

A Tragedy of Memory*

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Theatre is all in the present and *Antony and Cleopatra* is made up of a “series of presents”, to use Peter Szondi’s famous definition¹. In this play, however, more than in any other by Shakespeare, memory, not implicit but the explicit memory of the past, becomes part and parcel of what, not by chance, we call re-presentation. In fact, a sign that memory should be included amongst the different strands which make up the varied fabric of this play is its most famous passage concerning the description of Cleopatra on the Cydnus made by Enobarbus; a description (“The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne [...]” II.ii.191-226²) which is the memory of an event evoked by Enobarbus for himself and for the Romans. The fatal encounter between the “peerless couple” which triggers off the tragedy and determines the history of the world is staged as a memory which Enobarbus delivers to himself, to the other characters and to us; we have made it our own, made it part of our

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¹ See Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002 (originally published in German in 1961).

² All quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. M. R. Ridley, London-New York, The Arden Shakespeare (Second Series), 1954, rpt. 1993.

lives. Precisely because it is memory, the passage loses, I believe, its literary sumptuousness and takes part in the supreme theatricality of the play. Supreme because the inclusion of memory in the theatrical discourse not only enriches the specific experience of *Antony and Cleopatra*, but also remarkably expands the possibility for the theatre to be an image of life, to be *present* but, as it happens in life, to be crossed and nurtured by the past.

Clearly, a first level of representation of the past appears in other plays as well; that is, in all those plays which are based on events known to the public – such as the histories or the Roman plays. The playwright in fact, whilst putting a past event into the present, is also counting on the knowledge of the audience (which is always one of the protagonists of the drama); he is counting – and this is the case with *Antony and Cleopatra*, a story which is part of the historical and literary tradition and has become part of the collective imagination – on the audience's *memory*.

There is, however, another level which must be mentioned in the case of this play and it is the memory, apart from all other Shakespeare plays, of *Julius Caesar* in particular. Written in 1599, that is about eight years earlier, it was certainly known to the audience as 'drama', as well as 'history', or 'legend' or 'tradition'. For an Elizabethan spectator some of the characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* do not simply belong to history but to a precise performance in which, with the exception of Cleopatra, they had already acted and with whom they can be compared. *Julius Caesar*, then, is the theatrical past, as well as the historical past, of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and one realizes this particularly through the character of Antony who appears in the earlier play at the outset of his great adventure and is depicted, in the later one, in his path towards decay and an unheroic, grotesque, death. In this sense, the opening of the tragedy with Philo and Demetrius who, in a kind of *tableau*, comment upon Antony's situation, points to this comparison, to the presence of a theatrical memory:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
 O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
 That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
 The office and devotion of their view

Upon a Tawny front. (I.i.1-6)

And later the encouragement to a comparison is direct (hinting at the same time to a past of Antony's which *Julius Caesar* could not provide): "you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool", I.i.11-13).

But we are now facing an aspect of memory which does not rely simply on tradition and on *Julius Caesar* but becomes intrinsic to *Antony and Cleopatra* itself. The memory of an Antony of the past, in this sense, lives in all the characters (from Enobarbus to Pompey, from Lepidus to Cleopatra herself as we shall see) but is an essential part of the consciousness and of the stage actions of Antony's opponent, his antagonist Octavius Caesar (the same Octavius who had begun his career when very young in *Julius Caesar*). In the fourth scene of the first act not only does Octavius denounce Antony's debauched, 'Egyptian' behaviour, but he remembers a great and heroic Antony who had been able to brave the harshest difficulties, to fight famine "more / Than savages could suffer" (I.iv.60-61):

Yea, like the stag, when snow the pasture sheets,
The barks of trees thou browsed. On the Alps
It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
Which some did die to look on. (I.iv.65-68)

Memory, in Octavius, becomes celebration at the news, in the fifth act, of Antony's death: "The breaking of so great a thing should make / A greater crack [...] The death of Antony / Is not a single doom, in the name lay / A moiety of the world" (V.i.15-19). The Antony of the present gives way, in the mind and in the heart of Octavius, to that of the past; the present enemy yields to the brother and former companion: "Friend and companion in the front of war, / The arm of mine own body, and the heart / Where mine his thoughts did kindle" (V.i.44-46). It is the memory of such Antony which leads him to speak the final words: "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (V.ii.357-58).

The memory of that Antony is, however, continuously, dramatically alive in Antony himself and constitutes one of his fundamental traits. He is immersed in the present, in his passion

for Cleopatra, but within him is the constant, and often anguishing, recollection of the Antony of the past. It is true that his refusal of the past seems absolute and all-absorbing – “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the rang’d empire fall! Here is my space” (I.i.33-34) – but the “Roman thought”, as Cleopatra calls it (I.ii.80), often strikes him, and it is not just a sense of duty, an awareness of the responsibilities he should be taking, but also, and especially, a secret desire to recover his lost self. “Things that are past are done, with me” (I.ii.94) he says, but in fact it is not so; there is a deep laceration within him which, whilst making him love Cleopatra, and Egypt, presses him to declare he must break “These strong Egyptian fetters” (I.ii.113) and soon after the news of Fulvia’s death that he “must from this enchanting queen break off” (I.ii.125). He will go back to Egypt where his “pleasure lies” (II.iii.39), but right after his return to Egypt the sense of a great and glorious past as a triumvir and a soldier opposed to a present of decadence becomes stronger. After the first defeat he is actually harrowing (“Hark, the land bids me tread no more upon’t / It is asham’d to bear me”, III.xi.1-2) and the vision of himself as opposed to Octavius takes concrete shape:

He at Philippi kept
His sword e’en like a dancer, while I struck
The lean and wrinkled Cassius, and ‘twas I
That the mad Brutus ended. (III.xi.353-8)

And later:

Now I must
To the young man send humble treaties, dodge
And palter in the shifts of lowness, who
With half the bulk o’ the world play’d as I pleas’d,
Making and marring fortunes. (III.xi.61-65)

Even his actions, challenging Caesar, or punishing Thidias, are fundamentally motivated and dictated by his regret, mixed with anger, for a past (which is also his youth) which has gone by and for a present of decadence: “me declin’d” (III.xiii.27), “of late, when I cried ‘Ho!’ / Like boys unto a muss, kings would start forth, / And

cry 'Your will?'" (III.xiii.90-92) until the highly significant and painful verses of the message sent to Octavius:

Look thou say
He makes me angry with him. For he seems
Proud and disdainful, harping on what I am
Not what he knew I was. He makes me angry,
And at this time most easy 'tis to do 't:
When my good starts, that were my former guides,
Have empty left their orbs, and shot their fires
Into the abysm of hell. (III.xiii.140-47)

And soon after he says:

Alack, our terrene moon
Is now eclips'd, and it portends alone
The fall of Antony! (III.xiii.152-54)

From this moment on the conflict will materially be with Octavius but internally between the declining Antony of the present and the heroic Antony of the past. The dramatic burden of memory becomes stronger and stronger and Antony's tragedy may well be defined here, especially, as a tragedy of memory. It is this, in fact, that drives him to construct visionary images of greatness and strength of himself in order to retrieve his lost identity. When preparing for the battle he says: "but now, I'll set my teeth, / And send to darkness all that stop me" (III.xiii.181-82); and then: "The next time I do fight / I'll make death love me; for I will contend / Even with his pestilent scythe" (III.xiii.192-94). And whilst going to battle he will take his leave from Cleopatra "like a man of steel" (IV.iv.33).

And when this momentary victory seems to give him the feeling of having stopped time, of having exorcised the present and recovered the past, his language becomes epic; he calls his soldiers all Hectors, he urges Cleopatra, who calls him "Lord of lords" (IV.xiii.17) to embrace an Antony whom he sees as an armed Mars (much like the one evoked by Philo at the beginning):

O thou day o' the world,
Chain mine arm'd neck, leap thou, attire and all,

Through proof of harness to my heart, and there
Ride on the pants triumphing! (IV.viii.13-16)

He celebrates his triumph with words:

Trumpeters,
With brazen din blast you the city's ear,
Make mingle with our rattling tambourines,
That heaven and earth may strike their sounds together,
Applauding our approach. (IV.viii.35-39)

But the victory is short-lived, this recovering of lost time is but an illusion and the battle at sea will bring defeat. The anger against Cleopatra who, in his view has betrayed him by fleeing with her boats, is followed by the false news of Cleopatra's death. And it is through the thought of death that Antony pursues the memory of himself. The greatness which he has not been able to win back, he will now try to attain with a noble death such as the one he asks Eros to provide for him (IV.xiv.55-68) not having "the courage of a woman" (IV.xiv.60), he who had "quarter'd the world" (IV.xiv.58). However, this too proves to be difficult. Eros kills himself and Antony is incapable of accomplishing that final deed that would annul the present and bring him back to the past. He does manage to inflict a mortal wound on himself, but death is slow to come and the predicament becomes grotesque: before us is not the hero but a poor man dragging himself on the ground, crying out for a final blow and then, after having discovered that Cleopatra is alive, asking to be taken up to the monument where she is hiding. The present loses its greatness: Cleopatra, helped by her maids, draws him up to her ("Here's sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord!", IV.xv.33). The endeavour is entrusted, then, to the final words of the dying Antony, words which give substance to the conflict which has run through the final sequence of events:

The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at: but please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes
Wherein I liv'd: the greatest prince o' the world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to

My countryman: a Roman, by a Roman
 Valiantly vanquish'd. Now my spirit is going,
 I can no more. (IV.xv.51-59)

But even more than with Antony, this process of recovering the past is implemented by Cleopatra whose words, after Antony's death, are certainly a mourning celebration, but are also, and particularly, an attempt to recreate, with words, the Antony of the past, his memory (which now becomes *hers* as well):

The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord?
 O, wither'd is the garland of war,
 The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls
 Are level now with men: the odds is gone,
 And there is nothing left remarkable
 Beneath the visiting moon. (IV.xv.63-68)

A mood which culminates in the memorable exchange with Dolabella (V.ii) where Antony's memory is transfigured into an image which is not simply heroic but divine ("His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck / A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted / The little O, the earth. [...] / His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear's arm / Crested the world: his voice was propertyed / As all the tuned spheres [...] / He was a rattling thunder", V.ii.78-86): the present is truly annulled, and words create that sense of the absolute which Antony, whilst living, had not been able to attain. And later, with words which are perfectly suited not only to the discourse on memory but also to that of art (another central theme of the tragedy – for how could they be separated?):

Nature wants stuff
 To vie strange forms with fancy, yet to imagine
 An Antony were nature's piece, 'gainst fancy,
 Condemning shadows quite. (V.ii.97-100)

Finally, for her memory becomes reality, she asks to be dressed up as a queen to return to the Cydnus: "Show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch / My best attires. I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony" (V.ii.226-28).

Memory, then, acts on Cleopatra as well and it is not just the one she shares with Antony. Amongst the many facets of this extraordinary character, amongst the elements which form her "infinite variety", there is, in fact, the constant memory of a Cleopatra of the past. Memory of events linked to Antony and to their now threatened love:

When you sued staying,
Then was the time for words; no going then;
Eternity was in our lips, and eyes,
Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor,
But was a race of heaven. (I.iii.33-37)

Memory of past, carefree days, spent fishing and playing in the water, and performing loving skirmishes (II.v.10-20). But also the memory of her youth, her "salad days" as she calls them (I.v.75) in which her hand was "a hand that kings / Have lipp'd, and trembled kissing" (II.v.29-30), a hand upon which Julius Caesar "Bestow'd his lips" and "it rain'd kisses" (III.xiii.83-84). The years of a beauty she feels is waning, and fears is fading: see for instance the moment in which Antony is away and the thought of their love mingles with the awareness of the contrast between past and present:

Think on me
That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,
And wrinkled deep in time. Broad-fronted Caesar,
When thou wast here above the ground, I was
A morsel for a monarch: and great Pompey
Would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow,
There would he anchor his aspect, and die
With looking on his life. (I.v.27-34)

If Antony could hope to return to the past, to regain his lost greatness, Cleopatra knows that the decline brought on by years is irremediable; her death is not, as in Antony's case, a way to retrieve the past, but a way to abolish time. When, wearing the regal attire which her maids have brought her, she acts out that scene which Antony had not been able to recite: "Give me my robe, put on my

crown, I have / Immortal longings in me" (V.ii.279-80), she – and it is here that the use of meta-theatre becomes crucial – kills herself, and with herself, she kills memory. In the supreme, mysterious and sacred act of suicide, time is one, absolute. There is no past, no present, no future. Cleopatra's death is also the death of memory, the deliverance from recollection, the conquering of an eternal space of freedom: "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (V.ii.288-89). In fact the prophecy of a new heaven, new earth, finally enacted.

(Translation by Maria Valentini)