precedence over other type of acting to attitudes of

introspection. The theater of Seneca has long suffered neglect for the same reason. T.S. Eliot wrote in 1932 that Seneca was "full of statements useful only to an audience which sees nothing" because the characters of his dramas do not seem to move, his actors to act or interact. Eliot, however, added immediately: "Seneca's plays, in fact, might be practical models for the modern broadcasted drama" (1932:55). These Roman tragedies, which for centuries had lived under the shadow of the Greeks and in the dark margins of tradition, appeared suddenly fit for the most advanced medium of the day.

Hamlet went as far as Shakespeare would go in this direction. But Hamlet's favorite pose of inaction is composed, relaxed (and relaxing) in comparison. At their most dramatic, the characters of this theater of anxiety *do* nothing but roll their eyes, look pale and terrified, numbed as they are and knocked out of their minds by the sight of an invisible, incomprehensible and inescapable contagion. Notwithstanding the prolonged immobility of Lorenzo and Philippe during the confession, the success of *Lorenzaccio* in 1952 came as no surprise, in this respect. Equipments in the wings of the Théâtre National Populaire do not exhaust the matter, if they proved *sine qua non* conditions. The French had the deepest reasons just then to sympathize with the private, personal, yet universal sense of self-defeat

and abjection that Musset so masterfully and relentlessly exposes.

Uberfeil was right, however, to note that, in a century *qui fait théâtre de tout*, the resistances that the dramatic text opposes to public performance are easily overlooked. *Les planches* no longer impose their unique format. As if to gnaw at the impossible could make it disappear, one is constantly looking for the technical means to overcome the limits of representation. We have an eye today and an uncommon taste for that which escapes "normal" perception. Thanks to the cinema, television and the computer, which definitely blurs the distinction between private and public space(s), essentially everything is deemed representable.

And so theater directors since World War II have introduced operatic techniques and mixed media to supplement what came to be perceived as the drab day-to-day realism, the psychological clichés, fatigued verisimilitudes and bourgeois proprieties of the stage practices inherited from the Nineteenth Century. Alone before the war to ask for a revolution in the theater, the awakener was Artaud:

Nous avons perdu tout contact avec le vrai théâtre, puisque nous le limitons au domaine de ce que la pensée journalière peut atteindre, au domaine connu ou inconnu de la conscience; -- et si nous nous adressons théâtralement à l'inconscient, ce n'est guère que pour lui arracher ce qu'il a pu amasser (ou cacher) d'expérience accessible à la conscience (1978:45).

Artaud proclaims: no more Cartesian clarity on the stage -- but darkness and confusion; the secret beyond "known" secrets, obscure and inaccessible. The division between stage and orchestra must go. The separation between bodies and souls present in the theater must be destroyed.

Artaud organized what had only been arrogance in the Surrealist Happening: the jeering mockery and nasty kick of the audience. Attacked, cleansed, purged, shaken from everywhere, individuals must lose consciousness and withal, their repressed, sick identities. They ought to (con)fuse in identification beyond the limits of mere sympathy and enter into a trance where "*les forces dangereuses pour la société*," intimate and collective infections are released: "*Le théâtre est fait pour vider collectivement les abcès*" (1978:30).

Shelley's imagery of contamination could not be more appropriate. No wonder that Artaud was so interested in the resources of cruelty (received and given) which laid dormant in *The Cenci*. During the 1960's, directors who count as influential today borrowed what they could from Artaud's *Théâtre Total*. Jean-Louis Barrault and Peter Brooks started by applying to Seneca the shock-therapy Artaud had imagined for Shelley.²⁰ The long static scenes of reflection were

²⁰ In 1968, Barrault mounted Seneca's *Medea* in Paris; Brooks his *Oedipus* in London. The inner torments of the Senecan characters must have corresponded to the social turmoils of the period, for these productions were very successful.

energized with the help of screens, projections, electronic vibrations -- and the public went along, or so it seems, eager for every unfathomable suggestion.

The 1960's were the age of Happenings in Europe and in America. Revolution was in the air. What happens when, as Lyotard puts it, things stop happening? The stupefied whispers of Beatrice and Lorenzo turn to shouts. We are certainly not any closer than we were yesterday to the irrepresentable cause of anxiety. But at least we can read these two tragic dramas which come near -- so disturbingly, so profoundly near -- with less prejudice.

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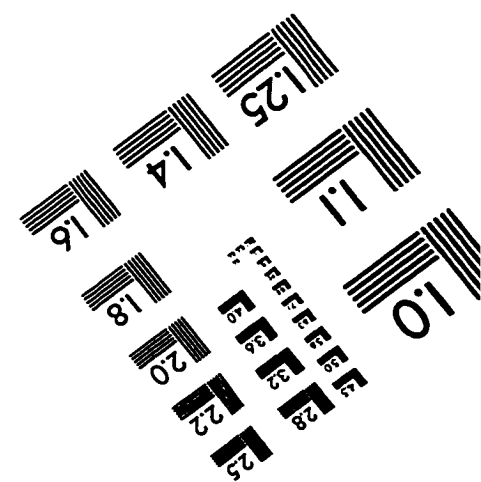
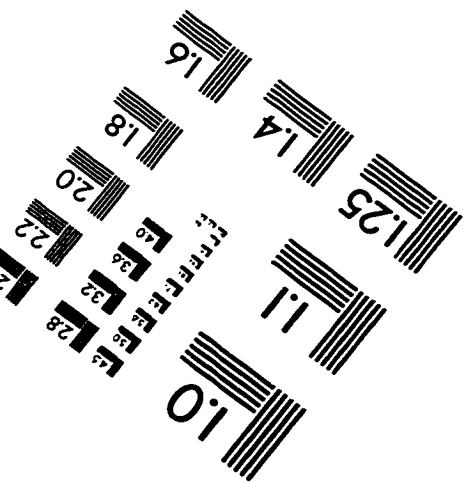
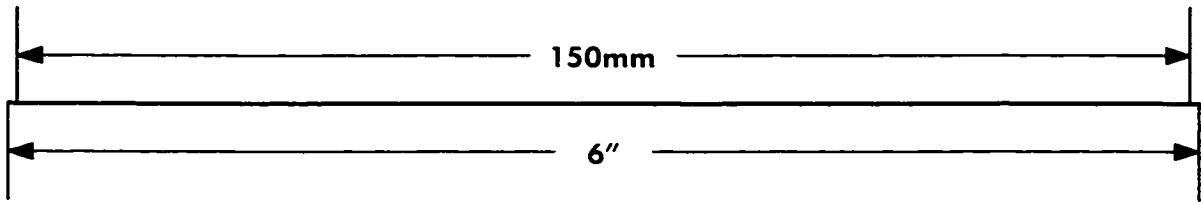
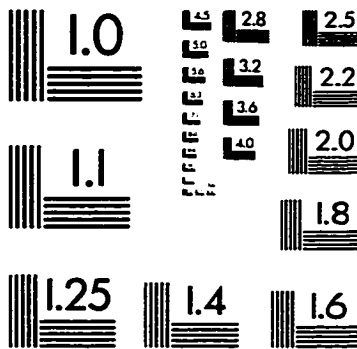
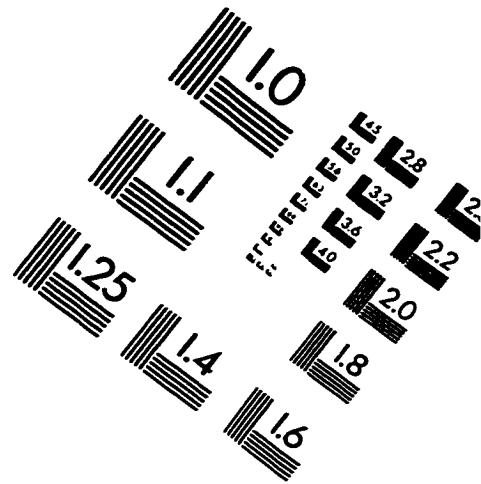
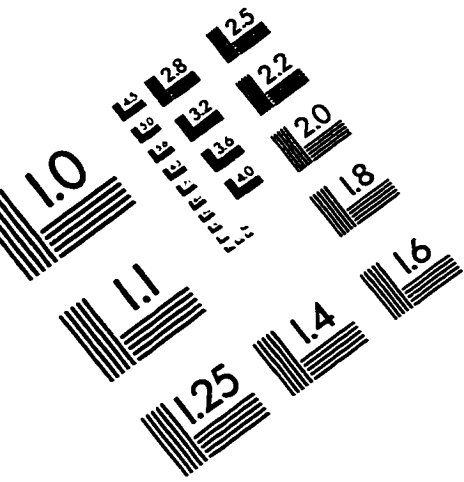
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