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ON

Massimo Cacciari’s *Hamletica*¹

The Indubitability of Doubt. An Interpretation of Massimo Cacciari’s “Hamletica”

Massimo Donà

Massimo Cacciari’s *Hamletica* is a formidable *descensus ad inferos*, a plunge into the heart of the paradox that constitutes our being and possibly outlines the inmost essence of man himself.

From Hamlet to Beckett by way of Kafka: in this fascinating journey, presented with his customary brilliance, Massimo Cacciari does more than just deal with one philosophical question among many, however interesting, but addresses the issue of philosophy at its most authentic, the question that all our greatest predecessors have asked. It is the same question that motivated Socrates to strive to understand who or what the unique being that only is what it is by means of its *actions*, so to speak the being that “is what it does,” or better yet the being that only exists as “action,” actually was about.

It’s certainly no coincidence that Plato – obediently following in the footsteps of his master Socrates – pointedly remarked that a thing can possess no beauty, truth or even virtue if not in the light of its final destination, the immanent end that determines what a thing really is (see *Republic* 601 d). In Western thought, the truth of a thing has always been tantamount to its *practical significance* – something it discloses solely in the light of the “action” in which it finds its proper use or function.

Already in Socrates, however, man is what he is inasmuch as he possesses the power to “create” himself, escaping a condition that is fundamentally inadequate to his deepest essence. That is where philosophy reveals its usefulness. According to Socrates, philosophy allows us to discover who or what we are, and therefore to act in a way that may cure or save us from a state of fundamental inadequacy, a sort of disease: a condition that fails to correspond to our ultimate end as we might discover it to be.

Hence the notion of philosophy as a cure for the soul, the only practice that allows us to become what we really are or could be.

Only in the modern age would this idea would effectively come to terms with its structural *aporias*, that is to say, with the quandaries that have always afflicted it from within.


Iris, ISSN 2036-3257, III 5 April 2011, p. 183–204
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If all of us are beings that constantly need to “make” themselves in order to become what they are, however, it is clear that we could never finally recognize ourselves in what we have managed to achieve at any given moment. Each of these achievements, whatever its merit, will have to be “negated” as a burden, a hurdle that stands in the way of what we could always be and therefore could still become. The product of our actions never reflects what we truly are, i.e. what we are inasmuch as we still need to become it.

In a word, the past – that is, what we were able to realise in each given situation – is by definition a “lie.” Since it is only capable of returning a certain image of ourselves, the past definitely cannot establish the rules of our praxis, given that the fundamental purpose of our activity, so to speak, is precisely to “exceed” that past.

For this reason, Cacciari argues, the modern dissolution of values – the very values upon which we have been accustomed to grounding our innumerable forms of action – was the inevitable outcome of our gradual realisation of the inescapable implications of human nature, a human nature that we might well term “aporetic,” in that it is irrevocably condemned to negating or denying everything that it cannot help becoming.

This is why no nomos arising from the past (let us not forget that the present is always made up of the past) was ever capable of binding us to its dictates, of imposing a subdued and deferential obedience upon us.

For how long, however, have we worshiped the past as such?

The game could not last forever. If this is true, however, modernity did not come about as an overcoming of classical metaphysics, but rather as its radical accomplishment, once man began to recognize an insuppressible need to re-found in toto the hierarchy of reality.

On what basis could he possibly have accomplished such a dramatic feat? Upon what kind of assumptions could he have acted, when the only possible points of reference were the disiecta membra of a past devoid of all auctoritas?

Cacciari is very clear about this: Hamlet is the personification of this new and yet quite ancient type of man, a man who has awakened to his own situation and knows that he will henceforth have to doubt all of the rules that have been established by the labyrinthine meshes of his past.

With Hamlet, the philosophical act par excellence has finally found its object.

And what, in fact, should Hamlet doubt, if not what the past has had to say about him (although it can only ever say what he no longer is), a past that never allowed Hamlet to understand, in a positive sense, what he himself could really be?

The point is that nothing that the past has to say has a chance of expressing its own ultimate end or ours, although the past happens to be the very stuff we are made on; the past never had anything to say about these things, and yet it never ceased to beckon us, inviting us to follow its lead.

How could we have followed its ethos, however, if the only thing it had to say about itself and us was the necessary possibility of its being negated and exceeded?

In the end we are left with nothing but doubts about its indecisive and untrustworthy indications, but nevertheless we find it hard to escape its force of gravity, as if it had been nothing. We are at liberty to adopt a critical stance, at all times, but this very gesture implies the past as its counterpole: skepticism, in the light of which every authentically philosophical choice is made, is directed at the past.
In *Hamlet*, at any rate, the “I” discovers its own impotence, burdened as it is with an intolerable powerlessness that prevents action but provides no excuse for inaction (we are nothing but “action,” after all). Compelled to follow the existing order (the only order that can provide them with a world at all), human beings have no choice but to “act” their way through life, enacting a scene that is inevitably doomed to become nothing but a digression.

The “I” that wanders onstage asking questions upon questions, on the other hand, cannot find the answers he desperately needs. The best that can happen to him is encountering a miraculous *exemplum*, bestowed upon him as it were “by grace,” that is “gratuitously,” and not as a reward for his merits or a consequence of his actions. This divine example, however, has no power to dictate new rules, indeed it has nothing to offer save a miraculous glimpse of a kingdom *that is not of this world*.

*Pure love*, therefore, shall be its name (Ophelia in the case of Hamlet): a love that has no power to incite action, but all the same can expose a fissure or gap in the chain of blind factuality, in the fabric of a “necessity” that appears to be perfect (that is, etymologically, “past”), but is really nothing more than petrified reality.

As a result, the subject – which can only grasp the sense of things in terms of their ultimate end or practical significance – is no longer capable of making decisions. Being in no condition to act like he wishes to, the subject is forced to come to terms with its irredeemable incompleteness, for in every product of human activity it sees but a reflection of “dissatisfaction,” of his own discontent. Something else, something more needs to be done, if we want the product of our actions to be recognized as simply, irreducibly “given.”

As we can see, Kafka is just one step away: the transition from Hamlet is “immediate,” indeed so smooth that it can hardly be called a “step.” At this point, that is, K is confronted with a pure, undecipherable “givenness,” and eventually recognizes it for what it really is: a product that appears to be petrified, because in its being past it could not exist save in a state of abstract petrifaction, by turning into sheer “nature.” Hence K’s trouble: he is unable to come to terms with this timeless presence, to find a place in the oppressive plenitude of an ahistorical present.

While in *Hamlet* the present and the past still appeared to entertain a relationship of sorts, in that one implied the other and therefore necessarily opened some kind of perspective on the future, in the case of K illusion is dissolved and exposed as utterly implausible.

Still, the dwellers of that *givenness* are trying to convince K that their own order is unmistakably natural. They know that the “fact” as such is “nature,” an undecipherable nature that cannot answer the questions of the stranger, i.e. a man who has come to realize that this heap of detritus (the past as it appears “to the present”) is pure Schloss, pure “closure” to questioning. No key can be obtained that would allow to disclose and grasp its secret.

In the end it is all about *comprehension*, and this goes for both Hamlet and K. Both are striving to decipher the only sense that might allow them to discover who we really are.

No answer, however, may come from a “so it was” that has turned into stone; or perhaps the lack of any reply is the best possible answer. The petrified past answers by showing itself, nothing more.
Only this heap of debris, that is, is able to embody the one and only law by which K is required to abide: the sole, utterly groundless law of the all. A law that hides no secrets, and that no key will ever be able to unlock.

Its language is the language of the pure being-there, a condition that both Hamlet and K must irrevocably “negate” to become what they still believe they could become: creators of a new order, sources of the law, legislators who wish (inasmuch as they “need”) to de-termine themselves in the face of a given order.

This is why they cannot help but strive to transfigure that order and its motionless, voiceless givenness, but they do so from the point of view of what it “shall necessarily always be:” indestructible rock that neither contradicts objections nor disagrees with them. Givenness is unable to do so because it holds no sense whatsoever, no truth that could be pitted against another.

This conflict, therefore, has nothing in common with a struggle between an “old” and a “new” order, as some will have it: a fight in which the old must necessarily attempt to resist the assaults of the new.

The past is nothing but pure and boundless “indifference:” it can be broken through by anyone at any moment, but it cannot be defined. It accommodates every conceivable definition, but none of these is apt to grasp its paradoxical secret, because the past hides no secret that could be revealed.

In this indifference embracing all that is, no real advance is possible. Motion is tantamount to utter “motionlessness,” its horizon wraps us in the same, timeless indifference.

And yet K is beckoned by this “state,” he wants it to recognize him, to admit of him as a partner in a debate, because nothing but that silence can he express a “freedom” that, were it not addressed to a “Thou,” would be reduced to a mere, empty tautology.

Or perhaps freedom is really nothing but tautology, insofar as the Schloss – the castle that only consists of its endless paths, each of which is practicable because none leads to a goal or solution; the countless paths that ought to lead K to a central Room, but only end up defining the castle itself precisely by virtue of their apparent viability, a mockery of freedom – is unable to respond to free will. All it does is “be,” be what it always was. Before this indestructible, indemonstrable principle submission is the only option. Indeed, by claiming a freedom that doesn’t lead anywhere, and particularly when voicing such a claim, all we do is submit to the castle, because freedom itself is doomed to just “be what it is,” to become one with the spectral silence of the Castle and its countless, endless mazes.

The Schloss is therefore a faithful reflection of a freedom that cannot be achieved, because it can never be recognized as such, if not by virtue of the ghost that is constantly being reflected on its surface: its own ghost, the ghost of an endless quest for recognition.

The only way this freedom has a chance to re-cognize itself is indeed as a specter, and not as what it had possibly always been.

This is why K, as Cacciari adeptly underscores, is unable to grasp the essence of his own liberty. All he can do is experience its vanity, recognize that every path and every advancement are illusions, and constantly stress his apathetic and yet growing fatigue, condemned to know nothing about himself and the reasons of his deceptive wandering.
Deceptive, but stubborn nevertheless. K is constantly engaged in the invention of new motivations, even if they will never grant him access to the world of true life, a world in which things are no longer indifferent, but can be recognized by means of a judgment that can lead to decisions resting on legitimate persuasions. Unless K believes that such a judgment is at all times theoretically possible, he finds himself unable to pursue his quest, his incessant questioning, his search for an authentic motivation that might bring about an equally authentic decision.

This stance, however, necessarily implies an endless waiting that ultimately preludes to a harsh disillusion, to a disenchanted and hopeless recognition of one’s radical “senselessness.” What we are waiting for, in the end, is nothing but the dissolution of our waiting itself.

Beckett’s characters, as we can see, are not that far removed from Hamlet and K. After all Beckett’s characters are nothing but so many variations on the situation that Hamlet’s story had incarnated and K’s determination to become what he was had corroborated. What is K, after all, if not a replica of Hamlet, a Hamlet who has come to realize that the past from which he wants to break free but in which he finds himself inextricably entangled (for what reasons he doesn’t know), the past of which he is meant to be the inescapable and primordial “negation,” is in fact pure nothingness?

However, nothing can come from nothing; neither as a purely factual or given result, nor as a messianic presentiment of a somehow reassuring or redeeming future. And faced with this nothing (the past), which each of us always already also “is,” with the wall of the past and its radical insensitivity, we are reduced to stammering protagonists wandering on a stage where words fall apart and degenerate to mere sounds, rhythms, untranslatable gesticulations, timeless agents that in turn – as Beckett’s characters have admirably shown – eventually come to embody their own comical powerlessness. Comical, indeed, in that these characters utterly fail to represent their unhappiness, that is to say their defeat, as Cacciari rightly points out. A defeat that looms from the very beginning over any possible claim to rebuild the world upon a new foundation.

This is why the witness of these failures is an endless flow of words that incessantly rearticulate the same riddle, the same emptiness, the same spiritual exhaustion (as Hegel, or better Kojève’s Hegel would say.)

The quest for sense – as the only source of legitimacy for our decisions, the one condition of possibility of our actions, the sign that shows us the way and ultimately directs us to our destination –, the questioning that asks an entity to transfigure its primordial being-negated, its nothing-ness, into something like the positivity that the logic of utilitas (a condition of possibility of its truth) appeared to promise: this quest, this questioning, is doomed to come to nothing. Its hopes are incessantly thwarted by the stammering replies of a rhythm that has nothing in common with the rhythm human-kind was expecting, the rhythm that might reconcile men with a music to which their ears had turned deaf since an immemorial past. Men have long believed that the cheap barrel organ tunes of the polis were indeed echoing the majestic, mighty symphony that might heal the undeserved suffering that an unjust life was visiting on them.

A music whose score they were used to reading in the thick meshes of the fabric of tradition, the heritage of a grandiose past dominated by the Aristotelian principium inconcussum: the indubitable foundation of an abstract and ever deadly “positivity.” In other words, the principle of non-contradiction.
Yet modernity would bring the reasons of this failure to light.

What is Hamlet, after all, if not the lucid realization of this defeat? In his words the philosophical gesture that Descartes had rediscovered in its most radical form becomes a condition of desperate *insecuritas*, owing to the very power of the *Principle*, the unquestionable power that rules all givenness.

At the same time, it is in the light of this very power that the eternal, inescapable possibility of an “alternative” becomes visible, from all points of view.

There is a reason why Hamlet is prone to “doubt.”

On the other hand, the *givenness* disclosed by the past (any past) is clearly and distinctly *unknowable*. This is the way it appears inasmuch as the ghost of the “possibility of what exists being otherwise” – conjured up by doubt as a *methodos* and primal form of thought – also calls for representation, as the thing that every present-past (to quote Augustine) might possibly already be, unbeknownst to us.

This said, how can we claim to know the past?

I am not talking about degrees of factual certainty.

The persuasions that come from the past could melt at any moment like snow in the sun and be shown to consist of mere *rhetoric* – as Carlo Michelstaedter would probably say.

What is could easily have been “otherwise.” That is why Leibniz’s question (“why is there something instead of nothing?”) was unlikely to ever find an answer. It is owing to the same principle as above. A *principium fírmíssimum* that requires us to acknowledge in the very first place that every determinacy as such points to something else, to something different. Something that belongs from the beginning to its existential field, if only as a *discarded possibility*.

An “alternative” that could easily be more than a mere “alternative.” That is the whole point.

This said, what can we “do?”

How can we “act,” when we have no way to know for certain that what that we wish to manipulate (every form of “doing,” after all, aims at a redefinition of what is “given”) really is what it would have us believe it is?

When at any given time – since we are always only ever speaking of something that “no longer is” – “something else” could have easily been “in its place?”

The problem is that the “past” never speaks in an *epistemic* mood, although *episteme* is and will always be the place in the light of which the past can bear witness of its inexorable indeterminacy, *i.e.* the possibility of its *indefinite being otherwise* (it is in the light of the first *principle* of knowledge, after all, that we can, insofar as we must, admit that every determinacy is “other” from everything that it is not, and therefore could always be “otherwise,” or even be identical with the things whose “negation” it constitutes.)

It follows that one’s “action” should always imply an awareness of the radical *aporia* that lies at its heart, the *aporia* of which K is the most exemplary and disenchanted witness, inasmuch as K’s desperate will to recognition and the will to knowledge that inspired Descartes’ (and Hamlet’s) *Cogito* are but two faces of the same coin.

It is hardly a coincidence that in his attempts at a recognition K offers to sacrifice his *vis dubitativa*, his ability to call things into doubt, to the inescapable transcendence of the almighty principle that rules every givenness and the in-finite relationships it entertains.
No determinacy, indeed, entertains a relationship to just one or two things: what is, is always necessarily connected with all that it “is not.” In other words, it is fundamentally unknowable, as Kant has proved once for all: the halo of “alternatives” that envelops a determinacy is actually nothing but an infinite “being-otherwise” that cannot be reduced to a handful of specific and clearly determined possibilities.

K has realized that he has to sacrifice the paralysis of his indecision to the immobility of a principle that is nothing, in the end, but the source itself of universal doubt, beginning with one’s own feeble and hazy certainties, of whose truth we are unconvinced.

K is ready to submit to the one and only indubitable certainty there is, the principle that casts the shadow of doubt on everything that is and encounters no resistance, because it represents the incontrovertible source of all distinctions, and consequently nothing has the power to question it, to call it into doubt.

K’s “quest,” his “questioning,” aspires to being recognized by what is in turn recognized by him as its principle, and from which his cognitive eros is estranged only in appearance. This estrangement, that is the state of being a “stranger,” rather concerns K’s own questioning, as the only thing that can never be called into doubt.

It follows that K’s questioning is estranged from itself in the first place, in the light of the incontrovertible principle whose primordial expression his very questioning is. This principle as it is manifested in an endless process of questioning and doubting, in fact, is the only thing that can never be called into question by the doubt that constitutes its one and inevitable expression. Doubt is the principle’s only possible expression. Calling it into doubt would be tantamount to confirming it, to assessing the indubitability of doubt. This paradox proves its incontrovertible insuperability.

That is why K aspires to being recognized by the Schloss, by the indestructible principle whose primordial expression he feels himself to be: he wants to be recognized by the Schloss as its primeval and therefore immediate expression.

The Schloss, however, can provide no comfort: it is a “principle,” it is “indestructible.” Nothing exists beyond the horizon of the castle, nothing can define it, i.e. draw its boundaries.

The Schloss cannot provide the comfort of a judgment that excludes another, because its insurmountable silence is in itself the answer K was looking for, the only possible answer to his questions.

One thinks that K should be aware of this, as are the novissima brought on by Beckett. All these characters ever do is restate what K had already manifested as the truth behind Hamlet. They speak of an act of waiting that has no possible counterpart, no object, but simply “is.” It is as simple as that: waiting is the only thing that is.

An act of waiting that by virtue of its being such is granted from the beginning “the answer” to its restlessness, the only possible answer, the answer that K’s exhaustion ought to have disclosed as a “relational” condition founded on doubt in which we are never alone. We are not alone insofar as we are walled in by the inescapable loneliness that is the paradoxical solitude of the indestructible, the “principle” of all significance, simultaneously closed and open (whose closure and determination, that is, is at the same time an opening to negation, to an otherness that points to the only path its aporetic indestructibility can find to be practicable.) The Principle that replies by negating all answers, and in so doing appears for what it actually is.
Hence the immanence of a *senselessness* that lies at the heart of all significance, inscribed in its deepest core. When discovered as such, on the other hand, this senselessness appears to be irresistibly *comical*, inasmuch as it emerges as an act of *waiting* unburdened by the weight of any conceivable, and at any rate vacuous, “hope”: all it can do, therefore, is dissolve. Even in the best case scenario it is doomed to an *empty future* that will never come about, a future that *could never be*, for it has always already existed within an answer that remains “to be given” – given to the “state-of-no-longer-being” that characterizes all that appears to be, to concretely exist (in the inescapable present of all existence.)

Better yet: all that actually *is* in a life that is bound to recognize itself as *tragically unhappy* inasmuch as it is unaware of the impossibility of what most of us are seeking and expecting, but always takes on the form of a solution that is abstractly “other” than what it is.

As soon as it realizes that it is no different from this *indestructible-impossible principle* that at all times it inevitably “becomes,” life will finally be able to *laugh* at the spectral shadow cast by its own miserable subjectivity.

The subject, however, does not give up his quest, but continues to search for an answer that may put an end to the restlessness inevitably born of his incessant questioning. Even though it might easily solve the riddle, by just lingering in a condition that may only claim the name of “happiness” inasmuch as it is experienced as the *abstract opposite* of the condition in which all who still have not found an answer are condemned to dwell.

This is the subject of which Beckett’s characters are the only truthful “*negation,*” a negation that does not presage anything different, at least as regards the persistence of an interrogation that may turn into a word opening onto the unsurpassable nature of the “*ever-future*” that constitutes *ab origine*: what each of us always already is, given that in fact what each of us has eventually managed to become *no longer is* what it is. The only thing it has to say about the subject is what the subject “used to be,” although this “something” is immanent and inevitably demands to be continued.

Such a “past,” in other words, is “future,” but a “future” that cannot be foretold by traces whose concrete form remains *untranslatable* (with this we are trying to suggest a response to Cacciari’s perspective in this book). Untranslatable, that is unable to be translated in that “happiness” that can only be experienced beyond the echo of an enigmatic voice, the voice of the precious, inaudible and therefore *sacred* silence that seems to envelop most of contemporary art.

Not all *images* (that is, the images that our questioning will be able to uncover) are destined to become groundless *fictions* without a real-life referent: in fact, to be recognized as such they should be able to conjure a “truth” that can be clearly distinguishable from “falsehood.”

After all, is it not the very *aporia* of which images always become the perfect manifestation that prevents us from endorsing the “tragic” mood of Cacciari’s response to the question at hand? That is the way it is: the indestructible and silent *Schloss,* after all, cannot be distinguished in the first place from an “open space” that in turn would allow our wanderings to be told apart from the “truth” in a clear and distinct way.

Indeed, the fact that images are not what they are and therefore are intrinsically open to *doubt* – in other words the *being-otherwise* that speaks and comes forward as
such in every single one of them – is by no means (as far as beings and their determinacy are concerned) the precondition of an *indeterminacy* that would inevitably expose their irredeemable nature as illusions, but presents them in the light of what their illusory nature always already says and is, in that it refers to their simple and primordial constitution of *non-beings*, and their voice turns into an echo of the invariable, deafening silence of the *Principle*, the *indestructible*.

The same principle that forces their motionless and powerless “freedom” to become a figure of its own “indestructible nature,” or perfect existence. An ever perfect existence that announces a real and legitimate “future,” the future that philosophy is relentlessly and exclusively talking about.

This does not mean that it needs to feel inadequate in front of the power of the principle itself, a power that is incessantly outlined as such in doubt and nothing but doubt, the “doubt” that makes us restless and that alone will be able to save a being by setting it free in the face of an *Other* (the “ever-future”) with which, inevitably, we need to deal every day.

*(Translated from Italian by Francesco Peri)*

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**The Depletion of Sense and the Possibility of Action**  
Claudio Ciancio

1. The path that Massimo Cacciari pursues in this work is in many respects both convincing and surprising, and the author himself acknowledges its surprising character in the Preface in which he justifies the sequence and internal connection between the three essays of the book that are dedicated in turn to *Hamlet*, Kafka’s novel *The Castle*, and Beckett. The discussion moves “from the action that still seems able to ‘decide,’ albeit in the context of a general *insecuritas*, through the bewildered and *in-capacited* action of K in *The Castle* – which produces a paradoxical image of our irremediable ‘incompleteness’ – to the *exhausted*, and for this reason also inexhaustible, action of Beckett” (p. 11). The most surprising aspect here of course is the leap from Shakespeare to Kafka, if not the shorter step from Kafka to Beckett. And yet the temporal distance that separates K from Hamlet in no way impairs the effective continuity of the argument as a whole. We should rather ponder precisely how, in a cultural horizon framed by incipient rationalism and the rise of modern science, as well as the beginnings of colonial expansion, it was possible for a figure such as Hamlet to emerge in the first place, a figure who undeniably anticipates more recent modes of thinking and feeling.

In Cacciari’s interpretation, at any case, Hamlet clearly heralds a certain condition of crisis – a crisis of thought, of morality, of civilization – that leads directly to our own current sense of crisis. The theme of Hamlet is the incapacity to de-cide,
an “incapacity to cut into the continuity of time, to ‘complete’ an epoch and to initiate another” (p. 33). This incapacity has a double face. On the one hand, it is yielded by the weight of the past, a time devoid of any self-evident or governing teleological meaning, merely the “incubus of things already done that clings to historical existence” (p. 16). On the other hand, it is the incapacity to find reasons for a decision that would transcend the old order that has dissolved and help to establish a new one: “a decision rendered impossible, on the one hand, by the inexorable recurrence of what has already been done, and, on the other, by the unfathomable inability of the will to advance beyond this” (p. 35). This conflict is utterly modern in character since the inexorability of the past here has nothing to do with the “Fate” of the ancients which is capable of instituting a meaning and governing history. The theme of “decision” (a decision we are incapable of making), a decision that can institute something new, is a modern theme, one that is marked by the Christian sense of temporality.

From here the transition to the horizon of Kafka, three centuries later though, is quite intelligible and indeed almost direct: it is the transition from the incapacity to decide to the impossibility of deciding. K, apparently a stranger, has no roots; he makes no attempt to decide, but simply finds himself inserted in an opaque and impenetrable system. K wants to stay within the self-enclosed world of the castle, simply wishing to be acknowledged, and to complete the action he has begun. But in this closed system there is no end or purpose to be pursued or attained, or rather, more generally, there is no real alterity, as Cacciari takes pains to emphasize: “But all Otherness has been completely ‘embodied,’ thus annihilating any sense of distance. ‘Everything falls into das Abstandslose, into a uniformity deprived of distance,’ as Heidegger says, and he might be describing Das Schloß. There is not even a sovereign” (p. 69).

One cannot really provide a theological interpretation of this experience. So the author claims, and he is surely right to distinguish the position of Kafka from that of “K” in The Castle. Nonetheless, in the concluding section of the essay on Kafka, Cacciari does offer a kind of theological reading, not in the sense that K’s condition could be read as a condition of faith, but in the sense that it only becomes intelligible against a theological background, or rather, against the background of a theological question that remains undecided. K’s condition seems like that of one who has long since been driven out of Paradise, one whose freedom could perhaps be read as that “weak messianic power” of which Benjamin speaks, which possesses an essentially critical-negative significance. The problem is to know whether K’s failure preserves an echo of this weak messianic power, or whether no one any longer awaits salvation, or, finally, whether the messiah is a defeated messiah who is already amongst us, and “under the sign of his irredeemable defeat must continue to be awaited and to create our need for him” (p. 74).

2. Beckett represents the concluding phase of this parabola. For what is overcome here is not only the procrastination of Hamlet, which was supposed to be a preparation for action, but also the exasperated impatience of K, who wanted to understand the system in which he found himself inserted (see p. 83). All that is left in Beckett is the illusion of existing, the static impotence of lives devoid of history and belonging, entirely drained of sense. The stance of Beckett, in Cacciari’s interpretation, is mediated and facilitated by two decisive factors: the literary achievement of Joyce and
the philosophical, or more properly speaking the cultural-historical, significance of the end of absolute idealism. After Joyce, the author tells us, “we can only proceed by withdrawal. This age is a great backwash that litters the shore with *disiecta membra*, with unrecognizable and irredeemable shards and fragments. The world of before has passed away, along with the words that furnished its images, that ‘betrayed’ its meaning in these images. This world is no longer representable – and words must now express this very unrepresentability, thereby mutating into voices, into fragmented voices, into sounds more than voices, into gestures more than sounds” (p. 76). In a striking image of his own Cacciari interprets Beckett’s work as a sort of creation in reverse, a movement that inverts the process of mysticism, insofar as it produces “the disintegration of all connection, all harmony, all discourse” (p. 81). In this sense Beckett represents the surprising outcome and conclusion of the parabola described by idealist philosophy. In bringing closure to history in his system, Hegel bestowed systematic order and completion to everything. Here everything is submitted to the philosophical concept and “in the concept everything presents itself at once” (p. 91). But in that case – and this is the surprise, the unexpected outcome – we are faced not with the triumph of the concept but an “exhaustion of spirit” (p. 91) The full self-satisfaction of thought leaves “bare existence” (p. 92) and an “insurmountable emptiness” (p. 93) outside of itself. “Beckett turns out to be the ‘heir’ of the ultimate significance of idealism” – the order of absolute Reason inevitably leaves wrecks and relics outside it (p. 95).

Beckett’s characteristic perspective produces a certain comic effect in various senses: the dialogue of his figures seems unintelligible, every attempt at rational comprehension is ridiculed, the moments of *peripateia* are frozen in inertia, and, even more incisively, we encounter a sense of unhappiness devoid of all ground or purpose. Yet here, again, Cacciari draws a theological conclusion: Godot signifies God-out, a God who continually fails to arrive and cannot save us anyway, especially since we can no longer understand what salvation would mean. And in this continual failure to arrive we also encounter, after the reversal of Hegel, the comic reversal of Nietzsche (see p. 98). But the comic moment that lies in the very declaration that happiness is impossible now becomes the only way in which one can preserve the idea of happiness itself (p. 107). Here Cacciari deploys a thesis that is as important as it is replete with problems, namely the idea of a revelation *sub specie contrarii*. The Infinite cannot be represented in analogical terms: “Only the lowest, only what has been utterly repudiated, only the stone rejected by all, can become a sign, in all its poverty, of ‘that’ which is wholly other to all possible definition” (p. 105). There is an emphatic similarity (though not perhaps an identity) here with the view defended by Pareyson when he appealed, like Cacciari himself, to Dionysus the Areopagite. Pareyson speaks of *Deus revelatus sub contrario* and defines this revelation in terms of the “inseparability of the physical and the transcendent.” As Pareyson puts it: “Only the language of the sensible can furnish the site of the transcendent, since it is only here that the latter can manifest itself in its irresistible presence and its irreducibly ultimate character at one and the same time. The symbolic image, precisely by virtue of its sensible nature, being *toto caelo* distinct from the nature of divinity, lends itself pre-eminently to the representation of the latter because it recognizes its total inadequacy from the first, and in recogniz-
ing this inadequacy simultaneously overcomes and redeems it.”\textsuperscript{2} Nonetheless, there is an important difference in the two approaches, for all the apparent similarity of the respective italicized terms here: other in Cacciari, \textit{toto caelo} in Pareyson. For Cacciari, a trace of absence is always retained in ultimate difference: “Here, and here alone, is it possible to preserve the idea of an impossible happiness – and here, breathing this emptiness, we may know its trace” (p. 107). For Pareyson, on the other hand, the symbol is the trace, \textit{sub contrario}, of a paradoxical presence.

3. The relevance of this comparison with Pareyson, and with a philosophy focused upon the paradoxical more generally, is highlighted by the Appendix to the volume, in which Cacciari expressly returns to Kafka, interpreting his work as a form of parable and contrasting it with symbol and allegory alike. Cacciari rightly observes that the symbol involves “the essential unity of its parts,” (p. 107) while the parable of Kafka is more like a perpetually suspended bridge, and the only path that it offers is an aporetic one (p. 115). The writer’s word is “cut off from an origin he seems to have forgotten, and equally remote from a destination which nothing permits us to glimpse. The only remaining path, then, [...] will be that of clearly exposing this word, one that is pure in its \textit{indecision}, in its remoteness from everything \textit{symbolical}” (p. 116).

I think that this issue regarding the unity of the symbol should be examined more closely since this unity is paradoxical in character. It is not something that is merely intuited or conceptualized, but must simply be affirmed. And while this affirmation is not devoid of grounds and reasons, it can only be sustained through a leap or wager. The enigmatic character of this symbolic unity invites an infinite work of interpretation since no conceivable process of hermeneutic mediation could ever prove exhaustive or complete. It is only because Cacciari explicitly invokes Hegel as he does, and thus remains within the horizon of the absolute system (as his Kafka and Beckett arguably also do), that we could claim that, once everything meaningful has been said, we are left only with shards, with what lies outside of the concept. Only thus, in other words, can we claim that the inexhaustibility of discourse after the end of “the system” is a merely dissipated inexhaustibility, or as Cacciari puts it in the \textit{Preface}, an inexhaustible trace of what has been exhausted. The words of Kafka, as the author points out, “insists on the distance that separates us from any effective purchase on being, shows how tirelessly we strive to be without ever being able to ‘arrive’ there” (p. 116).

It is beyond question that we do indeed inhabit just such a condition of depleted meaning, and that there is no conceivable remedy that does not begin by acknowledging this condition. Or, perhaps better, by taking a step back, and thus returning to a consideration of Hamlet, the point from which, according to Cacciari’s interpretation of the argument, everything began. Let us look back, therefore, at the crucial passage that tells us “it is necessary to act only when the reasons for your action are evident to thoughtful reflection. But for historical existence this implies only awaiting and delay” (p. 31). The ungrounded character of the will frustrates every possible decision. Nonetheless, I believe that we may legitimately ask whether freedom does not constitutively involve the possibility of instituting sense, and I say instituting it rather

than properly creating it for it is only by gathering up fragments of the past and given traditions of meaning that we can establish new configurations of significance. The groundlessness in question is a constitutive dimension of the will that does not inevitably condemn it to impotence. For such groundlessness reveals itself in a double manner, insofar as freedom invariably involves a certain leap, the affirmation of something new that has indeed already been prepared for, yet is always also different from such preparation, and insofar as freedom does not realize a rationally articulated sense, but produces a paradoxical synthesis instead.

As far as this problem involves the question of freedom, it is not solely, or primarily, a problem of knowledge, but one of praxis. If the spontaneity and creativity of freedom is capable of evoking and instituting horizons of meaning, then it also becomes possible to represent these horizons precisely because freedom institutes them: they are no longer simply concepts or evacuated images since they arise along with the reality to which they refer. It is the very radicality of the crisis, so powerfully evoked by Cacciari, that requires us to acknowledge a radical alternative: either the primacy of the logos or the primacy of freedom. If we accept the latter, then a new beginning, a new constellation of sense, is always possible, and perhaps even especially so in conditions of crisis, of the erosion or evacuation of historical possibilities. For when all the meaningful words have been depleted, it is only in the awareness and practice of this depletion that we may glimpse a negative and residual hint of the meaning that has been lost. Yet perhaps freedom never loses its capacity to institute new possibilities of meaning, and with them new words as well.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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"Hamletica" by Massimo Cacciari
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1. In his restless peregrinations along the paths of philosophy and politics, Massimo Cacciari said no shortage of adieus, faithful as he was to his demon: the obstinate will to understand the world, living it, emerging himself into its very time. But the adieu, not expressed but rather “made” in Hamletica, I suspect, cost him more than the others due to its being addressed to the thinker who was his constant point of reference: Martin Heidegger. In particular, it is the Heideggerian interpretation of the modern that in this book is rejected: rather than being the age of the last metaphysics – the metaphysics of the subject whose self-representation provides the absolute foundation of objectivity of knowledge and therefore of the world – the modern is, for Cacciari, characterized as an age of crisis: of the “subject” (chapter I, dedicated to Shakespeare), of political theology (chapter II, on Kafka), of language (chapter III, dealing with
Beckett). Posing in a unique series Shakespeare, Kafka and Beckett, Cacciari has extended the sphere of modernity, encompassing within it the so-called post-modern. Toward such an end, he has effected a dis-location of the plane of analysis: from "philosophical" to "artistic" discourse, or more precisely, literary. There is a question to be asked first of all: why did Cacciari choose art as the privileged "object" for the interpretation of the modern?

In the absence of a direct response, I will hazard my own: for the different intentionalities that guide the two discourses. If the first motivation of Descartes had been to establish knowledge on a certain, *secura*, basis, overcoming the "crisis" opened at the end of the Middle Ages, the intent of Shakespeare was instead to penetrate the depths of the schism between knowledge and power, from which *his* world was suffering. It is not that this schism cannot be found in Descartes, but it exists in the silences, in the *imbalances* of his philosophy, as, for example, in the different reaches of the sphere of thought and of the will. Descartes *suffered from* the blow of the world and wants to take it on; Shakespeare *represents* it. And since Shakespeare is conscious that even *representation* is powerless to express the separation of knowledge from the world, he duplicates the representation, translating it into *theatre*. Shakespeare brings the scene into the scene, the theatre into the theatre. Cacciari dwells on the relation between "to do" and "to act" – on which is measured the crisis of the subject, of history and of politics – in pages that are among the sharpest of the chapter. What is to be added, a comment? That of this impotence of "representation" the young Nietzsche, still fresh from philological studies, was well aware, and did not miss acknowledging it but wanted – as a philosopher – to pose a remedy, placing at the center of man and history the will, the power of the will. But in the end he realized that the will without knowledge is impotent – and he did not miss expressing it, and not only with words. Shakespeare had preceded him: Hamlet cannot act because he does not know his "past," which presents itself to him as a ghost. But it is not only the "reality" of the past that is in play; so too is the future, the possibility to give on the basis of the past, sense to action. "The apparition of the ghost – writes Cacciari – certainly opens Hamlet's eyes not onto a tremendous crime that provoked the crisis of a kingdom, but onto the entire decadence of the values that appeared to sustain it" (p. 26). The comparison with Cervantes may, at this point, prove useful: the period is the same, and *Don Quixote* is an epic work no less than *Hamlet*. To some extent, the Knight of the Sad Countenance is the inversion of the Prince of Denmark; but it is in the same way in which the comedy is the inversion of the tragedy. Whereas Hamlet is prevented from acting due to his lack of knowledge, Quixote makes of this lack the basis of action. And he also "theorizes" it: primacy lies not with knowledge but with force: "without arms one cannot support letters, because with arms republics are defended, kingdoms are preserved, cities are guarded, highways are secured, the seas are cleared of pirates." (And one can nearly hear Vico's voice.) The *ingenioso hidalgo*, aware no less than Hamlet that the world is out of joint, overcomes the doubt of the "spectrality" of the past, opting for action. No matter the "truth;" illusion suffices if the will, against all reason, sustains it. But the outcome of the "comedy" is no less tragic than the tragedy: the will without knowledge is destined to shipwreck. The last illusion of Quixote – the renouncing of life for the dream of a bountiful Arcadia – is still more painful. In the end, it is
death that saves him. The “playful” irony of the comedy is harsher than the severe seriousness of the tragedy. Hamlet, after death, will receive Fortebraccio’s praises, the poor hidalgo the pitiful words of the curator, the barber and the young servant. A bitter laugh bends the modern upon itself if the only true praise for the Knight of the Sad Countenance is the expression of regret by Sancio for the life of the errant “servant.” There is not just one scene of Don Quixote that is theatre: the entire novel is theatre. And we are only at the beginning of the modern! Goethe would certainly have remembered Cervantes when in Faust he places the Prologue in Theatre before the Prologue in Heaven. Nevertheless Mephistopheles, the trickster demon, more Schalk than Geist, der verneint, is in the second part of the tragedy, actor, prompter, and director – but most of all director. All history – the history of the world – is a theatre: “the scene is a cosmic topos” (Benjamin).

2. The entrance into the world of Kafka is prepared by an analysis of the “Castle” in Christian mysticism (Teresa de Ávila e Juan de la Cruz), Arabic mysticism (Ibn ‘Arabi) and Jewish mysticism (the Zohar) – preparation necessary to illustrate that the work of Kafka does not have any relation with this tradition other than one of memory – memory of a past irreparably past. Kafka’s Castle, Cacciari reminds us, is only ein recht elendes Städchen, which is not distinguished from the village. A loss? Certainly a loss. But also a gain: the end of an illusion (which later would become a lie) – the illusion that to enter the Castle of the blessed one must abandon the will. Actually, one could only enter that Castle only by means of “a will of power superior to every worldly power.” I do not know if I am forcing the text, but it seems that here Cacciari unveils the hybris of those who speak “in the name of God,” or of Being, or worse, as one of their representatives. My supposition is confirmed by another affirmation that one reads in these same pages, and that is the fact that the paths that lead to the “mystical” Castle are not lonesome, since on them meet “amigos,” “parientes,” “vasallos,” but also “legiones de demonios” who block passage and lead astray. And here I do not suppose but am certain: Cacciari writes thinking of another hybris, strictly conjoined to the preceding one: the hybris that has dominated “political theology” since its birth; the hybris that makes preferable proselytize (propheteúein) over speaking in tongues (glóssais laleîn); that makes preferable the discourse that builds the City to the discourse that addresses God directly. This world is in decline – in decline before Kafka, in decline with Nietzsche. Kafka speaks beginning from this decline. And here Cacciari says – in no uncertain terms – another farewell: “the decline of the Nomos of the Earth constitutes the prophecy of Hamlet.” One could not more clearly affirm the lateness of the political theology of Schmitt – here indicated with the title of his most important work.

But the fall of the illusion (later only a lie) does not reveal a better world, or even a desert of values. For Kafka, this revelation has already “befallen,” and is already “passed.” The world of Kafka is the world of the impossibility of action. The more one strains to move, the more one falls back to the point of departure. Immobility is the true substance of this world. It is worth underlining here that there is a profound difference between the interpretation of Kafka given in Hamletica and the one given in Icons of the Law (but twenty-five years have passed!). In this, Cacciari, lingering on the brief story Vor dem Gesetz, taken up and commented upon as in the rabbinical tra-
dition *midrash* in the penultimate chapter of *The Process*,attributed the immobility not to action but to the place of action. First of all to the Text: no interpretation or comment can vary, because they are all provoked and embraced. Therefore to the place of Law, in which one never enters because from it one never exits: it is senseless to want to enter or exit from the Open. In *Icons* Cacciari, as is attested by his employment of the same language, reread Heidegger through Kafka. In *Hamletica*, Cacciari’s farewell having already been consummated, Kafka is interpreted differently. The immobility is of man, of men, and not of Text or of Law: of man – of the land surveyor – who even once he decides to enter the village, remains foreign, a stranger, *Fremd*. Stranger for his incapacity to act, to respond to the call? But why attribute blame – the blame for lacking knowledge-ability – to the land surveyor, if the power that called him is the same power that continually withdraws, nullifying all the efforts of K.? Here there is no Castle inaccessible to an assault by the will to power, therefore there is no blame. There is no human, all too human, *hybris*. And yet Cacciari speaks of blame and error. A theological language after the death of theology? Really, the blame and error of the land surveyor – but no less of Amalia and of Josef K. in *The Process* – are of an altogether different kind. The theological language used to describe a world vacated of the divine underscores the death of theology. The blame and the error of the land surveyor – but no less than that of Amalia and of Josef K. – in a world in which power is reduced to the ability-to-not-decide, to the ability to “put off,” to the ability to replicate *in indefinitum* documents, offices, secretaries and undersecretaries, messengers, etc (the practice of the *midrash* applied to juridical order and to its administration) consist in the search for sense, meaning of action where sense and meaning have disappeared. The blame consists in their being foreign to this world, in their being “ruins” of the past.

Speaking of K.’s “blame” Cacciari writes: “Kafka, who knows himself in K., represents him with ruthless participation.” Of course he knows himself in K. – as in all the other characters – but recognize himself? Absolutely not. Kafka knows himself in his characters, in so far as he knows his stellar distance from the world that they represent. From this awareness of this distance, the ruthlessness of his participation, which reveals itself in icy cold, “objective,” writing. Kafka describes the world “after” the death of God without any nostalgia for the political theological past. It is said that he laughed reading to his friends the first chapter of *The Process*. It was a ruthless laughter of one who understood that which Josef K. did not manage to understand, and that the inspector even tells him with ferocious simplicity: “I am not even able to say of what you are accused, or rather I do not know if you are accused. You are under arrest. I know nothing else.” This affirmation certainly concerns K. directly; but it is not limited to his “case.” The words of the inspector define the law (with lower case!) in general, whose effectivity is not fact of reason; it is simply a fact. Kafka does not show the abyss of the *noumenon*, the mysterious depths of the Sacred; he reveals the abyss of the phenomenon, its terrible gratuitousness. If there is a sentiment that Kafka shares with Josef K., it is *shame*. K.’s shame for his death – like a dog – and for his assassins, above all for them. But Kafka’s “shame” for his era is the *memory* of the past, not *nostalgia*.

3. “In the beginning there was thunder” – this “Vichian citation” by Beckett has two “trajectories”: one toward the beginning, and evident; the other toward the
future, hidden and requiring comprehension. But it is from the present from which Beckett speaks that one must begin in order to understand both in their constitutive relation. From the present “after Joyce,” after all possibilities of writing were realized and exhausted. Today there is only the possibility of “working with the means of impotence.” Cacciari compares the present misery with past riches: “the noble man (of Eckhart) leaves everything for a mystical communion, to become one with the same Beginning; that of Beckett releases every will to power in order to appear to us “unsavable” in his own misery.” It is clear enough that the comparison does not “measure” only the misery of the present, it also defines the “destiny” of ancient nobility. The present misery, in fact, is much more than a “loss,” and reveals “a radical inessentiality: man is not a political animal.” To act, the “to act” of Shakespeare, passing through the Kafkian Fremdheit, is translated by Beckett as isolation and incommunicability. The words no longer having force of re-presentation, do not signify, they are no longer signs. The crisis of the subject, the crisis of political theology, and the crisis of language together are the development of one and the same crisis: the crisis that defines the modern in its impossible but still always “taken up” relation with the past. And here the past is the archaic past of the Vichian citation: the past of the thunder of the originary language, the language of the Earth and Heavens – not “metaphor,” but rather material realities. Earth is the dwelling place of animals, and the Heavens, the Night that lightening tears across. This, says Vico, where he narrates the exit of the Juggernauts from the originary hordes, from the animal howl that makes of itself a sonic hieroglyph, a monosyllabic gesture. Beckett brings us back to this when he stages “down, guitti, worn-out masks,” “leftovers of to act” which arrive “at the ‘cruelty’ of body language, of the injured body.” The articulated word, the signi-ficant word fallen back into monosyllable and gesture. Cacciari denies that this “new barbarism of sense” is a purifying cleanse necessary to give rise to a new history, new knowledge-power. “Leopardi and Beckett, he writes, ruthlessly disenchant the hope of Vico, revealing the more authentic and dramatic rock bottom.” There is no doubt that Vico was a thinker of crisis, more precisely of the modern as crisis: the interior contrast present in his work between tradition and modernity is among the greatest expressions of this crisis in philosophy. But Beckett’s “disenchantment” – this is the question – is only a fall, Verfallenheit? This thesis is too schematic and unilateral for Cacciari to embrace it. Positive and negative entangle a single string. “Only the lowest, the absolutely rejected – he writes – the stone discarded by all can signify, in their poverty, only that which is nothing other than other, in respect to every possible definition.”

In this poverty, hope – the restless, blind hope of the present: ἔλπις ἐπληκτενετε νουκ ἐστὶν ἔλπις.

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Waiting without a Ground
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The Italian philosophy of the second half of the 20th century seems to have unfolded as a sort of reversal, as a turn towards the question of ground. It is as if the philosophy of culture had become a temptation which had to be avoided if the most fundamental questions of all were to be addressed. A turn of this kind had indeed already been accomplished by Luigi Pareyson, who was perfectly well aware that he was thereby stepping beyond the neo-idealist and the neo-Thomist tradition alike. And he took this step on the basis of an intense re-engagement with the older idealist and romantic tradition of philosophy. It was a step that broke decisively with the Italian tradition that, as Remo Bodei has recently emphasized, since the time of the Renaissance – or at least for some considerable time as I would claim – has dedicated its greatest efforts to the philosophy of history, to political philosophy, to what Bodei has called “the philosophy of impure reason.”

But it was necessary to go further, to recognize the possibility of yet another move. The question of the ground needn’t exclude all reference to culture, nor is culture unable to reflect the ground. For the bond that connects them profoundly modifies the one and the other. Their reciprocal relationship modifies their respective significance, modifies the philosophical semantics of both terms.

Acutely aware of the significance of this move, Massimo Cacciari has dedicated all his philosophical reflections to such questions, and has thereby provided a further and highly original turn to Italian philosophy. In this context it would not be amiss to claim that the entire philosophical path that Cacciari has pursued from his relatively early book Krisis through to Hamletica, his most recent work, reflects this move, or, better, this pas de deux. The problem of connecting ground and culture thus becomes both a theoretical and a political necessity, or rather, a politico-cultural necessity. In fact, at the very beginning of his philosophical journey, in Krisis, Cacciari had already encountered this question of the loss of ground that was so significant for the culture of the finis Austriae. The figure of Nietzsche, who had assumed enormous significance through the interpretation of Martin Heidegger in particular, loomed large in the background here. For Heidegger had recognized him as the great thinker of the “will to power.” In this context Nietzsche appeared as the exemplary thinker of crisis, and as its effective and authentic premise: the concept of the will to power was the essential manifestation of a philosophy without grounds or foundations – a philosophy that transformed itself into the will to power. In this sense the will to power represented nothing but the gap, the abyss, that had emphatically begun to open up between being and its ground. This catastrophic gap signals the end of the analogia entis. This latter was the space within which an ethics could be articulated, an ethics in which the subject acknowledges the rational

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3  See F. Vercellone, an Interview with Remo Bodei, in Tuttolibri, supplement of La Stampa (forthcoming).
order of the universe in which it belongs. It is a site that precedes the conception of ethics as a purely private realm, and antedates the process in which ethics is transformed into morality. What emerges here is ethos, something that binds religious motivations with customs and practices, something that lies at the basis of classical tragedy.

From the rigorously philosophical perspective, the gap between being and ground is nothing but the principle of de-cision as the loosening of being itself (subject) from the anchoring ground, and thus as dran, as deed and action. In this context, action is merely the deed of a being that has lost all ground in the arche, and veers therefore towards the nothing. In acting a being is brought back, in a kind of regression, to the energeia from which it sprang. Acting is thus pure dynamis, simple power, the site of a being that has dedicated itself to pure agency, free of any friction imposed by the ground. It is this ground that ensures that what has now become dran was once one being, and thus an entity. The culture of the finis Austriae was moving, according to the analysis in Krisis, in just this direction; it was moving, to reiterate what we have already said, towards a critical self-liberation of the being of beings from all ground. And this presaged its coming resolution into action.

Within the terms of this constellation, the being of beings and the ground entered into a “negative” relation with one another, and we could therefore speak of a “negative thinking,” and its crisis, in this connection. It was a thinking that thought negativity so utterly and completely that it was driven to abandon negativity itself. Ultimately, it was an acting-and-thinking that lived with the absence of any ground, but also lived in and through that absence. (All this produced significant consequences from the political perspective, of course, and reflects the cultural upheavals of those years.)

If we turn now to Cacciari’s most recent text, Hamletica, we find a schema of thought that consorts very closely with such reflections, although it now appears under a quite different sign. Here, in Cacciari’s readings of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, of Kafka’s The Castle, of Beckett’s Endgame, the absent ground reveals itself solely as a tragic hiatus. This hiatus manifests itself as expectation (and expectation is a form of desire). But it is an expectation that never turns into action. It is arrested at the level of striving.

What has happened here? We have just pointed out that the schema of thought has not basically been modified. Yet the structure, and the conception of one of these two terms, being and its ground, has undergone a certain modification in the course of Cacciari’s philosophical reflections. As we know, this modification concerns the idea of ground, and it echoes throughout the entire theoretical edifice of his thought. We can trace it through the books Dell’inizio and Della cosa ultima, the two major texts that Cacciari has dedicated to the question of beginning and the question of ground. And along this path he has pursued a fascinating itinerary that has finally brought us, amongst other things, to the insight that “the indeterminate” is more original than being itself, and lies beyond this principle of principles. This is the apeiron to which, amongst the pre-Socratic thinkers, Anaximander had dedicated particular attention. Once we have begun here, we can only push further and further into the depths of this question. Eventually we have to concede that the indeterminate is something more, and something deeper, than the determinate inasmuch as it harbors not simply the possibility of being, but also that of non-being. Despite the seemingly abstract character of these considerations, what we witness here is nothing less than a titanic and mythological conflict that involves being and nothing as such.
Addressing the most fundamental principles in this way, we are inevitably led onto the terrain of the end, the limit, the border. But to whom then does it fall to explore this domain of the originary, understandably claimed as it is by philosopher and theologian alike? Each party tends in fact to assert its own superior authority here. It is entirely intelligible if these rival positions come into essential conflict, for it is a veritable logomachy that has been unleashed. It is a war of principles in which freedom and its source is at stake. In this case, of course, there is no question of conceiving freedom merely as the indifferent possibility of choice, where we are able to select one of two different options available to us. The freedom in question here is something far more radical: it is a matter of responding to an abyssal process of being that opens itself to everything possible, including therefore its own nothingness. Only in this way is it given to us to think a freedom that has nothing to do with the mere possibility of choosing between different options. The originary choice at stake here concerns not simply the world and the manifold spectrum of being itself, but also, as we have seen, the possibility of its opposite: the nothing. Freedom can only consist in responding to this abyssal range of possibility that harbors the most supreme opposition. This freedom can be traced back to a certain donation: an absolute donation, an instantaneous choice on behalf of being and existence that expects no recompense. And the discourse regarding the origin is welded at this point to that regarding the last things, the ultimate thing. Freedom now consists in responding to the donation that we have been granted, the donation that we ourselves are, with a total and complete abandon that coincides with a voluptas, a joy that is at once corporeal and spiritual, of this world or the next. Thereby we do more than simply approach that originary freedom that is at once the first thing and the last. For it is necessary to take a further step, turned toward the horizon, indeed a step – let us not be surprised – that is essentially political, acknowledging that we now find ourselves on the terrain of human being-together, on the terrain of community. And the undiminished panorama of existence begins in this way to reveal its features and contours before us. “This is what I am, just as every being is this or that.” What is it that binds us? An analogical bond that is established by freedom. It is this bond that founds the future community in the present. Thus the ascent to further principles is not a path without return, but reason here belongs to the polis, the community, of the present, and is a pre-figuration of future community. This is the ultimate bond of an ethos at once present and absent.

Now Cacciari’s Hamletica appears, at least in part, even ignoring any appeal to the “cunning of reason,” to derive from certain reflections to be found in Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics. In fact Hegel tells us there, amongst other things, that “Hamlet hesitates because he does not blindly believe in the spirit,”6 in the ghost of his father.

Cacciari’s Hamlet is entrapped in the empty symbolic order that the absent ground assigns to him. Yet this emptiness proves all too full for him. The ground with which Hamlet contends assumes the most familiar garb of all, namely that of the past. The ominous and threatening character of the past is a classical theme that inevitably con-

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Massimo Cacciari's *Hamletica* fronts a completed and resplendent modernity. It is a theme already clearly announced, in specifically philosophical terms, by the early Nietzsche in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, that on *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*. And of course this renders the question particularly timely. And this despite the fact that the whole direction of Cacciari’s approach is frankly anti-Nietzschean. Hamlet’s past interrogates and commands him. That of Nietzsche produces illusory and deceptive masks. Hamlet’s past “searches for reasons to act” (p. 27) while that of Nietzsche dazes and deludes. But in both cases reasons to act are lacking. “The ghost demands vengeance, that the chain of action remain unbroken, that every action belong to this chain without ever being able to de-code, to cut through it [...] Thought does not course after action; for thought properly moves nothing” (pp. 26-27). On Cacciari’s reading, Hamlet would impose a caesura upon time, would usher in a new time, but is incapable of doing so. This is what is at stake here. And this is the step that takes us from Shakespeare to Beckett by way of Kafka. In *The Castle*, K recognizes the impossibility of decision as a given. The last schema of community that led Hamlet to meditate upon the possibility of the vengeful trial by ordeal – the most extreme expression of an avenging community – has now vanished. “That which is shared ‘in common’ is [...] just what is denied to K [...] Hamlet moves from the order of facts to try, in vain, to demolish their sovereign sway; K, from the very beginning, appears a stranger, ‘ontologically’ a stranger, and tries to understand and participate in a ‘system’ that remains impenetrable to him” (pp. 42-43).

If K pursues his struggle with the *nomos* as far as this can go, and ends up proclaiming its intrinsic otherness or strangeness, recognizing that the *nomos* will never belong to the subject, discovering in short that the end of *ethos* does not simply coincide with a particular historical phase or period, but was always already harbored in the things themselves. Once it is realized that the end of the classical is merely the end of an old and persisting illusion, once it is recognized that the idea of a classical tragedy grounded on *ethos* is a mirage or illusion of perspective, then the step from Kafka to Beckett, to the Beckett of *Endgame*, is entirely comprehensible. But it is not, for all that, devoid of surprises. Community is now impossible. The path of the *logos*, and thus of discourse, ends here, whether in the sense of *Rede*, as a form of argumentational speech, or in the sense of *dis-course*, as a form of speech that courses from here to there. The “rich” and fertile words of Shakespeare are at an end too, the words that bear within them the memory of the absent ground, of the impossible necessity of acting. The scene to which we are introduced here belongs to a world that is already over. The Beyond, the double shape of transcendence – whether that which brings us to kneel before the heights of the divine, or that which leads us to the asymptotic horizon of all action – has now vanished. What we approach here an implosion within the purest form of immanence. Words have forfeited their sense. The subject has lost its predicate, whether positive or negative. The history of knowing has ended. And it ends in comedy. The phenomenology of spirit regresses to its very beginning. Knowing no longer turns to action, and becomes a fruitless knowing. It is reduced to a yearning appetition. Its fruitlessness is comic, tragically comic. It is the last fragment of tragic knowing. If refuses to appeal to the absent ground, in a romantic fashion or in the ironic manner of Solger, but now assumes the features of a trace, of a fragment. These are the ultimate forms of a possible symbolic order. They take shape as the object of an impossible recognition, of a vital but uncertain desire. And perhaps these
are the very cards that are left to play. In other words, the forms of real history must be rediscovered within this symbolic history. In order to recognize, at last, that there is no real history that is not symbolic. And to retrace the entire path, once again, from its beginning. It is another beginning. A beginning in imago.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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