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## An Anthropology of Italian Theory

### Hamlet in Venice

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“Hamlet has [. . .] provided, over the centuries,” writes David Bevington in his recent cultural history of the play, “a kind of mirror, a touchstone, a key to understanding the collective and individual self.”<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, Hamlet is enrolled as a special guide to contemporary Italian theory, a philosophical constellation that has generated a good deal of international interest and suggested a new perspective on the classic question of Shakespeare’s Italy.<sup>2</sup> Italian theory is generally acknowledged to be a philosophy of praxis; this case study examines the political praxis of a major Italian theorist in the mirror of his analysis of *Hamlet*. An Italian philosopher and erstwhile member of both the Italian and European parliament, as well as mayor of Venice for twelve years, Massimo Cacciari left his office in 2010, a year after the publication of his book *Hamletica*, a philosophical triptych on Shakespeare, Kafka, and Beckett.<sup>3</sup>

As Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano have remarked in *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, the “theoretical ‘laboratory Italy’ [has had] a remarkable capacity to speak—frequently through the medium of radical misunderstanding—to a bafflingly disparate set of situations. It is all too easy to imagine a Reading Agamben in Bogotá, a Reading Negri in Tehran, a Reading Vattimo in Beirut, a Reading Esposito in Seoul.”<sup>4</sup> These displaced readings and radical misunderstandings imply a detachment from the cultural and political contexts where these theories were originally formulated, and an obliteration of the political practices to which they are sometimes directly associated. My focus here is then the sociology of philosophy that Chiesa and Toscano consider beyond their remit, as I propose a reading of Massimo Cacciari *as* Hamlet in Venice, against the political background of the city that he guided for over a decade.

If Shakespeare is a language in which we continuously translate ourselves, I propose to read traces of Cacciari’s political practice in his interpretation of the Shakespearean text that has traditionally garnered the most critical attention from philosophers.<sup>5</sup>

While trying not to reduce the text to the context and not to confound the reader with the conundrums of Italian politics, I hope to show that Cacciari's approach to Shakespeare may provide some insights into certain blind spots of Italian theory and into the Italian "collective and individual self."

### THE MAYOR-PHILOSOPHER

It is impossible to summarize in brief the multi-faceted career of Massimo Cacciari, who if less known abroad than his colleagues Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, or Gianni Vattimo, has been very influential for them and the Italian left, and far more active in institutional politics.<sup>6</sup> The intellectual path of this *enfant prodige*, born in Venice in 1944, ideally began in Prague, since he credits Kafka for opening up the philosophical horizons that he has been pursuing for fifty years now, and it is significant that *The Castle* is the text that Cacciari reads alongside *Hamlet* in the book under consideration.

After a brief affiliation with Potere Operaio, a radical left-wing worker's party, Cacciari joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and was elected to the national Parliament, where he served from 1976 to 1983. Those were the years in which the PCI, the largest communist party in Western Europe, reached its political zenith, with 34 percent of the votes the year of Cacciari's election, at a time when it was gradually distancing itself from the Soviet sphere of influence and was challenged by a host of more radical fringes.<sup>7</sup> But as he was representing the communists and occupying himself with their industrial politics, Cacciari was busy dismantling the grand narratives of classical Marxism and especially its progressive historicism, by theorizing a "negative thought" inspired by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.<sup>8</sup> Another key aspect of his formation, relevant to frame his interpretation of *Hamlet*, is that Cacciari collaborated with other important Marxist intellectuals and artists such as the composer Luigi Nono, the painter Emilio Vedova, and the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, who became close friends and paternal figures. To this day Cacciari continues to invoke them as ghostly presences whose wisdom and authority remains unsurpassed. A professor of aesthetics since the late 1970s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the metamorphosis of the PCI into a series of ever new political avatars, Cacciari became the protagonist of a new political phase.

In 1993 he was elected mayor of Venice, at a critical juncture when a corruption scandal had wiped out most traditional parties and Italian citizens were able for the very first time to vote for a specific candidate instead of leaving the business to byzantine negotiations between factions. The polis seemed the ideal place to reconstruct a renewed sense of politics, literally annihilated by the collapse of twentieth-century ideologies and utopias: Cacciari's election evoked for many the Platonic model of the city-state ruled by the philosopher kings. Becoming the only progressive leader in a conservative region otherwise dominated by the Christian Democrats and later by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi's newfangled party Forza Italia, Cacciari

campaigned more and more vocally at a national level for an alliance between the progressive components of the Catholic and socialist/communist traditions, which constituted the political basis of his city council. During this intense phase, he also managed to publish his most ambitious theoretical works, *Dell'Inizio* (1990/2001) and *Della cosa ultima* (2007), as well as two important essays on the concept of Europe, *Geofilosofia dell'Europa* (1994/2003) and *L'arcipelago* (1997/2005).<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, his marked interest in theology became more and more manifest, making the atheist Cacciari the most sought-after interlocutor for Catholic intellectuals and church representatives, almost invariably less versed in Trinitarian arguments than he was. In 2000 he unsuccessfully tried to become governor of the Veneto region, a defeat that may have thwarted his national ambitions. The prince did not become king and returned to teaching, but in a surprise move he ran again for mayor of Venice in 2005, in an unprecedented runoff between two left-wing candidates. This last-minute decision led to a hairbreadth victory, and the support he won from conservative circles scared by his rival (a communist magistrate) forced Cacciari to form a city government controlled by Catholic moderates. An initially very popular mayor despite his proverbial haughty and dismissive attitude, Cacciari gradually lost his consensus while his intellectual appeal steadily grew. In 2010, after successfully supporting the election of a Catholic moderate mayor, Cacciari retired from active politics, devoting himself to his position as dean of the department of philosophy that he had co-founded at a private Catholic university in Milan.<sup>10</sup>

### HAMLETICA

Cacciari's incursion into Shakespeare recapitulates simultaneously the main tenets of his political philosophy and the politics of literary criticism in mainstream Italian culture. Impatient of the subtleties and family quarrels of Shakespearean criticism, his bibliography is characteristically limited to grand thinkers available in Italian translation (e.g., W. H. Auden, Harold Bloom, René Girard, Pavel Florensky). In the classic dispute between Hamlet as the icon of modern subjectivity and Hamlet the political actor, Cacciari stands squarely with one of his guiding thinkers, Carl Schmitt.<sup>11</sup> Through the intriguing mediation of Giordano Bruno's concept of *actus-positus*, he translates Hamlet's classic dilemma on being into a dilemma on doing.<sup>12</sup> "Hamlet is the pivotal figure who calls into question the possibility that to do means to accomplish, to fulfill, to bring to completion, to terminate, to dispose, *to decide*" (21). To act against Claudius would not be a real decision, but the achievement of an objective pursued by someone else, the Ghost. "The ghost demands the pure decision. But what kind of decision is an imposed decision?" (16).

As the reading continues, it becomes clearer that Hamlet is not our contemporary, à la Jan Kott, but, like Nietzsche and all of Cacciari's intellectual heroes of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Vienna, he is *posthumous*, condemned to be misun-

derstood or ignored in the present; he is not political but *unpolitical*. Unpolitical, a conceptual term that has defined Cacciari's philosophy for thirty years, means the opposite of its literal definition of "not concerned with politics."<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, being unpolitical means facing and embracing politics in all its factuality, without legitimizing it through values, considering it as a naked struggle for power divorced from all theological and moral implications. To begin with, Hamlet feels he has no real access to the past, to the grounds of his father's conduct and of his manifestation as a ghost (who, pace Stephen Greenblatt, Cacciari locates in Hell).<sup>14</sup> "If the past is venerable, why is it deferring to us, how can it be foundational if its 'presence' is constrained to appeal to us, to our wretchedness, to implore us to be 'carried on?'" (25).

Cacciari follows Nietzsche's parallel between Hamlet and the Dionysian man: "[b]oth have truly seen to the essence of things, they have understood, and action repels them; for their action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things."<sup>15</sup> He maintains that "[t]he apparition of the Ghost opens Hamlet's eyes not to a horrendous crime that provoked the crisis of a kingdom, but to the total decay of the values that appeared to sustain the kingdom" (26). However, this nihilistic prince is ineffectual in a Nietzschean transvaluation of all values: "Hamlet finds himself to be a stranger to all the systems that surround him, that of the courtier and that of the Machiavellian politician, that of philosophy and that of honour. And yet he is incapable of 'overcoming' them. He coexists with them, thinking about their disintegration; he sees them with the eyes of the fool at the graveyard" (32).

What then distinguishes the unpolitical Hamlet from a merely anti-political Hamlet, disgusted with the rottenness of Denmark? The fact that he is everything but inert: "Hamlet does indeed act. But his actions cannot proceed according to the order he had received—and not even by contradicting it. In order to contradict it he would require new values replacing the ones that unhinged the world" (31). The unpolitical man cannot risk entering into a dialectical relationship with the past, offering an antithesis to its thesis: "To piece the world together one would have to *think* a new beginning, that presupposes a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate" (30). This prince, in conclusion, is not a *Princeps*, he who—as Julia Lupton reminds us—"makes a beginning in a new constitutional order that will subsume him."<sup>16</sup> Hamlet's actions will then proceed "undecidedly":

[T]hey will be Machiavellian like those of a king when he gets rid of his "friends" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; they will be domineering like that of a sovereign "outside of the law" in the terrible scene of the killing of Polonius; he will be caught in his own ploys in the scene of the pretended madness and the play at court; down to his last exploits, weaker and weaker, almost longing for an end, any end. [. . .] Hamlet is the opposite of the victor as a "pure and innocent soul." He intervenes, he acts, he kills but "occasionally." The impossibility of finding a ground for his own purpose does not lead to inaction, but to the inability to *cut* the continuity of time, to fulfill an epoch and to start a new one. (31–33)

Hamlet does not shy away from the political stage: while always striving for a moment of constitutive power, he is actually reduced to playing a set of roles that can even have lethal consequences, and finds his own performance invariably inadequate.<sup>17</sup>

How to break this vicious circle, then? At this point Cacciari makes a crucial move, turning to a different character. “Ophelia is the authentic stranger [. . .] the only figure that is worth her own death [. . .]. Ophelia is a stranger in the theatre of the world as her own god: unconditional love, that demands nothing and fulfills its own figure precisely in its being misunderstood and unrequited” (36). Subordinate to the roles enforced on her by her father and Hamlet, “she ‘obeys’ her violence as if she turned the other cheek [. . .]. While everyone is left with the shame of having still *to act*, she, the weakest person, has demonstrated the power to de-pose her own spirit [. . .]. Her figure is fulfilled; fulfilled is the judgment that she expressed in the only form of purity: silence” (37–38). Cacciari is anxious to ward off a religious interpretation of Ophelia’s behavior, reminding us that she does not pray and that her death may have been blasphemous. Ultimately, no salvific message may be drawn from the play: “[i]n the world of Hamlet, the only hope is that of a negative theology” (39).

### BEAUTY AND THE MONSTER

The temptation to draw a biographical parallel between Hamlet and Cacciari, two melancholic and irascible princes well versed in German philosophy, haunted by the ghosts of their fathers, and capable of playing many roles, would be irresistible but of very limited import. The personality and trajectory of this idiosyncratic thinker is less relevant than a certain socio-anthropological configuration that seems to reproduce itself at various levels in Italian culture, including a sophisticated system such as that of Cacciari.

In her seminal book *Beauty and the Monster: Discursive and Figurative Representations of the Parental Couple from Giotto to Tiepolo*, early modern historian Luisa Accati has argued that Catholicism in Italy should be understood less as religious institution or belief than as a long-term anthropological situation.<sup>18</sup> In a fascinating iconographic analysis that traces the gradual disappearance of St. Joachim and St. Joseph (the father and husband of Mary) from Italian religious painting, Accati argues that Italy is a patriarchal society with weak fathers. It is a Catholic culture defined by the cult of a Virgin increasingly removed from her physical embodiment, and finally declared by the Church “free from any personal or hereditary sin,” thanks to the doctrines of her immaculate conception and perpetual virginity. As a corollary, the paternal figure in Italy is doubled into a strong spiritual father, the celibate priest representing the Church, and a weak natural father, connected to the secular power and constructed as morally inferior. In Accati’s astute psychoanalytic reading, this doubling makes it seriously difficult for the son to identify with this diminished father. The authority of the Church, based on the pure, unsullied relationship between mother and son, is contrasted with the imperfect relationship between father and son

that characterizes civil authority. Accati usefully elucidates that this configuration is peculiar to Italian Catholicism, where the presence of the Church and the absence of a strong centralized state have created a different balance (or lack thereof) between the spiritual and the temporal power than in other Catholic states such as France or Spain. The elevation of a divine woman to supreme cultural icon has paralleled the constant and enduring marginality of actual women in society, culture, and politics. The social and individual identity of women is dissolved in the collective subject of the quintessential Mother, controlled by the ecclesiastical authority. This sharpens the conflict between father and son, making it insoluble. In Italy, Accati contends, we all claim to be the children of the same mother, so we are all brothers, and nobody is bold enough to define himself as an adult and challenge the Church.<sup>19</sup>

This interpretation leads us back to Cacciari's Ophelia. While longing for an ultimate decision that can separate itself from all the specters of the past, moving even beyond Schmitt's decisionism, Cacciari projects this ideal of transvaluation onto the image of a silent woman who has been forced to choose between speaking the words of others, getting to a nunnery, or giving birth to sinners. Nun, harlot, mystic—Cacciari's vertiginous speculations aimed at a nihilistic overcoming of all foundations end up chiming with the rigid symbolism of the most dogmatic institution in Italy.<sup>20</sup> By sending Ophelia to the grave, Hamlet may have enabled a sudden irruption of the political in the rotten state of Denmark, but his dark and gloomy understanding of procreation also precludes any hope for the future: he will not become a father.

Alongside the marginalization of women in politics, a second socio-anthropological factor comes into view. Catholic Italy is a country with one of the lowest birthrates in the world, and behind the stereotype of the "mama's boy," there is a tenacious social configuration in which women are urged to become mothers (or showgirls) and children are reluctant to become adults and are inhibited from becoming socially and professionally independent. This also translates into a remarkably slow turnover in politics, society, and culture: Italy is not a country for young men (let alone women). The attendant irony lies in the fact that power is by and large held by Cacciari's generation, which envisioned a social revolution in the 1960s. Some of them still advocate progressive views; others have crossed to the other side and, with the zeal of the convert, have become the most uncompromising conservatives; others seek new existential grounds. But whatever their position, they share a surprising generational solidarity. Haunted by their ghostly fathers, they are loath to pass down their legacy to their children, often blaming them for not being able in turn to rebel against their fathers.

These contemporary Italian Hamlets are far from inert, and they "occasionally" strike lethal blows, almost invariably at the wrong adversary, especially women. While making a titanic effort to break the symbolic order of the system, many radical thinkers often replicate its more conservative formations. Since Italy is a conservative country where the Church holds phenomenal influence, it is more realistic to curry favor with it or court its supposed representatives rather than to oppose it in the name of alternative values (since values are "bad conscience" anyway). Negative

theology may be antithetical to the official theology, but it oddly reaffirms the same social matrix. While longing for a new constitutional order, Italian Hamlets à la Cacciari engage in an endless series of ruthless realpolitik acts, without ever offering resignation, in both meanings of the word.

## HAMLET AND PROSPERO

There are certainly more things in Cacciari's philosophy that I can account for here (or understand), and I caution against a reductionist reading of Italian philosophy. However, the coincidence between the most radical meditations of some Italian philosophers and their position vis-à-vis the role and representation of women and younger generations should not be dismissed as a secondary or irrelevant element. Toscano and Chiesa have called attention to "the increasing significance of Christian and Catholic thematics" within Italian theory, but its full import, a real return of the repressed, remains under-examined.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s a generation of aggressive and exceptionally bright young men defied a stagnant Italian society and occupied many key positions of power. Thirty years later, this army of determined Fortinbrases has been turned into a host of aging Hamlets who have not yet exorcized their ghostly fathers, have silenced their Ophelias, and have not been able to open new space for their children. No surprise that another figure with uncanny Shakespearean connotations has stolen their stage: a Duke of Milan who for two decades subdued his people with "rough magic" and mesmerizing spectacles of vision and sound, yet unwilling to break his staff.<sup>22</sup> While Hamlet wavered, Prospero ruled.

## NOTES

1. David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet through the Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), viii. Cf. Margreta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4: "[O]ne of the great sources of Hamlet's cultural prominence is his free-standing autonomy. Existing independently of the play in which he appears, he glides freely into other texts, both fictional and theoretical."

2. "In recent years, the writings of Giorgio Agamben on sovereignty, bare life, and states of exception have become a touchstone in recent Shakespeare criticism. In a different quarter, Italian neo-Marxists such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno identify life with the generative capacities, the 'constituting power,' of creative social arrangements that emerge from 'the multitude'—understood as a protean, increasingly globalized collectivity that overlaps with but is not fully identical with the sovereign 'people' of the modern nation-state. The term multitude itself stems from Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, which traveled north via Hobbes and Spinoza, and then returned to Italy in the past century through Gramsci. Thus, Machiavellian inquiry, born in the permanent emergency of the Italian city-states, loops through northern Europe—coloring both the republicanism of England and Holland

and the authoritarian liberalism of Hobbes—in order to find its way to a uniquely Italian modernity. Reversing this itinerary invites us to review the traditions of republicanism and civic humanism associated with Venice and Florence through the frameworks of both bio-power (Agamben) and constituent power (Negri). By emphasizing the extent to which these intellectual imports from contemporary thought are in fact built from materials native to the Renaissance itself, we hope to suggest an approach to Shakespeare and Italy that is both responsive to contemporary concerns and fully oriented by the landmarks and neighbourhoods of the plays themselves.” Paul Kottman and Julia Lupton, “Shakespeare’s Italy, from Machiavelli to the Present” (panel proposal to the International Shakespeare Association, Ninth World Shakespeare Congress, Prague, July 17–22, 2011).

3. Massimo Cacciari, *Hamletica* (Milano: Adelphi, 2009). All subsequent quotes, in my translation, are from this edition. Page references are in parentheses in the text.

4. Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, eds., *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 5.

5. Cf. Paul Kottman, ed., *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 8.

6. An excellent introduction to and selection of Cacciari’s work is to be found in Massimo Cacciari, *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, ed. and with an introduction by Alessandro Carrera, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

7. These fringes were the breeding ground of Italian theory, producing many influential intellectuals and politicians still active today.

8. Cf. Massimo Cacciari, *Krisis: Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977). Cf. Cacciari, *The Unpolitical*.

9. Since the 1980s all the most important works by Cacciari have been published by Adelphi press in Milan. As their double publication dates indicate, he frequently revisits and revises them.

10. The institution itself, singlehandedly created by a charismatic Catholic priest and entrepreneur, was shaken by a major embezzlement scandal at his recent death in 2011.

11. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, trans. David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (New York: Telos Press, 2009).

12. Cacciari, who has always been interested in Renaissance philosophy, draws here on Gilberto Sacerdoti’s pathbreaking, post-Yatesean inquiry into the relationship between Shakespeare and Bruno: *Sacrificio e sovranità: Teologia e politica nell’Europa di Shakespeare e Bruno* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).

13. See Alessandro Carrera’s excellent introduction in Cacciari, *The Unpolitical*, 1–43.

14. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1994), 39.

16. Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Hamlet Prince, Tragedy, Citizenship, and Political Theology,” in *Alternative Shakespeares 3*, ed. Diana E. Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 185.

17. Borrowing Auden’s definition, Cacciari believes that for Hamlet the only option is “to play at possibilities” (W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000], 164), always finding his own performance inadequate. “What I play cannot be what I am and what I do. As much as he struggles, Hamlet cannot identify with his roles to the point of making of them his own life” (Cacciari, *Hamletica*, 34).

18. See Luisa Accati, *Beauty and the Monster: Discursive and Figurative Representations of the Parental Couple from Giotto to Tiepolo* (Florence: European Press Academic Publishing, 2006), 9–15.

19. This may also explain why major Italian feminists extol the papal views on gender and the happy life of mystics and nuns, and radical theorists favor St. Francis over Marx. In Accati's opinion, this tenuous paternal authority invites always negative identifications, and it is a well-documented fact that Italian ideological configurations, from progressive anti-fascism to old and new forms of anti-communism, have been the only effective ideological cement.

20. Significantly, the other important Italian philosopher who has engaged with *Hamlet*, the feminist Adriana Cavarero, has offered a reading of Ophelia as a pagan figure, a mermaid whose autonomy lies outside of the Christian matrix. *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender*, trans. Robert de Lucca and Deanna Shemek (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

21. Chiesa and Toscano, *The Italian Difference*, 5.

22. The crisis, indecision, and internal feuds of the political left have been crucial factors for the long political and cultural hegemony of Silvio Berlusconi, a media tycoon turned politician who curiously cultivated Renaissance philosophy and published a series called "The Utopian Library," including Machiavelli, Bacon, Marx, Engels, Thomas More, Erasmus, and Giordano Bruno. Massimo Cacciari was the editor of More's *Utopia*.