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Introduction: Philistine Acts of Violence

In contemporary societies, we continuously face acts of violence with individual motivations, like thefts, rapes, and murders, among others. Occasionally, artistic creation, literary or cinematographic, uses these violent acts as case studies. We can quote, as an example, Truman Capote's novel, *In Cold Blood*¹, analysing the violent robbery to a Kansas residence resulting in the murder of four family members. Then there are crimes committed in the name of ideals such as in the case of the nine assassinations committed by Charles Manson's cult with the purpose of starting the apocalyptic war he had predicted. Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's novel, *Helter Skelter*², offers a literary documentary on this strange case. There are acts of violence motivated by racial issues, the Nazi holocaust of the Jewish people being the most visible expression of this kind of crime. The imaginary recreations of this genocide are well known. As an example, we can highlight William Styron's romance, *Sophie's Choice*³, because it is rare to find written forms that are successful in articulating irony concerning scenes of great suffering. Extreme acts of violence, such as the ones committed during military conflicts, have been the basis of excellent literary work, as is the case of Ernest Hemingway's novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*⁴, which focused on the Spanish Civil War. Finally, novels that examine terrorist attacks can be mentioned, such as, Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*⁵, which analyses the IRA attack on a Harrods department store in London in 1983.

Naturally, there are fewer acts of real violence perpetrated against objects that are considered to be abstract, such as art or science. We are not referring to the assassination of people

¹ Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Random House, 1966).

² Vincent Bugliosi, Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: the true story of the Manson murders* (New York: Norton, 1974).

³ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979).

⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Scribner, 1940).

⁵ Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985).

who might embody those ideals – artistic or scientific ones – as in the cases of Webern, John Lennon, Archimedes, and Moritz Schlick. Instead, we will only consider public crimes in which the single known motivation was hatred towards art or science. The word philistine, which was disseminated during the 19th century by Matthew Arnold, in his classic work *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)⁶, is a useful starting point, because it expresses hate towards all that is cultural and artistic. Following Arnold,

...culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.⁷

The Arnoldian conception of culture is indebted to a notion of education (*Bildung*) that allows for the constitution of a society in which, in Arnold's idiosyncratic terminology, "sweetness and light"⁸ can be established. Rather than drawing on the values of what Levi-Strauss calls "aristocratic" or "bourgeois humanism" – the former addressed to a narrow group of people and the latter, marked by the cult of the exotic⁹ – Arnold recuperates the essential meaning of the classical *humanitas*. In line with this humanist definition of culture, the author denounces two attitudes designated respectively as barbarian and philistine. The former would be proper to the noble classes, founded on arbitrary, capricious and violent behaviour derived from their social power; but in the society of his time, it was also possible to discover another strong attitude centred on contempt in the face of art and culture. It is this latter attitude that Arnold designates as "philistine." So, we could consider the narratives that we are going to analyse as philistine acts of violence.

The extraordinary cases I will consider will be explored through two famous novels. The first one is *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by the Japanese author Mishima¹⁰, the second is by the Polish writer Joseph Conrad: *The Secret Agent*.¹¹ We can see in these philistine actions a common characteristic, namely, the expression of resentment against the *reality principle* expressed both in hatred of art and of science. As we shall see, the principle of reality must be interpreted not so much in the Freudian sense, but rather in the light of Clément Rosset's thought. In his case, this principle refers to the constitution of the Ego itself. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out:

The ego's constructive function consists in interpolating, between the demand made by an instinct and the action that satisfies it, the activity of thought which, after taking its bearings in the present and assessing earlier experiences, endeavours means of experimental actions to calculate the consequences of the proposed course of action. In this way, the ego comes to a decision on whether the attempt

⁶ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 6.

⁸ "What we call sweetness and light". Ibid., 11.

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'Anthropologie face aux problèmes du monde moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

¹⁰ Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York/London: Vintage Books, 1994).

¹¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. Richard Niland (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

to obtain satisfaction is to be carried out or postponed or whether it may be necessary for the demand to be suppressed altogether as being dangerous. (Here we have the reality principle.)¹²

In our view, Rosset's vision expands the Freudian principle, giving it a metaphysical dimension. The real is beyond all illusions/projections and translates the experience of being with others here and now. In what follows, we will therefore give importance to the relationship with *otherness*, as well as how *time* is lived. In this light, I argue, what both stories share is the expression of the human refusal of beauty and time, or in other words disgust towards the real *tout court*.

I. The Destruction of the Temple in Mishima's *Gold Pavilion*

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, also known as *Golden Temple* or *Gold Pavilion*, published in 1956, is, without doubt, the most famous novel of Yukio Mishima, the “writer on emptiness” to use Marguerite Yourcenar's words.¹³ A real event inspired the novel. In 1950, Hayashi Yoken, a young Buddhist monk, 22 years old, burns a golden Zen pavilion considered to be one of the most famous and beautiful temples of Kyoto. It is clear that the intentional destruction of one of Japan's jewels – it remained untouched despite the heavy American bombing of the island – created a general feeling of sadness. The Japanese writer became interested in the case when he heard that one of the motivations presented by the young monk was “hatred towards beauty.” We know that Mishima's work revolves around the complex relationship between beauty and death in line with the decadent aesthetic ideals of the end of the century – Mishima considered himself to be a disciple of Huysmans¹⁴ and Oscar Wilde¹⁵ – so his interest in this event is understandable.

What is the narrative of the Golden Pavilion? The hero and narrator, Mizoguchi, is a young son of a Buddhist monk. He is not only ugly; he also has a stutter. In his own words, his stutter creates an obstacle between him and the outside world. As Mizoguchi explains at the beginning of the novel, it is sounds, more than the meaning of the words, that are the key, the link connecting the inner and exterior world. His childhood friends continuously make jokes about him, imitating a monk with a stutter trying to recite Buddhist sutras. His father has frequently talked about the beauty of the Golden Pavilion (a temple dating back to the 14th century), and the young monk is used to spend his days imagining how beautiful it is. However, it is not just the beauty of the temple that occupies his adolescent mind. Near his uncle's house there lives a lovely girl named Uiko. He falls in love with her and dreams of the moment when he can touch her. One day, he gets up early in the morning and follows Uiko. When she gets on her bike, he jumps in front of her, but can't say a word. The girl is frightened, and her mother complains to Mizoguchi's family. The young man wishes for the death of his ephemeral loved one, because, as he himself confesses, if it weren't for others there wouldn't exist shame in the world. “In order that I might truly face the sun, the world itself must be destroyed.”¹⁶ This, in its own way, is an indirect comment on David Hume's argument in *A Treatise on Human Nature* where he says, “'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the

¹² Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1973), 382.

¹³ Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima ou la vision du vide* (Paris : Gallimard, 1980).

¹⁴ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris : Charpentier, 1884).

¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, “Preface,” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (New York/London, Vintage Books, 1994), 12.

destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”¹⁷ For Hume, Reason is not the opposite of passions. “Moral judgments express our approbation of behaviour or certain qualities of character.”¹⁸ Such approval or disapproval does not derive from reason, but from another emotion, namely, the feeling of displeasure or pleasure triggered by sympathy, understood as the ability to feel the emotions of others. Mizoguchi’s emotion of shame overcomes any other feeling and is beyond any rational consideration.

A short time later, his father takes him to visit the temple in Kyoto. His first reaction is a negative one similar to young Marcel’s disappointment in *La Recherche*, when he visits, for the first time, Balbec’s beach resort, about with which he has dreamed so much.¹⁹ A miniature of the temple charms Mizoguchi. After all, the small dimension of the model does not pose a threat to him. That same day, the father asks the superior of the temple to take care of his son when he dies. When they return home, the temple that has disappointed him so much regains its beauty in Mizoguchi’s imagination. It becomes even more beautiful than before he visited it and becomes “the most beautiful thing in the world.” His father dies shortly after, and Mizoguchi becomes a novice at the Golden Pavilion. He starts calling the temple “you” as if it were a person. Mizoguchi is afraid the temple will disappear when he closes his eyes. The young monk becomes a friend to Tsurukawa, a kind novice who does not care about Mizoguchi’s stutter. He is surprised by Tsurukawa’s attitude, because it allows him to see for the first time that if his stutter disappeared, he would still be himself, compared with past situations in which the act of despising his stutter was similar to despising himself.

All these events occur during the Second World War, which leads him to fear losing the temple in the bombings. In one other scene, he imagines the temple destroyed and taken by a typhoon’s winds. Perceiving that the bombings could destroy the beautiful golden pavilion at any moment draws him even closer to it. He identifies with it because both live a common danger. He starts dreaming of Kyoto being destroyed by fire, with both on it. In this way, he creates “a balance which would allow me to be the Golden Temple and the Golden Temple to be me.”²⁰ When the war is over, the first big divorce between Mizoguchi and the temple occurs. “Nothing flowed there, nothing changed. The Golden Temple stood before me, towered before me, like some terrifying pause in a piece of music, like some resonant silence.”²¹ Moreover, he adds:

‘The bond between the Golden Temple and myself has been cut,’ I thought. ‘Now my vision that the Golden Temple and I were living in the same world has broken down. Now I shall return to my previous condition, but it will be even more hopeless than before. A condition in which I exist on one side and beauty on the other. A condition that will never improve so long as this world endures.’²²

When the war ends, the superior recites a Koan to his disciples. The Zen temple belongs to the Rinzai cult that focused on the interpretation of enigmatic narratives known as “Koan.” It is a canonical Zen paradox known as “Nansen kills a cat”.

After the sutra recitation, everyone in the temple was called to the Superior’s room to hear a lecture. The catechetical Zen problem that he had chosen was ‘Nansen Kills a Cat’ (...) has been noted since ancient times as one of the most difficult Zen problems. In the T’ang period, there was a famous Ch’an priest, P’u Yuan,

¹⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978), 416.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹⁹ Marcel Proust, *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Paris, Gallimard, 1918), II, 21.

²⁰ Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

²² *Ibid.*, 60.

who lived on Mount Nan Ch'üan, and who was named Nan Ch'üan (Nansen, according to the Japanese reading) after the mountain. One day, when all the monks had gone out to cut the grass, a little kitten appeared in the peaceful mountain temple. Everyone was curious about this kitten. They chased the little animal and caught it. Then it became an object of dispute between the East Hall and the West Hall of the temple. The two groups quarrelled about who should keep the kitten as their pet. Father Nansen, who was watching all this, immediately caught the kitten by the scruff of its neck and, putting his sickle against it, said as follows: 'If any of you can say a word, this kitten shall be saved: if you cannot, it shall be killed.' No one was able to answer, and so Father Nansen killed the kitten and threw it away. When evening came, the chief disciple, Joshu, returned to the temple. Father Nansen told him what had happened and asked for his opinion. Joshu immediately removed his shoes, put them on his head, and left the room. At this, Father Nansen lamented sorely, saying: 'Oh, if only you had been here today, the kitten's life could have been saved.'²³

In 1947, Mizoguchi continued his studies in the university where he met his new friend, Kashiwagi, who had a highly visible feet deformity. Kashiwagi said to him, "People think they can't see themselves without the presence of a mirror." Being crippled and deformed is like always having a mirror in front of your nose. Kashiwagi was quite cynical and shows him how one can "catch life within adversity." He taught him that deformity could be a seductive factor, a parallel idea to K's in *The Trial*²⁴ when he discovers, in his lawyer's house, that physical deformity can be attractive. However, Mizoguchi found out he had another problem besides his stutter. Whenever he was in the arms of a girl, the image of the temple came to him, and he became impotent. "Between the girl and myself, between life and myself, there invariably appeared the Golden Temple."²⁵ When he discovers it is the temple generating his impotence, he decides, in a first approach, to run away. Contemplating the waves and the wild sea, the thought of destroying the temple by burning it comes to him. The destructive project mentally frees him. He manages to have a first experience with a prostitute, although, as he says, he only had physical satisfaction and no pleasure because there was always one other observing his acts. When he goes to set the temple on fire, he feels exhausted, as if the temple's beauty had power over him. By the fire, he meditates for a long time on the intrinsic link between beauty and emptiness:

...the beauty was never completed in any single detail of the temple: for each detail adumbrated the beauty of the succeeding detail. The beauty of the individual detail itself was always filled with uneasiness. It dreamed of perfection, but it knew no completion and was invariably lured on to the next beauty, the unknown beauty. The adumbration of beauty contained in one detail was linked with the subsequent adumbration of beauty, and so it was that the various adumbrations of a beauty, which did not exist had become the underlying motif of the Golden Temple. Such adumbrations were signs of nothingness. Nothingness was the very structure of this beauty. Therefore, from the incompleteness of the various details of this beauty there arose automatically an adumbration of nothingness, and this delicate building, wrought of the most slender timber, was trembling in anticipation of nothingness, like a jewelled necklace trembling in the wind.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 61.

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *Der Process* (Stuttgart, Reclam, 2013).

²⁵ Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, 148.

²⁶ Ibid., 241.

What was left was the hated image of him. Mizoguchi manages to set the temple on fire and plans to die in it. However, he ends up running away unharmed. "I wanted to live"²⁷ is the last sentence of this novel.

Although Mizoguchi's looks were quite the opposite of the mythological character Narcissus (in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* version²⁸), the kind of relationship that developed between him and the temple is a common "narcissistic" one. Mizoguchi projects himself in the beautiful image of the temple, building his own identity in the relationship obtained in beauty and the perennial characteristic of the temple. On the one hand, the temple is like the opposite image of him all that he isn't but would like to be; on the other hand, he acknowledges (or he wants to) in the temple the same fragility he recognises in his own body. Narcissus destroys himself in front of his beautiful image whereas Mizoguchi needs, at a certain point, to destroy the Golden Pavilion.

In this way, Mizoguchi finds himself in a conflictual situation: on the one hand, the temple sustains his psychological safety because it is the image of beauty and perfection with which he can identify himself. After all, he lives in the temple, and that space has begun to work as an extended body of Mizoguchi himself. On the other hand, it is an obstacle stopping him from living. Right living – meaning in this case having a relationship with things other than the temple – would mean to take on his imperfect shape (his stutter, his ugliness, or metaphorically: his insignificance). However, in expelling the temple outside himself in order to survive, it appears in its full presence and no longer as just "other to himself" but as "an accusatory other, a witness of his shortcomings". The ideal situation for Mizoguchi would be to die in the temple in a strange double suicide pact.

How can we understand this relationship to an object, a pavilion, such that the temple becomes the Other that one desires? On this problem the words of René Girard on the nature of desire, as well as his critique of the Freudian conception of narcissism, are particularly enlightening. According to Freud²⁹, there are two types of desire, one of which intentionally aims at others, whereas in narcissism the object of desire is the subject itself, the Ego. On this reading, cases of "secondary narcissism," modelled on a hypothetical childhood primary narcissism, seem to express self-sufficiency on the subject's part insofar as the Other is thoroughly identified with the Ego.

Girard criticizes this view by showing how Freud is deluded by his own interpretation. Narcissistic "self-sufficiency" is merely an illusion offered to others with the clear aim of arousing their desire. A "narcissistic" person is as vulnerable as any other human being. However, in creating the impression of needing no other, of being self-sufficient, it presents itself as the *difference* that whets the desire of others. If someone loves his own Ego so much, it must have an infinite value. After all, the "narcissist" seems to wish the ego for himself and, according to Girard, the fundamental law of desire is that the latter does not desire something in particular, but the very act of desire. Desire is not motivated by any necessity, or by the object in itself, but by the mediation of the desire of others. Thus, the pretended desire that the narcissist reveals to have about himself is only a ruse to stimulate the desire of others.

The coquette knows more than Freud about desire. She does not ignore that desire attracts desire. To be desired, therefore, it is necessary to convince others that one wishes oneself. A self-desire for oneself, this is how Freud defines narcissistic

²⁷ Ibid., 248.

²⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin, 2004), III 339-510.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Zur Einführung des Narzissmus (1914)," in *Gesammelte Werke. Werke aus den Jahren 1913-1917*, ed. Anna Freud *et al.* (Frankfurt am Main: S.Fischer, 1946).

desire (...) The strategy of desire, and not only sexual, consists in giving others self-sufficiency that we believe ourselves if we succeed in convincing others.³⁰

However, at the limit, *an object like the Pavilion or an animal like the kitten appears endowed with this fullness, insofar as they appear self-sufficient, radically centred in themselves*. In this way, by revealing themselves as invulnerable, they arose at first a great desire – like that which Mizoguchi feels for the temple; but since, at the limit, there is no correspondence with his desire, the impulse to destroy breaks out³¹.

If we read the novel with close attention, particularly the passages about the koan “Nansen kills the cat,” similar to the Zen principle that states, “if you meet Buddha on the road, kill him”, we discover Oscar Wilde’s terrible sentence according to which we always kill what we love. None of the monks was able to pronounce a word in that odd collective stutter because the kitten had already become part of each one of them. The kitten appeared to the hypnotised gaze of the monks as self-sufficient, whose reverse will be the destruction of the object of desire. However, Mizoguchi is far too involved in that mysterious entity of mediation between the ego and the other – “him and the temple” – to avoid cruel resentment, which sooner or later will occur and will lead to the destruction of the beloved temple.

II. The Destruction of the Greenwich Observatory in Conrad’s *Secret Agent*

In 1907, Joseph Conrad, an English writer but who was of Polish-Ukrainian origin, published the novel entitled *The Secret Agent*, one of his favourite books. The story is also based on a real event: in the late 19th century (1894), there was a failed bomb attack against the Greenwich Observatory in which the perpetrator died. One day, Joseph Conrad was commenting on the strange feature of the event with a friend, who casually dropped made the remark “Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards”³². In the same way that Mishima found himself creating a story about the burning of the Golden Pavilion, and Jean Cocteau wrote “The Eagle has Two Heads” as a way of understanding the strange death of Empress Elisabeth (Sissi)³³, Joseph Conrad wanted to reconstruct the hidden motives for that insane act but, most importantly, to demonstrate how life can lead normal people to “madness or despair.”³⁴

What is the story of this novel? It is the story of a couple, Adolf and Winnie Verloc. The husband is a professional agitator in an anarchist organisation working undercover for a conservative embassy. We cannot say that Verloc is brilliant; quite the contrary, he is someone with limited qualities and quite mediocre, although within certain limits he is not a callous person. Winnie does not love him but decided to marry him because it was the only way she could survive with her brother Stevie, who is mentally disabled and whom she loves deeply. One day, the embassy summons Verloc and, after being criticised for doing nothing, he is

³⁰ René Girard, *Des Choses Cachées depuis la Fondation du Monde* (Paris : Grasset, 1978), 513-515.

³¹ The perception of this illusion is one of the main factors of Mizoguchi’s violence. As Lawtoo underlines, “From Nietzsche to Conrad, Lawrence to Bataille, the experience of mimesis dissolves the modern ego in such a fundamental way that, strictly speaking, there is no ego left for intensely desiring, in the Romantic sense.” Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego. Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*, (Michigan, Michigan State University Press, 2013), 3.

³² “I pointed all this out to my friend who remained silent for a while and then remarked in his characteristically casual and omniscient manner: ‘Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards.’ These were absolutely the only words that passed between us” Joseph Conrad, “Author’s Note to *The Secret Agent*” [1920], in Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, ed. Richard Niland (New York/London.; W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 235.

³³ Jean Cocteau, *L’Aigle à deux têtes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1946).

³⁴ “[...] *madness or despair*.” Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 196.

told to execute an attack on Greenwich Observatory with the purpose of compromising political anarchist organisations in public opinion.

Pay attention to what I say. The fetish of today is neither royalty nor religion. Therefore the palace and the church should be left alone. (...) Of course, there is art. A bomb in the National Gallery would make some noise. But it would not be serious enough. Art has never been their fetish. It's like breaking a few back windows in a man's house; whereas, if you want to make him really sit up, you must try at least to raise the roof. There would be some screaming of course, but from whom? Artists - art critics and such like - people of no account. Nobody minds what they say. But there is learning - science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow. It is the sacrosanct fetish.³⁵

Nothing could work better than a bomb placed in a prestigious scientific institution as a way of compromising a political group that, despite its propaganda, is in fact quite peaceful.

The only violent character is known as the "Professor" and, more than an anarchist, he is a nihilist, eager to exterminate from the face of the earth everyone he considers weak, imbecile, and feeble at heart. The Professor fabricates the bomb to destroy the Observatory. Verloc, for safety reasons, decides to use Stevie to place the bomb. Everything is planned to go accordingly, but then Stevie stumbles and the bomb explodes, destroying the boy's body. In spite of the power of the explosion, the police discover a fragment of cloth with the boy's address written on it. His sister had sewn it into the jacket so that the boy would never get lost. Verloc, who has never understood the strength of the relationship between Winnie and Stevie, tries to console his wife with the argument that it would have been much worse if had it been him instead of her brother. Hearing this argument, Winnie stabs him in the chest with a knife, murdering him. Afraid of being hanged, she runs away and takes all the family assets, looking for protection from an anarchist, an old friend of Verloc named Ossipon with the nickname of "Doctor." He is a disciple of Lombroso's theories, which were very fashionable at that time. According to this famous Italian criminologist, it would be possible to identify the character of a person by observing the physical characteristics of the skull and face. Now for Ossipon Winnie's features are symptomatic of insane and troubled behaviour. Comrade Ossipon promises to help her but is afraid of being connected to such a disturbed woman, so he steals her money and puts her on a train to Paris, jumping off the train at the last minute and leaving her alone, without money, and completely abandoned to her fate. Winnie ends up killing herself. The novel ends with a dialogue between the Professor and Ossipon. When they read in a newspaper about the suicide of a boat passenger, the journalist argues that an "impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness or despair."³⁶

The American writer Paul Bowles tells us in his celebrated novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, that there is a capital difference between being a "tourist" and a "traveller."³⁷ The tourist is one who barely arrives at a foreign place and thinks of returning home soon; the traveller is one who may never return. The novels by Joseph Conrad, and in particular *The Secret Agent*, are

³⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 23-24.

³⁶ "Ossipon, as if suddenly compelled by some mysterious force, pulled a much-folded newspaper out of his pocket. The Professor raised his head at the rustle. 'What's that paper? Anything in it?' he asked. Ossipon started like a scared somnambulist. 'Nothing. Nothing whatever. The thing's ten day old. I forgot it in my pocket, I suppose.' But he did not throw the old thing away. Before returning it to his pocket he stole a glance at the last lines of a paragraph. They ran thus: '*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.*'" Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 143.

³⁷ Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (London: Penguin, 2004).

the most vivid expression of the human being's status as a "traveller" and how he often deludes himself into thinking he is just a "tourist."

The question that is present not only in this novel but in almost all of Conrad's works is this: if someone suddenly loses the foundations that give body and horizon to his life, can a pearl of new wisdom be born? Or will he, on the contrary, discover the pure and penetrating horror so well expressed in *Heart of Darkness*?³⁸ Conrad, in his atavistic pessimism, does not hesitate to choose this second hypothesis.

III. Comparative Analysis of Mishima's and Conrad's views on Philistine Acts of Violence

Winnie experiences absolute tragedy, or according to Jean-Marie Domenach's portrayal of the tragic in *Le Retour du Tragique* (1967): innocent guilt.³⁹ Let us take a closer look at the thesis of the French personalist philosopher. A few years before the publication of this study, George Steiner had published a work with the very significant title, *The Death of Tragedy*⁴⁰. The thesis sustained was very clear: "all men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy is not universal."⁴¹ According to Steiner, for example, we find it neither in traditional Japanese pieces nor in the Jewish worldview. "Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world."⁴² The book of Job is the work that comes closest to tragedy, but in the end, God compensates Job "for his agonies." The tragic theatre, so well expressed in classical Greek culture, is the expression of a pre-rational view of the world, insofar as it supposes the existence of destructive and irrational forces that, like the web of destiny, lead human actions. Thus, from the moment that we know the rational causes and the psychological motivations of the acts, tragedy ceases to have meaning. When one knows the clear explanation of an event, however sad it may be, what sense does it have to speak of the tragic? Hence Steiner's claim, in principle counterintuitive but with Kierkegaardian roots⁴³, that both Christian religion and rationalist science destroyed the possibility of classical tragedy. Jean-Marie Domenach opposes this thesis by showing that in the different works associated with tragedy, such as those by Sophocles and Beckett, we find the same intuitions about the essence of tragedy, for instance the punishment of those who are innocent. Both in the view that evil can paradoxically derive from goodness, and in the idea that freedom can become destiny, Domenach proposes the universality of the tragic. Tragedy is, for Domenach, the nostalgia for a lost unity before the conflict between destiny and freedom, while expressing the tremendous effort of freedom in going beyond what is assumed to be irremediable. To think that the irrational has been dissolved in the contemporary world is a sign of blindness. "We are warned that the return of the tragic is inevitable, and indeed it is already there, in this blind questioning that is raised in the most

³⁸ "He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York/London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1988³), 68. "Like much of Conrad's fiction, this story functions as an occasion for a critical meditation on the process of psychic formation and disintegration of the subject's moral character." Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego. Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*, 91-92.

³⁹ Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le Retour du Tragique* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 23.

⁴⁰ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ "Si notre époque y perd le tragique, elle y gagne le désespoir." Søren Kierkegaard, "Le Reflet du tragique ancien dans le tragique moderne," in *Oeuvres Complètes III, L'Alternative I*, trans. Paul-Henri Tisseau/Else-Marie Jacquet-Tisseau (Paris : Éditions de l'Orante, 1970), 137.

advanced part of art and literature.”⁴⁴ Oedipus is guilty without any malicious intention; Antigone is guilty because of her inescapable sense of justice; Philoctetes is condemned to solitude due to a nauseating wound he is not responsible for; Ariadne of Naxos is condemned to go crazy due to a terrible abandonment, just like a Winnie of the ancient times. Mizoguchi is, in his way, innocent of his sick love from which he can only free himself by destroying what he loves the most.

However, the common ground between *The Secret Agent* and *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* lies not so much in the tragic as in the absolute divorce between the imaginary and reality – in the way Lacan⁴⁵ and Slavoj Žižek⁴⁶ have understood it, that is, imaginary fantasy distinct from both the symbolic and the real. Although the interpretation I propose is not psychoanalytic, the importance attached to the “other” and “time” in the “reality principle” is of crucial importance. The reality of the Golden Pavilion’s beauty, as well as the reality, prosaic but not less significant, of the Greenwich meridian, the symbol for the unavoidable presence of time in our lives, are the objects of the most insane form of violence.

In both cases, I propose, the imaginary representation of an “authority,” whether in the form of the Pavilion or the Greenwich line, is initially internalised and then projected outside, thereby making possible the destruction of the symbols of power. This process can be compared with the case underlined by Mark Seltzer, concerning the strange event, equally real, of a serial killer commonly known as H.H. Holmes (1861-1896), who constructed a fictional hotel in Chicago, complete with the most modern technologies, which became known as “The Murder Castle,” as a way to deceive his potential victims. “The Holmes Castle was constructed as a tourist trap. Hastily built in the early 1890s, it was strategically located to house, and to victimise, its share of the massive crowds from the nearby World’s Columbian Exposition.”⁴⁷ This serial killer saw “The Murder Castle” as an extension of his own identity. “The identification with technology that seems to empty out the very category of the subject [...] promises the subject’s self-determination or autogenesis – in effect, machinic production as self-production.”⁴⁸ In this way, we can surmise a reduction of the subject to the place where he committed his crimes, in such a way that H.H. Holmes saw the “Hotel” as an organic and material extension of his identity. “Hence the tendency toward the inorganic and inanimate appears as the reaffirmation of the irreducibility of persons to the natural or vital order.”⁴⁹ In contrast, in the actual dramas devised by Mishima and Conrad, the first identification with the inorganic – whether it be the pavilion or the clock – aims belatedly at a recovery of the subject after the destruction of this representation in the imaginary, through fire, as in Mizoguchi’s case, or through a bomb, as in Verloc’s case. Mizoguchi says at the end that he wanted to live, just as Verloc pretends that nothing happened, even after indirectly killing an innocent child.

This interpretation of these two literary works becomes clear if we consider Clément Rosset’s philosophical thought. Known primarily for his studies on Schopenhauer⁵⁰, Clément

⁴⁴ Jean-Marie Domenach. *Le Retour du Tragique*, 288.

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, “D’une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose,” in *Écrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966).

⁴⁶ “The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 1989), 75.

⁴⁷ Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers. Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York/London: Routledge, 1998), 205.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁹ Ibid., *Serial Killers*, 213.

⁵⁰ *Schopenhauer, philosophe de l’absurde* (Paris : PUF, 1967); *L’esthétique de Schopenhauer* (Paris : PUF, 1969).

Rosset is the author of a vast philosophical oeuvre of a markedly personal character, both in style and in the topics covered.⁵¹ Understanding philosophy as a critical attitude, Rosset tries to show us how the complete and unconditioned assumption of reality, in what is ephemeral and accidental, is a condition of possibility of the true joyful experience of existing. Influenced by the Nietzschean notion of “joyous science” (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* ⁵²), Rosset underlines the reciprocity between the feeling of joy and the unconditional approval of the act of existing. Hence his scathing criticism of all philosophies that seeks to find a foundation outside the real. Underlying this “ontological duplicity”, this refusal of the real, in the end he finds the same sentiment portrayed in the celebrated verses of Rimbaud, according to which “*La vraie vie est absente*.”⁵³

Our experience of reality is, for Rosset, identical to that which Parmenides describes to us when he underlines its perennial character.

The reality of coffee is that of what I drink at the moment, the reality of the Parthenon is that of the ruins I visit today in Athens. To say it in one word, incurring an apparent paradox: no reality has been subjected to change, to the past, and to be, to exist means to be oneself and now, – no other, not before, not after, not elsewhere: unchanged, not begotten, imperishable, immovable. There has always been a total agreement between the most insignificant reality and the being described by Parmenides.⁵⁴

The real incarnates into the experience of a “here” and a “now,” from which it is impossible for us to flee. We are “condemned” to a “here” and “now” that remain unalterable, regardless of the changing context in which they occur. As much as we want to change space or time, we are not able to really live in a space and a time other than the “here” and the “now.” The inability to live the present time, the only time that is real, is for Rosset the most common sign of our inability to live. “To dispute what is, in the name of what was or could have been if we reversed the course of time, comes from a common and instinctive hallucination.”⁵⁵

The novels of Mishima and Conrad are perfect illustrations of this refusal of the principle of reality, be it in its artistic or scientific form. The denial, in both cases, proves to be tragic. Mizoguchi doesn’t live in his own life, but in the illusory life of an object, the Pavilion; the idea born in Verloc’s mind is that science and time are not real, but only fetishes of an epoch.

As Clément Rosset would say, the consciousness of real experience is forced upon us, very often against our most intimate will. That is the case, according to the French philosopher, of seasickness.

The one suffering from seasickness [...] finds himself in a situation such that it is unbearable to think it might last any longer, but there is no hope to stop it, at least in a short timeframe, because it is as impossible that an agitated sea suddenly calms as it is that the ship caught in the storm will reach the distant shore in that instant. It is not worth asking the captain to stop for a moment [...] given the effect of the swinging – like this old English lady [...] who, in her sickness still

⁵¹Clément Rosset, *La Philosophie Tragique* (Paris, PUF, 1960); *Logique du Pire* (Paris, PUF, 1971); *Le Réel et son Double* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976); *Le Réel. Traité de l’Idiotie* (Paris, Minuit, 1978).

⁵²Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, ed. G.Coli & M.Montinari, in *Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999).

⁵³Arthur Rimbaud, “Une saison en enfer (1873),” in *Poésies. Une saison en enfer. Illuminations* (Paris, Gallimard, 1984), 135.

⁵⁴Clément Rosset, *Principes de Sagesse et de Folie* (Paris, Minuit, 2004), 17.

⁵⁵Ibid., 20.

found the energy to climb the deck and intimidate the captain ordering him to “Stop it!” In fact, it is reality itself that is cursed, formally condemned, completely rejected and literally “vomited.”⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

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