Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue Moderne per la Comunicazione e la Cooperazione Internazionale
Classe LM-38

Tesi di Laurea

Unveiling Evil: Nihilism in Shakespeare's Macbeth

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n° matr.2092207 / LMLCC

Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"Take a look! Take a close look! This is your life!
This is the hour-hand on the clock of your existence!"
Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy

Introduction

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a play abounding with philosophically significant questions which find their crystallised form in Nietzsche's nihilism. This paper attempts to delineate a correspondence between the Bard and the German philosopher, thus applying modern philosophical theory to the aesthetic realm of early modern literature. The research centres on a handful of staple themes such as the role of time, the evil dilemma, the opaqueness of free will, the transvaluation of values and the merging of truth and appearance. The same themes are confronted with Nietzsche's constructs of the Overman, the will to power and the eternal recurrence of the same, by analysing some of his most famous works such as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Human All Too Human* (1878), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) among others. Therefore, this paper selects a corpus of both Shakespearean Studies and Nietzschean commentaries to build a comparative and interdisciplinary study, possibly offering a new perspective on one of the four major tragedies in Shakespeare's production. Of these papers, a handful of Macbeth commentaries which have endeavoured a similar research – one linking the literary text with philosophical analysis – have proved extremely resourceful as a starting point for this paper and has been recurrently cited.

Starting from the assumption that nihilism is a shapeshifting philosophical category with ancient roots in the history of human thought, this paper analyses its echoes in the play. In particular, this paper explores three different levels of nihilism throughout each respective chapter – temporal, moral and epistemological nihilism. All of them are to be understood as strictly interconnected: experiencing one level implies experiencing– sooner or later – the others as well, and this is exactly what happens to Macbeth. I have chosen to start with the study of temporal nihilism as it is considered the fulcrum of Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole and is, thus, the best way to introduce his thought. This allowed me to prepare the ground for a more detailed discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy in the second chapter, which addresses morality and ethics by commenting on complex passages of long misunderstood texts. The last chapter deals with epistemology and other aspects of metaphysical essence. As they find their thematical equivalents in the most fascinating and unresolved mysteries of the play

(which can be easily summarized by a series of statements such as "fair is foul, and foul is fair" or "nothing is, But what is not"), I have decided to approach them at the end of my dissertation. Therefore, the sequence of the following chapters follows an order of increasing difficulty and complexity, but there is also a line of continuity between one another which I hope to have made clear in the various passages.

Besides the omnipresent *leitmotiv* of nihilism, some of the most frequent interpretative refrains that have been discussed alongside throughout the paper are the idea of Macbeth as a melancholic character, the debate around a self-restoring harmony intrinsic to nature itself, the prophetism degenerating into apocalypticism, the interstitial presence of evil within human beings, the shadow line between extreme lucidity and spiralling folly, the theme of suicide and the intricate overturning of reality and appearance in which the role of illusions becomes crucial to the accomplishment of individual actions. Unsurprisingly, most of these features are the same features *Macbeth* shares with other Shakespearean masterpieces such as *King Lear* or *Hamlet*, and, at the same time, they are concepts on which Nietzsche himself has elaborated.

The first chapter starts by discussing temporal nihilism as the core of Nietzsche's philosophy. Following this perspective, the concept of Eternal Recurrence is the all-encompassing theory which subordinates all the others. Prior to that, the chapter introduces the philosophical discourse of interest by reflecting on the meaning and (mis)usage of the word nihilism itself to clarify how it can be applied to *Macbeth*; what emerges from this preliminary reflection is the existence of two types of nihilism, one referred to as "passive" while the other as "active" nihilism. Having provided the necessary background information, the chapter approaches the Nietzschean reading of the play by retelling Zarathustra's passage of the three metamorphoses of the spirit as the unaccomplished parable of Macbeth. It proceeds by addressing the figure of the Overman, focusing on the contrast between creative and destructive forces of the spirit, to prepare the ground for the discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy of time. Special emphasis in introducing this topic is given to King James' *Daemonologie* (1597), one of the sources of the play. Drawing on the parallelism between the two works it emerges a deep angst towards the nature of time, which is pervaded by an irrepressible apocalypticism. In philosophy, this angst becomes problematic once the dream of stability paradoxically overturns itself in the denial of life. In chasing his *throne of mud*,

Macbeth adopts the *idée fixe* of an Eternal Life which paralyzes life itself in its metamorphic nature. In other words, the *world of becoming* is gradually devalued as it proves insufficient to contain Macbeth's vaulting ambition and denies his eschatological redemption. Although Macbeth dies unrepentant and unredeemed, he becomes obsessed with the expectancy for judgement. Once he realizes that he cannot pursue salvation on Earth, he projects it to the realm of Christian afterlife – thus rejecting the present tense in which, conversely, the whole play is compressed into. In Nietzsche, the same tension between living in the present moment and being aware of eternal becoming is embodied in the figures of the unhistorical and historical man – who are then overcome by the suprahistorical man. The latter was conceived by Nietzsche prior to the writing of his *Zarathustra* to reconcile the awareness of eternal becoming with historical consciousness while also positing Zarathustra's missions of accepting the horror of eternal recurrence and embracing mortality.

The second chapter revolves around the notion of Will to Power to deepen the moral problem surrounding Macbeth and his actions. The aim is to investigate to what extent was Macbeth misguided or influenced by the witches and his wife, and to what extent did he deliberately choose evil, while challenging the myth of free will – which was debunked by Nietzsche. Resuming from the notion of life devaluation anticipated at the end of the first chapter, the correlation between temporal and moral nihilism is emphasized as the matter of transferring value from one life to another has huge implications towards the matter of ascribing values to actions and personal intention. Before approaching Nietzsche, this chapter starts by focusing on the literary criticism which has investigated the related topics in *Macbeth*. Namely, what has been labelled as the "perversion" of Macbeth's will stems from the pivotal roles played by prefiguration and imagination. On the one hand, prefiguration is the literary device employed to represent – at the stylistic level – the theme of foreknowledge. The early modern man was relatively familiar with benign or malign spirits' visitations which, differently from *Macbeth*, occurred most frequently during sleep, in the oneiric realm. Although these spirits could influence and forewarn men, free will was considered a solid entity which was not affected by their supernatural powers. Imagination, on the other, is the mind faculty associated with the pathological symptom of melancholy which tells us more about the subject's deepest desires and, consequently, about his ethics. In other words,

the Witches' ascendant over Macbeth does not work as an excuse for him, and neither does his state of persistent rapture. The altered state of mind he exhibits was carefully unpacked by critics, who successfully proved his liability by denouncing his deliberate and unethical choices. One of these observations emphasized how pursuing kingship through murder is not what the Witches solicited: it is Macbeth's spontaneous fantasy. Resorting to Nietzsche's contribution, however, problematizes the very notion of individual will by noting that even if we assume that a deed was accomplished voluntarily or consciously, volition and consciousness are irreducible mysteries which are impossible to trace back to a point of origin. In other words, even if we assume – as I have done – that the Witches are the representation of Macbeth's latent desire, the question of where does said desire come from remains. What Nietzsche strongly criticizes is *teleology*, or the belief *in causa sui* – thus dismissing both the free will construct and the mechanistic interpretations. Conversely, his theory of the drives revolving around the Will to Power differentiates between strong and weak wills in individuals according to their attitudes towards life. Examining this theory at a deeper level to relate it to Macbeth's case proved challenging, as his behaviour constantly oscillates between his self-affirmation and assertion and the fatalistic, traumatic repetition of a death drive.

The last chapter deals with Macbeth's epistemological crisis, which culminates in the final Act. It investigates the problematic relationship between truth and appearance (starting from the infamous line "fair is foul"), the idea of a doubled conscience (or "divided self") and the disintegration of desire. The play explicitly reminisces the occult tension towards knowledge, a quest inspired by daemonic forces which constituted the early modern imaginary and resulted in damnation and annihilation. The noumenal crisis affecting the Reformation hero is a hallmark feature which uncannily surfaces in the play by uncovering an abyss of tragic ambiguity where truth seems unattainable. Parallelly to this angst, the themes of marred desire – or *wretched contentment* – and loss of innocence are articulated throughout the play. All of these aspects converge in Nietzsche's – and Zarathustra's – philosophy, as he advocates for an immanent understanding of knowledge to dodge the impending threat of what he called a *moral scepticism* or pessimism. To this end, the roles of artificial truth and newly inspired desires are pivotal in inspiring a different approach to life. Our

interpretation and understanding of Shakespeare appear aligned to Nietzsche's epistemological theories, as they both suggest that reality must be grasped in its precarious nature while knowledge must be constantly *negotiated*.

The play is built on the allegorical as well as linguistic pattern of doubleness. The dualism between reality and appearance can be read both through the lens of the political drama – as a critique of society, court facades and masquerading – and through those of the metaphysical angst discussed thus far. Focusing on the second alternative makes it clear that a neat distinction between the illusory and the authentic is almost always impossible, which is the reason why life becomes so dreadful and obscure in the play. Therefore, the play takes place in the liminal space of *equivocation* (Act 5.5) in which everything is flipped onto its reversed side and 'nothing is/ But what is not' (Act 1.3). Great attention is given to Macbeth's final soliloquy as the moment in which he acknowledges the vanity of life, in its fictional essence, and the indifference of a hostile reality. In his total embrace of (epistemological) nihilism the meaninglessness of time and the meaninglessness of words are directly proportionate.

The chapter concludes by reflecting on the union between literature and philosophy, taking into account both its potentialities and its limitations or risks. In this framework, Nietzsche becomes a significant figure as he stands at the threshold between poetic, fictional writing – which characterizes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* among the others – and traditional philosophical inquiry – which is the style he adopts, for instance, in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Despite the obvious differences between philosophy and literature, there is a meaningful ground that both disciplines share, and that is the ground in which great existential questions are posited. Therefore, it is not much a matter of explaining Shakespeare with Nietzsche or *vice versa*; rather, it is an attempt to find and compare the different manifestations of nihilism in both authors. If my analysis is successful, readers will be able to appreciate the philosophical complexity of *Macbeth* as a tragedy permeated by a proto-nihilism, as well as differentiate it from the *active* form of nihilism devised by Nietzsche throughout his intellectual career. Another meaningful result of this research is the echo of existentialism in Macbeth's language: the pervasive confusion between existence and essence is one of the leading interrogatives leading him to acknowledge, like Nietzsche did, the lack of unity of his world. While Nietzsche remained the central philosophical reference for this paper,

other philosophers and intellectuals such as Plato, Kant, Lacan, Freud and Kaufmann have been mentioned in the relevant contexts of pertinence to complement the present analysis in the most insightful and, hopefully, compelling way.

Chapter One
Macbeth as the Tragedy of the Third Metamorphosis

*"It sometimes seems to me that
the whole of philosophy is only a
meditation on Shakespeare"*
Emmanuel Levinas, Time and the Other

This chapter attempts to provide a Nietzschean interpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by centring on the issue of nihilism and its existentialist facets. Two of the core constructs of Nietzsche's philosophy – the Overman and the Eternal Recurrence of the same – will be addressed in my reading of the play. Prior to that, I will dedicate the first section of this chapter to introduce the very notion of nihilism itself, understood as a shapeshifting philosophical category with firm roots in the history of human thought and culture. The aim is both to discuss Nietzsche's understanding of it in relation to its early manifestations – what I will refer to as "proto-nihilism" –, and to dismantle the extensively common as well as misleading interpretations of his works as deeply imbued with pessimism and cynicism.

The second section provides a brief overview of the Early Modern age, focusing on some of its most significant cultural aspects – such as the Ovidian legacy of the metamorphosis, a central image in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, and the recurrent myth of the wheel of fortune, understood as a structural condition of impermanence. The same section underlines the importance of Shakespeare's legacy for Nietzsche, before embarking on my Nietzschean reading of the play in the third section.

After a general introduction delineating the echoes of nihilism in the tragedy, as well as referencing previous philosophical readings of the play, the analysis covers two further subsections; the first one delineates the figure of the Overman and relates it to Macbeth, while the second unfolds the concept of Eternal Recurrence – understood as the fulcrum of Nietzsche's entire philosophy – in relation to Macbeth's nihilistic conception of time.

Finally, the last section of this chapter will draw a conclusion by looking at Akira Kurosawa's cinematic adaptation of *Macbeth,* and briefly comparing the correspondences between the literary and the filmic text, as well as between Western and Eastern philosophies.

1.1 Against Nihilism: preliminary thoughts

Nihilism is a 19th century philosophical category mostly associated with Nietzsche for his philosophical contribution. Etymologically speaking, it is a philosophy of "nothingness" having its first echoes in the Qoelet Book: the Latin locution "nihil sub sole novum" is one of the first examples addressing the inherent vanity and futility of human lives. Prior to that, the Greeks were equally familiar with a similar notion. [1]If nihilism is rooted in the history of human thought, the religious consolation offered by the Sacred Scriptures served as what Marx famously coined as the "population's opium". Put differently, nihilism as a philosophy of nothingness is an omnipresent leitmotiv which metamorphosed throughout history. Its definitive, crystallised form is attributed to Nietzsche.

Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez has meticulously eviscerated the pre-Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean usage of the term, highlighting how "there is a surprising lack of consensus regarding its specific meaning"[2] in both academic discourses and popular culture. If one is to restrict the research field to the purely philosophical realm, then there is a general consensus crediting Friedrich Jacobi with the first usage of the term in the 18th century. However, Vazques insists on the "exact origin of the word" being "unclear"[3]. Vazques also remarks how the term is not explicitly deployed by Nietzsche himself until *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1886: by that time, he had already published some of the works I will refer to in this chapter, such as *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Untimely Meditations* and *Human, All Too Human*.

Speaking of a proto or *Ur*-nihilism in ancient – as well as early modern – culture is not incorrect if one holds Nietzsche's assumptions and understanding of nihilism as valid. As Vazques explains, Nietzsche's polemics against Socrates, Plato and the whole of Christianity are not simple criticisms. His *j'accuse* against these philosophies identified, on the one hand, Socratism and Platonism as early "forms of nihilism", while Christianity was "nihilistic in the most profound sense"[4] for its negation of "all aesthetic values". Such an emphasis is not accidental, as he advocated for an aesthetic

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[1] By means of example, Gorgias was more interested in the epistemological and ontological consequences of nihilism when inquiring that "nothing is" in his treatise "On Nature".

[2] Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez, "Nietzsche's shadow: On the origin and development of the term nihilism", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 47, No. 10, University of Kent, 2021, 1199-1212, p. 1199.

[3] *Ivi*, p. 1201.

[4] *Ivi*, p. 1203.

interpretation of life as opposed to a moral one in *The Birth of Tragedy*. On the other hand, the "Christian-moral" interpretation – in which nihilism was rooted – posited "a superior reality that undermines life"[5].

Given the high level of ambiguity surrounding the notion of nihilism, Vazques put a great deal of effort in warning against its current "explosion in usage"[6], which "worked against Nietzsche's efforts"[7]. In his view, the elusiveness of the term which entered "the domain of popular culture, […] above all, to disqualify all sorts of ideologies" backlashed Nietzsche's own reputation, who ironically became "the philosopher of nihilism, rather than the philosopher working against nihilism"[8]. At least at the academic level, such formula is problematized and unpacked to its root: in such cases, we hear the more accurate rebranding of Nietzsche as the philosopher of "affirmative nihilism"[9] or "active nihilism"[10], which was the only valid response in order to overcome "passive" nihilism. Yet, that did not stop most people from identifying Nietzsche with it. From post-modernism onwards, we are most likely to associate nihilism with cynicism or with an "extreme form of sceptism"[11]. Therefore, labelling Nietzsche as a nihilist while failing to understand what nihilism actually meant for him – especially from the moment he finally disassociated from Schopenhauer's philosophy – is detrimental. The issue of reception is extremely complex, and it encompasses not only the realm of philosophy itself but also the realm of language and translation. By means of example George de Huszar, referring to the notion of Will to Power, has noted that the German word "*Macht*" has a broader meaning than the English equivalent "Power". While "*Macht*", in Nietzschean sense, is associated with "vitality, enthusiasm, *virtù* in the Renaissance sense", "Power" is linked with "brute force and domination". According to de Huszar, such misinterpretation explains the misreading and the Nazification of Nietzsche.[12]

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[5] *Ivi*, pp. 1203-1204.
[6] *Ivi*, p. 1207.
[7] *Ibidem.*
[8] *Ibidem.*
[9] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", *History and Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Wesleyan University, 1977, 30-39, p. 35.
[10] Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez, "Nietzsche's shadow", p. 1205.
[11] *Ivi*, p. 1208.
[12] George de Huszar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of all Values", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol 6, No. 3, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945, 259-272, pp. 259-260.

But still, without necessarily bringing up the infamous Nazi interpretations into the discussion, the aim of this chapter is to focus on the misconception surrounding Nietzsche's type of nihilism and alleged pessimism. Indeed, part of the prophetic power of this controversial philosopher stems from the fact that he envisaged the destructive danger of a chronically cynic (or nihilist) mind. Intellectuals like Mark Fisher have noted, although in a completely different context, this imminent menace. In stressing the "prescient" value of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, Fisher interprets the dangerous detachment of the modern man as a consequence of the "oversaturation of an age with history" which leads "into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself" and eventually into "the even more dangerous mood of cynicism"[13]. As Fisher interprets this passage, such "is the condition of Nietzsche's Last Man, who has seen everything, but is decadently enfeebled precisely by this excess of (self) awareness"[14].

1.2 The Early Modern

Risking a Nietzschean interpretation of Shakespeare requires explaining why pairing these two authors, though provokingly, has a certain basis of pertinence beforehand. Besides the general leitmotiv of nihilism, there are two significant aspects that form the lineage between the Bard and the German philosopher; these are the concept of the metamorphosis and the constant state of change undermining any possibility of perdurance. These staple themes have featured the Renaissance, or Early Modern, era to which Shakespeare belonged and inscribed himself as one of its greatest representatives.

Prior to the Scientific Revolution, magical thinking was wired into humanity: the constant mutability of fates, the alchemical transformation of matter, the mutual influencing between micro and macrocosm, the Aristotelian logic of finding similarities between things that are dissimilar, are some of the elements of this culture. The act of metamorphosis has always been part of our collective imagery, especially thanks to

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[13] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Untimely Meditations", ed. Daniel Breazeale, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1997, p. 5.
[14] M. Fisher, "Capitalist Realism, Is there really no alternative?", Collective Ink, 2009, pp. 6-7.

Ovid's dedicated narrative poem and *magnum opus*. The human being was situated above the animal and below the divine spheres, as one's soul could be either elevated or debased. "Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss"[15] easily summarises Zarathustra's message in his mission to redeem humanity, a declaration resonating with the early modern belief of a duality which is intrinsic to human nature. Shakespeare's tragedies reflect this omnipresent tension, as well as following the Renaissance popular storyline of the hero's internal corruption and moral degradation: a conceptualization of the wheel of fortune myth, which overturns the fates of powerful men and women. And in Shakespeare, the higher one rises, the greater one falls down. His tragedies seem to point to the reality of constant change as the only reality in which we are immersed. This is why German-American philosopher Walter Kaufmann, speaking of a post-Christian existentialism[16], included Shakespeare in the genealogy of existentialists along with Nietzsche. Kaufmann is perhaps one, if not the only one, who most strongly insisted on the bound between the two. In his *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, he defines the both of them as advocates "of beauty over mediocrity" with "the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions"[17], despite the fact that "man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death, with nothing after that;"[18]

Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare's impact on Nietzsche is worth-noting indeed. As Katie Brennan remarks, his notebooks prove that he planned to write a whole chapter on Shakespeare in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although he eventually abandoned the project, Brennan recognizes the importance of Shakespeare in Nietzsche's (early) philosophical growth as an influence that is not just "a mere appeal to authority"[19]. Thankfully, to leave out of the book the extensive and dense passage about *Hamlet* was not one of his options. Besides all the valid reasons why the tragedy of the Danish Prince could have been awarded his legitimate place in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Andreas Höfele conjectures a motif that may have to do more with Nietzsche's personal aesthetic fruition of the play.

[15] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None", ed. A. del Caro & R.B. Pippin, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 7.
[16] Katarzyna Burzynska, "'Nothing will come out of nothing': The existential dimension of interpersonal relationships in *King Lear*", in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. C. Bourne & E.C. Bourne, Routledge, London, 2019, 535-550, p 538.
[17] *Ibidem.*
[18] Walter Kaufmann, "From Shakespeare to Existentialism", Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980, p. 3.
[19] *Ibidem.*

If Hamlet personifies the collision between Socratic and Dionysian, and Nietzsche is, in his reading of the play, projecting the core elements of his philosophy onto *Hamlet*, he is turning "Shakespeare's melancholy prince into something like an *alter ego*"[20].

This reflection does not attempt a philologic reconstruction of the alleged influences that Nietzsche drawn from one of his favourite authors as a justification for the present reading; yet it provides useful background information to contextualize the two profiles before starting the analysis I intend to carry out. Another interesting aspect to consider – especially because Nietzsche is a post-romantic philosopher – is that of Shakespeare's reception in Romantic Germany. '*Unser Shakespeare*' is the expression with which eighteenth-century German authors have claimed him as their generational symbol during Romanticism. To be precise, August Wilhelm Schlegel called him '*ganz unser*' (entirely ours), thus initiating the cult of Shakespeare during the Sturm und Drang movement alongside his friend Goethe, who praised him as well for his precocious and prolific talent. If the Romantic movement is, as Berlin argues in his study, "an attempt to impose an aesthetic model upon reality" in which "everything should obey the rules of art"[21], critics like Patrick Gray can draw the conclusion that not only did Shakespeare influence Romanticism: he anticipated it.[22] As I will show in the following section, which starts by discussing the resonances of nihilism in the play, the two referenced studies suggested a similar idea – which contributed to the originality of their readings. In their view, *Macbeth* can be read as a work populated by characters who are symbolically conceived as personifications of specific philosophical postulates or statements, and whose fates obey to the principle of natural order which no king can defy.

Provided that my resulting analysis – one proposing to gradually penetrate Nietzsche's thought for literary purposes – is conceived as a provocation, its main intent is that of strengthening the bond between the two disciplines as a prolific ground to stimulate the debate on their mutual influencing, as well as to offer a different, perhaps unusual but hopefully original, perspective on *Macbeth*.

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[20] Andreas Höfele, "No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 33.

[21] Berlin, I., 1965. Henry Hardy, ed. 2001. *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[22] Katie Brennan, "Nietzsche's *Hamlet* puzzle: Life affirmation in *The Birth of Tragedy*", in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. C. Bourne & E.C. Bourne, Routledge, London, 2019, 585-598, p. 585.

1.3 Venturing a Nietzschean Interpretation: introducing *Macbeth* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

This section attempts to frame *Macbeth* in the philosophical discourse of nihilism by looking at a couple of studies which have engaged in a similar analysis. I will, then, anticipate some elements of reflection to hint at possible links between Shakespeare's play and Nietzsche's philosophy. Finally, I will introduce *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to illustrate its structure and contextualize it in its historical period.

Tzachi Zamir is one of the scholars who most prominently remarked how nihilism – "the uncanniest of all guests"[23] – plays a huge role in the play; it is "the philosophical concern" underlining *Macbeth* which prevents the nihilist character from bestowing value to anything. Such philosophical attitude can either "take the form of dismissing any criteria according to which values may be ascribed" or prove that "value is always relative to some perspective which one has no reason to privilege"[24]. The final soliloquy uttered by Macbeth following his wife's suicide explicitly encapsulates this extreme *impasse* in a nutshell, yet nihilism is enshrined in the text. The meaninglessness of life, the transvaluation of values, the nature of evil, the relationships with time, the opaqueness of reality are all staple themes in nihilism that Shakespeare has displayed throughout the play. In Zamir's view, Shakespeare "depicts a complete movement of nihilism", but without restricting it "to a "position" or a "thesis"". Instead, he "pictures it as existential hollowness, as a reaction to life that persistently bypasses the possibilities for meaning"[25]. In Irving Ribner's view, each character in *Macbeth* is the personification of a philosophy and every single aspect arranged by Shakespeare in the *mise-en-scene* is in fact a "statement about the nature of evil", as well as its manifestations. For Ribner, such statement is materialized and takes the concrete form of action: "[t]he action of Macbeth is cast into a meaningful pattern centering about the hero, and the roles of characters are governed not so much by the requirements of psychological consistency as by specific symbolic functions"[26]. Likewise, Zamir noted that "through Macbeth, Shakespeare captures an intellectual nihilism that is only a

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[23] Nietzsche's famous question found in his notebooks dated 1885-1886.
[24] Tzachi Zamir, "Upon one Bank and Shoal of Time: Literature, Nihilism, and Moral Philosophy", *New Literary History*, Vol. 31, No. 3, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 529-551, p. 530.
[25] *Ivi*, p. 545.
[26] Irving Ribner, "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Oxford University Press, 1959, 147-159, p. 159.

symptom of a psychological and existential depth-structure", while Macduff "embodies an opposite capacity for allowing the present to speak"[27].

Of the two scholars mentioned heretofore, Zamir is the most explicitly philosophical. In his seminal contribution he credits Arthur Kirsch's reading, which similarly perceived *Macbeth* as "a tragedy of the deliberate emptying out of human life"[28]. Kirsch was equally attentive to the aesthetic response, identifying both the audience's and Macbeth's own as "one of loss"[29]. Yet, neither of them seems to be interested in resorting to Nietzsche to prove their points. Instead, a reading of *Macbeth* with a similar endeavour is King-Kok Cheung's, who outlined a *fil rouge* between Shakespeare and Søren Kierkegaard in her essay about *dread*. Her core assumptions are three: the first one is that Macbeth's tragedy served as a "prefiguration" of Kierkegaard's diagnosis. Shakespearean scholars are familiar with his ability to provide incessantly resourceful and ahead-of-his-time insights about human psychology which proved significant for modern philosophy as well. The second assumption is that of a bond between Shakespeare and Kierkegaard, based on the fact that the latter regularly quoted the former as a way of incorporating his legacy. The third assumption centres on the religious tie, as "both Shakespeare and Kierkegaard are steeped in the Protestant tradition; and in both, dogma is accommodated in psychology"[30]. While plenty of interpretations based either on "theology or faculty psychology" which may account for a "moral judgement of Macbeth"[31] were given, Cheung laments the lack of an aesthetic judgement – dealing with our "emotional response" – of the play. In wondering how one deliberately chooses evil, she used Kierkegaard to read *Macbeth*, thus bringing the literary and philosophical discourses together in an attempt to enrich both soils. What enables a Kierkegaardian reading of *Macbeth* is, first of all, the fact that the philosopher has received the poet and playwriter's wisdom and used it to build his philosophical theory.

Other scholars have mentioned Absurdism as well with respect to *Macbeth*, which I am more reluctant to link with the play. Bradley has outlined four

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[27] Tzachi Zamir, "Upon one Bank and Shoal of Time", p. 546.
[28] Arthur Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide", *ELH*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 1984, 269-296, p. 292.
[29] *Ivi*, p. 293.
[30] King-Kok Cheung, "Shakespeare and Kierkegaard: "Dread" in Macbeth", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Oxford University Press, 1984, 430-439, p. 430.
[31] *Ibidem.*

Shakespearean masterpieces as the "big four" tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-1597), *Hamlet* (1600-1601), *King Lear* (1605-1606), and *Macbeth* (1606-1608). Of these four, the ending of *King Lear* is more absurdist than the ending of *Macbeth* is. More than the philosophy of absurdism per se as it was conceived by Albert Camus, a general sense of absurdity runs rampant by the end of *King Lear*, when injustice has won, and the main characters ended up crushed. If *Macbeth* ends tragically, there is still a sense of self-restoring harmony enabled by the neutralization of the main character, a character who "kills a king so that he may become a king who can be killed"[32]. As Ribner puts it, tragedies are marked by the clashing between emotion and intellect, *sense* and *sensibility*. In such a Manichean dialectic, the emotional component intensifies as the play develops – until reason prevails and, in the end, we see that "although one man has been damned, there is an order and meaning in the universe, that good may be reborn out of evil": such is the feeling of ultimate reconciliation provided by tragic epilogues, according to Ribner.[33] Because *King Lear* does not have this reconciliatory luxury its disastrous ending has been frequently sugar-coated and softened with an alternative one, which involved the wedding between Cordelia and Edgar. Not only is there no order in the original ending, but there is also no "meaning", to quote Ribner, in such horror at all – which is perhaps even more distressing. Although the idea of "reconciliation" referred to Macbeth's tragedy seems to me as an overstatement, the level of despair reached by *King Lear* has been, for a long time, almost inconceivable to the Elizabethan audience.

Macbeth, on the other hand, is frightening for different reasons. Starting as a character attributed with "golden opinions", his debasing grows alarmingly uncanny for his audience, as it signals a latent possibility of corruption that does not spare anybody. Act 4.3 proves particularly prescient in the analysis of the play: when Macduff states that "angels are bright still, though the brightest fell" he is obviously explicating the parallelism between Macbeth and Lucifer. The same page conveys a high rate of prefiguration when Macduff – the avenging character – confesses to have lost his "hopes" where Malcolm – future King – has found his "doubts". If Macduff's hopelessness highlights the dismay with which he will repair justice at the end of the play, Malcolm holds onto his "doubts". The act of doubting is a philosophical posture

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[32] Gregory Foran, "Eschatology and ecclesiology in "Macbeth"", *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 1, The University of Notre Dame, 2015, 1-30, p. 13.
[33] Irving Ribner, "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 159.

which keeps the *logos* flowing, and which undoes, in Hegelian jargon, the *synthesis* by opening the dialectic. The Doubt, philosophically speaking, is a chink, a new inception, a dialogic future – the same future that Malcolm embodies. It is impossible not to remark the Dionysian component – to use Nietzsche's vocabulary – in future King Malcolm. In the same Act, Malcolm confesses his insecurities as heir to the throne. His "voluptuousness", his "cistern of lust", "avarice" and "more-having" will, not only makes him unfit to his fate, but also leads him to recognize himself as the "tyrant" he wants to annihilate. Although his self-deprecation is purposefully exaggerated to test Macduff's loyalty, Macduff's first responses are remarkable. Throughout the first part of this exchange of reflections, Macduff operates as the peace-restoring character, a role he will assume – in spite of himself – more tangibly at the end of the play. He encourages and reassures Malcolm by suggesting the possibility of a "temperance" which does not preclude the satisfaction of pleasure. In Macduff's firm conception of harmony, all vices are "portable/with other graces weigh'd" (Act 4.3), or in other words, all vices are tolerated as long as they are compensated and balanced with other virtues. The Apollonian and the Dionysian are equals in Macduff's pre-Socratic mind. Like Nietzsche, Macbeth understands that one cannot kill the Dionysian or separate it from the Apollonian because, in Nietzsche's words: "Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction"[34]

While Macduff and Malcolm form one of the couples of the play, Macbeth and Banquo form the other. Besides their initial friendship and comradeship, they are drawn together for a symbolic reason. When approaching the theme of human evilness, Shakespeare suggests that it lies within ourselves as our double, or as an inseparable presence mingled with goodness in a mutually dependent agglomerated core. This perfectly applies to Banquo, the character who best portrays this doubleness. He, like Macbeth, met the witches and heard their tempting prophecy; he, like Macbeth, did ponder about their prophecy – but he did not act upon those thoughts and chose a different path. In Ribner's words: "Banquo is [the] ordinary man, with his mixture of good and evil, open to evil's soliciting, but able to resist it"[35]. Once again, we can read

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[34] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, p. 543.
[35] Irving Ribner, "The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 152.

into him the early modern narrative of dual tension, the debasement as opposed to the sublimation.

Nietzsche-Zarathustra's plea to the 'red judge' encapsulates this tension in an attempt to question the demonization of purported villainous characters:

> "Enemy" you should say, but not "villain"; "sick man" you should say, but not "scoundrel"; "fool" you should say, but not "sinner." And you, red judge, if you were to speak aloud all the things you have already done in your thoughts, then everyone would cry: "Away with this filth and poisonous worm!" But thought is one thing, and deed another, and the image of a deed yet another.[36]

The "image of a deed" resonates to *Macbeth*'s readers as the role of vision and the materiality of action are central devices in the play: Suparna Roychoudhury links the *black bile* of melancholy – traditionally associated with *Hamlet* – to *Macbeth*. Namely she ascribes "the vanishing witches, the floating dagger, the ghost at the banquet table, the pageant of apparitions"[37] to the phantasmatic figurations of melancholic disorder, causing direct consequences such as "trouble sleep, insomnia, and visual and auditory hallucinations"[38], all marks of troubled perception and of a disturbed relationship between the mind and the external world, automatically resulted.

In Nietzsche, it is the image that "made this pale human pale", as this human "was equal to his deed when he committed it, but he could not bear its image once he had done it."[39] If this psychological profile perfectly reflects the aftermath of such deed on Macbeth's mental health, Nietzsche-Zarathustra warns us of a pre-deed madness: "Listen, you judges! There is still another madness, and it is before the deed. Oh, you did not crawl deeply enough into this soul! Thus speaks the red judge: 'Why did this criminal kill? He wanted to rob.' But I say to you: his soul wanted blood, not robbery. He thirsted for the bliss of the knife."[40]

Both Nietzsche and Shakespeare are fascinated by the interstitial presence of evil in the individual construction – a construction thriving on doubleness and hidden facades. Adopting this stance on human nature, it is not surprising that this psychological tension finds its aesthetic equivalent in the writing of the play. From the

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[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None", ed. A. del Caro & R.B. Pippin, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, p. 26.
[37] Suparna Roychoudhury, "Melancholy, Ecstasy, Phantasma", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 111, No. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 205-230, p. 218.
[38] *Ibidem.*
[39] *Ibidem.*
[40] *Ibidem.*

very beginning, the characters voice lines that are often subtly contradictive statements built on the coexistence of opposites. From Macbeth's reciting that "nothing is, but what is not" (Act 1.3), or his questioning about "Who can be wise, amaz'd, temperate and furious/ Loyal and neutral, in a moment"(Act 2.3), to Duncan contemplating how his "plenteous joys wanton in fulness/ Seek to hide themselves in drops of sorrow"(Act 1.4), to Lady Macbeth's observing to his husband "what thou wouldst highly, that thou wouldst holily; wouldst not play false, and yet wouldst wrongly win" or her even more iconic line commanding him to "look like th'innocent flower, but be the serpent under'it" (Act 1.5). Shakespeare's writing plays with the unveiling of truth in an intricate overturning of reality and appearance, of the real – in Lacanian sense – and the illusory[41], as well as lyricising the psychological complexity of his characters.

In his analysis of *Hamlet* in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes: "Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion"[42]. Similarly, for Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino – who extensively commented on Nietzsche – knowledge does not coincide with action, with the presumption of doing, with the pretention of wanting. Tragic heroes are, in fact, tragic for being trapped in their will. If Hamlet is paralysed by memory and over-awareness, Macbeth has the cunning inspiration and deceptive foreknowledge of the Weird Sisters on his side. The etymology of the world "*re*velation" – coming from the Latin "*re*" (again) and "*vēlō*" (to cover) – literally means "to veil twice", to filter the real. Concealment is what allows us to see: by removing the appearance, one removes the essence. In Höfele's translation of a passage of *Ecce Homo*, "Why Am I So Clever", Nietzsche writes:

> I know no more heart-rending reading than Shakespeare: what must a man have suffered to have such a need of being a buffoon! Is Hamlet understood? Not doubt, certainty is what drives one insane- But one must be profound, an abyss, a philosopher to feel that way. – We are all afraid of truth. […] But the strength required for the vision of the most powerful reality is not only compatible with the most powerful strength for action, for monstruous action, for crime – it even presupposes it.[43]

This take sees truth ("the vision of the most powerful reality") as coincidental with "monstrous action". Apparently, it contradicts everything that has been argued heretofore. However, Höfele is linking the fear of truth with the pursuit of crime, which

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[41] See Chapter 3 for insights.
[42] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings", ed. R. Guess & R. Speirs, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999, p. 40.
[43] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo", p. 26, translated by A. Höfele in "No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 47.

is far from contradicting Nietzsche's, Shakespeare's, and Severino's intuitions on the paralysis of knowledge on action. For Höfele, it is "the certainty that drives one insane" and the resulting abyss that "can only be endured by playing the fool" and which "conjoin with the mightiest form of action, the monstruous, the criminal."[44] Macbeth is suspended in a shadow line between the maddening certainty – disguised as foreknowledge – and the deranging illusion of a tale – the prophecy – which could have been fictitious from the start. Perhaps, Nietzsche was once again correct in supposing that "the belief in truth is precisely madness". Under this respect, as Höfele wisely mentions the "fool" and the "need of being a buffoon", the lack of such figure in *Macbeth* must be addressed. The archetype of the Fool is a hallmark presence in Shakespeare's tragedy: metaphorically, it is a disruptive point, a threshold between hypocrisy and authenticity, derangement and lucidity, deception and reality. Its presence is the return of the repressed, which operates through an estrangement effect and which hilariously evokes a hidden abyss with malicious naiveness. Unlike *King Lear*, an absurd-intertwined tragedy, Macbeth's court lacks its Fool, and I would like to argue that such absence is not accidental. Whenever we have a Fool, we have another side of the story, another truth penetrating inside the layers of the text. But the Macbeths are unable to bear such truth, to deep dive into the abyss and survive it. Symbolically, the lack of the Fool also denies any possibility of human genuineness over a corruptive power thirst. *King Lear* also dramatizes court fakeness and double façade – which Lear's Fool recognised and made fun of – but it eventually offers a possibility of reconciliation between an illuminated, as much as traumatized, Lear with sincere and genuine Cordelia. A reconciliation in which the Fool, who was close to Lear during his meltdown, plays a huge role in. Yet, Macbeth exhibits a form of lucid, somewhat stoic, folly. The infamous dagger hallucination in Act 2.1 is a lucid dream – or nightmare – in which Macbeth sees and at the same time is aware of the nonexistence of his vision: "There's no such thing: It is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes". This is yet another example of what Zamir and Kirsch referred to as 'hollowness' and 'emptying out of human life'; the Renaissance hallmark concepts of, in this case, *horror vacui*, or more generally in the entire play, of *vanitas,* are early manifestations of 19th century nihilism; Macbeth is a character haunted by the spectre of *nihil*.

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[44] Andreas Höfele, "No Hamlets" p. 49.

Now that I have sketched out the main characters of *Macbeth* and framed the play in the philosophical discourse of interest, I will now move on to Nietzsche's primary texts.

Zarathustra, like *Macbeth*, offers the parable of a universal clash: "the strife between light and darkness, […], between Good and Evil"[45] (Fisher). Both Shakespeare and Nietzsche overcome the dualism embedding their texts in ambiguity and high metaphorical density.

In his Introduction to the Cambridge edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Robert Pippin argues that the prophet's call to arms addresses "modern European Christian people especially, […] to pursue a new way of life"[46]. As I have already argued, the point of departure between previous forms of nihilism and Nietzsche's nihilism is the void left by religion. In choosing the name for the prophet of his book, Nietzsche opted for a pre-Christian religious figure – the Persian Zoroaster – who "established [....] the central struggle in human life […] between […] good and evil, which Nietzsche interpreted in Christian and humanist terms as the opposition between selflessness and benevolence on the one hand and egoism and self-interest on the other"[47]. His interpretation is impregnated with meaning and resonated to Macbeth's own story, as I will argue in the following chapter. To this chapter purposes, it is sufficient to remark how Nietzsche traces back such human struggle to an almost primordial point of human history which precedes the rise of Christianity – thus suggesting that this tension is universal and embedded in human life. But, as Pippin reminds, Nietzsche-Zarathustra does preach a self-overcoming of morality, an escape from "this absolute dualism, but without moral anarchy and without sliding into a bovine contentment or a violent primitivism"[48]. Morality, on the other hand, should be "located in a deeper and more authentic layer of man's mind"[49].

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is made of four parts, the last being "more of an appendix". The first two introduce the figure of the "overman", with precise references to the 19th century historical context which Nietzsche regards as an epoch of

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[45] Kurt Rudolf Fisher, "The Existentialism of Nietzsche's Zarathustra", *Daedalus*, Vol. 93, No. 3, 1964, The MIT Press, 998-1016, p. 1005.
[46] Robert B. Pippin, "Introduction" to "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. ix.
[47] *Ibidem.*
[48] *Ibidem.*
[49] Kurt Rudolf Fisher, "The Existentialism of Nietzsche's Zarathustra", p. 1012.

transition[50]. It is an epoch urging men to find a "justification" of their own existence following "the experience of God's death"[51]. The third part enlarges the discussion to the realm of "temporality", in the understanding and experience we make of it, to introduce the image of "the eternal return of the same", which Nietzsche himself has called "Zarathustra's central teaching"[52]. In its centrality, this doctrine is related to all of "the previous teaching – the death of God, the superman, the will to power"[53].

Human All Too Human (1878-79) anticipated some of the issues matured in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, including the after-effect of such a knowledge and truth. In questioning it, Nietzsche asks his readers "But will our philosophy not thus become a tragedy? […] Is it true, is all that remains a mode of thought whose outcome on a personal level is despair and on a theoretical level a philosophy of destruction?"[54]. In fantasizing over a purifying knowledge, he reiterates the role of men's *temperament* (not a random word choice if we consider that the virtue of *temperance* was a cardinal concept in the Renaissance) in front of the influence of truth. He fashions a world where men will no longer "praise", "blame", "contend", "gaze contentedly" upon those things "for which one formerly felt only fear". And he goes on by imagining a humanity no longer "prodded by the idea that one is only nature or more than nature"[55] – beasts or gods. To this end, men must find the proper temperament and must know renouncement. More than a philosophy of destruction, it is a philosophy of privation: the *unchained*, liberated man must let go of everything that other men hold as valuable: "that free, fearless hovering over men, customs, laws and the traditional evaluations of things must suffice him as the condition he considers most desirable"[56].

Nietzsche knew that a *pars destruens* without *pars construens* is an end to itself; the twilight of the idols is simply the prelude to a new daybreak. The seeds of Nietzschean new values – the overman, the will to power and the eternal return – will supplant the former ideals; therefore, the purpose of criticizing society is to destroy such

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[50] Robert B. Pippin, "Introduction", p. x.
[51] Kurt Rudolf Fisher, "The Existentialism of Nietzsche's Zarathustra", p. 1009.
[52] Robert B. Pippin, "Introduction", p. x.
[53] Kurt Rudolf Fisher, "The Existentialism of Nietzsche's Zarathustra", pp. 1012-1013.
[54] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 29-30.
[55] *Ibidem.*
[56] *Ibidem.*

outdated values.[57] Nihilism is the philosophical tool enabling us to cut the umbilical cord which tied us to an archaic society; but instead of isolating us and drifting us apart in a void, it is functional to a collective rebirth. Or in his wordings, it must be functional to the *transvaluation* of all values: "Nihilism represents the logical conclusion of our great values and ideals – because we must *experience* nihilism before we can find out what value these 'values' really had. We require sometime, *new values*"[58].

1.3.1 The Three Metamorphoses for a Philosophy of Creation

The tenth fragment of Zarathustra's Prologue ends with the beginning of Zarathustra's journey:

> "May I be wiser! May I be wise from the ground up like my snake! But I ask the impossible, and so I ask instead of my pride that it always walk with my wisdom. And if some day my wisdom abandons me – oh it loves to fly away! – may my pride then fly away with my folly!" – Thus began Zarathustra's going under.[59]

With this curious prayer, Nietzsche's hero begins 'going under', metaphorically coming back down from his mountain as if he were to descend into the Underworld. Wisdom, pride and folly: these are the three interjoined components which he is willing to give up for his mission. There is already a sense of loss at the origin, at the principle of this tale: one must be ready to abandon his wisdom first and foremost when one begins 'going under'. The undeniable artistic wisdom and sensitivity featuring Nietzsche's style is the main reason why some scholars have questioned his status as a philosopher – even if he is a canonized author. As Ansell-Pearson as noted, Nietzsche is not interested in providing us the "life-saving myth" which is supposed to obviate the need of a God that humanity has killed, because he is aware that the idol kills the subject. Nor is he interested, unlike many cynic and inattentive readers are, in reifying the void:

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[57] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", p. 32.
[58] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", pp. 3-4.
[59] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 3.

> Nietzsche's teaching is an exoteric one, […] and will be so until the time is right, until the "moment" has been prepared. Then, and only then, will Zarathustra, the redeemer of humanity, begin his descent, his "down-going."[60]

The opening fragment of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*'s first part, preceded by the passage quoted above, is the celebrated parable of the spirit which undergoes three symbolic metamorphoses: "Three metamorphoses of the spirit I name for you: how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child"[61]. Macbeth perfectly reflects the first two; starting as the "camel-hero", he was one of the king's most trustworthy vassal and easily embodied virtue and courage. His virtues are such that King Ducan extensively glorifies and praises him – somewhat recalling in a foreboding way Nietzsche's classic quote: "Even God has his hell: it is his love for mankind"[62].

Macbeth started morphing into the Nietzschean lion following his encounter with the Weird Sisters and, as it is well known, his downfall begins. In this perspective, his tragedy is the failed third metamorphosis. The camel is the symbol of resilience, as well as loyalty and reverence: a sort of Sisyphus who wants to be "well loaded" and willingly bears the heaviest burdens of the spirit in the solitude of the desert. In Dylan Hughes' study on Lacan and Nietzsche, the camel represents "acceptance" and the "internalization of values and morals, both passive and active" understood as a set of "demands of the Other"[63]. Were Macbeth to remain a camel until the end of the play he would have abandoned his "cause when it celebrates victory"[64]. Instead, hearing the first prophecy douses him into a sense of determinism: "Come what come may,/ Time and the hour runs through the roughest/ day" (Act 1.3). Far from being firm and strong-willed he agrees with Banquo to ponder their decisions, but once his future starts to reshape, he reluctantly gives in to his subconscious wishes:

> The Prince of Cumberland!/ that is a step/ On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap,/ For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!/ Let no light see my black and deep desires;/ The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (Act 1.4).

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[60] Keith J. Ansell-Pearson, "The Exoteric Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche", *Political Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Sage Publications Inc., 1986, 497-505, p. 497.

[61] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 17.

[62] *Ibidem.*

[63] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God: Nietzsche, Lacan, and the Sinthome of Tragic Wisdom", *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*, no. 6961, 2020, p. 90.

[64] *Ibidem.*

The second metamorphosis starts occurring. According to Nietzsche, there is a point in the life of the spirit in which reverently obeying to already-assessed values is no longer enough. This is when the lion is evoked:

> [T]o create freedom for oneself and also a sacred No to duty: for that, my brothers, the lion is required. To take the right to new values– that is the most terrible taking for a carrying and reverent spirit. Indeed, it is preying, and the work of a predatory animal. Once it loved "thou shalt" as its most sacred, now it must find delusion and despotism even in what is most sacred to it, in order to wrest freedom from its love by preying.[65]

The 'thou shalt' is, fundamentally, the "self-evident and totalizing completeness of value" undermining subjective creativity; this is why the lion, with his heretic "No", comes to fight the dragon, which symbolizes "the tyranny"[66] of "all created value". However, such preying instinct shifts into an individualistic drive leading to murdering intentions. The child, a key symbol in both Shakespeare and Nietzsche, is the unaccomplished transformation. Ironically, the role it assumes in the Witches' prophecies haunts Macbeth's dread and angst, who grows tormented about the need for a (male) heir to secure his line of succession to the throne. Although metaphorical, the line with which he requests Lady Macbeth to generate male sons only insists on his fantasy of perpetual sovereignty. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth's perversions (the unsexing process: "Come to my woman's breasts,/ And take my milk for gall" and the infanticide: "I have given suck, and know/ How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:/ I would, while it was smiling in my face,/ Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,/ And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn' as you/ Have done to this") seems to foretell that the pursuit of an offspring is not a conceivable scenario for the couple. The child for Zarathustra "is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying. Yes, for the game of creation my brothers a sacred yes-saying is required. The spirit wants its will, the one lost to the world now wins its own world"[67]. In other words, the child is the Overman himself, for he is constantly and entirely immerged in his game, for he simply *is*. Part of his purity derives from the act of forgetting the ego, the part of the self that when avidly nurtured transfigures the subject into an idol.

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[65] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 17.
[66] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 90.
[67] *Ibidem.*

Regardless of the messianic and magnifying tone that Nietzsche infuses into his Zarathustra in his mission of inspiring the world, *all and none* and regardless of the imagery of grandeur and majesty he so often evokes, Nietzsche advocates for a "small poverty" which clashes with Macbeth's "vaulting ambition" (Act 1.7). Nietzsche famously frowns upon everything involving the masses or vast groupings of people – including, and especially, the institution of the State itself. In a passage invectively aiming at any form of government – especially the Monarchy – he expresses harsh criticism towards the lavish and lustful accumulation of material goods and hierarchical supremacy:

> Just look at these superfluous! They acquire riches and yet they become poorer. They want power and first of all the crowbar of power, much money– these impotent, impoverished ones! Watch them scramble, these swift monkeys! They scramble all over each other and thus drag one another down into the mud and depths. They all want to get to the throne, it is their madness– as if happiness sat on the throne! Often mud sits on the throne–and often too the throne on mud.[68]

More than moralizing or sermonizing on a sinful lifestyle based on superficial values in favour of an ascetic and minimalistic one, he is pointing at a materialistic and corrupted conception of power – hence the final zoom into the image of the mud throne. Unsurprisingly, the passage is titled "*On the New Idol*", a reference used to shift the viewpoint on the danger of power relations between idol and worshipers. And yet, this invective inevitably implies a spiritual, rather than material, nurturing and growth – a philosophical standpoint that becomes explicit with his exclamation: "Indeed, whoever possesses little is possessed all the less: praised be a small poverty!"[69]. These passages resonate with what is left of Macbeth's character nearing the end of the play: although his character is not portrayed as the embodiment of lust and gluttony, his struggle for power is what ultimately impoverishes him. Contrary to early interpretations of heavily abridged and manipulated versions of *The Will to Power*, the Nietzschean Overman is built on a creation-driven ideal that violently collides with the Tyrannical. "Show me that you are not one of the lustful and the ambitious!"[70], he imperatively demands to the Spirit of the Child, formerly Lion-metamorphosed. As anticipated by the parable of the metamorphoses of the spirit, the idea of new beginning, movement, and sacred Yes-saying are the point of origin of the Overman. But *Macbeth* is a tragedy beginning and

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[68] *Ivi*, p. 35-36.
[69] *Ibidem.*
[70] *Ivi*, p. 46.

stalling with the second metamorphosis of the hero's spirit, who "threw away their last value when [he] threw away [his] servitude"[71]. One who pursues power and stability is believed to become a free man: yet the true horror and inconceivableness that haunts Macbeth's conscience is Nietzsche's insidious and pressing question: *"free for what?"*[72]. The overlapping points between the Creator and Macbeth are deceiving. On the one hand, Macbeth is his own enemy, especially when confronted with his declining mental health and spiralling into madness. Macbeth is also a lonely character, even when surrounded by guests celebrating at his banquet. But his loneliness is not a search for himself; much the contrary. When Nietzsche says that "the worst enemy whom you can encounter will always be yourself*"* he is simply prefiguring the loneliness and sufferance that forges the Overman. To reiterate the brilliant preface of Zarathustra:

> Lonely one, you go the way to yourself! And past you yourself leads your way and past your seven devils! To your own self you will be heretic and witch and soothsayer and fool and doubter and unholy man and villain. You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes! Lonely one, you go the way of the creator: you will create yourself a god out of your seven devils![73]

Scholars like Ribner have seen the traits of the unredeemable character in Macbeth in the destiny Shakespeare reserved him, in not granting him the "heroic gesture" of suicide. In this narrative choice Ribner sees a philosophical pattern resonating with his theory of self-restored order: spiritual destruction equals physical destruction, thus the hideous image of his slain head.[74]Following this perspective, I would clarify that in "granting" suicide to his wife, Shakespeare is far from redeeming her. If Macbeth's physical death is the consequence of his spiritual death, it can be argued that Lady Macbeth's spirit was not destroyed. I would argue that her spirit was simply *lost*, during her last deranged appearances: if Shakespeare designed a literal correspondence between spirit and body, like Ribner suggested, she was both physically and spiritually sleepwalking. The firmness and confidence she so eloquently showed have been directed towards her last self-destructive effort. On top of that, we can easily assume that she was wicked from the start, and therefore, she did not properly betray her spirit.

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[71] *Ibidem.*
[72] *Ibidem.*
[73] *Ivi,* p. 47.
[74] Irving Ribner, "The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 159.

That of redemption is an extremely significant issue for Zarathustra, especially in relation to time. To quote Kurt Fisher's analysis:

> [N]o longer does one create out of nothing. One creates the future out of the past. The past, man's past, is a fact. What man did cannot be undone; yet on the other hand the past now […] appears arbitrary, a series of chance occurrences that might have been different. [..] redeem the past – that is Zarathustra's task. He is the redeemer of chance; he redeems what was by creating what will be.[75]

1.3.2 "*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow*": for a Philosophy of Time

As well as philosophizing on the theme of evil and human nature, the play perfectly encapsulates the culture and the philosophy of its time, starting with the themes of sorcery and alchemy. Similarly to what Ribner and Zamir had noted about the personification of a philosophy, Foran perceives an analogous sensibility towards history, which flows through Shakespeare's characters: in this case, *Macbeth*'s purpose is that of voicing a "Reformation anxiety" which Shakespeare had anticipated with *Hamlet*. This interpretation was pioneered by New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt in his *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001). In Foran's understanding of it, the Reformation anxiety was triggered by the Protestant denial of the Purgatory, which "marked the lost sense of connection with the dead"[76]. However, *Macbeth* more explicitly dramatizes exquisitely political matters of turmoil and upheaval.

One of the sources of the play is King James' *Daemonologie* (1597) – a study of demonology and black magic, which also accounts for the North Berwick witch trials of 1590. King James VI installed himself as King of England succeeding unmarried Queen Elizabeth and promised an "unbroken lineage"[77]; in 1605, two years after his accession, he was hailed by three sybils in Oxford. To quote Foran's translation of the Latin original hail, the sybils promised "power without end"[78] and, when referring to James'

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[75] Kurt Rudolf Fisher, "The Existentialism of Nietzsche's Zarathustra", p. 1013.
[76] Gregory Foran, "Eschatology and Ecclesiology in Macbeth", p. 9.
[77] *Ivi*, p. 1.
[78] *Ivi*, pp. 1-2.

progeny, they reiterated: "We set no limits to the fates; / In worldly rule fame's goal may be the stars"[79].

Foran has noted the sense of impending doom and apocalypticism in *Daemonologie*, for the treatise "considers its subject in light of the imminent end of the world"[80]. Similarly, Macbeth conceives time apocalyptically, as an antagonistic force contrasting his design of dynastic longevity.[81] It is the same apocalypticism that the "peace loving King James"[82], whose public persona revolved around the promise of progeny continuity, shared with him.

In *Macbeth*, the catastrophic scenario was carefully and meticulously unfolded by Shakespeare as he added "images of earthquakes, solar eclipses, falling stars, angelic horsemen, seas stained red with blood, hellish smoke, stinging scorpions, blasting trumpets, and more"[83] . He transferred Macbeth's doomed and apocalyptic visions into the stage and presented it to his audience – already confronted with the theme of regicide.

In probing Macbeth's "eschatological hope for completion"[84], Foran looks at affirmations such as "I go, and it is done" as the prophetic passage between conditional sequences and accomplished facts. His subtle theological analysis does not miss the comparison between this verb tense shift and those recognized by seventeenth-century exegetes in the prophetic passages of the Bible[85]. In his reading, Macbeth's prophetic attitude is a view of the future as "folded up within the present"[86] deriving from the encounters with the Witches. Therefore, Foran does not perceive Macbeth's repeating of the word "done"[87] as something accidental: he is striving for accomplishment, completion and perfection, while fighting against the sense of impeding doom. His temporal mania, tinted by prophetism and apocalypticism, is the same promise of eternity that Nietzsche discards. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he addressed the striving for perfection, fullness and stillness as forces working against the very nature of human beings:

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[79] *Ivi*, p. 2.
[80] *Ivi*, pp. 1-2.
[81] *Ivi*, p.4.
[82] *Ivi*, p. 5.
[83] *Ivi*, p. 10.
[84] *Ivi*, p. 12.
[85] *Ivi*, p. 2.
[86] *Ivi*, p. 11.
[87] *Ibidem.*

Evil I call it and misanthropic: all this teaching of the one and the plenum and the unmoved and the sated and the everlasting! All that is everlasting– that is merely a parable! And the poets lie too much. But the best parables should speak about time and becoming: they should be praise and justification of all that is not everlasting! Creating–that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's becoming light. But in order for the creator to be, suffering is needed and much transformation.[88]

In this passage, Nietzsche-Zarathustra shifts the focus from divine eternity to the *here* and *now*, from the eternally fixed and stable to the non-stop movement and constant change of life. This is a staple take throughout the general framework of Nietzschean thought, as it is, primarily, his attempt to dismantle the afterlife-projected mentality of Christianity. But besides the (anti)religious undertones, the discourse of constant flux and becoming – once again rooted in Greek philosophy – is a means of accepting the contingency and the suffering of human life. It conjugates the philosophy of creation which has been addressed thus far, by reclaiming the role of men as beings *in* time, and *of* time. But in Shakespeare, this condition is the essence of tragedy; as Northrop Frye, puts it,

[t]he basis of the tragic vision is being in time, the sense of the one-directional quality of life, where everything happens once and for all, where every act brings unavoidable and fateful consequences, and where all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation. In the tragic vision death is, not an incident in life, not even the inevitable end of life, but the essential event that gives shape and form to life. […] Tragedy revolves around the primary contract of man and nature, the contract fulfilled by man's death, death being, as we say, the debt he owes to nature.[89]

To this *memento mori* dread, I would add the wheel of fortune narrative. Shakespeare is interested in showing us the sudden and unrepairable changes of fates, the *fall* of men in a limited and relatively short period of time. Macbeth, on the other hand, has feverish dreams of stability, prosperity, and eternity. Continuing his bloodline becomes an anguished categorical imperative which, as I have previously argued, seems fruitless from the start. Situated in the reality Shakespeare has shaped for him and born in a world where "suffering is needed", his angst is reinforced in a crescendo which only Lady Macbeth's suicide seems to have silenced. But far from resorting to nihilism at the very end in a pitiful and self-complacent way, the seeds of nihilism were planted in Macbeth from the infamous encounter which ultimately marked his (and Banquo's) life. He manifested a nihilistic attitude throughout the entire play, an example being Act 2.3. After murdering King Duncan, he had no choice but to pretend that he was equally

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[88] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 66.
[89] Northrop Frye, "Fools of Time, Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy", University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1967, pp. 3-4.

shocked and grieving as Banquo and Macduff were. And although we know that he is putting a double façade, I would not consider his lines as artificially mendacious and cunning when he observes: "from this instant,/ There is nothing serious in mortality,/ All is but toys; renown and grace is dead,/ The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees/ Is left this vault to brag of"(Act 2.3).

Instead of dissimulating a desperate reaction mimicking Banquo's and Macduff's, he chose to speak in a way that resonates with his final speech in a nihilistic and unsettling way. Ironically, him saying that 'and the mere lees/ Is left' disturbingly signals a partial truth. The '*To-morrow*' speech is a dark epiphany which not only exhibits nihilism in a condensed core, but that also reveals him the nature of time, redefining his perception of life. Now that he is sitting on the throne of mud, as Nietzsche would call it, he understands time. And the moment he grasps it, his demise has already started (Malcolm's closing speech is only a few pages away).

The excerpt quoted above restates the centrality of suffering: one of Nietzsche's many intuitions was, in fact, the relationship between pain a pleasure. Suffering and bliss are not mutually exclusive, but rather directly proportionate. Sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss enables one to experience pure joy more intensely; as George de Huszar explains:

> [W]hile it is possible to go through life without great pain, great joy will be lacking too, for pain is the father of joy, and suffering and happiness grow together or remain small together […] The person who transvalues his values finds tragic delight in life. He is not a stranger in a world he never made.[90]

Nietzschean philosophy incorporates analogous antithetic yet inextricable and inseparable oppositions – pain and joy, death and creation – in the same way Shakespeare uses language in the lines I have previously pinpointed. Nietzsche's advocation for "bitter dying" and suffering is not a sterile martyr-complexed nihilistic act of masochism to appease the philosopher-prophet's ego who pre-emptively isolates himself, hermit-like. Embracing mortality, for Nietzsche, is embracing life:

> Indeed, much bitter dying must be in your life, you creators! Therefore you are advocates and justifiers of all that is not everlasting. In order for the creator himself to be the child who is newly born, he must also want to be the birth-giver and the pain of giving birth.[91]

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[90] George de Huszar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence", p. 265.
[91] *Ibidem.*

Lady Macbeth's suicide and Macbeth's wretched soul denounce their inability to bear such sufferance. Their deficiencies in front of the '*way of the creator*' is part of what denies their redemption. Macbeth's embracing of mortality is the exact opposite of Zarathustra's: as Marina Favila underlines, Macbeth does not want to "become", he wants to "be […] always"[92]. And to be king always, he enters a spiral of "mortal thoughts"[93], a path paved by multiple murders. The way Macbeth walks this path is related to his understanding of time and has drawn the attention of a number of critics. The first issue to be addressed is his expectancy for judgement, presumably in the afterlife. Favila points out how he "figures the murder as a hunt whose consequences end with the hunt itself"[94]: he believes in the final and deserved judgement ("But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,/ We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases/ We still have judgment here, that we but teach/ Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return/ To plague th' inventor") – but until that moment he persists in "leaping and jumping over eternal consequence"[95].

Northrop Frye has grouped Macbeth under Shakespeare's "tragedies of order". The Jacobean Age was the era of unification of England and Scotland, which terminated with a severe economic depression and, on top of that, the 1625 bubonic plague outbreak. Scholars have noticed the darkness of the tones in literature and the pattern of testing the stability of social order. In addressing Macduff's supposedly heroic and valiant order-restoring avenging regicide, Foran draws an "image of doomsday with dismay" presumably voicing "the Jacobean audience's expected response to regicide", an audience which will be confronted forty years later with the same "apocalyptic fervor in Britain"[96]. Reducing the text to the context is an oversimplification and, therefore, not my purpose. Yet, nihilism is the product of a specific historical situation and, to this end, it is useful to remark how Nietzsche's late nineteenth century was baptized as an age of historic decadence. The *Untimely Meditations* (anticipated at the beginning of the chapter) addressed Nietzsche's "historical alienation" resulting from such social

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[92] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 1, The University of Chicago Press, 2001 1-25, p. 1.
[93] *Ibidem.*
[94] Scott F. Crider, "Figures Unethical: Circumlocution and evasion in Act 1 of *Macbeth*", in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. C. Bourne & E. C. Bourne, Routledge, London, 2019, 210-227, p. 219.
[95] *Ibidem.*
[96] Gregory Foran, "Eschatology and ecclesiology in "Macbeth"", p. 3.

corruption, and the subsequent "disillusioned distance"[97] from which history is perceived.

Just like the issue of time is, according to Frye, the essence of all tragedies, of the tragic itself, Carl Pletsch has rightfully highlighted the fact that the philosophy of time is for Nietzsche "the whole of his philosophy"[98]. Time is, for him, "infinite and aimless"[99] and the philosophically relevant question he was left with was "how the eternal future and the eternal past relate to each other"[100]. A popular theme of baroque literature is the convergence and overlapping of reality and dream – a theme that emerged in Shakespeare as well[101]. In his 1874 essay *On the Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche conceptualises the unhistorical and the historical man, both of equal necessity and importance: while the unhistorical consciousness is "the ability to live in the immediate present"[102], the historical conscience is clouded by "the terrifying awareness of eternal becoming"[103] which he avoids "by seeing the present only as a 'hyphen between the past and the future'"[104]. As Pletsch explains, the unhistorical man is not aware of eternal becoming and is thus immune to its horror. Contrarily the historical man is, like Macbeth, wide awake in the nightmare. On the one hand we have an "eternally meaningful present"[105] which is constantly reborn in the mind of the unhistorical, who, in his art of "being able to forget"[106] reminds us of our animal legacy. On the other hand, we have a historical consciousness which prevents us from living in the "immediate present"[107]. Nietzsche had Zarathustra confess that the idea of eternal return horrifies him when he writes: "I feared my own thoughts and hesitations"[108].

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[97] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", p. 31.
[98] *Ibidem.*
[99] *Ibidem.*
[100] *Ibidem.*
[101] In *Macbeth*, the sleepwalking episode is the primary example of this motif that I would call "*stream of unconsciousness*". Lady Macbeth's detailed oneiric experiences, culminating with her delusional attempt to clean her blood-stained hands, are meant to represent the liminal stage of her conscience. Because the *limen* is humanly untraversable, this "*journey at the end of the night*" casts her into a state of, what Nietzsche, Freud and Marx would call, "*fake conscience*" – as well as preluding her final self-annihilation.
[102] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", p. 33.
[103] *Ibidem.*
[104] *Ibidem.*
[105] *Ivi*, p. 35.
[106] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Untimely Meditations", p. 63.
[107] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", p. 33.
[108] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 178.

Macbeth's perversions of eternity and his final denouncing of the slowness of time share the same inability to live in the present which Nietzsche ascribes to the Historical Man. If by the end of the play, once he assumes the pace of life as bare meaninglessness and unsubstantiality, he comes to be repulsed by eternity, all instants of meaningful present point to "dusty death". Critics have exposed his "circumventing [of] times and things"[109], his going *back and forth*, his continuous attempt to "'jump', 'mock', 'master', 'beguile' time, cheating the present to get to the future"[110], his terror of resting in the present and simultaneous fear of the future which drive him to the Witches[111], or his relapsing back into "Revelation's imagery of blasting trumpets and angelic horsemen"[112] when assessing Duncan's murder. According to Favila's insight about the last soliloquy uttered by Macbeth, his bending and distortion of time enters a crisis: her reading shows how his *to-morrows*, paradoxically, do not point to the future, but backwards, to the present and to the past "leading us, ironically, back to death"[113].

> Macbeth is caught in the sameness of any day, past, present, or future, that lights our way into darkness. Yet Macbeth is not just caught in a time warp where every day is the same day; he is trapped once more in the future. Tomorrow takes the place of today, indeed acts as if it is today. Macbeth uses the present tense to describe time's movement: tomorrow "*creeps*" from day to day, living and dying before it is born. The whole passage is suggestive of a life already lived. Macbeth, again, sees the "*future in the instant*"[114].

Up until this point it appears that a partial identification between Nietzsche/Zarathustra and Historical Man/Macbeth is possible. But Nietzsche, who was probably allergic to mere dualisms, always gives the third option, and that is the suprahistorical (*uberhistorisch*) man. Briefly, "in order to get over the horror of becoming […] historical man invents the pursuit of happiness in history"[115]. If the unhistorical man is "*viable*" – meaning he lets the flux of time and becoming flow through himself – the historical man is "*evasive*"[116] – he is detached, disillusioned, abstracted. The suprahistorical man "too recognizes eternal becoming, but he persists in this awareness"[117] by being true to it and "true to the essence of history"[118]. Therefore,

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[109] Tzachi Zamir, "Upon one Bank and Shoal of Time", p. 532.
[110] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", p. 16.
[111] *Ibidem.*
[112] Gregory Foran, "Eschatology and ecclesiology in "Macbeth"", p. 10.
[113] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", p. 23.
[114] *Ibidem.*
[115] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time, History and Theory", p. 33.
[116] *Ibidem.*
[117] *Ivi*, p. 34.

if he is wise "his wisdom disgusts him", or at least this was Nietzsche's condition in 1874. That was the precocious and premature period of his writing which prepares the ground for his Zarathustra, whose first edition is dated 1881-1883. Indeed, "overcoming this disgust"[119] is the mission to achieve: "to overcome the conscious 'no' of the suprahistorical man to repetition and to incorporate into eternal recurrence the 'moment' when the world is complete and has achieved its end as one that has always existed"[120]. Therefore, Zarathustra, as the figurative embodiment of Nietzsche's stage of maturity, comes to the embracing of death and mortality. On the one hand he is able to do so as he is guided by the faith in eternal recurrence, while on the other hand, it is the act of accepting one's finitude which can be traced back to the concept of *Amor Fati*. When Nietzsche writes "I know the heartbreaking final hours"[121] he is not simply accepting his more or less metaphorical end. He is, more decisively, claiming it: "just such a destiny – my will wills"[122]. Death is one of the ways through which Time realizes itself, *from the past until completion.*

The gap between Macbeth and Nietzsche is yet another missed leap that Mabeth fails to perform, exactly like the third metamorphosis. While Macbeth "perceives the mere growth and passing away of all things as the only structure of time – a structure of meaninglessness", which time-bounds human life to those "vicissitudes of time", thus depriving it of permanent features[123], Nietzsche – who starts from the same perspective of the same structure – "says '*once again*' in order to first give it meaning"[124]. Such is, according to Pletsch, the meaning of Nietzsche's affirmative nihilism – a philosophical posture on the extreme limit of nihilism as we know it[125], which takes us back to the Pre-Socratics:

> The affirmation of ephemerality and annihilation, which is the decisive part of a Dionysian philosophy; the yea-saying to opposition and war; becoming, along with radical repudiation of the very concept of being . . . The doctrine of eternal return, that is to say, of the unconditional and

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[118] *Ibidem.*
[119] *Ivi*, p. 35.
[120] *Ibidem.*
[121] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 66.
[122] *Ibidem.*
[123] Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche", *New Literary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, 83-101, p. 85.
[124] Carl E. Pletsch, "History and Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy of Time", pp. 35-36.
[125] It is Nietzsche himself who considers his position as "*being barely within the philosophical tradition*" (*Ibidem*) – hence the questioning of all-reducing and all-comprehensive labels from the very beginning of this chapter.

endlessly repeated circulation of all things – this doctrine of Zarathustra might in the end have been taught already by Heraclitus.[126]

I have started this chapter by provoking and questioning the labelling of Nietzsche as a simple "nihilist": affirmative nihilism is not the same as plain nihilism, or pessimism, or cynicism, or, least of all, defeatism. If this evolved breed of nihilism which cut ties with Schopenhauer is ultimately vital, it is such a "liberating experience because it shows that reality has lost all meaning to the extent that we have deprived it of meaning through the positing of a world other than the one we inhabit, suffer in, and in which we try to express our freedom, our will to power"[127]. The dead-end Macbeth falls into after shifting all meaning on his dreams of eternal life – thus depriving *his* life of all meaning – is a dead-end of passive nihilism fuelled by what psychoanalysts would call a death drive[128]. The projection of value to an afterlife, according to Nietzsche, is the consequence of the loss of meaning which used to lie in intention: when the human will is devalued, men look for a divine will that can restore a superior meaning. In Robert Nicholl's words, "[t]he will becomes free when it can choose time's passing, when it can will itself in its own transience and finitude", when it no longer conceives being "as the timeless permanence of presence"[129]. This is why the next chapter centres the problem of the individual will and its alleged freedom, both in relation to *Macbeth*'s prophetism and to Nietzsche's overcoming of nihilism.

1.4 Thrones of Mud and Thrones of Blood

Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth* (*Throne of Blood*, 1957) absorbed Shakespeare's philosophy and briefly rephrased it in the forest spirit's song:

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[126] Nietzsche, Werke, II, 464-467.

[127] Keith J. Ansell-Pearson, "The Exoteric Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche", pp. 501-502.

[128] Death drive is related to the pattern of repetition, which can be applied to *Macbeth* if considering the existentialist time discourse, but also his constant resorting to esoteric prophecies and murder as his two main ways of dealing with major inconveniences. For more specific insights regarding Freudian Psychoanalysis see: Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The International Psycho-Analytical Press, London, 1922.

[129] Robert Nicholls, "The Child's New Time: Heidegger's Nietzsche: Time Beyond Revenge", in *Zarathustra's Joyful Annunciations of…,* ed. David Goicoechea & Marko Zlomislic, Though House Publishing Group, 1995, 17-39, p. 38.

Strange is the world/Why should men/Receive life in this world?/Men's lives are as meaningless/As the lives of insects/The terrible folly/Of such suffering/A man lives but/As briefly as a flower/Destined all too soon/To decay into the stink of flesh/Humanity strives/All its days/To sear its own flesh/In the flames of base desire/Exposing itself/To Fate's Five Calamities/Heaping karma upon karma/All that awaits Man/At the end/Of his travails/Is the stench of rotting flesh/That will yet blossom into flower/Its foul odor rendered/Into sweet perfume/Oh, fascinating/The life of Man/Oh, fascinating.[130]

This passage is particularly telling for a number of reasons, one of it being the mingling of Western and Eastern philosophy. From the inconsistency and unsubstantiality of life (*vanitas*) to the cyclical transformation of stinking flesh into the blossoming flower (a perspective on life which sees the compenetrating nature of the opposites famously symbolized by the yin and the yang: where there is life there is death, and vice versa), from the decay and debasement of "base desire" ("the worst of the medieval seven deadly sins"[131]) to their ultimate annihilation, the spirit of the forest lucidly chants about an extreme form of nihilism in which there is no apparent reason why men should receive life. In the film, the spirit is treated like a Shakespearean Fool who talks nonsense and enjoys cunning his listeners. Both the spirit and the witches persuade Macbeth into his own nightmarish dream of sovereignty: the Witches promise him that no man of woman born will defeat him, while the spirit assures Washizu (Macbeth's alias) that he will be invincible as long as the trees of the forest will not start walking. However, if the Witches' speeches are undecipherable and filled with oxymorons, the spirit's song is much more lucid and clearer, almost didactic. Interestingly so, the spirit recalls the Fool better than the Witches, as he *is* telling a truth, although unasked for and inaudible for the two samurais.

Throne of Blood ends with the revelation of the Spirit's prophecy to provide its audience with a rational explanation accounting for the destabilizing view of a walking forest: how can a mass of trees *possibly* walk? The film reassures its spectators that Washizu's opponents have simply cut trees during the night and used them as a shield to march in front of his castle. The ending of *Macbeth*, which does expose Macduff's Caesarean delivery as the fatal detail in the Witches' prophecy, leaves more space for destabilization.

Regardless of its restored order theorised by Ribner, *Macbeth* is a tragedy, and tragic epilogues are inherently not pacifying – otherwise they would not be tragedies. I

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[130] Throne of Blood, dir. Akira Kurosawa, Toho Co., Ltd, Japan, 1957, Film.
[131] Irving Ribner, "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 149.

have emphasized how Shakespeare did not grant Macbeth's suicide and had him, rightly one might say, slayed by the avenging Macduff. While his demise could be – and has been – read as the legitimate and deserving ending, as the coherent and symbolic epilogue which crowns the natural order as the supreme ruler over men's individual fates, there is still much discomfort in Macbeth's fulfilled death penalty. As Michael Bristol confesses, "Macbeth frightens me and at the same time he makes me sad. When the story is finished, he knows something about himself even if understanding comes too late and costs too much. I have to respect that"[132]. Tragic epilogues served many purposes, all purposes but that of resolving our existential interrogatives. Our doubts are unreconciled and unresolvable, and tragedies remind us that the paradigmatic emptiness that is left in their epilogues is infinitely more appealing and interesting than the densest plotlines. We are left with the same, perhaps unanswerable, questions, the same which will be addressed in the following chapters: how did this happen? What is evil? The *skepsis* continues, and it does so by embarking on the previously anticipated discussion about human will. By elaborating on the problem of nihilism, the following chapter attempts to offer new insights about Macbeth's agency and prophetic mindset which concur to the tragic marring of his life.

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[132] Michael Bristol, "Macbeth the philosopher: Rethinking Context", *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 4, The John Hopkins University Press, 2011, 641-662, p. 659.

Chapter Two: The problems of Choice and Action. *Strong* and *Weak* Wills

> "*when he committed the wrong he was in his senses, i.e., he was in possession of his freedom*"
> Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Practical Reason

The previous chapter exposed Macbeth's fixation with eternity while starring in a tragedy which, in its tragic nature, deals with the inexorable flowing of time. I have pointed out that the final overtaking of nihilism is not accidentally related to the issue of time in the "To-morrow" speech for the same reason why Nietzsche regarded the eternal recurrence of the same as the fulcrum of his philosophy. Accepting the world of *becoming* for what it is was conceived as the ultimate challenge to the overcoming of "passive" nihilism. In *The Will to Power* – a selection of Nietzsche's notebooks written between 1883 to 1889 – he writes that ""Willing": means willing an end", an end that gives meaning to life itself and is embraced by the overman. Things are complicated when he adds the further step, implying that such ""[…] end" includes an evaluation"[133]. Evaluating inherently means assessing value, but the nihilist systematically *devalues the highest values*. Starting from the natural condition which sees the individual dealing with "a vast confusion of contradictory valuations and consequently of contradictory drives"[134], Nietzsche argues that all evaluations are a product of a unique perspective. The tension arising between conflicting instincts is what, in spite of the acute psychological turmoil it entails, enables men to acquire knowledge and "comprehension beyond good and evil"[135] – which is the same task Macbeth struggles with. In unpacking the assumption that "nothing has meaning", Nietzsche explains that ""[a]ll meaning lies in intention, and if intention is altogether lacking, then meaning is altogether lacking, too"" and that "[i]n accordance with this valuation, one was constrained to transfer the value of life to a "life after death""[136]. This is why the philosophy of time implies, among other things, a reflection on the act of willing and evaluating. As I will show in the last section of this chapter, the world of

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[133] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, p. 150.
[134] *Ivi*, p. 149.
[135] *Ivi*, p. 150.
[136] *Ivi*, p. 351.

becoming must be accepted without recurring to a will, to an intention, to a higher-ranking divine evaluation which brings meaning from the outside.

This chapter starts by briefly introducing the concept of evil and its relationship with the will. The second section joins the debate around Macbeth's "free" will and agency starting from a selection of dedicated essays. The third section concludes by associating these commentaries with the Nietzschean notion of "will to power" and its relation with nihilism. To do so, I will restrict my attention to the aforementioned *Will to Power*, edited by Walter Kauffman in its restored version, as well as two of his later works, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) and *The Anti-Christ* (1895) – much of which derived from his notebooks. By incorporating Nietzsche's stances towards will, purpose, action and morality, the chapter attempts to provide another interpretation of *Macbeth* centring on the moral side of nihilism.

Critics have wrestled with the problems of free will and evil in their analysis of the main character. The debate either points at his lucidity and self-awareness – thus emphasizing the deliberateness of his choices – or, on the other hand, to his pursuit of a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to hollowness and self-alienation. Most critics are firm in holding Macbeth fully accountable for his actions, and even those hinting at the misguiding role of the self-fulfilling prophecy do not remove responsibility from Macbeth but, rather, point at the opaqueness and ambiguity of his motives.[137] Yet, the two core constructs at the basis of an analysis of the play – free will and evil – are far from unproblematic. Both notions are intertwined with each other, and they both posit intricate interrogatives regarding their sole existence. In the first case, that of free will has been a philosophical trend living eras of increasing and decreasing popularity. In the other case, the incursion of evil, which menaced human will, has also been perceived as almost unexplainable. Theodicy, the branch of religion philosophy addressing the presence of evil, attempts to provide an explanation for its intrusion in God's perfect world. The following section briefly introduces its theories, and the legacy carried on by Western philosophical tradition – with its implications around human will – in order to give a first interpretation of the play.

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[137] As for the psychological insights on Macbeth's lucidity, I am referring to Cox's "Religion and Suffering in Macbeth" and Crider's "Figures Unethical". Suggestions of the self-fulfilling prophecy are to be found in C.G. Martin's "The Reason of 'Radical' Evil", while the theme of hollowness is the core of Zamir's ("Upon One Bank and Shoal of Time"), Kirsch's ("Macbeth's Suicide") and Bristol's ("Macbeth the Philosopher") readings.

2.1 Framing Evil: on Theodicy and Free Will

In the introduction to *The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy*, Kremer and Latzer write:

> Philosophically, evil presented a challenge to the consistency and rationality of the world-picture disclosed by the new way of ideas. But in dealing with this challenge, philosophers were also influenced by the theological debates about original sin, free will, and justification that were the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, and that exercised a formative influence on European intellectual life right up to the publication of Leibniz's Theodicy in 1710.[138]

Macbeth has already been read as a tragedy depicting a "Reformation anxiety" dramatizing the moral upheaval brought by Protestantism and reminiscent of Christian imagery[139]. For two centuries, "the problem of freedom and predestination reached an unsurpassed degree of crisis"[140], a crisis Shakespeare has internalized and represented by reproducing the level of ambiguity and uncertainty which featured his age.

Before understanding how evil corrupted Macbeth, scholars endeavouring in theological interpretations of the play needed to justify the presence of evil in itself. The Pagan world did not problematize it because the Gods were not believed to be necessarily benign themselves. As Catherine Gimelli Martin explains, "[i]n other forms of monotheism, including Platonism, evil was usually explained away as either an illusion or a stage in psychic evolution"[141] . Therefore, evil became a contradicting presence in the Judeo-Christian tradition – whose God was supposedly good and just, and yet had created Satan. In the Middle Ages, Augustine initially embraced the Manicheans sept argument which "posit[ed] an evil god as the source of evil, leaving good alone as the product of the good god". However, he later discovered "the 'nothingness' of evil", which he saw as "simply the privation or absence of a good which ought to be present"[142]. The idea of evil as a sort of void is significant for an interpretation of *Macbeth*, which has been previously read as the tale of "emptying out

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[138] Kremer & Latzer, "Introduction" in *The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. By Kremer & Latzer, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, 3-9, p. 3.

[139] One interesting observation was provided by Catherine Gimelli Martin who noticed the assonance between Satan and Macbeth's chief servant Seyton (see: C.G. Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil", *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 113, No. 1, 2016). See Chapter 1.3.2 for historical insights about Reformation and literature.

[140] Kremer & Latzer (eds), "The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy", p. 5.

[141] Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Ethical Philosophers", *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 113, No. 1, 2016, 163-197, p. 164.

[142] Kremer & Latzer (eds), "The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy", p. 4.

of all human existence"[143], as the tragedy of a character sunk in hollowness who is stuck contemplating his own *horror vacui*. Remarkably, Foucault understood the features of madness as those of "*nothingness*"[144]; at the peak of his lucid folly – the ecstatic breach causing him to hemorrhagically lose substance – Macbeth declares his final and unequivocal embrace of nihilism. Similarly, his wife was wiped out by the same maddening sense of guilt.

According to Augustine, God had his own reasons to allow the *privatio boni* (lack of good). In his aesthetic theodicy, Augustine argued that "just as shadows are needed in paintings and dissonance in musical compositions"[145], God might "judge it better to bring good out of evil than to allow nothing evil to exist."[146]. In other words, "God is able to draw good even out of the disordered (hence evil) choices of free rational agents, angelic and human, which choices are themselves the causes of a vast amount (if not all) of the evil around us."[147] That is what Augustine referred to as the "free will defence". The same notion was elaborated by Descartes in the IV Meditation, in which he locates "the origin of evil in the will of the erring creature", defending both the notion of free will and that of the "predestination of all events"[148].

According to W. C. Curry, traces of Augustinian theories are carried out by the extremely unusual – hence significant – word choice of "germens" in Banquo's and Macbeth's lines in Act 4.1:

> Curry pointed out that both passages draw on a neo-Platonic and stoic idea that when God transformed chaos into created matter, God first made "seeds of reason" (*logoi spermatakoi* in Greek, translated as *rationes seminales* in Latin), which mediate between ideal forms in the divine mind and material essences. Adopting this idea to explain how evil disrupts Gods plan, Augustine speculated that God permits demons to know the "seeds of reason" and on occasion to speed up natural (i.e., divinely ordained) processes in a destructive manner. This is what Banquo refers to, Curry argued, when he says to the witches, "you can look into the seeds of time / And say which grain will grow and which will not" (Macbeth , 1.3.58-59), and it is what Macbeth refers to when he says that the witches, empowered by their "masters," can tumble natures "germens" (or seeds) together even till destruction.[149]

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[143] Arthur Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide", p. 292.

[144] Michel Foucault, "Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason", Vintage Books, New York, 1988, p. 107.

[145] Kremer & Latzer (eds), "The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy", p. 4.

[146] Augustine, "Confessions and Enchiridion", ed. by Albert Cook Outler, The Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1955, p. 355.

[147] Kremer & Latzer (eds), "The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy", p. 4.

[148] *Ivi*, p. 5.

[149] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering in "Macbeth"", *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 225-240, p. 226.

Reinterpreting Augustine, idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling argues that evil derives "not from 'nothing' but from the hidden potentiality of God, and especially from his irremediably ambiguous gift of freedom"; yet God is the only one who is able to fully grasp the essence of evil, while those choosing it are deluding themselves by "believing that they can become godlike"[150]. In other words, human beings have the freedom to choose evil, but not the faculty to understand its nature. In Hegel's understanding, the real choice that God allows us is between "freedom and self-fulfilment or submission and self-effacement"[151]. To assert oneself, the only eligible option for a subject is rebellion – the Biblical act best represented by Lucifer.

Nietzsche would seem to agree with Hegel for once: his tale of the three metamorphoses tells a similar story when predicting the rise of the lion as the natural reaction of the spirit who is no longer satisfied with mindless obedience to authority. Significantly, the Third Apparition inspires Macbeth to be "lion-mettled" and "proud" (Act 4.1). If "evil is both necessary and inherent in the good of self-individuation", then it makes sense why "Macbeth cannot pursue his natural destiny without committing the positive good of self-affirmation"[152].

In *Macbeth* the prevailing tension between obedience and rebellion is explicated by the recurrent and pressing idea of *going against nature*. From the first Act of the play, "the merciless Macdonald" and the Goodness of Fortune assisting him are addressed as "a rebel" and "a rebel's whore" respectively.

The first character sensing the unnaturalness of the soon-to-be-accomplished deed is Macbeth himself. His line "Whose horrid image…Against the use of nature?" (Act 1.3) immediately reveals that in fulfilling the prophecy – which originated from the intelligence of supernatural beings nonetheless – he would disrupt the natural order and pre-existing harmony of his kingdom. Declaring that "[n]ow o'er the one half-world Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abused/ The curtained sleep" (Act 2.1) suggests that nature has been fatally offended and entombed in perpetual darkness. At the same time, him contemplating a seemingly dead nature could be a reference to the Still Life artistic movement associated with *vanitas*. Likewise, Macbeth's observing of how Duncan's "gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature" (Act 2.3) reiterates the same

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[150] Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil", pp. 172-173.
[151] *Ivi*, p. 178.
[152] *Ivi*, p. 177.

concept. Besides the main character, the old man conversing with Ross in the second Act and the Doctor assisting Lady Macbeth are two other *dramatis personae* who recognize the lack of natural order. They both describe the deed as "unnatural": while the old man, who does not suspect Macbeth yet and believes the parricide hypothesis, points out its going "against obedience" (Act 2.4), the Doctor is more interested in observing that "unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles" (Act 5.1), which is the same reason why his natural science is of no use for Lady Macbeth's illness. In Act 4.1, referring to the new set of prophecies, Macbeth triumphantly cries: "Rebellious dead, rise never till the wood/ Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed Macbeth/ Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath/ To time and mortal custom". The walking forest is an example of rebellion for it goes against nature. In prohibiting rebellion and demanding obedience to the natural order of things, Macbeth becomes the same Tyrant he rebelled against. The fact that these "unnatural" clauses – the walking forest, the man of no woman born – eventually realize themselves in spite of reason and logic, signals a loss of order, harmony and security, a breach of natural laws – but this time, at Macbeth's expenses. Because this kind of supreme disorder defeats Macbeth, it consequently restores the lost order.

What is remarkable in these instances, save for the last one, is that this absolute repulsion and rejection of the evil deed – which dangerously reversed the harmony of the cosmos and plunged it into chaos – is an attempt to push evil to the *unnatural* (or *supernatural*) realm, an attempt to rationalize evil, to place a safe distance between the human and the non-human. Only the Doctor, aware of the limits of medicine in the treatment of mental disorders, seems to feel a universal sense of guilt by hopelessly exclaiming "God, God forgive us all". But perhaps, *Macbeth* attempts to uncover the all-too-human nature of evil – which is the type of awareness characterizing the era of modernity. This argument is reinforced by the plain observation that the Witches do not even instruct Macbeth as to "the means to kingship"[153], because it is him who fathoms the mysterious scenario by means of the unfathomable project of murder. As Ribner puts it, the Witches "simply suggest an object which may incite the inclination to evil which is always within man"[154]. Banquo is the only character who seems to grasp the continuity between good and evil: in reflecting how "oftentimes, to win us to our harm,

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[153] King-Kok Cheung, "Shakespeare and Kierkegaard", p. 431.
[154] Irving Ribner, "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 151.

/ The instruments of darkness tell us truths" (Act 1.3) he recognizes how truth can lie among both, although "in general, evil works through deception"[155]. Not accidentally does Banquo refer to the Witches as "the instrument of darkness", as their appearance always imply scarcity of vision and a disturbingly gloomy atmosphere of thunders and lightings. According to John Wilders' commentary of *Macbeth* (2004) "after the disappearance of the witches it grows light, the mists disperse, and we have a clear view across the Scottish landscape"[156]. Their vanishing "[i]nto the air" is also significant for Macbeth, who witnesses how "what seemed corporal,/ Melted, as breath into the wind" (Act 1.3), denouncing the loss of corporality which, in turn, implies unsubstantiality and invisibility. Therefore, the Witches embody darkness not only as an index of malignity and evil, but also – and most importantly – as an impairment to vision. Most of the actions in the play take place at night because vision – symbolized by lightness – is feared. Macbeth's lines "Yet let that be,/ What the eye fears when it is done to see" (Act 1.4) and "Art thou, fatal vision, sensible/ To feeling as to sight?" (Act 2.1), or Lady Macbeth's "That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (Act 1.5) are examples of the embracing of darkness and invisibility. As Scott F. Crider puts it, Macbeth commands the stars to "hide their light" so that they can prevent him from seeing what he is thinking about doing: "he does not want to know what it is he is deliberating about doing until it is done"[157].

Christian philosophy has outlined a taxonomy of evil which distinguishes "unwitting or passion induced error" and "deliberate evil"[158]. In her article about Shakespeare and Milton, Catherine Gimelli Martin explains that deliberate evil – or "real evil" – appears "through conscious, rational choice", while misleading sense perceptions account for such "fallen desires or motives", which do not coincide with real evil. The discriminant is, therefore, the concurrence of mind and will – which, according to Martin, were fully sound once Macbeth decided to go ahead with his business.[159]

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[155] *Ivi*, p. 152.
[156] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", ed. by John Wilders, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 89.
[157] Scott F. Crider, "Figures unethical: Circumlocution and evasion in Act 1 of *Macbeth*" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. C. Bourne & E.C. Bourne, Routledge, London, 2019, 210-227, p. 217.
[158] Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil", p. 165.
[159] *Ibidem.*

The play's narrative walks the tightrope between mental derangement and "demonic inspiration" – featuring "evil visitations, premonitions, and hallucinations"[160] – and the *spermatakoi* – with their unbearable lucidity and extreme consciousness. Macbeth is a character who crosses the line between these two realms, thus experiencing both the maddening and paranormal visitation of evil, which dived him into the abyss of folly and hollowness, and the new, insightful form of knowledge about reality. In ascertaining how Macbeth was sound of mind, Martin quotes Robert F. Fleissner, who similarly argued that

> the original audience of Macbeth would readily have perceived that before he commits his crime, he completes all the steps traditionally associated with mortal sin: "(1) recognizing] the seriousness of his crime-to-be, (2) reflect[ing] on it sufficiently, but then (3) willfully proceed[ing] to commit it regardless

Another distinction between different breeds of evil is to be found in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, in which he separates *instrumental* evil – the "selfish pursuit of illicit ends for personal gain" – from *radical* evil – "evil for its own sake". The latter, just like good deeds, "transcends or even forsakes normal worldly benefits" but it "perversely invert[s] the moral law by declaring evil good and good evil". According to Martin, Macbeth starts by fulfilling his plan mainly for instrumental reasons, but at the same time he persists in his deeds because "he is beginning to enjoy inflicting powerlessness, shame, and suffering on others for its own sake" – thus embracing depravity and sadism. In either case, the role of his will is fundamental in the progressive evolving of his actions.

Historicists, in believing that historical circumstances produce action – hence "agency and intention are illusions"[161] – are one exception to this perspective. Likewise, postmodern behaviourist psychology liquidates free will as "a logical impossibility" in which character is "an illusion, […] a pre-established and only partially unstable circuit of innate and acquired habits"[162]. In this view, "[e]ven when a bad character turns good or a good one turns bad, no real change occurs – some invisible switch in the circuit has simply been flipped"[163]. Even without accepting the thesis of predisposition, which arbitrarily excludes any form of deliberate choice, it is interesting to observe the

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[160] *Ibidem.*
[161] Michael Bristol, "Macbeth the philosopher", p. 655.
[162] Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil", p. 179.
[163] *Ibidem.*

46

occurrence of such "invisible switch in the circuit", which makes the individual undergoing a series of transformations while remaining and considering oneself as essentially the same.

In the 1989 Introduction to the Italian edition of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Giulio Raio writes:

> Metamorphosis is not change; as radical as it might be, change always occur in a subject who remains identical, change regards the accident – not the substance. Transmutation in form, on the other hand, means that something – all at once and in its totality – is something else, and that 'else' is its true essence[164]

It is safe to argue that Macbeth is another character by the end of the story, but his substance has not changed (it was rather emptied out). Metamorphosis is a shift in terms of appearance which leaves the essence intact; in psychoanalysis it is a manifestation of the unconscious desire. According to Matthew N. Proser, the Witches are not the *inspiration*, but rather the *manifestation* of Macbeth's latent desire which he reifies (the dagger becomes the corrosive symbol of the deed). As he argues: "The weird sisters do not even plant the seed of desire in Macbeth, but rather, their 'All hail's' incantatory and enigmatic, act as an objectification of a desire already existent within Macbeth"[165]. Banquo's persistent question addressing the Witches: "Are ye fantastical" – in which fantastical means "imaginative" – resonates in Macbeth's consideration of his thought "whose murder yet is but fantastical", reinforcing the idea that the witches represent his secret desire.

2.2 "Fate up against your Will"? Prefiguration, Imagination and the Perversion of the Will

Speaking of a pre-determined, pre-established, pre-existing condition might sound as an attempt to refute responsibility – until we add volition to the equation. This

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[164] Giulio Raio, Preface to "Il Processo" by Franz Kafka, Biblioteca Economica Newton, Roma, 1994, p. 7 (my translation).
[165] Matthew N. Proser, "The Heroic Image", Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, p. 62.

section explores the enigmatic role of Macbeth's individual will in relation to obscure prophecies, melancholic alterations of the psyche, and the theme of destiny set up as an *idée fixe* ultimately resulting in the perversion of the will. To do so, I will resort to several studies and commentaries which have raised the same questions.

2.2.1 On Prefiguration and Foreknowledge

One detail in the play that has been perhaps not sufficiently investigated is the fact that Macbeth and Banquo found their way to the Witches on their own and under unspecified circumstances. From their reactions, readers can safely assume that the encounter was not intentional or planned, but the Third Witch, the same one who hailed Macbeth as future king, seems to have predicted his arrival ("A drum, a drum/ Macbeth doth come"). What is even more perplexing is that she sensed Macbeth's presence, but not Banquo's. Something similar will happen again in their second meeting, before which the Second Witch immediately perceives his presence as she warns "[s]omething wicked this way comes" (Act 4.1). Undoubtedly, the background around the meeting in Act 1.3 is one of the first, if not *the* first, mysteries of the play. The Witches' reunion occupies the very first scene of the play, ending with the sisters famously chanting their motto "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". Interestingly enough, the first line uttered by Macbeth in his first appearance – prior to their meeting – is "[s]o foul and fair a day I have not seen" (Act 1.3). The first result of his line is that of immediately recalling the Witches' quintessence, almost suggesting an "intercourse" between them which transforms the "external temptation" more into a "psychological projection"[166].

But on top of that, Macbeth also inverts the two terms by saying "foul and fair" instead of "fair and foul" – thus signalling his future twisting of reality. In a play about foreknowledge, many are the moments of prefiguration of the deed as a literary device. The first one, in narrative terms, is Macbeth's defeat of Macdonald, the "disloyal traitor", who deservingly lost his life to bear his "heavy judgement": following Macbeth's victory, Duncan – completely oblivious of the fact that he is about to replace a traitor with another traitor – commented "[n]o more that Thane of Cawdor shall

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[166] King-Kok Cheung, "Shakespeare and Kierkegaard", p. 431.

deceive/Our bosom interest" (Act 1.2)[167]. Act 2.2 provides another blatant instance of prefiguration, when Lady Macbeth insistingly suggests that her husband wash his hands after the deed, first by urging him to "Go get some water/ And wash this filthy witness from your hand", and then by assuring that "A little water clears us of this deed". As it is well known, the gesture of obsessively washing her hands will mark her descend into insanity.   Water also suggests the history-long symbolism linked with spiritual cleansing. Similarly, in Act 3.4, by saying "I am in blood/ Stepped in so far that should I wade no more" – in which "wade" literally means to walk through water – the religious symbolism is overthrown by Macbeth. A more subtle case of prefiguration could be Macduff's inadvertent summoning of Lady Macbeth, who enters the scene in Act 2.3 right after he delivers the line "As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites", in which the "sprites" easily recall the "spirits" she evokes and that are so emblematically associated with the "fiend-like queen". Finally, Macbeth inviting Banquo to his celebrations before having him killed by his assassins is yet another moment of deeply ironical anticipation, as Banquo will come to his Banquet, though as a ghost.

The Renaissance distinguished between benign and malign spirits which were given the power of foretelling the future. These creatures often presented themselves to humans as oneiric apparitions. If malign, these spirits would play "upon his personal desires" and "delude him" accordingly by deceiving his imagination and beclouding his reason; if benign, they could "warn him" or encourage him by "anticipating future events"[168]. According to Jerome Mandel, the Renaissance man just "knew for a certainty" that such spirits were real and dwelled in a separate yet "equally real world", in which they obeyed different "laws of space and time, cause and effect"[169]. This separation may seem well-defined and abruptly stark, but the "vague, loose, less trustworthy body of knowledge"[170] circulating in the Renaissance could not always neatly and adequately elucidate on the "distinction between what was real and what was supernatural"[171]. Oneiric manifestations were one of the possible means of

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[167] The circularity of the Thanes' fates led critics to speculate about an eventual corruption of King Malcolm in succeeding Macbeth.
[168] Jerome Mandel, "Dream and Imagination in Shakespeare", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Oxford University Press, 1973, 61-68, p. 63.
[169] *Ibidem.*
[170] Hardin Craig, "The Enchanted Glass: The Elizabethan Mind in Literature", Creative Media Partners, New York, 1936, p. 66.
[171] Jerome Mandel, "Dream and Imagination in Shakespeare", p. 61.

communication between the two worlds, but men were thought to be free to accept or reject the message brought to them. In other words, despite the great powers belonging to these spirits, "they could not change free will". As Mandel explains, they could "affect a man's senses and Imagination" either "from without, when they offered the senses (awake or asleep) a sensible but insubstantial object – as evil spirits offered Macbeth a dagger, the handle toward his hand" or "from within, by jiggling the humors and bodily spirits which affect the senses in various ways"[172]. But this supernatural soliciting was always confined as an external influence whose response was the product of man's free will. Imagination, as I will show in the following subsection, plays a pivotal role in relation to free will and the ambiguous interference of supernatural spirits. The matter is complicated when the imaginative faculty was distressed or compromised by any "disturbance in the normal balance of the bodily humors", such as melancholy, or any "mental upheaval"[173] , including nervousness and fear, unleashing in the problematic visions of dreams, or in Mabeth's case, of nightmares.

2.2.2 On Rapture or Unethical Imagination

During their encounter with the Witches, Banquo immediately notices Macbeth's growing distress in hearing the prophecy and inquires him about his reaction. Macbeth's anxious temperament is evident and clashes with the courage exhibited by his comrade from the very beginning. From the moment the third Witch hailed Macbeth "that shalt be king hereafter" (Act 1.3) – in which "hereafter" means both "from now on" and "in the afterlife" – nearly every character surrounding him refers to him as "rapt". The first one is Banquo, who remarks how "he seems rapt withal" and further comments "Look how our partner's rapt" to Ross and Angus (Act 1.3). Even Wilders' commentary defines him as rapt and "[s]carcely conscious of the presence of Banquo and his friends" while "tick-coming fancies seemed to crawl through his brain"[174]. Interestingly, one of the meanings of the adjective (carried up and transported into heaven) significantly resonates with that of "hereafter" – thus contributing to the enhancement of the

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[172] *Ivi*, p. 63.
[173] *Ivi*, p. 62.
[174] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", ed. by John Wilders, p. 90.

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ambiguity of the situation. In a letter to his wife, Macbeth describes himself as "rapt in the wonder of it", referring to the "mortal knowledge" (Act 1.5) offered by the Witches. Interestingly, over the timespan of a couple of Scenes, the "strange intelligence" (Act 1.3) has already become fatal. He still adopts the word "strange" in a few more occasions (i.e., "Strange things I have in head that will to hand" or "My strange and self-abuse/ Is the initiate fear that wants hard use", both in Act 3.4), a symptom of the growing estrangement (or rapture) by which he is infected. While the Macbeths do not question the existence of the Witches, Banquo is the only character who doubts his conscience after the encounter ("have we eaten on the insane root,/ That takes the reason prisoner?") instead of being completely mesmerized by it. In his agitating state of rapture, Macbeth spirals into the depths of imagination. He seems to grasp something that exceeds his senses and his understanding, but it is not precisely clear whether it is something of metaphysical essence or if it is a "pathological imagination" or, more precisely, "humoral melancholy, alienating ecstasy, and the 'phantasma' of intent"[175]. Clinical studies on the human mind – inspired by the Aristotelian theory of mental faculties – were abundant during the Renaissance: it is an ancient knowledge mixing the Galenic theory of humours, early psychology and occult philosophy together. Philosophically speaking, imagination, or "the mind's image-making faculty"[176], has received a great deal of attention after Aristotle by Montaigne. Its "pathological associations"[177], the effects of the power exercised on the human mind, inspired him to collect a series of accounts "of false perception and delusion" which involved "psychosomatic ailments, self-fulfilling superstitions, and crafty placebos"[178]. Aristotle's explanation to "imaginative disorders" pointed at a surplus of melancholy. In asking how and when do these melancholy-related "hallucinatory ecstasies"[179] degenerate into potentially dangerous and harmful situations, Suparna Roychoudhury suggests the presence of an "impersonal and perceptual"[180] type of melancholy in Macbeth. Recurring to the term "ecstasy" is not casual: if the limen between inward and outward is blurred in Macbeth's complicated relationship between mind and external

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[175] Suparna Roychoudhury, "Melancholy, Ecstasy, Phantasma", p. 1.
[176] *Ivi*, p. 207.
[177] *Ivi*, p. 206.
[178] *Ibidem.*
[179] *Ivi*, p. 217.
[180] *Ibidem.*

world, the word ecstasy, which literally means "to stand outside of oneself", perfectly fits Roychoudhury's analysis. What captivates its audience, according to Roychoudhury, is the difficulty of distinguishing "illness" from "ordinary human impulses" as well as "figments in the mind" from "things in the world"[181]. If for many critics Macbeth has been a prisoner of his own imagination (R.A. Foakes), Roychoudhury's intuition sees it as "partly sourced in human volition"[182]. For instance, she suggests that the dagger scene, instead of being interpreted as one of the many hallucinations or "abstract cogitation", could be understood as "a partial visualization of an event"[183]. If every deed, prior to its fulfilment, must be imagined or visualized in the mind of the doer, then "imagination, even when it is corrupt—especially if it is corrupt—may be the most startling expression of the human mind's agency rather than a symbol of its cowering passivity"[184]. Therefore, instead of being divinely induced or demonically inspired, imagination encapsulates "the full force of the human will"[185]. In other words, precisely this "matrix of interlocking effects" — our perception of the world which devises itself in front of us, as well as the impressions and information that we transmit — coincides with "the entirety of a person"[186]. If we are what we are able to imagine, then one might argue that "[w]e become what we say", as Scott F. Crider does. Both Crider and Cummings have identified "the ethics of imagination compared to action" as well as "the ethics of language-use"[187], as the two crucial issues of the play. In asserting the centrality of volition in the tragedy, Crider writes:

> Macbeth, although influenced by his wife and the weird sisters, is himself the origin of the murderous action; it is a voluntary act which results from unethical figuration, figuration which receives external encouragement from human and supernatural powers but which originates with, and is cultivated by, him and his linguistic acts of unethical figuration.[188]

In the leap between imagining and doing, delaying his actions – which derives from the vice of evasion and is rhetorically symbolized by the technique of

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[181] *Ivi*, p. 221.
[182] *Ivi*, p. 225.
[183] *Ivi*, pp. 227-228.
[184] *Ivi*, p. 229.
[185] *Ivi*, p. 230.
[186] *Ibidem*.
[187] C. Bourne & E.C. Bourne, "Introduction and Prolegomenon to some future research programme for Shakespeare and Philosophy" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, 24-131, p. 38.
[188] Scott F. Crider, "Figures Unethical" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, p. 221.

circumlocution – is Macbeth's most frequent behaviour. We see him almost always procrastinating, presumably further pondering his decision "in a situation of perplexing conflict of values"[189]; even in Act 3.4, when he plans another encounter with the Witches he decides: "I will tomorrow – And betimes I will – to the weird sisters". All of his 'tomorrows' will haunt him at the end, unfolding in an endless chain of meaningless and inescapable temporal units. Crider partly attributes the Macbeths' fall to their "rhetorical figuration", as they "become figures unethical by practicing unethical figures"[190]. In his analysis of Macbeth's conflicting attitude towards the Witches' "supernatural soliciting", Crider defines his reflection as a circumlocution: because the "horrid image" to which Macbeth yields is not yet an image of murder for the audience until four lines later. At this stage, he displays "ethical evasiveness"[191], which is the first sign that he is not ready to face his own prospect and hopes for an effortless self-fulfilling of the prophecy ("Without my stir", as he words it). But the thought cannot be unthought; if he momentarily suspends his action, it is because he still has a conscience. It is only in the fourth Act that, being no longer "young in deed" (Act 3.4) and having familiarized with the "firstlings of [his] heart", he somatises his thoughts by crowning them with act. The heart becomes the hand: "be it thought and done" (Act 4.1). By the time Lady Macbeth kills herself he is immune to fear.

2.2.3 "Protect me from what I want": Macbeth's opaque volition

Because of the recklessness of Ducan's murder, Bristol infers that Macbeth falls into the trap of *akrasia* and thus yields to the same temptation that goes against "his own better judgement for the sake of sensual pleasure"[192]. *Akrasia*, or Aristotelian "incontinence", is the "lack of strength" or the "weakness in the faculty of self-command"[193]. It conveys and idea of seduction, which in this case is that of getting away with murder without being punished by *nemesis* – the goodness of retribution. If

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[189] C. Bourne & E.C. Bourne, "Introduction and Prolegomenon" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, p. 88.
[190] Scott F. Crider, "Figures Unethical" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, p. 211.
[191] *Ivi*, p. 217.
[192] Michael Bristol, "Macbeth the Philosopher", p. 657.
[193] *Ibidem.*

his interpretation is valid, then it is "the "one night stand" theory of akratic action as a short-term hedonistic egoism"[194]. Bristol provides this sort of explanation because he too recognizes that Macbeth had not many other reasons for committing his crime: neither "political ambition" or "his own honor" are satisfying explanations for his "moral suicide"[195], which is why he joins Zamir's reading of the play as the representation of a pervading sense of hollowness. According to Zamir, such hollowness does not derive from Macbeth's lack of a motive or ambition – otherwise his "vaulting ambition" line would be nonsensical – but rather, from the lack of "motivational depth"[196]. In other words, Macbeth's ambition is as vaulting and overwhelming as it is completely empty. A side of effect of his ambition is, predictably, the solitude he confines himself into: because ambition commands him to "rise higher on the great chain of being" he goes against God's design which reserved him a specific position and function. To do so, he "must break the bond which ties him on the one hand to God and on the other to humanity"[197].

Differently from what Martin has argued, Macbeth does not – *cannot* – enjoy committing any of his crimes, otherwise he would not have to endure "[h]is hallucinations, lack of sleep, constant fear, […] despair"[198]. Instead, it is precisely in this vacuity that all of his tragedy dwells. Even so, Macbeth embodies the maxim of "destiny is choice"[199], in the sense that destiny without choice is a meaningless concept. At the crossing point between accomplishing the deed or not, the Macbeths exhibit "a clearly chosen will-to-power" towards "a self-imposed delusion" by "deliberately turn[ing] ambiguous signs into predetermined outcomes"[200]. An example is Macbeth's emotional response to the hearing of a bell ring in Act 2.1, in which he displays his metaphorical thinking: "for it is a knell/ That summons thee to heaven or to hell". If radically evil subjects are fuelled by a strong will, or "vaulting ambition", perhaps Macbeth's choice and will do not revolve around the decision of murdering Duncan – something he repeatedly fantasizes and ruminates over with guilt and pleasure – but, rather, around the decision of believing the Witches. It is by "perverting their

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[194] *Ibidem.*
[195] *Ibidem.*
[196] Tzachi Zamir, "Upon One Bank and Shoal of Time", p. 529.
[197] Irving Ribner, "The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 149.
[198] John D. Cox, "Religion and suffering", p. 232.
[199] Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The "Reason" of Radical Evil", p. 179.
[200] *Ivi*, p. 191.

imaginations, […] their wills, and finally conscience and reason itself"[201] through the endorsement of the "fair is foul, and foul is fair" logic, that radically evil subjects overthrow good and evil to create a reality to thrive in, which will eventually become the bait trapping them forever. What initially seemed like a one shot deed – the regicide – eventually becomes a vicious cycle in which Macbeth is stuck and which will alienate him, thus "cancel[ing his] free will and turn[ing] action into an endless, meaningless process where free choice collapses into destiny"[202]. Of the couple, Lady Macbeth is the one who most excitedly fixates with the idea of destiny when she appoints "fate and metaphysical aid" as the two forces which have seemingly "crowned withal" Macbeth (Act 1.5). He comes to accept such fate, which first had him dazzled, not until the third Act, in which he resolves that he "must embrace the fate/ Of the dark hour".

As critics have noted, Shakespeare does not give a backstory for his characters, leaving much doubt about the events preceding the Witches' arrival (including the enigmatic absence of the Macbeths' alleged child). The first consequence of this narrative void is that it entails an interpretative void, meaning that it prevents any mechanistic cause-and-effect reading of the play; for example, any clue regarding Macbeth's life chronicles or psychological insights could have been valuable information for many critics in order to explain the deed in light of such facts. In this sense, Shakespeare's reticence abruptly prohibits those attempts of psychologism and overall flattening to the play detriment. Secondly, the fact that we are oblivious about Macbeth's character synopsis and everything that ever happened to him *before*[203], suggests that the only truly significant matter is what happens here and now, in the single instant which overturns lives, and which Macbeth will consequently flee in his eschatological projection. In the same way, if everything we know about Macbeth's worth comes from external praise, from the virtues which were attributed to him by his peers, the value system of the old order is thus relegated to the insignificant sphere of the past which is wiped out by the regicide. Both Macbeth and his wife understand destiny as folded up in the instant, though a dark one. Eternity is encapsulated in "the hour", the "future" lapses in "the instant", so much so that Macbeth figures the deed as something to get it over with "quickly" or "here, upon one bank and shoal of time" (Act

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[201] *Ivi*, p. 194.
[202] *Ivi*, p. 195.
[203] See Chapter 3 for insights.

1.7).[204] Far from being impulsive and thoughtless, none of Macbeth's murders are performed without premeditation. His promise "This deed I'll do before this purpose cool" (Act 4.1) coalesces the pervasive imagery of heat, blood, fire, hell, hot temperateness with that of the cold-blooded murder, of nihilistic wasteness, of stoic folly, of inner desertification.

2.3 Nietzsche's Will to Power, or a new concept of "Life"

Thus far my analysis revolved around several conceptualizations of evil. As a *nonentity* (Aquinas), it consolidates Kirsch's and Zamir's nihilistic interpretations centring on the themes of emptiness, void and hollowness. As a deceptive force or illusion (Plato), it offers insights about the role of imagination and other mental phenomena – with all due implications about human volition and ethics. As an act of rebellion against God's consolidated order (Judeo-Christian tradition), it surfaces in the theme of obedience, "unnaturalness" and ambition. Among the others, Ribner conjoins the idea of natural order, which Macbeth subdues to his own will by defying God's, and that of the deceptiveness of evil, which corrupts and tempts him with false promises and "half truths"[205]. Regardless of how it is phrased and defined, (radical) evil lies within man and his own will, and in Macbeth's case the verdict is clear: most critics – with the exception of Historicists among others – concur in seeing him as an "exceptionally conscientious man […] who is fully aware of his alternatives"[206] and who is not even deceived, according to some, by demonic inspiration nor misguided or goaded by his wife's counsel. On the contrary, as Crider notices, in "[Act] 1.5, it is Macbeth who appears to suggest the action to his wife, and in 1.3, First Witch is clear that their powers are limited" and for this reason he concludes that "after all, the deliberation is clearly undertaken freely"[207]. No other feature but his consciousness provides critics with feelings of pity and quasi-admiration in his regard. According to Crider,

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[204] With this respect, I would like to clarify that this does not contradict what I have written in the previous chapter. In Chapter 1.3.2 I discussed the aftermath of the regicide on Macbeth which resulted *precisely* in a distorted conception of time (with its greatest resonance in the "Tomorrow" speech). Pre-regicide Macbeth, on the other hand, is unanimously recognised as a completely different person.
[205] Irving Ribner, "The Pattern of Idea and Action", p. 151.
[206] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering", p. 232.
[207] Scott F. Crider, "Figures Unethical", p. 225.

Shakespeare seems most lured by the moral error of "self-absorption"[208] as the pre-condition leading to the transvaluation of all values. As argued in the previous chapter, Romanticism owes much to him, and so does Nietzsche. Romanticists set up the cult of the "wild genius" as well as the fascination with "outlaws, heroes, aestheticism, self-destruction" from this primitive form of transvaluation, which enables one to "create values, […] goals, […] ends, and […] your own vision of the universe, exactly as artists create works of art"[209]. It should not come off as surprising that, perhaps the only Shakespearean character who is rightfully entitled to the definition of active nihilist is the Fool. As Jan Kott, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, writes:

> The Fool does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order. He sees brute force, cruelty and lust. He has no illusions and does not seek consolation in the existence of natural or supernatural order, which provides for the punishment of evil and the reward of good. […] The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational.[210]

This abyss-enduring folly which refuses the projection of a superior existence is another instance of the Shakespearean legacy in Nietzsche. From this point onwards, I will discuss Nietzsche's critique of *décadence* and of "moral world order", his debunking of the construct of free will and his theory of the will to power.

In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that, for a long time, morality served as the antidote against nihilism in providing an "ethical canon" and "world order"[211]. He listed four reasons as for why the "Christian moral hypothesis" was so central: namely, it bestowed "absolute value" to man; it justified evil and freedom ("evil appeared full of meaning"); it empowered men with the ability to recognize "absolute values" and discerning what was "most important"; and, finally, it operated as "a means of preservation" against man's self-despising or life-despising, or knowledge-despising attitude.[212] Nihilism – as the recognition of man's insignificance in the universal (temporal) scale, as well as the lack of meaning, nullity of all values and impossibility of gaining true knowledge – is the opposite of self-preservation. Morality protected man against the Christian-born nihilism in valuing the same constructs denied by it: both life in general and men's existence, as well as freedom, ability to make moral choices, and

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[208] Maximilian de Gaynesford, "The Sonnets and Attunement" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy,* 269-287, p. 273.
[209] I. Berlin, "The Roots of Romanticism", Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1965, p. 14.
[210] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", Doubleday, New York, 2015, p. 112.
[211] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 12.
[212] *Ivi*, pp. 9-10.

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epistemological possibilities. In other words, Nietzsche seems to suggest that the toxicity of Catholicism (discussed in the first chapter) was counterbalanced by morality and its promise of ultimate meaning[213]. In this fashion, examples of possible meanings could have been "the "fulfillment" of some highest ethical canon in all events, the moral world order; or the growth of love and harmony in the intercourse of beings; or the gradual approximation of a state of universal happiness; or even the development toward a state of universal annihilation"[214]. Because human life has always been goal-oriented, as the goal disappears, meaning disappears too. Human beings are desperate for the need of a goal in their lives, a need Nietzsche traced back in the old supposition that it must be "put up, given, demanded from outside – by some superhuman authority". Even with the dissolution of faith this habit survives and pushes man to find "another authority"[215]. The Witches are Macbeth's other authority; this is why he says "if *chance* will have me king" (Act 1.3). "Chance"[216], also exchangeable with "destiny"[217], is a superior *voluntas*, a higher force which is simply commanding him to fulfil it. The point here is not that kingship is not Macbeth's own desire – as it was put forward from the beginning of this chapter[218] – but rather than he instinctively resorts to a higher will to justify and legitimize it before eventually assuming it as his own.

Yet, morality offers a misinterpretation of the world when it posits a "distinction between real and imaginary" stemming from the co-existence between a *real* and an

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[213] In the third treatise of *A Genaology of Morals*, Nietzsche illustrates several examples of how Christian values ultimately overthrow themselves due to inner contradictions, or how the Christian dogma is eventually destroyed by its own morality. He quotes the Latin maxim "*patere legem, quam ipsam tulisti*" (submit to the law which you yourself have established) to reaffirm his imperative of self-overcoming ascribed to the "law of life" or "law of necessity", which demands all great things to destroy themselves (for further details, see: F. Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo", ed. by W. Kaufmann, Vintage Classics, 1989, pp. 159-161).

[214] *Ivi*, p. 12.

[215] *Ivi*, pp. 16-17.

[216] In Nietzschean vocabulary, "chance" is the unpredictable, the *randomness* which finds its way even in Zarathustra's tale of the Overman ("the heaven of innocence, the heaven of hazard, the heaven of wantonness").

[217] It is interesting to remark how the source of these future-anticipating prophecies, the Weird Sisters, suggest in the etymology of their denomination the concept of fate: "In Anglo-Saxon literature, "Wyrd" is the name of the personified goddess of fate", and proof of this can be found in the Century Dictionary as well, which refers to the Weird Sisters as 'the fate sisters' (See: Albert H. Tolman, "Notes on Macbeth", *PMLA*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Modern Language Association, 1896, pp. 200, 203)

[218] In the reading I have attempted to provide, the Witches are the *representation*, or *manifestation* of his latent desire. Similarly, I have argued that Macbeth's first choice did not revolve around killing or sparing Duncan (as it was proved, the Witches never suggested him to do so) but rather, in choosing to believe or disregard their "supernatural soliciting" – especially because, in his mind, holding it as a form of truth is automatically linked with the horrific image of murder.

apparent world. In the *Twilight of the Idols,* Nietzsche summarizes the correspondence between morality and religion which both choose the unreal over the real:

> The distinguishing marks which have been given to the "true being" of things are the distinguishing marks of nonbeing, of *nothingness*—the "true world" has been constructed by contradicting the actual world: this "true world" is in fact an apparent world, insofar as it is just a *moral-optical* illusion. […] we *revenge* ourselves on life with the phantasmagoria of 'another', 'better' life" […] Dividing the world into a 'true' and an 'apparent' world, […] is merely a move inspired by *décadence* […] Tragic artists are *not* pessimists – in fact, they say *yes* to everything questionable and terrible itself, they are *Dionysian…*[219]

Macbeth's entire world order collapses into itself with his debasement, so much so that the world of the living becomes more frightening than the world of the dead, in which undisturbed Duncan peacefully dwells and sleeps. Once reality is deprived of its harmony, Macbeth is deprived of both ethical and aesthetic values. In his story we find the same reversal between real and apparent – both in compliance with the theme of court falsity shared with *King Lear*, and in the exploration of metaphysical and supernatural entities – the same "phantasmagoria" for the eternal life ("mine eternal jewels"), the same decadence in the dark and gruesome tones of its setting. *Décadence* is, for Nietzsche, the origin of nihilism. Schopenhauerian morality, which best represented mankind highest ranking of values, was conceived as the "negation of the will to live" or "*décadence*-instinct"[220]. Decadent values involve the impoverishment of the instincts – whether of power, of survival or of growth. In opposition to that, there stands the will to power, which revolves around the instinctual: "Every mistake, in every sense, is the effect of degenerate instincts, of a disintegrated will: this virtually defines the *bad*. Everything *good* is instinct – and consequently is easy, necessary, free"[221]. As a result, whatever stimulates the will to power – like the instincts do – is *good*, while anything "stemm[ing] from weakness"[222] is *bad*, including the paralysis which prevents "weak people" from committing immoral acts because they "are not strong enough" to face the consequences – and *not* because they are genuinely repelled by the thought of such wrongdoing, or because they have a solid moral compass[223]. The

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[219] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer", Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1997, pp. 21-22.

[220] *Ivi*, p. 28.

[221] *Ivi*, p. 31.

[222] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ: A Curse on Christianity", Algora Publishing, 2004, p. 104

[223] Nietzsche's approach to the theme of evil is, to the very least, provokingly controversial: defined as an "evil-sceptic", he believed that evil as a moral construct was invented by the "weak spirits" and used as a

role of the instincts in *Macbeth* is controversial: his murders are calculated and often delegated to an equipe of professionals, but at the same time his "intercourse" with the Witches, in which the unfathomable image seizes his mind, is deliberate and instantaneous. Even the "be it thought and done" naturalness which is finally approached after his leap into the abyss indicates a rewiring of his self-conditionings. The idea of a disintegrated will seems more suitable from the moment he has no other choice but that of relying and embarking on a spiral of assassinations which are externalised to his Servants: because, menaced by his victims, he becomes enslaved inside a vicious circle which does not obey to his own will, but rather, to his degenerated mere survival instinct. Therefore, this death drive is not a stimulation of the will to power: it arises from a purely selfish fear – weakness, one might say – which has, from this perspective, little to do with personal choice. His life must now *obey* to an autonomous and automatically reinforced traumatic pattern.

2.3.1 *"Patere legem, quam ipsam tulisti"*

"Obedience to a law or a lawgiver" was, according to Nietzsche, the Christian explanation to the "thus-and-not-otherwise" state of things; his suggestion shifts the viewpoint from the "law" to the inherent nature of the subject who is "constituted thus and thus"[224]. The law does not exist, nor does obedience: "things are unable to be other than they are"[225]. In tracing back their states "to will, to intentions, to acts" one denies the innocence of becoming, which must be constantly justified. The will, which implies the existence of responsibilities, was invented to punish and "to find people guilty". In this statement the question of theodicy and the concept of radical evil resurge in what Nietzsche conceived as a paradox: "Human beings were thought to be "free" so that they could be ruled, so that they could be punished"[226]. Theodicy sees men as free to choose evil, and their will is determinant in establishing *to what extent* they are evil,

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means to demonize their enemies and oppressors. For a revised analysis see: Claudia Card, "The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil", Oxford University Press, New York, 2002.
[224] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", pp. 336-337.
[225] *Ivi*, p. 337.
[226] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the idols", p. 35.

how radical is their evil. From this analysis, it results that men are measured by "the will of God"[227], who first allows the alternative to goodness and then proceeds to punish or reward mankind according to their degree of obedience. In this regard, the beginning of the play has another interpretive layer which I will eviscerate now.

Praising Macbeth, the Captain recalling Macdonald's defeat affirms that "Disdaining Fortune", Macbeth brandished his sword and "faced the slave". That is why his success in the battlefield was so impressive and exceptional: because he scorned the deity responsible for men's destinies. As Hecate predicted: "He shall spurn fate". Macbeth is a character who was able to bend Fortune and forge his destiny. But at the same time, if rebellious Macdonald – having Fortune on his side – was supposed to win and Macbeth defeated him all the same, then Macbeth has already defied the divine will by imposing his supremacy on it, just like Ribner suggested. In strictly practical, realistic terms Macbeth was clearly doing what he was supposed to do and what was good for his kingdom: killing his opponents would be just as "against nature" as the survival instinct would. But in terms of narrative and storytelling, this scene might be another anticipatory sign which contributed to the overall atmosphere of ambiguity hampering the characters' search for meaning in the events of their lives. It almost seems that Fortune, "the rebel's whore", likes traitors and rebels only to fleetingly empower them and have them killed right away. Afterall, as Jan Kott writes in his commentary of the play the whole of the world, stepped in blood, is reduced to "those who kill and those who are killed"[228].

As for Macbeth, he seems to be recognised as brave ("He sures deserve that name") in the same measure he proves himself as scornful of destiny and obedience, to the same extent he is willing to overthrow order and predetermined outcomes. Undoubtedly, this aspect of his initial characterization is rather Nietzschean. Yet, both in Shakespeare and Nietzsche, the idea of free will comes to a crisis. In Nietzsche, free will is problematized when it is understood as *causa sui* – the belief in causality – which he defines a "psychological necessity" proving our inability to conceive events and intents as "divorced". In such a need, the belief in the efficient cause (*causae*) and that in final causes or purposes (*télé*) converge[229]. Because the event alone is never enough

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[227] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ", p. 125.
[228] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 73.
[229] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 335.

and "we want to have a *reason*" or a motivation explaining it, "the drive to find causes" [230] arises in men.

Nietzsche's most explicit attack on free will is to be found in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which he dismisses it as a "boorish naiveté" which one has to get out of his mind. Yet, he rejects the just as naïve mechanistic interpretation of "cause and effect", which is referred to as plain and simple "un-free will". These concepts were the legacy of the "moral order of the world", the falling out of grace of men polluted with the ideas of sin and temptation: "Chance robbed of its innocence"[231]. If something is thus-and-thus-constituted it is not because a "rule of "law"" was inscribed. Instead, as he reiterates, "*We* are the ones who invented causation" as well as "law, freedom, grounds, purpose" and similar sorts of inventions, which are the *mythological* projection of a "symbol world onto things as an "in-itself". In reality, beyond free or un-free wills "it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills" – in which the *weak* are inevitably attracted by "fatalism"[232].

The audience is introduced to Macbeth's immense virtue and courage through external praise; Macbeth is then outshined by his wife, and yet, as the play goes on he still proves an impressive degree of strength and endurance even when his own mental faculties are failing him: the Banquet scene best displays his laceration, the paradox of being at the lowest of his mental state *and* at the peak of bravery and fierceness. If he is – at least at the beginning – depicted as a character who easily embodies *Amor Fati*, who *disdains* and *scorns* Fortune and who fights for his own future, at the same time he lacks Banquo's firmness to see through the Witches' deceptiveness, exhibits fatalistic and deterministic thinking and finally surrenders to life-despising annihilation. It is difficult to categorize his will as either "strong" or "weak" because his own character as a whole does not fit dichotomic descriptions.   The diagnosis of a "perverted" will (Martin) would perhaps suit Nietzsche's idea of "degeneration", in which the unthought and unspeakable maze of the unconscious produces an internal division. As I have anticipated in the previous chapter, tragic heroes suffer the short-circuit between action – supposedly prompted by an individual will – and knowledge: perhaps the inherent

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[230] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", p. 32-33.
[231] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ", p. 125.
[232] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 22.

contradiction of his character can be explained through this inverse proportion between a will which inevitably declines in void and hollowness, diminishing as much as his knowledge deepens.

In *Twilight of the Idols,* Nietzsche added the linguistic categorization of "deed" and "doer" to his reflection upon the will as a "*faculty*" producing an "*effect*": the idea of a deed implying a doer, or the idea of active and passive agents are grammatical constructs which have shaped human mindset and wired what he called "the presupposition […] of *reason*"[233] into our brains. In fashioning a world of wills the world was reduced to a bunch of subjects whose consciousnesses were misconceived as causes – which were ultimately confused with reality themselves[234]. This reflection resonates with another key theme in Macbeth, which is the "temporal merging of cause and effect" in which images from the present are viewed "from the perspective of future consequences"[235] in an ecstatic and figurative game of reversals.

Summarizing what has been dismantled thus far: there is no law, no will, no action, no goal, no values. In other words, "there is no grand unity" in the world of *becoming*, a world which was erroneously sentenced as a "deception"[236] by Christian morality. Here is rooted the separation between real and apparent world. Literature and philosophy have shown that the very concept of evil has been conceived either as a lack of 'unity' (an example being Torquato Tasso's Reformation Classic *Gerusalemme Liberata*) or an illusory entity. Because "there has to be an illusion, a deception at work that prevents us from perceiving what is" and the deceitful culprits are the senses, "*which are so immoral anyway*"[237], as they belong to the world of *becoming* and hides us the real world.

In his "If it were done when 'tis done" speech, we find Macbeth mistrusting, if not demonizing, his senses – especially vision – as he is now fully internalizing the new doctrine ("it is but what is not"). Even if, in some cases, his senses are illusory, their fiction carries the truth of his desire, which, in a way, makes it *more real than the real*. It does not matter if the dagger is there or not: even if it were a phantasmatic apparition, an hallucination, a visualization, a materialization, it is the expression of his thought.

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[233] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", p. 20.
[234] *Ivi*, p. 32.
[235] King-Kok Cheung, "Shakespeare and Kierkegaard", p. 436.
[236] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 13.
[237] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", p. 18.

Therefore, because its vision produces tangible effects, the essence of the dagger is just as real as his mind is. As Jean Paul Sartre asserted, essence precedes existence.

The last form of nihilism prevents men from believing in "metaphysical" or "true" worlds, to "afterworlds and false divinities"[238]: the only requirement to confront this loss is the ability to endure the world of *becoming*. Nietzsche identified three categories of value-projection which has been employed to "measure the value of the world"; these are "aim", "unity" and "being"[239], and are, ultimately, the cause of nihilism. "Are there really will, purposes, thoughts, values?", he asks. Once again Heraclitus proves to be one of his greatest influences, as he was the first philosopher recognizing 'being' as an 'empty fiction': the apparent world is *the* world, the 'real' world is a lie. Here his inquiry tackling morality and ethics finally returns to his most exquisitely existentialist tones, when he redeems the world in its fundamental innocence by claiming that "One is necessary, one is a piece of destiny, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole" and that "*there is nothing outside the whole!*"[240]. This statement echoes in Sartre's (existentialist) lecture about essence preceding existence in which he similarly affirms that "man simply is"[241]. Judging and measuring one means judging and measuring the whole, but because "*nothing exists besides the whole*"[242] no one is able to do it. This final thesis leads him once again to the philosophy of time, as one must understand becoming neither as "an apparent state" nor as a phenomenon supposedly constrained by a "final intention" or a will: instead, it must be justified at any given moment ("[b]ecoming is of equivalent value every moment"), thus elevating each single, unrepeatable instant constituting the whole of time, while discarding the pursuit of a final state: "the sum of its values always remains the same […]. The total value of the world cannot be evaluated; consequently, philosophical pessimism belongs among comical things"[243]. The same idea applies to human beings, as creatures *in* time and *of* time: his sentencing that "we are not the result of an eternal intention, a will, a wish"[244] is both a restorative, a liberation, and a warning which removes a "meaning"

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[238] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 13.
[239] *Ibidem.*
[240] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", pp. 36-37.
[241] Sartre's lecture was held at the Club Maintenant in Paris in October 1945 and was then translated and published as "Existentialism is a Humanism", Yale University Press, 2007.
[242] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 403.
[243] *Ivi*, p. 378.
[244] *Ivi*, p. 403.

onto which we can impute the responsibility for how and who we are. Nietzsche's attitude towards meaning and morality – which were mutually dependent in the ancient moral world order – is easily explained by the tools of Scepticism but there is an ongoing debate about what type of Scepticism suits him best. As a trained philologist he understands *skepsis* as "research", as a philosophical tool or praxis to subvert dogmatism, rather than as a set of assumptions related to a sort of *epoché* or to the impossibility of truth – as it would reverse such practice into that of "negative dogmatism"[245]. It is the same negative dialectic in which the radical nihilist falls once having recognized the "absolute untenability of existence"[246] and altogether lack of meaning. As Begam & Soderholm put it "[i]n Shakespeare, skepticism produces tragedy"[247]; in Nietzsche radical postures – whether sceptical or nihilist – produce tragedy as an overall embitterment towards life, but tragic authors such as Shakespeare are, as previously argued, *not* pessimists and least of all, *not* against life. As remarked by Nietzsche in the previously quoted excerpt, tragic, or *Dionysian,* artists embrace the ambiguity, the overture, the hiatus between the familiar and the uncanny ("everything questionable and terrible").

2.3.2 "Whether you will, what you willed to will": Nietzsche's Theory of Action Revised

Reading Nietzsche, there is one significant problem preventing the present interpretation from drawing a unified and logical conclusion. As Katsafanas noticed, "Nietzsche seems to alternate between denying that there is any such thing as a will (conceived as a causally efficacious capacity for reflective choice) and relying on a conception of the will"[248]. Prior to 1883 – a year by which he had already published

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[245] Kathia Hanza, "Nietzsche: Experimental Skepticism and the Question of Values", in *Sceptical Doubt and Disbelief in Modern European Thought: A New Pan-American Dialogue*, ed. by V.R. Rosaleny & P.J. Smith, Springer, 2021, 283-300, p. 285.
[246] *Ivi*, p. 9.
[247] R. Begam & J. Soderholm, "Platonic Occasions: Dialogues on Literature, Art and Culture", Stockholm University Press, Stockholm, 2015, p. 139.
[248] Paul Katsafanas, "Nietzsche and Kant on the Will: Two Models of Reflective Agency", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol 89, No. 1, International Phenomenological Society, 2014, 185-216, p. 186.

books such as *Untimely Meditations*, *Human All Too Human* and *Daybreak* – Nietzsche shows scepticism about the will. According to Katsafanas, this shift does not denounce a blatant inconsistency, in which the philosopher seems to not even recognize that he is denying and affirming the same thing over and over; instead, Nietzsche is culpable of terminological sloppiness, using the same term for different concepts. As a result, he gradually developed a more complex and refined theory of the will – thus relatively departing from his early formulations – in which he still conceived the act of willing as "causally determined" but also as "philosophically significant"[249]. Examples of confusing and disorienting contradictions are to be found in numerous passages of previously commented *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Twilight of the Idols*: first, he counterclaims the existence of a will, then he proceeds to explain how strong wills are able to exercise a chokehold on all sorts of impulses and stimuli. The very concept of will to power itself seems out of place in the mouth of a will-denier raging about the absolutely unforgivable "*causa sui*" self-delusion. Katsafanas justifies these apparent incongruities by arguing that Nietzsche is simply rejecting *an idea* of the will – and that would be the *causa sui* – while supporting another – the ""strong" but not causally isolated will"[250]. Standard readings of Nietzsche rely on the ungraspable role of the unconscious, in which our drives are rooted, to formulate a theory of action. The three masters of suspicion[251] – Nietzsche alongside Freud and Marx– deconstructed consciousness and identity by declining their staple constructs (i.e., the will to power) in their respective philosophies. If much foundation in his works can be found to defend this position – his revaluing of the instincts could strengthen the bond with the psychology of the Id –, Katsafanas objects that Nietzsche did view *conscious* thought as a leading factor.

In the previous chapter I have mentioned Nietzsche's understanding of pain and pleasure as an inseparable core. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, he proves how these sensations do not have "a determinate motivational impact on human actions"[252], because they become either aversive or attractive according to the agent's interpretation,

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[249] *Ibidem.*
[250] *Ivi*, p. 192.
[251] I am referring to Paul Ricœur's seminal contribution to the field of hermeneutics. In his view, leading the post-Hegelian critique, they problematized the role of the subject by introducing hallmarks concept such as the Unconscious (Freud), the Alienation (Marx) and the Will to Power (Nietzsche).
[252] Paul Katsafanas, "Nietzsche and Kant on the Will", p. 202.

which is a *conscious* operation. As he writes: "what really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the meaninglessness of suffering"[253]. To this, one may add that Nietzsche regarded pain and suffering as what, more than everything else in history, has enhanced mankind: in this case, suffering would be meaningful, justified and attractive because sought by the agent. Pain for its own sake, on the other hand, would be meaningless and aversive. It is only through interpretation, as a conscious act carried by the agent, that sensations of pleasure or pain influence motives which, in turn, influence actions.[254] As a result, our actions are more causally determined by interpretations that it might seem. To illustrate this claim, Katsafanas brings the example of a man experiencing suffering who desists from his desire to alleviate it because, after reflecting upon it, he starts to believe that suffering was sent to him by God as a punishment: in light of this interpretation, suffering becomes attractive, so that he chooses to participate in its perpetuation[255]. This insight could account for Macbeth's persevering in evil endeavours while feverishly awaiting for judgement. The outcome is a twofold nature of his suffering: nurtured by its own attractiveness, it is "so unquestionably deserved"[256] and intensified by obsessive eschatological hopes. But approaching the final act, not only his sufferance, but all sorts of sensations he was capable of vanish like soap bubbles in the underworld of nihilism: the cry of women barging into his castle moves him not, as he confesses "I have almost forgot the taste of fears". Inured, numbed, anesthetized by the horror, light – symbol of reason and vision – is entombed by the endless shadow to which life, the "brief candle", is reduced. The sound and the fury are no longer meaningful to him, so much so that he might as well fight Macduff, knowing perfectly well that he would be throwing his life away.

To my purposes, it is not a matter of choosing between a conscious or unconscious thought process which ultimately informs actions; my reading of *Macbeth* does not reject the unattainable nature of submerged drives and conflicting instincts in its characters. Instead of unravelling whether our interpretations of our affects are conscious or unconscious phenomena – which, in my view, can be both – it is sufficient to understand that turning to the role of the unconscious as an easy escape route when

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[253] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo", p. 68.
[254] *Ivi*, pp. 202-203.
[255] *Ivi*, p. 205.
[256] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering in "Macbeth"", pp. 229-230.

addressing the theory of action becomes another lazy formula. Formulas, as I have pointed out, tend to be simplistic, especially when we are attempting to apply philosophy on literature.

From this reading, it derives that action is the product of a set of factors influencing one another in a non-unidirectional way. In this framework, "the will is merely one motive among others" which can "throw its weight behind certain motives, but it does not occupy a privileged position in the determination of action"[257].

This section has attempted to untie a terminologically dense passage of Nietzsche's philosophy to shed light on the way in which the denial of free will (as *causa sui*) can coexist with such a concept as the will to power. The latter, as it was discussed, is not quite a matter of making a choice or wanting something, as it is a matter of *affirming* oneself, or *causing influence*. Put it very simply, the will to power is a life stimulant – although a mere Darwinist reading would be as insufficient as it would be unfortunate. As I have discussed in the previous section, Macbeth goes in the opposite direction to life after the murder of Duncan; in this perspective, the regicide was the first and last deed which required him actual strength (a life-taking act which he pays by giving up his own), while the others are nothing more than a death drive, a traumatic repetition: in other words, weakness. Yet, at the same time, it is impossible to nail down Macbeth as a weakness-signifier. With the regicide he does not kill, symbolically and literally, only life. One uncanny detail revolves around sleep, "death's counterfeit"; perhaps Macbeth's lamenting that he has killed sleep is code for "I have killed death". Afterall, if "there is nothing serious in mortality" (Act 2.3), life and death becomes two forces eliding themselves in their insignificance. They are both equally "absurd"[258].

The mystery around his lacking "motivational depth" is the same interrogative that Nietzsche owns to Schopenhauer: if our actions derive from our will, no one knows where our will comes from. As Nietzsche puts it, once it is established that we are ruled by it, the problem of establishing "whether it is itself ruled" remains. If we understand aim (which in Nietzsche is often interchangeable with "will") as "planning and intellectual foreseeing" as Schopenhauer did, it is no coincidence that *Macbeth* is a play about foreseeing and foreknowledge.

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[257] Paul Katsafanas, "Nietzsche and Kant on the Will", p. 213.
[258] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 80.

Despite this unresolved enigma, despite the lack of unity that both Nietzsche and Shakespeare had envisioned, scholars like Kaufmann find pessimistic readings of their works as fundamentally inaccurate for both of them. Their legacy is this leap beyond the abyss itself, because "despite the fact that there is no cosmic order that would justify man's place in the Universe, there is still the grandeur of single existence"[259]. Resuming from the understanding of this dissolved unity, the following chapter expands on the epistemological component of Macbeth's nihilism to unpack his relationship with truth and knowledge, as well as to analyse how such relationship shapes his identity.

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[259] Katarzyna Burzyńska, "Nothing will come out of Nothing" in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, p. 538.

Chapter Three: Shakespeare, Nietzsche and the Abyss

> *"It is quite within the bounds of possibility*
> *for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature,*
> *but it is a rare and shattering experience for him*
> *to gaze into the face of absolute evil."*
>
> Carl Gustav Jung, Aion

In the previous chapter I have attempted to approach Nietzsche's will to power to explore nihilism on a different level and discuss its resonances in *Macbeth*. Departing from what the doctrine of teleology, which "imbue the world with a fixed religious logic", or the "mechanistic materialism", which "evacuates the very possibility of value or purpose"[260] altogether, Nietzsche argued that the "will" is an opaque concept itself providing more questions than explanations. As expected, it is impossible to explain why – or how – did a man choose evil. My discussion centring on freedom of the will and on the ethics of individual volition incorporated the discourse of imagination as a mind faculty which, in its darkest scenarios, accounted for the descend into madness. If imagination and "evil machinations" are, for Begam and Soderholm, "conspiring partners", the Satanic quest for knowledge is what inspires our literary heroes to *over-reach* and sacrifice anything. Inevitably, Begam and Soderholm provocatively asking "Can *homo* be truly *sapiens* if he is not – at least a little – *rapiens*?" or even "What if – *horrible dictu* – *We* are Satan?"[261] resonates with Macbeth's tragedy, in which the threshold between truth and mental derangement is often ambiguous.

From such reflection, they conclude that this fascination for the darkest corners of the human mind is the common ground for the greatest authors of all times. Similarly to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, *Macbeth* inserts itself in the field of literature hinting at the occult tension (*streben* in German) towards the demonic realm of knowledge leading to annihilation: these kind of tragedies, with their universal titanic strives, hold a pagan fascination stretching beyond Christianity and encompassing the history of humanity,

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[260] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 71.
[261] R. Begam & J. Soderholm, "Platonic Occasions", p. 60.

just like Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a pre-Christian messenger who comes to announce the death of God.

The past chapter addressed the moral side of this quest – exploring the philosophical problem of evil and the debate on agency and accountability, while questioning the origin of the will. The moral facet of nihilism encompasses the post-Kantian schism between real and apparent world, which is the field of discussion of the following pages. In Nietzsche, the true world is devoid of meaning, it is literally built on "nonbeing" or "nothingness", for it becomes the phantasmagoria of another, more fulfilling, more satisfying, eternal life. The same happens in *Macbeth* with the reversal – on both a linguistic and a symbolic level – of reality and appearances. Both Nietzsche and Shakespeare show us a real world which becomes the apparent one; while Nietzsche eloquently insists on bringing back men to Earth, Macbeth's story, as we know, goes in a different direction: *his kingdom is not of this world.*

Zarathustra himself, perhaps counter-intuitively, restates the necessity of illusions to prevent what he conceived as the "most extreme form of nihilism". Such stance, once again anticipated in *The Will to Power,* illustrates the fallacy of what I would define epistemological nihilism, which is similar to what has been already baptized as "negative dogmatism"[262]. As anticipated in the previous chapter, Nietzsche, while maintaining a sceptical attitude overall, never denied the possibility of knowledge and was well aware of the risks of such negative dogmatism, as he made clear in the 1886 preface to *Human, All Too Human*: "I was, […], already deep in the midst of moral skepticism and destructive analysis, *that is to say in the critique and likewise the intensifying of pessimism as understood hitherto*"[263]. His intuition denied the existence of a "knowledge-in-itself", as well as an "essence-in-itself", meaning that both concepts apply to and exist in "relations". There is no such thing as "in-itself"[264] in the first place, truth is here and now and "immanent"[265].

Believing that nothing is true because the world itself is not true originates from such Kantian distinction, on which he returns with his *Zarathustra*. If, on the one hand, radical nihilists assume the role of unwearied *pars destruens*, Nietzsche finds another

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[262] Kathia Hanza, "Nietzsche: Experimental Skepticism and the Question of Values", p. 285.
[263] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Human, All Too Human", p. 209.
[264] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will To Power", p. 334.
[265] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 88.

way to go about the same tragic problem: "that it is the measure of strength to what extent we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely apparent character, the necessity of lies. To this extent, nihilism, as the denial of a truthful world, of being, might be a divine[266] way of thinking"[267]. *This* is the type of nihilism Nietzsche devised; in this perspective, he was rather lapidary: nihilism does not contemplate the "in vain!", nor does it believe that everything deserves to be destroyed. Instead, "one helps to destroy" it in order to leave space for the new. Unapologetically "illogical", Nietzschean strong wills do not stop "with the No of "judgment"", for "their nature demands the No of the deed"[268]: the same 'No' uttered by the lion spirit that Macbeth turns into.

Contrarily, from weak wills results a form of emptiness, which Nietzsche paraphrases, interestingly, as "some stupid little fanaticism". In this spectrum, the point of no return is reached with the disintegration of the will: that is, the condition of those who find themselves swallowed by their stimuli in the underbelly of *decadence*, "at the mercy of accidents"[269].

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, Macbeth is first introduced to the audience through the praise that other characters have uttered to describe his heroic gestures. In this way, the audience is forced to rely on external information while everything else about and around him is mystery, thus increasing the level of ambiguity in the play.

In *Macbeth*, such ambiguity takes the form of the Uncanny, the creepy interrogative "who is this man?". If the "Nietzschean question" asking "What can a man do?"[270] was the core of the previous chapter, it is on this interrogative that these last pages will focus.

The fact that we are introduced to Macbeth through the golden opinions other people have of him serves, on the one hand, as a reminder of falsehood and doubleness (one remembers Lady Macbeth's line: "All our service, In every point twice done and then done double" in Act 1.6 which, according to John Wilders' comment is uttered with

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[266] "Divine" is not a word Nietzsche uses randomly. Fifteen pages later, Nietzsche talks about the "divine" power associated with the "eccentrics". Among these eccentrics, he lists the "fanatic" as well as "the possessed" and "the religious epileptic": what they have in common is that "strength" which, in its fear-excitement, was considered divine and wisdom-providing. The very concept of authority originated from this *deified*, or "divine", will.
[267] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Will to Power", p. 15.
[268] *Ivi*, p. 18.
[269] *Ivi*, p. 27.
[270] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 76.

a "false tone in her voice, a false expression playing faintly now and then across her face, always intensest when the spoken words are humblest"[271]).

On the other, it casts him further and further – as if he were some unattainable presence, whose virtue is so immense that it almost becomes scary, someone who is essentially unreachable and psychologically ambiguous.

It is not just Macbeth that becomes the *object* – rather than the *subject* – of the play, but his deeds as well. As critics have noted, the theme of murder, often metonymized by the dagger or by unwashed blood, is pervasive and concrete: it is substance, it is set up in its physical sphere, which clashes with the etherealness of the Witches and the unsubstantiality of the nihilists' life. But one cannot fail to notice that the first of the murder series is not staged. The audience simply does not see it, and that is not because the Elizabethan o Jacobean audience were particularly impressionable or sensitive. We see the scheming, the plotting, the orchestrating, and then the whole world is blood-flooded. Drama (and cinema) is about showing and not showing, covering and uncovering, veiling and unveiling. The first murder being relegated at the offstage is, in this sense, a manifestation of the Lacanian real.

Building on this reflection about the construct of identity, I will dedicate the following section to the exploration of the pattern of doubleness – resulting in an internal division – as a formal as well as narrative aspect at the basis of Shakespeare's writing. Parallelly, I will discuss the constant clash between reality and appearance as another core theme of the play, which is rendered both stylistically and symbolically. The second section of my analysis expands the commentary on Macbeth's last soliloquy which was introduced in the first chapter. The third and fourth sections are conceived as conclusive considerations, one reflecting on the nature of tragic plays, the latter summarizing and reflecting on what has been argued thus far.

3.1 Doubleness and division: epistemological nihilism in *Macbeth*

The play is structured on "a foundation of pairs"[272]. One of these pairs is formed, perhaps more subtly than the others, by Macbeth and the Porter. Instead of reducing the

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[271] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", ed. by John Wilders, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 105.

Porter's figure to that of comic relief contrasting with the prior scene, Frederic Tromly argues that his role is that of doubling Macbeth metaphorically, in order to show the similarities he shares with "ordinary" evil and the prosaic vices represented by the three imaginary sinners[273]. Macbeth's "infirmity of purpose and moral confusion" are thus doubled by the Porter's lines, assimilating Macbeth's evil to the "comic and the familiar"[274] registers. Above all, the Porter's remarks on drinking and lechery become particularly telling.

By means of example, the equivocation caused by drinking stands "in a metaphorical relationship"[275] with "the equivocation of the fiend, /That lies like truth" (Act 5.5). Another example, according to Tromly, is the Porter lamenting how the drink "provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance" (Act 2.3) while Lady Macbeth complains about Macbeth being torn between his "act and valour" and his "desire" (Act 1.7). In this sense, the Porter's remark on the gap between "desire and fulfilment" serves as an anticipation for their struggles, which will result, in Macbeth's words, in a "fruitless crown" (Act 3.1). That is because, murdering Duncan equals murdering sleep "and all other life-sustaining processes"; for this reason, their desires are inherently fulfilled in frustration, in a way in which "action become negation"[276]. Through this narrative lowering which translates "the horrible into the familiar", this scene reminds the audience of the proximity of evil in its paradoxical attires. The whole tragedy is built on paradoxes in which "strength grows to weakness and loss fades to gain"[277] to the point of perplexing our assumptions about good and evil as distant opposite poles.

The pattern of doubleness is a constant throughout the entire play. On the symbolic or allegorical level, Favila mentions the two kingdoms Macbeth rules, the two traitors, the rivals-couplet first made by Macbeth and Banquo, and then by Macbeth and Macduff, as her main examples. Other references to the theme of doubleness are – predictably – the clashing between the human and the supernatural, such as the "double-sexed spirits" paltering with Macbeth "in a double sense" (Act 5.8). On the linguistic level, Favila lists "the use of hendiadys, alliteration, and rhyme" and notes the use of the

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[272] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", p. 9.
[273] Frederic B. Tromly, "Macbeth and His Porter", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Oxford University Press, 1975, 151-156, p. 151-152.
[274] *Ivi*, p. 154.
[275] *Ivi*, p. 153.
[276] *Ivi*, 154.
[277] *Ivi*, 156.

word 'double' which is ""doubly redoubled" a dozen times throughout the text"[278]. To her purposes, linking the 'nothing is but what is not' refrain with Freud's double becomes a key argument for her psychoanalytic reading of the play.

The idea of the double often overlaps with the idea of the *Unheimlich*, a term best suiting Macbeth's experience of the Witches' encounter: as I have argued earlier, his reaction denotes a deep turmoil arising not only by the uneasiness of the situation but also by the proximity he feels with a group of supposedly unfamiliar beings. Supernatural creatures are undoubtedly a familiar presence in Shakespeare's plays, in which the context determines whether these are benign or not. The Early Modern saw a field of study – Frances Yates mentions the "Saturnian" or "Cabalist" in her dedicated research – which investigated the plurality of spirits – "bad spirits, or devils" as well as "good spirits, or angels"[279] – and their proximity with heaven or hell. Ghosts are also ascribed to this esoteric taxonomy of supernatural creatures, a bestiary which incapsulated the Zeitgeist and embodied the philosophical and theological concerns of the time. Yates chooses *Hamlet* to investigate the opaqueness of such nightly apparition as, once again, "the problem was to decide whether it was an invention of the devil or a prophetic inspiration giving dreadful insight into the true state of society"[280]. In her analysis, Hamlet and Macbeth share the symptoms of what was defined as melancholy. While Hamlet's melancholy, springing "inspired vision", is that of a "prophet" who lives in a world disrespecting "the Law" and threatening its "harmony", Macbeth's is "a symptom of weakness" which has to do with the deceptiveness of "witchcraft and evil"[281].

The Witches, therefore, represent the first experience of doubleness and (internal) division by exhibiting such doubleness in themselves through their inherent contradictions. The most blatant element of paradox is represented, on the symbolic level, by their beards, and by their antonyms on the linguistic. But, as Favila adds, it goes deeper than this: "they are on the earth, but not of the earth […]; they conjure yet are controlled by superior spirits"[282]. Their existence splits the world and its characters

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[278] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", p. 9.
[279] Frances Yates, "The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age", Routledge Classics, London and New York, 1979, p. 178.
[280] *Ivi*, p. 180.
[281] *Ivi*, p. 181.
[282] Marina Favila, ""Mortal Thoughts" and Magical Thinking in "Macbeth"", p. 10.

in two, forcing them to face their rotted, undesired selves, as well as confronting them with the philosophical dilemma of reality and appearances.

According to Susan Schreiner, such dilemma constitutes a palpable apprehension which clearly emerges from Shakespeare's plays and which she sees as an emblematic feature of his age. In other words, the Reformation sees what she defines as the "search for the real" – whether it is conceived as a metaphysical and existential inquiry, or a social, ethical observation "between being and seeming"[283] – as its most critical knot to untie. The yearning for certainties becomes a quiver, a haunting compulsion provoked by the shifting role of ancient constructs and traditional authority principles. The result of this struggle oscillates between the melancholic and the tragic state of the sixteenth century man – a man exposed to "the existential anguish", the "anxiety about finding the truth"[284].

Influenced by Montaigne, Shakespeare understood this unstable as well as perilous reality as a *negotiation* which overcomes classical scepticism, a position constantly redefining one's relationship with knowledge and illusion. As she puts it:

> According to Shakespeare one can, indeed, pierce through appearances to the reality that lies beneath. One is never left only with the "seeming" that makes, for Montaigne, all knowledge incomplete. But the knowledge one finds in Shakespeare is neither the transcendence of faith nor the empty verbal fabrications of the human mind. In the tragedies Shakespeare's characters discover the evil that lies at the core of reality. By piercing through the fictional world of appearances, the tragic hero confronts the burden of knowledge and the terror of truth.[285]

Following this perspective, it would be incorrect to deny any sort of epistemological possibility in Shakespeare. Rather, his plays depict the underground ramping of chaos and evil always threatening to resurface above the *limen*. Examples of these rampant presences are the witches or Banquo's ghost – the latter literally coming from the underworld in which Macbeth believed to have him imprisoned forever. In other words, there is no – as Nietzsche scholars would call it – "knowledge impossible", but there is no stability either. There is an external surface which veils the horror, the Lacanian real, lying underneath. *Macbeth* represents the unveiling of this boundary which results in

[283] Susan E. Schreiner, "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 83, No. 3, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 345-380, pp. 345-346.
[284] *Ivi*, p. 368.
[285] *Ivi*, p. 375.

nightmarish "anarchy"[286], a state of disorder which is only provisionally appeased in the epilogue.

Contrarily to what Ribner's suggested, the triumph of order over havoc is not the ultimate resolution in which harmony, almost automatically and magically, fixes the disruption of balance. Chaos is understood as an unrestrainable force, always threatening to break in, condemning men to a life of precariousness in which the price for truth is "not transcendence but catastrophe"[287].

Confronting truth has become for the Early Modern man part of the tragic experience; similarly to the leading role that time plays in tragedies according to Frye, Susan Taubes suggested that

> [t]ragedy means that the relation between man and the noumenal sphere, upon which his survival and happiness depends, has become uncertain, conflictual, strained to the limit, and can be expressed only in terms of contradiction and paradox.... The noumenal world has become incomprehensible and full of menace and no longer assures him of an ultimate harmony.[288]

This leads to Nietzsche's understanding of the very concept of truth, which he designed as a "*human* artifice" towards which the will to power is directed. If reality is a negotiation, truth is artificial. As corrosive as this argument may be, Nietzsche recognized the "noble lie" as – what would be called in modern jargon – a psychological need. Confronted with an *unveiled* truth which is not balanced or symbolically sublimated by illusion (rather *con-fused* with it), Macbeth sees the whole of life as fictional and cunning: a meaningless idiot's tale. The fiend, which he set up as his authority principle, "lies like truth". It is the type of nihilism that surges from the (alleged) truth of meaninglessness and groundlessness which swallows existence and blood-stains life. This is the reason why the Overman's – and the philosopher's – paradoxical mission is that of being "noble liars who do not deceive themselves"[289], who are aware of the non-coincidence between their artificial truths and reality. This should clarify the controversy of epistemological nihilism and allow us to discard the latter for good.

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[286] *Ivi*, p. 379.
[287] *Ivi*, p. 380.
[288] Susan B. Taubes, "The Nature of Tragedy", *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 7, No.2, 1953, 193-206, p. 195.
[289] Keith J. Ansell-Pearson, "The exoteric philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche", p. 498.

Both Nietzsche and Shakespeare's creations – *Hamlet* above the others, but *Macbeth* as well – contradicts the Socratic conception of truth which shaped Western thought, the assumption that "Virtue is knowledge, man sins only from ignorance". As traumatic as this debunking may be, they prove us that Socrates' explanation is not necessarily the case. The resulting war on the illusory and mendacious senses as dangerous temptations of evil capitulated with Nietzsche. Truth is an "artist's metaphysics" which he opposes to "the blind will to truth that seeks the truth at any price" and eventually culminates in "Welt-Vernicthung (world-destruction)"[290] as it quests for the world posited by Platonic, Christian and Kantian traditions.

In the first chapter, I approached his longing for the otherworldly realm of the afterlife as a consequence of his eschatological hopes which he seemingly abandoned towards the end as he adopted a nihilistic perspective on time and on human life. At the same time, his constant devaluing of the world – an illegible world that he is incapable of understanding – seems to be exacerbated by his failure to rule over it. From this perspective, his nihilism is at the same time the result of a deep *comprehension* (his new understanding of time above all, as well as the newly acquired knowledge about himself and about human nature) *and* of an uncanny *incomprehension* (the cryptic nature of a fundamentally indifferent and deaf universe, of which the Witches are the primary quintessence). His frantic attempts to impose order and approach stability turn out to be a fiasco leading him to slowly give up on life and seek the self-pitying consolation of a *postmortem* destiny. His thirst of knowledge, purely instrumental as such, marks his annihilation: should this truth be the death of us, writes Nietzsche, art will be our redemption – but Macbeth is known to die unredeemed.

According to Jan Kott's reading, Macbeth desperately tries to create a world purged of its dark spots, a heaven which rapidly escapes him to become an underworld. His "sinking" in the nightmare is a compulsion stemming from his perversion of combatting murders with more murders, of restraining crime while "becoming enmeshed"[291] in it even more, in purging the world of blood while *stepping* in it. The ultimate contradiction in the play, as it has been pointed out, lies in the vicious violence which is repeatedly perpetrated "under the spell of darkness […] in the name of peace

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[290] *Ivi*, p. 501.
[291] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 79.

and sleep"[292], following the brute logic of "blood will have blood" (Act 3.4), according to which "[t]hing bad begun, make strong themselves by ill" (Act 3.2). Contradiction is enveloped within the alarming state of raptness capturing Macbeth, as it origins in the hypnotized mind surrendering to the Witches' "instruments of darkness". If he dreams of a world "where the dead will have been buried in the ground once and for all"[293], their rising from the underworld impedes his project of new beginning. In other words, Macbeth aspires to a sterilized world that gives up tragedy in favour of order and stability: the same sign of decay that Nietzsche attributed to the post-Socratic, Apollonian civilizations. Reflecting on the life-enhancing character of tragedies, he exposes his Dionysian embracing of folly:

> If the Greeks were pessimists and had the will to tragedy precisely when they were sur rounded by the riches of youth, if, to quote Plato, it was precisely madness which brought the greatest blessings to Hellas, and if, on the other hand and conversely, it was precisely during their period of dissolution and weakness that the Greeks became ever more optimistic, more superficial, more actorly, but also filled with a greater lust for logic and for making the world logical, […] could it then perhaps be the case, despite all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of democratic taste, that the victory of optimism, the predominance of reasonableness, practical and theoretical utilitarianism, like its contemporary, democracy, that all this is symptomatic of a decline in strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion? [294]

Shakespeare's world, in its ungraspable irrationality and mystery, in its irreducible complexity, brought great ripeness to the art of literature for it encompasses Dionysian wisdom and embraces folly and life in all its facets: in other words, it is *whole*. As Nietzsche understood it, Dionysian wisdom "is an unnatural abomination" as "whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. "The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature""[295].

If Ribner suggested that the moral degradation of Macbeth is mirrored in his physical degradation, Nietzsche would add that his physical annihilation stems from the Dionysian knowledge that he was forced to bear, in spite of himself, and tried to avoid until the end. Section 3.2 returns on Macbeth's comprehension and incomprehension of reality to analyse his soliloquy.

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[292] Brents Stirling, "The Unity of Macbeth", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 4, No. 4, Oxford University Press, 1953, 385-394, p. 386.
[293] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 79.
[294] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy", pp. 7-8.
[295] *Ivi*, p. 48.

3.1.1: Macbeth's Divided Self

Nihilism, thus, thrives on the already discussed "problematic dichotomy"[296] – the real and the apparent world – established by an *instrumental* use of reason which ultimately turns against life.

Nietzsche's tackling of this philosophical problem has been labelled as a radical perspectivist theory which heavily polemized against the decadent mentality from which nihilism originated. His perspectivism was then completed with his theory of the will to power which accounted for a psychological definition of human drives. While philosophy attempted to prioritize the "true world" over the apparent, Nietzsche insisted that the "surface-world of phenomenal appearance *is* reality"[297]. Assuming this stance, it is now crucial to define reality.

In his vision, reality must be grasped on its "problematically aesthetic and creative character"[298]. As Hughes puts it, creativity, or "creative artifice", is the core of human existence as it gives "mobility" to desire, "flourishing" to life, "perdurance" to truth and being, and "value, agency, and freedom" to human life. This is why Nietzsche-Zarathustra teaches "to will is to create", as well as declaring that "[t]o will liberates": the three words – creativity, agency and freedom – are synonyms. In *Macbeth*, desire is marred, life is endangered, truth is cunning, being is fictional, and so everything else in the play flips onto its reversed side. Macbeth has lost the Shakespearean *negotiation* of reality.

Nietzsche also famously attacks the metaphysical fantasy of the self as a "substantial and self-identical totality with a freedom of will that is somehow causally discrete or self-contained". As Zupančič remarks, Nietzsche insists on him frequently describing himself as someone being at the borderline between 'Dionysus and the Crucified' ("I am two, I am split, I am the event"). Both figures emerge "as two, as a doubleness, only from within this very break"[299], and such doubleness is best represented by the recurrent figure of the high noon[300], the hour in which things are

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[296] Juan Luis Toribio Vazques, "On the origin and development of the term nihilism", p. 1204.
[297] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 73.
[298] *Ivi*, p. i.
[299] Alenka Zupančič, "The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two", The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003, p. 16.
[300] Curiously enough, Hecate declares: "Great business must be wrought ere noon" (Act 3.5).

"dressed in their own shadows", in which "one turns to two"[301]. In this fracture of reality, "*between* the suffering of Christ and Dionysus"[302], Nietzsche sees the springing of a new subjectivity.

Dwelling in the "border of noncoincidence"[303] between Dionysus and Christ allows the emergence of a new perspective centring around "the middle, inner edge of life, the point where life is decided"[304]. Such noncoincidence with oneself occurs with the "split of representation"[305] in which Nietzsche inscribes himself.

A similar theory in the field of literature is Mikhail Bakhtin's *principle of non-coincidence*. From this perspective, Macbeth obeys this principle as he becomes less and less coincidental to himself. Like Nietzsche, he is haunted by the "the parallel of an inconsistent Other", whose inconsistency derives from the shapeless mass of drives leaving the psyche torn and unreconciled, perversely tearing it "in different directions"[306]. He exhibits a divided self, a threefold identity ("Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor/ Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more", Act 2.2), and a destiny deserted by three prophecies with two meanings each. The mirror, symbol of identity, appears in the additional apparition evoked by the Witches showing eight kings, the last one holding the unobserved device. The parade is closed by Banquo, Macbeth's double, who rightfully frightens him, but the mirror seemingly conveys the same idea of doubling images and figures – perhaps subtly suggesting the double sense of the Witches' prophecies.

If reality is deceiving, the Macbeths are the first characters to be depicted as symbols of contradiction. The very identity of Macbeth as a traitor is significant for the historical and cultural context in which Shakespeare wrote the tragedy. At the time, treason was considered as a "self-consuming act" because once the traitor eventually loses control over his own intentions, he – the deceiver – becomes someone who "must have been somehow deceived" too. The self-consumption is accomplished in the liminal space of *equivocation*, in which the constructs of truth and lie are inseparable just like those of good and evil are. As Steven Mullaney explains, "[t]he traitor stands at an

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[301] Alenka Zupančič, "The Shortest Shadow", p. 25.
[302] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 87.
[303] *Ivi*, p. 86.
[304] Alenka Zupančič, "The Shortest Shadow", p. 122.
[305] *Ivi*, p. 28.
[306] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 76.

uncertain threshold of Renaissance society, athwart a line that sets off the human from the demonic, the natural from the unnatural, and the rational from the enigmatic and obscure realm of unreason"[307]. When a traitor confesses his treason and is executed, his death allows him to be assimilated back into society, thus marking his symbolical return. Starting from the assumption that the traitor is a verbal abuser who deludes, seduces, deceives, *outruns* reason, Mullaney sees *Macbeth* as the best symbol of *amphibology*, which corresponds to the rhetorical vice of *ambiguitas*. For his confusing and exploiting of the double meaning of words the traitor is undoubtedly a rebel undermining the perils of society.

In this perspective, Lady Macbeth strikingly resembles her husband for she is, just like him, "the tempting serpent and [...] also the deceived"[308]. Their roles are symmetrically inverted; if Macbeth starts by exhibiting clear signs of raptness, abstraction, self-absorption, and indecisiveness, his growing awareness clashes with Lady Macbeth's descend in her sleep-walking unconsciousness, or "semi-conscious passivity"[309].

3.1.2: "Is This Desire?": Macbeth's incurable disintegration

Reinterpreting theories of perspectivism, Nietzsche figured the concept of "truth" as an artifice which exists only locally, relationally and contextually. To this perspectivism, he added the "drives" understood as "wills to power" to complement his theory in a way that enabled him to explore the realm of human desire. Perspectivism allows him to discard the Kantian dualism of the world as a "noumenal reality" hiding behind the purely apparent "phenomenal world". As he argued, every object belonging to this world is perceived through the "constructive act" of "human cognition", but not through a supposedly "objective knowledge"[310] – which he considered a philosophical scam. What used to be a sharp dichotomy, now is a concentric circle: truth – understood

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[307] Steven Mullaney, "Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England", *ELH*, Vol. 47, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, 32-47, p. 32.
[308] Herbert R. Coursen Jr., "In Deepest Consequences: Macbeth", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Oxford University Press, 1967, 375-388, p. 376.
[309] Brents Stirling, "The Unity of Macbeth", p. 394.
[310] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 73.

as "inherent to appearance" – lies *inside* subjectivity, and not as a "stable reality independent from" it. If "permanence or objectivity" are illusory, then the "approximation of a world of becoming to one of being" relies on the (creative) act of "interpretation"[311].

Yet, the "agent" of interpretation, or "interpretative force" is not founded over "the egoic subject", because it is interpretation preceding subjectivity – not the contrary. This is the point in which his perspectivism overlaps with deconstructivism, leading him to build his theory of the will to power, which accounted for the definition of the human psyche not, as anticipated, as a "substantial totality" but as a "multiplicity of structures" constantly struggling "for power". Thus, he denounced the "fiction of identity" which required a thinking agent, a sentient being not to collapse, suggesting, instead, a continual deconstruction and reconstruction of it – or as Hughes words it, a "unknotting and reknotting"[312]. That of self-overcoming (the gerund is no grammatical coincidence), is a "tragic or Dionysian teaching" for it requires the positive affirmation of the ephemerality of being in the flux of becoming: seeing oneself in the present tense of an experience of "creative travail without finality"[313] which pushes nihilism to its extreme limits.

On the other hand, he unifies his perspectivist stance with the theory of the will to power and the analysis of the drives. According to Nietzsche, the problem with the drives arises as they are "for most people […] in a state of utter anarchy". This anarchy – the same psychological turmoil which I have discussed in the Introduction of the previous chapter – is incompatible with a "rational ego"[314], as he firmly asserts that "To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is"[315]. In *Twilight of the Idols,* he expands the same point by arguing that rationality impedes men's wholeness by *pruning* them of their instincts and selecting only one to let it flourish[316]. Neglecting this totality, this magma of desires is the modus operandi of the rational logic to pursue the egoic self. Between a pruned, rationalized, egoic self and "the abyss of suffering", Nietzsche chooses the abyss, because the abyss is part of the *whole*.

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[311] *Ivi*, p. 74.
[312] *Ivi*, p. 91.
[313] *Ivi*, p. 92.
[314] *Ivi*, p. 78.
[315] Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, in On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 254.
[316] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", pp. 545-46.

Claiming it means accepting the artificiality of "any sense of being in the present or future"[317]. Although frightening, this complexity dwelling inside is a possibility that – in the best case scenario – pushes men beyond good and evil, thus harbouring "great creative potential"[318]. It is poison and antidote, doom and salvation at once. To see through this anarchy, this inherent and structural contradiction one must reorganize one's psyche "around an ascendant central drive and desire". Such mechanism, which will be investigated in the following pages, is what enable us to achieve "agency and creativity", and it is has been defined as "sublimation" by psychoanalysts.[319] However, as Hughes suggests, having assumed that each process of sublimation involves the "channelling of a drive", one should be able to tell a "desirable process of sublimation" from a "pathological symptom formation".[320] In this perspective, a desirable sublimation requires "integration", while the pathological involves "splitting off or disintegration"[321]. In Kaufmann's words:

> The man… who has organized the chaos of his passions and integrated every feature of his character, redeeming even the ugly by giving it meaning in a beautiful totality—this Übermensch would also realize how inextricably his own being was involved in the totality of the cosmos: and in affirming his own being, he would also affirm all that is, has been, or will be.[322]

A similar preoccupation focusing on the loose distinction between ordinary and unhinged, is shared by Roychoudhury in her essay about Macbeth's pathological imagination. In both cases, the subtle line that is so easy to cross or stumble on gives us a clue about our volition.

Nietzsche circumscribed the problem of nihilism to the "collective failure of desire" or "presence of wretched contentment"[323]. Cajoling oneself for having "exposed the supposed groundlessness "underneath" the deceptive appearances of value and purpose" undermines our pursuit of a ""noble life""[324]. Such pursuit is oriented by the

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[317] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 95.
[318] *Ivi*, p. 77.
[319] According to Hughes et. Al., Nietzsche has anticipated many aspects of psychoanalysis. His understanding of the roles of desires, as "a recipe for the very becoming "whole" or "possible" of the individual, the forging of a singular organization and individuality" (Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 78) are, with this respect, prescient.
[320] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 76.
[321] Ken Gemes, "Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 38, 2009, 38-59, p. 48.
[322] Walter Kaufmann, "Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist", Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1968, p. 320.
[323] Robert B. Pippin, "Introduction" to "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. xx.
[324] *Ivi*, p. xviii.

assumption of desire – understood as a striving, a ""tension" of the spirit" – to inspire in men. *Macbeth* is a clear example of failure of desire. Lady Macbeth verbalized this impasse with immaculate clarity and brilliance: "Nought's had, all'spent/ Where our desire is got without content. 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/ Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy" (Act 3.2). From her line, to the Porter's infamous allusion to lechery, to the overall language of fruitlessness, there is one line uttered by Banquo in which sleep and the oneiric world is understood as the depositary of men's desire: "merciful powers,/Restrain in me the cursed thought that nature/ Gives way to in repose" (Act 2.1). In the following scene, Macbeth embarks on what sounds almost like a stream of consciousness, completely deaf to his wife's interrupting demands to clarify himself. As Stirling notices, in the confusing passing from light to darkness, "even a splendid rhetoric of conscience is ironically part of Macbeth's absorption in the murder of sleep"[325]. In such an obsessive proto stream of consciousness, he refers to sleep as that state "that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care" (Act 2.2), reiterating the bond between sleep and the drives. Hence, killing sleep is almost equal as killing desire. There is a perverted eroticism in *Macbeth*, but the dualism between Eros and Thanatos is designed as a spectrum – and at this point it is quite evident at what end of the spectrum Macbeth is pushed.

More often than not, the semantic field which desire is confined into is that of heat and hot temperance: Macbeth recalls himself *burning* in desire, his brain is "heat-oppressed, while his wife similarly burns up after drinking and the Witches, symbol of desire, schedule their next meeting "[u]pon the heat". But the *momentum* threatens to extinguish itself in the *coolness* of purpose, in the slow loss of illusions and innocence, in the eternity of the void. Sleep, the "chief nourisher in life's feast" (Act 2.2), disappears as the barrier between life and death is irreparably blurred in Act 3. The liminal stage in which the night is "[a]lmost at odds with morning, which is which" (Act 3.4) welcomes Macbeth in the realm of indistinguishableness, in the threshold between reason and folly, in which a fracture in time marks the loss of order.

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[325] Brents Stirling, "The Unity of Macbeth", p. 386.

3.2 Macbeth's (Walking) Shadow

In the first chapter I have commented on Macbeth's "To-morrow" speech to compare his understanding of time with Nietzsche's. Throughout my analysis I have stressed that his perishing of an unaccomplished suicide – at least according to Ribner – is a significant narrative choice employed by Shakespeare, although his final duel against Macduff seems to be a clear act of self-destruction leading scholars such as Kirsch to reconsider the suicide option and question the symbolic function of his death.

The aim of this section is to return on the last Act of the play and comment on more elements which can enrich a philosophical interpretation of Macbeth's tragedy – starting, of course, from his last soliloquy as the primary example of the triumph of nihilism.

According to Raymond Angelo Belliotti, Macbeth's soliloquy denounces five main assumptions that are recurrent "evaluations" of those characters experiencing the same level of despair. These are: an "uneasy relationship with time", the "unbearable commonness of life", the "accidental, minor context of human beings", our "impermanence" and, finally, the "clash of human pretension and our objective insignificance"[326]. It is safe to say that the order of his listing is not casual; the acute temporal sensibility is, predictably, the first step to the growing awareness culminating in the nihilistic assumption of our "objective insignificance". In Belliotti's definition, such relationship with time is characterized by a slowed perception of it, in which hopelessness and misery are underscored by the succession of instant after instant. In this succession of moments in time intention surpasses its extension. What follows is the deadly repetitiveness of the everyday which proves detrimental to the spirit (the *unbearable commonness of life*). Similar to this condition is the overwhelming realization of the contingent and fragile essence of life in its totality (the *accidental, minor context of human beings*), a life threatened by the nullifying effects of death and mortality on our beings and deeds (*impermanence*). Lastly, Belliotti sees Macbeth intuiting "the theatrical element of human life"[327] which makes men overrate their lives by attributing an illusory seriousness, often forgetting that our efforts are – verily –

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[326] Raymond Angelo Belliotti, "Shakespeare and the Absurd", in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, 564-584, p. 572.
[327] *Ibidem.*

aimless. Thus, this last statement mocks these anthropocentric flatteries which gave meaning to life, to the realm of sound and fury, as his previous line "there is nothing serious in mortality" (Act 2.3) did. The underlying message, which Belliotti relates to Camus' relational absurdity, is that humans are fools drunken by illusions whose aspirations remain unheard by a fundamentally deaf universe. What is important to establish, in Belliotti's view, is whether Macbeth is referring to his own life or is speaking, more generally, about everyone's. He identifies three possible interpretations depending on the answer to this question; the first interpretation presupposes that Macbeth, although inspired by his personal experience, is talking about a universal truth centring on the meaninglessness and absurdity of *all* life. The second interpretation considers the eventuality according to which Macbeth would be worried about the meaning and sense of *his* life exclusively, while the third significantly reminisces Ribner's interpretation of *Macbeth*'s epilogue: ruthless and unscrupulous "self-aggrandizement" or "unwarranted self-regard" inevitably end in "nihilism that extinguishes all value"[328]. However, Belliotti confesses scepticism towards this option, as the presence of a "purposive natural response"[329] contradicts the previously discussed theme of absurdity underlying *Macbeth* and its indifferent universe.

What is striking about the soliloquy as a whole is the opposition between Time and the Word, or time and logos. This parallelism is best evident when Macbeth comments "There would have been a time for such a word". Similarly, his mentioning of "the last syllable of recorded time" evokes an analogous gist. Anyone vaguely familiar with the Sacred Scriptures remembers the Logos Hymn famously reciting "*In principio erat verbum*" or "In the beginning was the Word". In the Johannine Prologue, Logos, God, Life and Light coincide in perfect unity, and, parallelly, the same entity coincides with "the beginning". Macbeth overthrows the Christian system by declaring the prevailing of death over life, as well as of darkness over light – which is another evident opposition in the soliloquy. For Macbeth, once time lacks meaning, so do words; his nihilism has, thus, an important epistemological component as it is projected in the Apocalypse. Etymologically speaking, *apokálypsis* means "to remove what covers", to unveil – which is why John's *Apocalypse* is also translated as The Book of

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[328] *Ivi,* p 574.
[329] *Ibidem.*

Revelation. Significantly, Philo attributed both the roles of "creation and revelation"[330] to the Logos. The *logos*, an unutterable truth which exceeds the *mythos* of the Witches' prophecies, becomes the mortal knowledge which infected Macbeth and doomed him to his end, in a backwards leap from *cosmos* to *chaos*. His beginning already preluded his apocalypse. From our understanding of Plato, *mythos* stands for "the truth through images", while *logos* accounts for the "divine, although impossible form of knowledge"[331] which will be literally incarnated in Christianity. From this perspective, the Witches offered Macbeth the *mythos* – the images – which were a simple vehicle towards a deepest form of knowledge, a fiction leading to the truth. As I have anticipated in the previous section, Macbeth sees life in fictional terms, but not in an empowering and liberating way, nor in a Nietzschean sense. The "meaningless tale" is perceived as a constraint – especially a temporal one, due to its sterile circularity and repetitiveness. Moreover, I have argued that he is haunted both by a comprehension and an incomprehension, because the *logos* as the deepest form of truth is ultimately unknowable, just like the Lacanian real is inherently invisible. Yet, there comes a *time* in which the real emerges, and its outcomes are never good. Traumatized by the *logos*, he becomes a figure in the *mythos* who eventually loses his control over his existence like an actor is limited by the script written by the Director-Demiurge. As Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "[o]nce truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks"[332].

As he passionately exposed in the book, the closest Shakespearean representation of the Dionysian man is Hamlet, for its unbearable awareness prevailing over the initiative of action; Macbeth's path is more complex. He started from an initial state of passivity in which his contrasting drives and desires and his psychological turmoil hampered any autonomous choice of action. His first deed required all of his strength, but it was enabled by "the veils of illusion", the supernatural soliciting by which he was raptured. As the story unfolds, his relationship with reality grows more and more complex. By the time he utters the "To-morrow" soliloquy he is ready to act

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[330] Darrell D. Hannah, "Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity", *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 2 No. 109, Mohr Siebeck, 1999, 781-783, p. 781.
[331] Katia Hay, "Understanding the Past in Nietzsche and Schelling: *Logos* or *Mythos*", in *Nietzsche, German Idealism and its Critics*, ed. by K. Hay & L.R. dos Santos, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2015, 167-186, p. 167.
[332] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy", p. 40.

once again, completely lucid and clear-sighted, but his action is conceived as a self-nullifying act originated in nihilism. It is the last reversal in which "nothing becomes anything anymore and everything becomes nothing"[333]. As a nihilistic speech, Macbeth's lines are anticlimactic and de-escalating towards a "dusty death". The soliloquy is built on these two oppositions – time/logos and light/darkness – the latter resonating with Lady Macbeth's idea of hell as a "murky" place. Hell is no longer associated with the imagery of heat, of "sound and fury", which used to be so meaningfully associated with desire in the play: as their desires are fulfilled in frustration and go "without content", their damnation ends in their dissolvement and fading. Light is feeble and fleeting, a "brief candle", while darkness is perpetual, confusing, murky, life-swallowing. Unsurprisingly, Hecate, goodness of darkness, has the most straightforwardly accurate prophecy: "And that distilled by magic sleight,/ Shall raise such artificial sprites/ As by their strengths of their illusion/ Shall draw him on to his confusion" (Act 3.5) – the same confusion that, in Macduff's words, "hath made his masterpiece" (Act 2.2) as the humanly incomprehensible force subduing the world of mankind. Realizing the unreliableness of the other prophecies, Macbeth fulfils Hecate's prediction when he promises "Yet I will try the last" during his last duel against Macduff. Maintaining the same line of behaviour and attitude as in the beginning of his parable, he spurns fate and scorns death "with a resolute and defiant gaze of concentrated majesty, hate, and knowledge"[334]. Moved by a stoic "indifference to death" he marches right towards the end and dies unrepentant: if suicide is "either a protest, or an admission of guilt"[335], then he neither feels guilty, nor has anything to protest about, as Kott observes. Commenting on the theatrical performance offered by Macbeth's actor Henry Irving, Wilders described his representation as that of a "wild, haggard, anguish-stricken man, battling for his miserable existence with the frenzy of despair"[336]. His death is puzzling and unreconciling for its reckless ambiguity, for it can be read both as an ultimately coherent act – Macbeth being Macbeth until the end – *and* as an index of his inability to reckon with the tragic aspects of existence – which

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[333] J. P. Dyson, "The Structural Function of the Banquet Scene in Macbeth", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Oxford University Press, 1963, 369-378, p. 376.
[334] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", ed. by John Wilders, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 214.
[335] Jan Kott, "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", p. 81.
[336] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth", ed. by John Wilders, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 214.

eventually turns out to be the fundamental cause prompting "the human impetus towards self-torture and destruction"[337].

There is a passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which the prophet is chased down by his own shadow. Initially uninterested by the Shadow's laments, Zarathustra finally confronts it with unconcealed disdain and demands for an explanation. The Shadow starts by introducing itself and recalls all the journeys in which it accompanied and followed Zarathustra behind his back. The following quote is an excerpt from the response:

> When the devil sheds his skin, does his name not fall off too? For it too is skin. Perhaps the devil himself is– skin. 'Nothing is true, all is permitted': thus I persuaded myself. I plunged into the coldest waters, with head and heart. Oh how often I paid for it by standing there naked as a red crab! Oh where has all my goodness and all my shame and all my faith in the good gone! Oh where has that mendacious innocence that I once possessed gone, the innocence of the good and their noble lies! Too often, to be sure, I followed on the heels of truth: and it kicked me in the head. Sometimes I believed I was lying and behold– that's where I first hit– the truth. Too much became clear to me, now it doesn't matter to me anymore. Nothing that I love lives anymore – how am I supposed to still love myself? […] What did I have left? A heart weary and insolent; a restless will; fluttering wings; a broken backbone.[338]

The passage quoted above condenses almost everything that I have argued about Macbeth's nihilism over the last two chapters: the self-consuming pursuit of knowledge capitulating in cynicism, moral decadence, the loss of a goal and devaluation. If Macbeth's life is a walking shadow, Macbeth himself has become the wandering shadow of a man. His mendacious innocence, corrupted by the hard-hitting truth, is lost like his desire is marred in the corrosiveness of the passing of time. If "all is permitted", then all is automatically devalued to the extent that "it doesn't matter" anymore. If everything – and everyone – he used to love has perished, he cannot draw that same love to himself. If all he has ever done was wandering back and forth – from light to darkness, from 'now' and 'hereafter' – he has no place for himself to return to. His fruitless crown is his "broken backbone". The "walking shadow" passage has the primary effect of disassociating the religious dualism of life and light; in many occasions throughout the play was the entombment of the light of the day by the darkness of a perpetual night *foreshadowed*. On the other hand, if one understands the word shadow as a philosophically connoted one, there is much more to grasp. In Macbeth's wording life is compared not to an object, but to a subject (the proximity

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[337] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 95.
[338] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. 221-222.

between the walking shadow and the poor player is not accidental), which suggests that the shadow is not just the didactic symbol of darkness but also a personification. Jungian scholars would understand it as our estranged side, the negative of our personalities. Macbeth's experience of estrangement leads him to identify himself with his own Shadow. His loss of substance – as the observer of reality – is projected onto all of reality as if in a syllogism (If I am a product of reality and I am nothing, then reality is nothing). Death is no longer a mystery, or at least, not as much as life has become – with all its shadows and nebulous wastes, with all its poor players and "juggling fiends" (Act 5.8), in which "juggling" conveys both the idea of manipulation and of grotesque buffoonery.

With all this being said, it would be a mistake to consider the last Act as the nihilistic *Kairos* of the play. Not only the whole play is haunted by "the language of futility and fruitless labour"[339], but there comes a moment of pure despair and tragic realization long before Macbeth utters his soliloquy, and that is the Banquet scene. According to J. P. Dyson, that is the scene serving as the turning point in the play, as it begins with Macbeth "still hoping to take his place as king" and ends with his "moment of tragic insight"[340] in which he acknowledges the inevitable ambiguity of a world escaping his control. It is the scene in which Macbeth first "goes into nothingness"[341] after witnessing a disconcerting reversal between appearance and reality. In this scenario, the spectre of Banquo unnaturally returning and emblematically sitting on Macbeth's stool is the most blatant element of disruption. His symbolic dethronement is, according to Dyson, not a mere political move, for the loss of a stool is the loss of a place in the world to call his own as a human being – not as a monarch. The historical representation of Jacobean politics becomes a pretext for Shakespeare to zoom in the "emotional exhaustion"[342] of a man who embodies both his own specific age and a universal tension. The reason why the play takes a turn during here and now, during *this* particular scene is symbolical; as Dyson notes, banquets are traditionally associated with harmony and union, being "symbols of life-forces" as well as of "order and hierarchy"[343]. The shift between the "martlet"[344] world and the "raven" world, even

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[339] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering in Shakespeare's Macbeth", p. 231.
[340] J. P. Dyson, "The Structural Function of the Banquet Scene in Macbeth", p. 370.
[341] *Ivi*, p. 373.
[342] *Ivi*, p. 376.
[343] *Ivi*, p. 371.

before Banquo's interference, is forewarned by Macbeth who is seen speaking with the First Murderer before joining the feast, in a passage from light to the "outer darkness […] where he belongs"[345]. In this perspective, his motion walks the opposite direction of the play, which goes "from the world of the raven to that of the martlet"[346] in its ending – the same game of inversions and reversals between what seems fair and foul ending in the final unmasking of Macbeth.

3.3 Philosophy and (Meta)Literature

Having considered the last soliloquy in his nihilistic force, there is one last detail allowing me to conclude my analysis with a final metaliterary remark. I am referring to Macbeth's conception of life as a "tale told by an idiot", which is an explicit merging of life into the realm of literature and fiction, or in Zamir's words a merging of "the theatrical […] into the real"[347]. In this case, it is even more significant that his line is uttered by an actor, a factor adding an additional layer of depth nearing the same sort of sensitivity and self-awareness of modern avant-garde literature which was best rendered by the breaking of the fourth wall. In the Early Modern, actors were not estranged to the *horror vacui* – the idea of being a mere shadow, an imitation, an empty recipient. Perhaps Macbeth's paradox could be summarized by Nietzsche's second question of conscience in *Twilight of the Idols*: "Are you genuine? Or only an actor? A representative? Or that itself which is represented? – Finally you are no more than an imitation of an actor"[348]. It is only after acting as a character in the Witches' supernatural accounts of the future that he recognizes himself as a represented figure who has been himself at the mercy of figures (the three apparitions of the last prophecies). Like Lady Macbeth in Stirling's reading, he is deceiver and deceived, representative subject and represented object; *Macbeth* as a dramatic work is, like

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[344] The martlet is recognized as a symbol of restlessness due to its unusable feet forcing him to fly relentlessly and has become an icon in English heraldry. Hence, it is a symbol of nobility and kingship, but at the same time it is an image significantly recalling the same restlessness which forbids Macbeth to stop his business leading to damnation.
[345] J.P. Dyson, "The Structural Function of the Banquet Scene in Macbeth", p. 372.
[346] *Ivi*, p. 377.
[347] Tzachi Zamir, "Upon One Bank and Shoal of Time", p. 532.
[348] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols", p. 11.

Goethe's *Faust* – a tragedy which, according to Franco Fortini, bears the seeds of nihilism itself – , "symbol and figure of a reality which is, in turn, symbol and figure of something else"[349]. This section attempts to conclude my philosophical reading by reflecting on the common ground between literature and philosophy and the possibilities arising from these types of academic research. I will refer to Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy – especially by commenting on some of his excerpts from *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Reading his early writings, it seems that tragedy itself, among all other kinds of literary genres, is the most explicit expression of philosophical discourses. Perhaps not coincidentally tragedies hold a privileged position in our artistic hierarchies. In his essay about the undefinable nature of Shakespearean tragedy, Robert Ornstein reflects on the reason why tragedies are so valuable for us as he writes:

> [f]or us great tragedies are the supreme artistic expression and the hallmark of great civilizations. Thus, even though there were only two brief periods in all of literary history when great tragedy was written, twentieth-century intellectuals consider the absence of great tragedy in our time a clear proof of our spiritual failings or abuse of language[350]

If the recipe for tragedy is the sense of "utter ephemerality; eventual dissolution and loss"[351], then Nietzsche was right in arguing that tragedies cannot deal with anything else but "what is uncurable, ineluctable, inescapable in the fate and character of man"[352], with what escapes men's control and perturbates their hard-won order.

It has become common practice to enlarge literary criticism, especially Shakespearean criticism, to philosophy as well as theology, psychology and all related fields of study, thus adopting multidisciplinary approaches to the reading of fictional texts. It is worth reminding that all of these academic performances, including mine, should not preclude a personal experience of the literary text as an autonomous and independent body. In stressing the importance of subjective and individual judgements, Ornstein notes that our literary education – featuring Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche and Bradely among others – lures us with the idea of defining "the nature of tragedy"; this idea presupposes the organization of systematisms and rigorous methodologies which make us more prone to

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[349] Franco Fortini, Introduction to J.W. Goethe's Faust, Mondadori, p. xxiv (my translation).
[350] Robert Ornstein, "Can We Define the Nature of Shakespearean Tragedy?", *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Comparative Drama, 1985, 258-269, p. 260.
[351] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 82.
[352] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Human, All Too Human", p. 219.

generalize, classify and categorize literature while advocating for a well-defined "ideal" which the plays we read must conform to in order not to be frowned upon. Yet, conventionality in form and substance would fail the Aristotelian primary task of "moving" its audience. Ornstein challenges some interpretations inspired by the positing of a philosophical paradigm, such as Bradley's metaphysics applied to his plays. For example, contrarily to Bradley's interpretation of Shakespearean heroes as typically "one-sided", Ornstein observes that Macbeth can hardly be said to prove his point. Rejecting the general misunderstanding of Macbeth being simply short-sighted, Ornstein makes clear that he performs a perfectly clear assessment of "the foulness of his deed"; its repercussions become "a terrible self-fulfilling prophecy"[353] following the irony inherent to all tragedies.

Classical influences such as Aristotle have received similar attention in Shakespearean studies. As it has been pointed out, Aristotle's template sketched out in the *Poetics*, as well as Athenian tragedies in general, were unknown to Shakespeare – although their legacy was received and incorporated during the Early Modern.[354] Aristotelian readings of *Macbeth*, particularly those involving the concept of *hamartia*, were both suggested and questioned in Shakespearean studies. For instance, John D. Cox belies the possibility of reading *Macbeth* according to the theory of a "tragic flaw": there are, indeed, "flawed heroes"[355] but to explain everything these characters go through and experience according to such flaws – which means that each hero is identifiable with one single flaw in particular – is somewhat lazy. *Catharsis* is another category which perhaps does not suit Macbeth adequately. Were Shakespeare to follow the Aristotelean recipe, Macbeth's monologue inspired by his wife's death should be the primary expression of such cathartic state; and yet, how detached, how wasted and desolate, how cold is his demise. If Aristotle was not one of Shakespeare's sources, whatever the reason, he certainly was not Nietzsche's philosophical influence. On the contrary, Nietzsche turned him and his *catharsis* into a target, accusing him to have failed to grasp the true nature of tragedy. In his view, the aim of tragedies "is not to get rid of terror and pity or to lead to resignation", for a tragic play is "a tonic, an exaltation

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[353] *Ivi*, p. 262.
[354] Robert Ornstein, "Can We Define the Nature of Shakespearean Tragedy?", p. 260.
[355] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering in Shakespeare's Macbeth", p. 235.

in the face of the terrible, a victory over fearfulness"[356]. *Catharsis* is not enough; nor is it the final end: this is what Shakespeare and Nietzsche seem to be suggesting us. What is the point – asks Nietzsche – in watching a tragic play by Euripides or Aeschylus or Sophocles, weeping for five or ten minutes, and then, when everything is over, simply going on with our lives? Nietzsche does not stop there though, as he confutes the discourse of the purifying and cleansing power of tragic plays as well as the implicit notion of "moral lesson"[357] serving educational purposes. In Höfele's words,

> [w]hoever thinks that Shakespeare's theatre has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with joy, and if the hero perishes by his passion this is precisely the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy.[358]

Following this perspective, I would argue that Nietzsche's artistic sensitivity is much attuned to that of Shakespeare – who was one of his literary mentors for a reason. Shakespeare rejects any univocal reading of his works, just as he – like Nietzsche – rejects the idea of art as completely subdued to morals, or of the aesthetic as eclipsed by ethics. The intent was not to purify or lecture the readers. After reading *Macbeth*, a sense of uneasiness as well as mystery and ambiguity is much of what is left. Asking art to answer our questions is not only an impossible demand, it is a wrong one: good art is more likely to destabilize our certainties instead. This is the biggest point of rupture between two distant ages; if "Macbeth's tragedy resists superior moral judgment"[359], Aristotelian *hamartia* no longer applies to Shakespeare, and neither does *catharsis*.

Put differently, philosophy and literature work best together when neither of them loses its sacred autonomy to satisfy our instinct to make ends meet. By means of example, psychoanalytic interpretations of literary works went so far as to lose their credibility once critics realized that such interpretations were not as nuanced and complex as they made them to be; on the contrary, their attempts to explain a novel or a poem in light of their theories flattened and depowered the beauty crafted by said novelist or poet. In the foreword to his collection of writings on modern literature and philosophy *Scienza di Niente*, Matteo Marchesini summarizes this complicated

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[356] George de Huszar, "Nietzsche's Theory of Decadence", pp 265-266.
[357] Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche", p. 87.
[358] Andreas Höfele, "No Hamlets", p. 37.
[359] John D. Cox, "Religion and Suffering in "Macbeth"", p. 235.

relationship by observing how, on the one hand, philosophers or philosophy scholars abuse writers by projecting themselves onto them, while, on the other hand, those writers tend to appropriate a given philosophical postulate to achieve an illusion of prestige[360].

Literature becomes universal when it philosophises on those "anxieties" that are "intrinsic to the human condition". Hence, the common ground between literature and philosophy is this constellation of themes, one of these being, according to Harold Skulsky, "the fear of life", which is even more dreadful than the "fear of death"[361]. *Macbeth* did not miss this opportunity of dread: mere death does not scare him as much as the agonizing nightmare of his life, which is why he even comes to envy Duncan as he is probably having a much better time in heaven than he is on earth. Therefore, once we recognize that literature and philosophy often share the same matters of interest, we must recognize that there is also a distinction in "responsibility" for writers and philosophers towards such matters. Failing to consider such distinction is detrimental to both parts. In this sense, the two realms are not separate, but autonomous: literature does not properly "teach", but in providing what Zamir calls "aesthetic articulation" – the translation of experience in shapes that are rooted in thought - it "enables gaining a hold on life's essentials, maintaining connections with evasive moments that escape us as they create what is most important"[362].

Nietzsche occupies a privileged position as he is generally recognized with the philosopher status, although his metaphorically dense, figurative, rhetorical, and literary writing did not pass unobserved. In the case of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it is not only a matter of style and language but of overall structure too, as the work – starting with a prologue and ending with an epilogue – was conceived almost in dramatic terms. In his Preface, Robert Pippin reflects on Nietzsche's stylistic and narrative choices which have baffled so many of his colleagues. If philosophy has always "thought of itself as clarifying what unclear" and attempted to "reveal […] what is hidden", then Nietzsche cannot be taken seriously after all, especially considering his infamous mental decline.

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[360] Matteo Marchesini, "Scienza di Niente: Poeti, Narratori e Filosofi Moderni", Elliot, Roma, 2020, p. 20.
[361] Harold Skulsky, "Literature and Philosophy: The Common Ground", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Wiley (The American Society for Aesthetics), 1968, 183-197, p. 184.
[362] Tzachi Zamir, "Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama", Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2007, p. 29.

Literature, on the other hand, "does not assert anything". The same thing was declared by Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesy* (1580-1595), in which he proved how the poet cannot really be said to lie because he "never affirmeth".

Furthermore, Pippin argues that, contrarily to philosophy, the more obscure and deeply hidden the meaning of a literary work is, the greater it will be ranked. This is Nietzsche's point of departure from traditional philosophy; instead of "freeing ordinary life from illusions", which used to be the aim of philosophers, his philosophy purposefully emulates literature "in its great compression of possible meanings" by ""showing" paradoxically how much more is hidden, mysterious, sublime in ordinary life than is ordinarily understood"[363]. It is fair to argue that this was Shakespeare's primary task as a playwright, the same task based on the balance between covering and uncovering (anticipated at the beginning of this chapter) which is purely theatrical and which was so memorably accomplished in *Macbeth* among his other plays.

3.4 Macbeth's Diagnosis: Final Remarks

If identifying melancholy with Shakespearean heroes is a practice extendable to Macbeth as well, then his melancholy can be understood as a longing for the lost innocence which he hopes to regain in the afterlife. From this melancholy, his search for lost time sinks in all the multiple layers of nihilism: repulsion for the world of *becoming* and the eternal recurrence of the meaningless, lack of purpose and vacuity of the individual will, dreadful relationship with truth and general understanding of the world. These layers correspond to the three macro categories which have been covered thus far: temporal or existential nihilism, moral or ethical nihilism and epistemological nihilism. This tripartite division of nihilism equals three different levels of meaninglessness – all of which were experienced by Macbeth – which are the meaninglessness of existence (derived from the realization of ultimate impermanence), the meaninglessness of action (derived from the denial of free will and "superior intentions") and the meaninglessness of reality (derived from the unattainability of true knowledge). As I hope to have made clear, all of these steps are mutually dependent and

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[363] Robert B. Pippin, "Introduction" to "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", p. xv.

related: realizing that time means nothing implies that our existences mean nothing, hence our actions mean nothing and, if this results in a moral relativism, then our interpretation of the world – one of the factors that informs action – suffers the same nihilistic perception. The same path is not as linear in *Macbeth*, as he starts by exhibiting moral nihilism – his paralysis of the will and moral agency being Shakespeare's research questions in the writing of the play – which leads first to epistemological nihilism and then, at the peak of despair, to temporal nihilism. The latter makes him realize that eternal life is an empty promise, what Hegel would call a *bad infinity*. For Nietzsche, internalizing this teaching – embodied by Dionysus – constitutes "the essence of the tragic"[364].

When he cries "let the frame of things disjoint, both worlds suffer" (Act 3.2) he is implying the belief in two – presumably separate, though often colliding – worlds, and he is willing to give up both of them. By the end of the play, he perceives the whole of reality in a horizontal flattening, almost one-dimensional. If life is a "tale told by an idiot" that signifies nothing, he is denouncing an empty form, a signified without a signifier, a content-free expression. Reality decomposes parallelly to Macbeth's sense of self, a self which reaches the limit of contradiction and is condemned to dissolve and collapse among his three identities (Glamis-Cawdor-Macbeth). Being a "tragedy of order", as Frye labelled it, it is no surprise that the instability of the Self mirrors the instability of the monarchy itself as an institution. As Kott remarks, "Macbeth defines himself by negation" and "is immersed in the world as if in nothingness; he exists only potentially"[365]. This means that Macbeth's line "nothing is,/ But what is not" (Act 1.3) is existentialism in a nutshell: "it is a constant exasperating contradiction between existence and essence, between being 'for itself' ad being 'in itself'"[366]. The world and its metamorphosis constitute the *whole* that does not persist and is never identical to itself, which is the definition of existence ($\bar{e}x + sistentia$). This explains why most translations into Italian substitute the verb to be with to exist. The difference is, philosophically speaking, abysmal: Existence is understood as subordinated by a superior Essence, which Plato identified with the Forms belonging to the Hyperuranian.

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[364] Dylan J. Hughes, "Language After God", p. 81.
[365] Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, p. 78.
[366] *Ibidem.*

If there is no superior order enticing human beings back to it – no unity – then nothing exists: this is the exact moment in which Macbeth becomes a nihilist.

Conclusion

To conclude this reading, it is useful to return to the premises made at the beginning of the first chapter. Nietzsche's philosophy has reinvigorated the controversial field of nihilism bringing a unique contribution which marked a new era. Emancipating "passive" nihilism into "active" or "affirmative" nihilism, Nietzsche devised a set of theories – the Overman, the Eternal Recurrence and the Will to Power – which carry the Dionysian teachings offered to humanity. In the first chapter I suggested that Macbeth appears as a passive nihilist for his destructive impulses and rejection of life. Continuing the analysis focusing on different aspects of nihilism seems to give credit to this argument.

Yet, because the instability between good and evil is one of the themes explored in the play, applying categories to Macbeth does not always work. This difficulty emerged most evidently in the second chapter, when it was made clear that the constant alternating – and overlapping – between lucidity and mental derangement is one of the main character's key features. His initial *Amor Fati* and extraordinary ability to bend Fortune are the most prominently Nietzschean elements. Likewise, his understanding of destiny as folded up in the instant is a remarkably different mindset compared to the final obsession with eternity. If the forces of life and death are duelling inside of him, then the ongoing tension between the two produces moments in which his behaviour is not coherent: an example occurs during the final duel against Macduff when Macbeth seems to find the vitalistic strength to face his opponent even after realizing the meaning of the prophecy.

Macbeth's gradual corruption points to a nihilistic demise which encompasses the three dimensions explored in this dissertation. Such demise prevents him from attributing value to a reality perceived as hostile and mendacious, illusory and fictitious, brief and futile. The peak of this devaluation occurs at the existential level once the eschatological project of salvation collapses and the burden of time is exposed as the core of tragedy itself. Yet, his experience of nihilism is complete and pervasive as it takes place throughout the whole play. In the last chapter I have suggested Act 1.3, when he enigmatically asserts that "[n]othing is/ But what is not", as the first moment in

which Macbeth gives an explicit clue as to the change he is starting to undergo – which is uncoincidentally a moment in which he employs a strikingly existentialist language. Nihilism and existentialism are the two philosophical statements which one can easily find in Shakespeare's tragedy; the dagger scene is perhaps the most telling for existentialist scholars as it represents the dualism between existence and essence.

In other words, there is an undeniable philosophical potential in Shakespeare which can resonate with many of the philosophical movements that emerged in Europe centuries after his death. If Lacan famously stated that the artist always precedes the psychoanalyst, then it is fair to assume that, more often than not, the poet anticipates the philosopher. Shakespeare's artistic sensitivity and deep understanding of human nature enabled him to explore the darkest recesses of his characters' psyche and provide insights that were incorporated into Western philosophers' thought. Furthermore, that of nihilism is a position conceived prior to both Nietzsche and Shakespeare. Perhaps, Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not have the same word for it, but *Macbeth* is a sign that they were familiar with the same condition of existential angst and despair. The idea of non-being and void, of vacuity and groundlessness are the symptoms of the crisis between man and external world – another central theme in the play – and their radicalization in Macbeth's mind proved fatal in determining his villainous nature.

His self-affirmation deed is an act of negation, an act going against life which ultimately accounted for his loss of substance as a character. This emptying-out is the curse of *nihil* that has haunted his kingdom and reversed its harmony. Trapped in the meaninglessness of it all, Macbeth is stuck contemplating the abyss beneath him without making the leap to surpass it. The same leap marks the passage to Nietzsche's "active" nihilism as the state of the individual who has recognized and accepted the ephemerality and horror of the world but, instead of entrenching oneself in the self-pitying condition of defeatism, does not give up on it.

Nietzsche argued that nihilism originated from the decadent mentality stemming from the dualism between a real and an apparent world. This is why I have referred to the Witches' apparition as the first experience of internal division which is at the basis of every nihilistic experience in the play. In the Early Modern, the spirits' visitations – whether benign or malign – and other occult phenomena provided the enigmatic and ambiguous signs that humans received from supernatural beings belonging to an

ethereal realm. As a result, believing in the existence of a superior world accounts for the devaluation of the present through the promise of an eternal and more fulfilling (after)life. Another outcome of this post-Kantian schism is the belief in another authority from which one can draw meaning and purpose for one's own life, an authority which justifies and validates one's actions. Finally, the "real" world standing in opposition to the "apparent" one declares the war on the mendacious and "immoral" senses, which served as our primary means of empirical knowledge but are demonized and mistrusted in this process. While the apparent world is subdued to a relentless state of metamorphosis in which nothing remains the same, the real world is a promise of transparency, stability and unity.

What we see happening in *Macbeth* is precisely the dismantling of such unity in favour of a reality in which "fair is foul, and foul is fair"; what we see happening on stage is the dialogue between the human being and the divine spheres coming at a crisis. Unsurprisingly, this crisis is the perfect soil for nihilism to run rampant and it bears a striking resemblance with the historical and cultural background in which *Zarathustra* was conceived and created as an apocalyptic messenger. This experience of loss and absolute dismay is the maturation of a truth which is more likely to lead to annihilation rather than salvation. As Nietzsche remarked, the moral system of Christian-inspired values perpetrated from the past was the antidote that kept the population on the right track to avoid the dissolution of their lives and integrity.

Confronted with a truth that can no longer be postponed, Nietzsche identified art – in its all-comprehensive acceptance – as the only redemption that humans can hold onto. In this perspective, literature and philosophy can shield us from these apocalyptic revelations to inspire a new way of living and be the antidotes against nihilism and its false conscience.

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Italian Summary

La tragedia di *Macbeth* è qui letta come rappresentazione letteraria del movimento filosofico denominato "proto-nichilismo". La lettura dell'opera è accompagnata di pari passo a quella della produzione Nietzschiana, filosofo esistenzialista celebre per aver popolarizzato il concetto stesso di nichilismo in età moderna. L'elaborato parte dunque ricontestualizzando storicamente questa nozione mettendone in risalto le sue radici più antiche nella storia del pensiero umano. Primi esempi di nichilismo primitivo sono rintracciabili nei presocratici come Gorgia, nelle Sacre Scritture, ma anche nel Rinascimento di Shakespeare, in cui si (ri)affacciano concetti come *vanitas* e *horror vacui*, che trovano ampio spazio nei più grandi capolavori artistici e letterari dell'epoca. L'avvento della modernità, di cui Nietzsche si fa uno dei maggiori interpreti, riprenderà questi stessi temi, esasperati però dalla crisi religiosa. Il nichilismo Nietzschiano, infatti, lungi da essere un dogma filosofico impregnato di cinismo, pessimismo e disfattismo nonché di pericolose derive reazionarie (come spesso si è fatto credere), si propone come posizione filosofica "estrema" dall'ispirazione eraclitea. Gli studiosi lo chiamano nichilismo "attivo" o "affermativo" per l'inesauribile carica vitale che spinge l'uomo ad autosuperarsi e colmare così il vuoto lasciato da Dio. Dunque, la prima differenza tra il nichilismo di Macbeth e quello Nietzschiano è questa reazione alla vita. Uno dei risultati più evidenti di questa ricerca è, per l'appunto, quella vicinanza di pensiero e affine sensibilità che accomuna Shakespeare e Nietzsche, entrambi non a caso definiti due esistenzialisti. Con *Macbeth*, Shakespeare mette in scena la devastante vittoria di quel che Nietzsche chiamerebbe nichilismo "passivo", dimostrandone appunto la tragicità. Nell'immaginario Shakesperiano sappiamo rintracciare i più diffusi paradigmi culturali dell'età elisabettiana e giacobiana come il mito della ruota della fortuna e l'immagine ovidiana della metamorfosi, entrambi annunciatori dell'impermanenza strutturale e dell'inarrestabile cambiamento insiti nelle nostre vite. Questi stessi paradigmi, assieme all'idea di Uomo come creatura in punta di piedi sull'abisso tra l'animale e il divino, saranno introiettati da Nietzsche *in primis*, a partire dal tema della metamorfosi. La prima corrispondenza tra il testo di Shakespeare e lo *Zarathustra* di Nietzsche è infatti

la parabola delle tre metamorfosi dello Spirito: se Zarathustra invoca il passaggio da spirito del cammello (simbolo di ubbidienza e resilienza) a spirito del leone (simbolo di forza e autoaffermazione) a spirito del fanciullo (simbolo dell'Oltreuomo), Macbeth non arriva a compiere il terzo passaggio. Secondo Nietzsche-Zarathustra, lo spirito umano compie un percorso che va dall'iniziale accettazione dei valori morali preesistenti al loro rifiuto. Tuttavia, distruggere i valori del passato implica la creazione di valori nuovi, passaggio chiave che viene a mancare in Macbeth, personaggio che si limita a distruggere come mosso da una meccanica pulsione di morte. Il simbolo del fanciullo è ironicamente centrale in entrambe le opere: per Macbeth diventa l'assillante imperativo di una progenie che gli manca per assicurarsi il suo sogno di longevità dinastica, oltre ad essere una figura chiave nelle profezie delle streghe. Da una parte quindi il fanciullo è simbolo dell'Oltreuomo, massimo ideale filosofico cui aspirare, dall'altra è invece limite ansiogeno che impervia l'ambizioso progetto. Il tema dell'ascendenza al trono è solo uno degli stratagemmi narrativi attraverso cui l'Apocalisse si fa strada nella tragedia. Shakespeare fu esplicitamente ispirato dal fervore politico instauratosi nell'epoca della Controriforma, in cui il nuovo sovrano (autore di un trattato di demonologia) prometteva stabilità e continuità dinastica. L'Apocalisse, la minaccia incalzante del caos, la presenza enigmatica e oscura dei poteri occulti stregoneschi, il rinnegamento del Purgatorio e la paura generalizzata per una fine del mondo sentita come imminente caratterizzano sia il mondo di Re Giacomo VI, sia quello di Macbeth. In questo scenario la filosofia del tempo diventa fatalmente cruciale. Il culto dell'eternità e della stabilità perpetua è rinnegato da Nietzsche e bollato come menzogna misantropica, mero residuo di un'educazione religiosa; per Macbeth diventa invece un sogno perverso. Se il tempo è essenza stessa della tragedia, lo è sia per l'angoscia verso la condizione mortale sia per la relativa velocità con cui i destini umani possono essere rovesciati irreversibilmente. Il nichilismo di Macbeth è, anzitutto, il risultato di questa consapevolezza che cerca inutilmente di sanare eliminando la concorrenza dinastica e proiettando la sua salvezza in termini escatologici. L'*hic et nunc* è il punto di partenza, il momento supremo che stravolge le vite dei personaggi, ma la dimensione del presente allo stesso tempo diventa una dimensione da cui fuggire per inseguire l'eternità divina. Il passato è perduto, quasi totalmente sconosciuto e dimenticato, mentre il futuro, il "domani, domani e poi domani", è anch'esso insignificante e odioso. Come

lugubremente espresso dall'ultimo soliloquio, il tempo diventa una sequenza insensata e insostenibile di istanti senza consistenza. Non per nulla, infatti, l'accettazione dell'Eterno Ritorno e del Divenire del mondo è per Nietzsche il compiuto più difficile, al limite dell'inconcepibile, del filosofo. Per questo motivo si ricorre così spesso all'insegnamento tragico tramandato dalla figura mitica di Dioniso, divinità che sempre viene fatta a pezzi e che sempre ritorna come promessa di vita.

Temi di natura così squisitamente esistenziale comportano anche un importante risvolto sul piano dell'etica e della morale: svalutare la vita terrena per il suo continuo scorrere significa svalutarne anche i valori e gli scopi finalistici prefissati da una volontà individuale. Il tema del libero arbitrio, che ben s'intreccia con il problema teologico del Male, è un altro grande snodo narrativo che viene invaso dal nichilismo. Tradizionalmente il Male, che per Shakespeare e Nietzsche si fa presenza interstiziale nell'animo umano, è direttamente correlato alla volontà umana che compie una scelta deliberata e consapevole come atto di ribellione luciferina. La responsabilità individuale è quindi centrale, a prescindere dall'eventuale attenuante di un'ispirazione demoniaca, nella decisione di disubbidire il Creatore e sconvolgere l'ordine armonico della natura per un vantaggio personale. Innumerevoli sono gli accenni al regicidio e a tutti i terribili eventi a esso successivi come a un orribile disordine contro natura, nonostante la malvagità sia parte integrante della natura umana. Banquo è l'esempio perfetto di umana commistione di bene e male, anche lui testimone delle profezie delle streghe ma provvisto dell'integrità necessaria per vedere attraverso la loro ingannevole nebulosità. Il confine tra lucidità razionale e rapimento estatico diventa sempre meno netto e più sfumato: se la volontà di Macbeth viene perversa dalle astratte idee di fato e predestinazione rafforzate dalle confuse profezie, le tracce di un desiderio latente di potere sono già presenti in lui da prima che le streghe le destassero. L'immaginazione infetta da impulsi sanguigni attinge infatti dalla sua volontà più radicata, senza il bisogno di ricevere suggerimenti o sollecitazioni esterne. Eppure, questa volontà è problematica: come è stato messo in evidenza, manca totalmente quella che è stata definita "profondità motivazionale". Quella di Macbeth, quindi, è un'ambizione vuota e vacua fondata su premunizioni dubbie ed ambigue e che lo condanna ad una situazione penosa di angoscia e solitudine. Il presunto libero arbitrio che spinge verso la strada del primo assassinio viene man mano annullato da un meccanismo ripetitivo e coercitivo in

cui non c'è più via d'uscita alternativa che non sia continuare a macchiarsi le mani di sangue. Di conseguenza, infatti, l'immaginario sanguigno, infernale e bilioso si estingue gradualmente in una freddezza desolata, distaccata ed alienante, a simbolizzare così l'appassimento del desiderio e la perdita dell'innocenza. Tutto questo conferma le interpretazioni dell'opera come storia di svuotamento, di vacuità ed empietà dilaganti come sintomi di nichilismo. Questo riporta alle premesse iniziali se si considera che, secondo Nietzsche, il nichilismo ha origine nel decadentismo che a sua volta insorge con la negazione della vita e l'impoverimento degli istinti. L'ordine morale che sistematizzava il mondo e, attraverso la dottrina cristiana, attribuiva valore alla vita funzionava come antidoto. Tuttavia, lo stesso ordine morale produce l'effetto contrario quando, a partire dalla tradizione kantiana, cerca di distinguere il mondo fenomenico dal mondo reale: questa dicotomia produce infatti una voragine incolmabile che fa scadere il mondo sensibile in una dimensione di illusorietà immorale. Allo stesso modo, la decadenza sia etica sia estetica irrompe nel mondo di Macbeth disintegrando la sua volontà individuale. Il libero arbitrio è sicuramente uno dei temi della tragedia che Shakespeare mette in relazione con il tema del profetico, secondo il quale tutto sembra già scritto e deciso da un'entità superiore. Eppure, da un lato Macbeth appare sin dal suo celebre scontro con Macdonald come un personaggio capace di sottomettere la Fortuna alla sua volontà, mentre dall'altro le pochissime informazioni date da Shakespeare sugli antefatti che precedono la storia precludono un'interpretazione meccanicistica dell'opera di tipo causa-effetto. Allo stesso modo Nietzsche confuta sia l'idea di libero arbitrio sia il concatenamento di causa ed effetto. Il vero mistero non è stabilire se le singole azioni degli esseri umani derivino dalla propria volontà individuale, bensì quello di stabilire da dove provenga, o da cosa sia governata a sua volta, tale volontà. In ottica nietzschiana, la volontà umana può essere forte oppure debole; forte se proiettata verso la vita, debole se corrotta dal decadentismo e indirizzata verso una mentalità tipicamente fatalista. In questo senso, Macbeth compie un'evidente involuzione verso una condizione paradossalmente antitetica: al suo raggiungere il grado massimo di potere e autorità sul suo regno, maggiori sono la sua vulnerabilità e debolezza.

Se definire la sua volontà in termini di forza o debolezza può essere sotto certi aspetti difficile, la stessa analisi dà esiti più netti se spostata sul versante identitario. Tra

i continui passaggi tra luce e oscurità, si assiste a una vera e propria dissoluzione dell'identità del protagonista. Esaminando l'opera sia da un punto di vista filologico (o linguistico) che allegorico (o simbolico) si nota una voluta costruzione sul tema del doppio. Il dualismo più evidente è, come anticipato, quello che riguarda la realtà e le apparenze. La crisi noumenica è, durante l'epoca di Shakespeare, la più grande vertigine conoscitiva che complica il rapporto dell'essere umano con la realtà circostante. Anche in questo caso mettere in dialogo Shakespeare e Nietzsche porta ad esiti simili: il primo parla di *negoziazione* della realtà, intesa come indagine epistemologica in bilico tra l'ordine provvisorio e la minaccia del caos; l'altro parla di *artificiosità* della verità, conferendo all'uomo la responsabilità di dosare la verità di cui è capace con un adeguato quantitativo di finzione. Lo sdoppiamento che leggiamo nella tragedia, quindi, può essere inteso come riflessione metafisica ed epistemologica su un mondo visitato continuamente da esseri sovrannaturali, ma può essere letto altresì come critica sociale alla falsità che caratterizza l'ambiente di corte. A prescindere da come venga messo in risalto, il tema del doppio produce una divisione, una lacerazione in Macbeth, che si ritrova in balia dei numerosi e contrastanti impulsi che si contendono la sua psiche, vivendo in uno stato di anarchia. L'aspetto più interessante è che se è vero che l'Io di Macbeth sia diviso, ai limiti della schizofrenia, la sua identità è invece triplicata. Ritrovandosi a essere contemporaneamente sire di Glamis, sire di Cawdor e Re di Scozia, il personaggio perde sempre più sostanza fino all'annichilimento – esattamente come l'istituzione monarchica che rappresenta. Tutto questo non è un caso se si considera che l'atto attraverso cui Macbeth tenta di affermarsi come individuo è un atto di negazione, cioè un atto che va a minare le fondamenta della vita e dell'armonia naturale. Questo spiegherebbe anche perché il desiderio che prima ardeva nei due coniugi si appaghi sempre e solo nella frustrazione. La costruzione dell'Io, infatti, richiede anche la sublimazione del desiderio, che a sua volta richiede un processo di organizzazione e canalizzazione dei molteplici impulsi in un sistema che dia coerenza e coesione al soggetto. La disintegrazione, o la fallita integrazione del desidero, è quindi un'altra sfaccettatura del nichilismo rintracciabile in *Macbeth*. Il nichilismo, benché onnipresente dal primo all'ultimo atto, trionferà eloquentemente con l'ultimo soliloquio di Macbeth in cui la svalutazione del concetto di Tempo va di pari passo con quella del Logos. È il ritorno dell'Apocalissi, chiamata anche Rivelazione, in cui un'orribile verità

ha portato un uomo alla dannazione (anziché alla salvezza), rovesciando l'immaginario cristiano in cui Dio, vita e luce (che nell'Inno al Logos coincidono nell'istante che dà origine al mondo) vengono sostituite da morte e oscurità. In questo modo, se la vita diventa un'ombra che cammina, Macbeth diventa anch'egli ombra di sé stesso.

In conclusione, il presente elaborato invita alla riflessione sul connubio tra letteratura e filosofia come approccio che possa arricchire entrambe le discipline, pur senza invalidare interpretazioni più intime e soggettive delle opere di finzione. La figura di Nietzsche torna ad essere centrale in questo quadro, essendo da una parte riconosciuto quasi all'unanimità come filosofo nonostante, dall'altra parte, l'impiego di un linguaggio letterario ad alto tasso figurale e metaforico che poco si addice al suo mestiere. C'è quindi una simmetria tra il poeta-filosofo Shakespeare (come è stato spesso definito) e il filosofo-poeta Nietzsche che dà un'impostazione drammaturgica al suo *Zarathustra*. Nonostante le chiare differenze tra le due discipline, entrambe attingono a un serbatoio di temi e quesiti – posti con le rispettive modalità – che riguardano l'esperienza umana.