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FALL AND REDEMPTION OF LANGUAGE IN THE 17<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

## 1. The body of language

The social, political and economic crisis which rocked England in the 17th century leading to the civil war was, correspondingly, reflected in a crisis in language. Language itself revolted and, roughly speaking, split into a 'royalist' and a 'puritan' camp. I say «roughly» because the ideological spectrum of conflicting discourses was much wider than our simple opposition would allow—witness the argument put forth by the radical sects for the total abolition of language: «Thoughts run in me», wrote Winstanley, «that words and writing were all nothing and must die».<sup>1</sup>

Yet, if the puritan hold of power proved to be short-lived and Monarchy re-entered, in 1660, once more the scene, puritan *ethos* was to exercise its government over language for centuries to come. The famous passage from Thomas Sprat's *A History of the Royal Society* will help illustrate this point and also provide the scaffolding upon which our argument will rest. I quote at length:

There is one thing more about which the Society has been most solicitous; and that is the manner of their Discourse: which, unless they had been very watchful to keep in due temper, the whole spirit and vigour of their Design, had been soon eaten out by the luxury and redundancy of speech....In a few words, I dare say, that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain'd than this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a noise in the world. They have therefore been most rigorous in putting into execution, the only Remedy that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution to reject all the amplifications, digressions and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive

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1. *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. G. H. Sabine (1941), p. 315.

expressions, clear senses; a native easiness; bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Sprat, unaware that the language he himself is using to advocate the new, «naked» style finds its organization in the rhetoric of disguise, presents language here as being diseased and in need of *remedy*, not only in its body, it is full of *swellings*, but also in its moral constitution. For, language has turned *vicious*, and has wandered away from the straight path into wanton *digressions*. Having fallen into *extravagant, luxurious* ways, language has become *impure*, deceitful, *metaphorical* and should, therefore be chastised back into its *primitive purity* to go forth once again, like our first parents, *naked*. The *unnatural, sense-less* noise and din of tongues that confound England should cease, and words returned once more back to their original, *natural, native* simplicity.

What gives to Sprat's discourse the possibility for its articulation is the archetypal narrative of fall/redemption and the theological opposition body/soul. It will be noticed that the semantic attributes attaching to the 'female' body of language are *dissimulation* and *corruption*, the first proceeding from the discourse of conduct, the second from the discourse of pathology. Dissimulation and corruption were two concepts causally related in the 17th century mind and these provided the negative, descriptive schema for Absolute Monarchy, for Court politics and manners, for the rhetoric of literature and the arts, and for Anglicanism as invested in the class of Bishops. The semantic attributes attaching to the 'soul' of language are the opposite ones, *veracity* and *incorruption*, and these provided the 17th century mind with the positive, descriptive schema for Parliamentarianism, middle-class *ethos*, Puritanism, and the rhetoric of science, or of enlightened reason.

A third semantic component embedded in Sprat's discourse is *desire* which, though it usually attaches to the body and proceeds from the discourse of sexuality, is here divested of its material origin and encoded as absence in the yearning for a return to the original, paradisaal abode. *Desire* as *anamnesis* generated in many 17th century discourses the narratives of the Apocalypse, or of the Deluge, and determined the

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2. Thomas Sprat, *A History of the Royal Society*, Second Edition (1702), p. 111 ff.

nature of their vocabulary. The voyaging forth from the old, corrupted world that was to be destroyed, to a new, innocent world that was to mark a fresh beginning; the passage from time past to time future through the tumultuous, tempestuous ocean of present moments, inspired not only the literature of imaginary travel and of utopias, but also of scientific and philosophical treatises. The millenarian mood, underlay the incentive to revolution.

Making the world new, as the puritan rebels aspired, necessitated a purified language that could describe it. The biblical narrative of the Deluge provided the model. For, the male/female pairs of beasts, fowl and creeping things which God ordered Noah to carry in the ark, ensured not only the propagation of a renewed species, but supplied the material conditions of a grammar for the procreation of a new, *simple* and universal language:

And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech.  
(Genesis, 11, 1).

Yet, as the story of *Genesis* is the drama of death, the fate of all things which exist in temporality being *decay*, sin, in the guise of dissimulation, sooner or later eats its way in and the body of language becomes infested:

Behold the people is one, and they have one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

(Genesis 11, 6-7).

It is at this juncture, when divisiveness and distance in the social order is diagnosed as infection in the body of language, that the Royal Society appears and undertakes the cure and restoration of the english language to its prelapasarian state, as well as its moral restitution through a rhetoric celebratory of the puritan *ethos*, since its stylistic norms encode the middle-class virtues of *thrift* (so many things in so many words), of *unembellishment* (as near the Mathematical plainness), and of *productive labour* (of the Artizans, Countrymen and Merchants) in opposition to the festive, elaborate rhetoric of the idle, aristocratic «Wits», or of the dissembling «Scholars». For they, «under a covetous black gown...would always be speaking words, but falls off when people begins to act their words».<sup>3</sup>

3. Winstanley, *Works*, op. cit., p. 475.

*Words and actions* were to be related once more and innocence regained for the fragmented social and linguistic orders. For, as Sir William Cornwallis had observed: «The motions of man, by reason of his reason called Actions—what an Eclipse doe they suffer with Vanitie's darke body getting betweene them and the cleannesse of reason?»<sup>4</sup>

## II. The ideology of concealment

The rigid demarkation between life and fiction was to be a non-aristocratic, middle-class «fiction» which materialized in the 18th century book market as a new product called «Novel». Though the elaboration of this aesthetic position was old, it was in the 17th century that the theory of imitation was reconstituted as political articulation by knowing itself now as the antithesis to the aesthetic ideology of Absolute Monarchy and of its Court which vested its power in the practice of *life-as-fiction*.

Rhetoric had provided the ideology of Absolutism with a system upon which the construction of the royal subject and of its dramatic function became possible. The Tudor and Stuart kings and queens existed as concretizations of divine monarchy, as «deputies elected by the Lord» whose role pre-existed their historical appearance. At the mystical ceremony of Coronation, the royal person assumed the sacred attributes of the royal role being thus transformed into an instantiation of personification entering the fantastical realms of allegory.

Feigned semblance, or dissimulation, as intelligent political practice was legitimized by the transcendent doctrine of the divine right of kings which placed the ruler above the law of the land, making him accountable to God only. Above the law, meant also beyond the limits of sublunary nature and of the logic of language. As legal tenet this doctrine was encoded in the metaphysical paradox of the «King's two Bodies» which, as Kantorowicz observes, from Blackstone's *Commentaries* «there rises the spectre of an absolutism exercised, not by an abstract «State», as in modern times, or by an abstract «Law», as in the High Middle Ages, but by an abstract physiological fiction which in secular thought remains probably without parallel.... The state of superhuman «absolute perfection» of this royal *persona ficta* is...the result of a fiction

4. Sir William Cornwallis, «Clothes», *Elizabethan and Jacobean Prose: 1550-1620*, ed. Kenneth Muir (1956), p. 84.

within a fiction». <sup>5</sup> As dogma, this fiction is nowhere so well articulated as in the royal, funeral service by the oxymoron: «the king is dead; long live the king!»

Shakespeare's *Richard II* is the supreme dramatization of the split between the royal person and the royal role, of the moment when representation is forced by the necessity of history to acknowledge presence. For, inspite of the fact that the doctrine of the «King's two Bodies» operated as a control on the incentive for insurrection, by making it punishable not only as a political, but also as a heinous, religious offense, the momentum of history pierced through the smooth correspondences of ideology. Shakespeare's historical tragedies can be seen as articulations in the language of felt temporality of the politics of iconization:

Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented. Sometimes I am a king:  
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,  
and so I am. Then crushing penury  
persuades me I was better when a king;  
Then am I king'd again; and by-and-by  
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,  
And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,  
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas'd till he be eas'd  
With being nothing.

(*Richard II*, V, v, 31-41).

The ruling ideology did not regard dissimulation in representation as a moral offence bearing the stigma of hypocrisy, or of secret, evil intentions. To the contrary, it viewed it as an essential rule for the conduct of life since assuming a disguise was the only way to structure one's actions. «*Es gran parte de regir el dissimular*», advised Baltasar Gracián.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the political advantages of dissimulation, and the dramatic possibilities which it offered for plot and character construction in life and literature, these were ideologically distanced and rendered legitimate through the master methaphor of the *stage*, a metaphor which, by

5. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's two Bodies* (1970), pp. 4-5. See also Marie Axton, *The Queen's two Bodies* (1977).

6. *El Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, Aphorism 88.

transcending social divisions, equated the world with the stage and mankind with actors in an ephemeral play. Thus, the machiavellian villain, as the possible *other* of divine kingship, was blurred in plays and political criticism silenced by the pessimistic, metaphysical mood of the vanity of human existence:

Now, what else is the whole life of man but a sort of play? Actors come on wearing their different masks and all play their parts until the producer orders them off the stage, and he can often tell the same man to appear in different costume, so that now he plays a king in purple and now a humble slave in rags. It is all a sort of pretence, but it's the only way to act out this farce.<sup>7</sup>

Shakespeare's uses of the stage metaphor are too well known,<sup>8</sup> but two worth repeating for the sake of our argument:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
and then is heard no more. It is a tale  
told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth*, V, v, 24-28)

When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools.

(*King Lear*, IV, vi, 186-87)

A transitory moment, a play, a tale, life searches after its image in the system of literature and there discovers itself a witless verbal construct «signifying nothing». In tragedies concerned with «the fall of hapless princes» the stage metaphor, besides its social and metadramatic value, served as a vehicle for political criticism: if king and court experienced life-as-fiction, then the player king, by pulling the mask off the royal actor, vindicated the claims of Drama to truthfulness and exposed to the audience the duplicities of ruling power.

Impersonation, or the assuming of a disguise, interpenetrated high life and literature in the 17th century. Texts returned their readers to life to seek a key to their decipherment, life sent the observer to texts

7. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (1980), p. 104.

8. See A. Richter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962), esp. Chapters V, VI; J. L. Calderwood, *Shakespeare's Metadrama* (1971).



for illumination. Romances concealed under feigned, exotic names contemporary personalities and places; the amorous, or political intrigues which advanced the plot reflected real, historical situations. During the Interregnum, Mrs. Philips set up in her country house a royalist *salon* where the devotees read and played Romance by assuming the names of the fictional characters. Mrs. Philips went by the name of «the matchless Orinda», Mr. Philips, her husband, as «Antenor». Barclay's *Argenis* was supplied in all editions subsequent to the first with a key to the characters and places: *Arx non eversa* stood for the Tower of London, *Hyanisbe* concealed Queen Elizabeth, *Usinulca* was an anagram for Calvin, *Hipophylus* and *Radirobanes* mask-names for the king of Spain.

In the naming of characters, 17th century Romance relied heavily on the rhetorical devices of *polynomasia* and *polyetymology*.<sup>9</sup> The *etymon* was so chosen as to reveal eternal virtues and graces lodging in the words and in the ladies. This apparently innocent stylistic device encapsulated the ideology of Monarchy and Court which consisted in the abolition of boundaries between ideal and real. The nobility, which formed the reading public of these Romances, was wont to practice a grammar of idealised, amorous conduct. The doubling of self became, thus, an important convention in these Romances. The characters assume many names and disguises the most frequent of which is the assuming of a name, or garment of the opposite sex. Transvestism as plot convention frustrated sexual sport and gave vent to bombastic, amorous declamation. In actual life, transvestism, which was a social and sartorial fact, facilitated sexual relations and flouted the platonism of courtly love.

A dramatic form of entertainment which best encoded the ideology of concealment, and which expired together with Charles I, was the Masque. Performed in palaces, surpassing any stage form in its splendour as spectacle, it signified to its noble spectators both the transitoriness of life-as-feast and the timeless plane of their princely existence by setting the action in times remote and places known only to exist as constructions in the texts of legend and literature: Arcadia, fairyland, the watery dominion of Neptune, the airy heights of the Olympians. It is not without significance that in Masques, Royalty and nobles parti-

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9. For an informative analysis of these terms, see Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (1948).

pated as actors and dancers in the performance. Thus, the demarkating line between audience and stage receded, the audience serving as a mirror to the actors, the actors as mirror to the audience.

Jacobean and Carolinian art offer another instance of the ideological production of concealment. By encoding the fictitious image, painting suppressed the representation of the historically real. Time in baroque art is annulled and Royalty shown to exist on a plane with the angelic and saintly host, with mythological figures of gods, demi-gods and heroes on a map of mythical places. Immortality was thus impressed on the Prince through the convention of spatial synchronicity. Charles I, and his queen posed as models for Rubens' painting of St. George; on the ceiling of the Banqueting Hall, at Whitehall, Rubens painted the «Apotheosis of James I,» showing his transubstantiated, mortal form ascending the heavens amidst putti, plump seductive goddesses and whirling, cosmic forces; Van Dyck, court painter to Charles I, perfected the technique of disembodiment of the mortal king into the immortal actor. «Charles I, in three positions» reminds us of king Richard's words: «Is not the king's name twenty thousand names?» (III, ii, 85). It is within the spirit of this painting that Charles I, while awaiting his doom at Carisbrook Castle, composed his memoirs, or, as the title page reads: *Eikon Vassilike: The Portraiture of his Sacred Majestie in his solitudes and sufferings*. The text, which covers the period from the Last Parliament to Charles' last prayers, is a most eloquent proof of the contradiction between the royal role and the royal person, of the fact that king and court cultivated an *eikon*, a representation instead of a presence.

It is this ideology which, over a century later, Oliver Goldsmith will ironize when, in *the Vicar of Wakefield*, he has the vicar's family pose for a family painting:

We desired to have something in a brighter style, and, after many debates, at length came to a unanimous resolution of being drawn together in one large historical family piece. This would be cheaper, since one frame would serve for all, and it would be infinitely more genteel; for all families of any taste were now drawn in the same manner. As we did not immediately recollect an historical subject to hit us, we were contented each with being drawn as independent historical figures. My wife desired to be represented as Venus, and the painter was desired not to be too frugal of his diamonds in her stomacher and hair. Her two little ones were to be as Cupids on her side, while I, in my gown and band, was to present her with my

books on the Winstonian controversy. Olivia would be drawn as an Amazon...Sophia was to be a sheperdess...and Moses was to be dressed out with an hat and white feather.<sup>10</sup>

The novel as text of the bourgeoisie debunks the romanced text of Aristocracy. An a-historical art form is shown here to fall victim to the inexorable process of history which deprives it of its ideological object of representation. The contradiction between manner and content to which the writing points is also a sign of its abhorrence of concealment and a declaration of its 'sincerity' since it does not hesitate to *reveal* the class motivations of its characters in posing for the painting. Art as a means for interiorising and deifying status has now turned into an external sign of status. Liberalism is the capacity which writing acquires to draw back and ironize the very object of its discourse.

The ideology of concealment extended in the 17th century into almost every field of writing: proposals for social or scientific reform took the form of Utopias such as *The New Atlantis*, or *The Famous Kingdome of Macaria*; Sir Kenelm Digby, Gentleman of the Bedchamber to king Charles I, composed his *Private Memoirs* in the form of a Romance; Richard Braithwait wrote the history of England from the days of queen Elizabeth to the death of Cromwell in a romanced version bearing the title *Panthalia*; James Howell's botanical treatise *Δενδρολογία: or the Vocall Forest* is supplied with «A full and perfect Clavis to Dodona's Grove». The forest within the book becomes a 'book', a code to be deciphered: trees give us a key to the social structure of England, the social structure of England a key to the hierarchical order of trees: *Elms* are the Nobility, *Prime Elms* the «principall» Nobility, *Yews* the Bishops, *Coppices* «the inferior sort of people».

The moral strictures placed by the Royal Society upon language, parallel the wrathful attacks directed by the puritans against the abuses in fashion, the elaborate costume and facial embellishment which concealed the true and natural appearance:

For mine owne excuse herein I nunsware, that in the writyng of [these Histories] I have used the same maner that many of our yonge Gentlemen useth now adais in the wearing of their apparell...Sometyme wearyng their haire freeseled so long, that makes them looke like a water Spaniell...their Cappes

10. (1953), pp. 101-102.

and Hattes sometymes so bigge, as will hold more witte than three of them have in their heddes; Sometymes so little, that will hold no witte at all. Their Ruffes sometymes so huge, as shall hang about their neckes like a Carte wheele; sometymes a little fallyng bande, that makes them looke like one of the Queenes silke women.<sup>11</sup>

William Prynne, in an attempt to correct these abuses, published in 1628 a Tract bearing the title:

*On the Unloveliness of Love-locks: being a Summary Discourse proving the wearing and nourishing of a Lock, or Love-lock to be altogether unseemly and unlawful unto Christians. In which there are likewise some passages collected out of Fathers, Councils and sundry Authors and Historians against Face painting, the wearing of suppositious poudred, frizzled or extraordinary long Hair, the inordinate affectation of corporeal Beauty and Women's manish, unnatural, impudent and unchristian cutting of their Hair.*

What gives rise to Rich's satire and Prynne's indignation is the concealment of nature by art, the elaborate rhetoric of Dress and the confusion it caused between the sexes. Transvestism, disguise, dissimulation, as was previously mentioned, constituted a social, sartorial, and linguistic fact. Language in the 17th century was experiencing not only a political but a sexual rift as well and the vices of concealment turned out to be female. Literature either forged lies, «feigned histories», or indulged in wanton play. Ornaments of speech, as Sprat declared,

are in open defiance against Reason: professing not to hold much correspondence with that; but with its Slaves, the Passions; they give the mind a motion too changeable, and bewitching, to consist with right practice. Who can behold, without Indignation, how many mists and uncertainties, these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our knowledge?<sup>12</sup>

Reason was to be discovered as bearing the characteristics of the male

11. Barnaby Rich, *His Farewell to a Militarie Profession, Elizabethan and Jacobean Prose: 1550-1620*, Ed. K. Muir (1956), pp. 12-13.

12. *A History of the Royal Society*, p. 111.

sex, the Adam to the Eve of literature. Reason's redemption was brought about by the spirit of science for:

From the time in which Real philosophy has appear'd there is scarce any whisper remaining of such horrors: Every man is unshaken at those Tales at which his Ancestors trembled. The cours of things goes quietly along, in its own true channel of Natural Causes and Effects. For this we are beholden to Experiments; which though they have not yet completed the discovery of the true world, yet they have already vanquish'd those wild inhabitants of the false world, that us'd to astonish the minds of men.<sup>13</sup>

The language, then, which the Royal Society was bent on exterminating was partly, as Sprat and many of his contemporaries maintained, the language of the religious Enthusiasts. Most importantly, it was the language of Eupheus, of the closed, deceitful Court circle, the theatrical language through which divinely ordained, Absolute Monarchy spoke. It is not to be wondered that in 1642 the Long Parliament ordered the closing of the theatres. A nation of practical, god-fearing people had no need of illusions and play. The metaphor of the world-as-stage had come to an end with the violent intrusion upon it of history.

Restoration, in 1660, brought back both king and stage. Upon the occasion of the first play to be produced in London with the reopening of the theatres, the following couplets were addressed to Charles II:

Greatest of Monarchs! Welcome to this place  
Which Majesty was so oft wont to grace  
Before our exile, to divert the Court  
and balance weighty cares with harmless sport.  
This truth we can to our advantage say  
that they would have *no king* would have *no play*.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, it was too late. For language had already progressed to its original, natural abode.

13. Ibid., p. 340.

14. Italics mine.

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