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Caesarean Operation:
Romanitas*, Politics and History*

Humanitas and Difference

Let me begin with the preamble with which Jacques Derrida started his reflection on humanism some years ago in an international colloquium on the theme of "Philosophy and Anthropology." Although it is concerned with philosophical issues, this preamble, when interpreted in due modification, is pertinent and relevant to our main theme. And this, I believe, will justify a rather long quotation from the outset. (I quote in a modified version.) [1]

> The possibility of an international literature [philosophical] colloquium (such as the present) can be examined infinitely, along many pathways, and at multiple levels of generality. In its greatest extension… such a possibility implies that contrary to the spirit of the "republic of letters" [the essence of philosophy]—such as it has always represented itself at least—literary [philosophical] nationalities have been formed. At a given moment, in a given historical, political, and economic context, these national groups have judged it possible and necessary to organize international encounters, to present themselves, or to be represented in such encounters by their national identity (such, at least, as it is assumed by the organizers of the colloquium), and to determine in such encounters their proper difference, or to establish relations between their respective

1. "The Ends of Man," now included in *Margins of Philosophy* (U. of Chicago P., 1978); first published in French in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972), this lecture was given in New York in October 1968 at an international colloquium. The theme proposed was "Philosophy and Anthropology." In quotation the original words are indicated in the square brackets.

> differences. Such an establishment of relations can be practiced, if at all, only in the extent to which national literary-critical [philosophical] identities are assumed, whether they are defined in the order of doctrinal content, the order of a certain literary-critical [philosophical] "style," or quite simply the order of language, that is, the unity of the academic institution, along with everything implied by language and institution. But the establishing of relations between differences is also the promised complicity of a common element: the colloquium can take place only in a medium, or rather in the representation that all the participants must make of a certain transparent ether, which here would be none other than what is called the universality of literary-critical [philosophical] discourse. With these words I am designating less a fact than a project, which is linked by its essence, (and we should say by essence itself, by the thought of Being and of truth), to a certain group of languages and "cultures." For something must happen or must have happened to the diaphanous purity of this element. (Derrida, "The Ends of Man" [1968])

International conferences, such as the present one, are frequent these days. They can be festivities, and are justifiably so; not only are they intellectual festivities but also festivities in the genuine sense of the word, offering errant scholars displaced dimension of the ordinary experience, where errant scholars may sometimes become aberrant. But the trend of international conferences harbours, as Derrida points out, some serious problems as well. They include the problem of national identities or differences, and its concomitant problem of "the establishing of relations between [these] differences," particularly when it is the case, as Derrida rightly contends, that "the establishing of relations between differences is also the promised complicity of a common element."

To translate this problematic in the present situation, what do we have to do with the promised complicity that exists between a common element = Shakespeare and differences = cultural traditions? What do we have to do with the problem of the universality of literary-critical discourse (Shakespeare), which is linked by its essence to a certain group of "cultures." There is, on the one hand, no question of Platonic transcendental idealism *à la* Alan Bloom on the subject of Shakespeare, namely, Shakespeare as universal tradition representing *humanitas* in its essential totality. [2] It may indeed be a theoretical possibility but without due consideration on its complicity with differences it can be in danger of being totalitarian. On the other hand, there is equally no question of cultural relativism pure and simple: it is untenable to speak of mere differences on the assumption of national, cultural, and racial identities with no reference either implicit or explicit to a common element that Shakespeare is. The question, put in a nutshell, is then that of humanity in relation to different cultures: the question, in Derridian terms, of "the medium" or "representation that all the participants [with their own differences] must make of a certain transparent ether" that Shakespeare is. And this "medium" or "representation," as Derrida also says, is not a matter of fact but a matter of *project*. How do we go about the representational project that all the participants with different cultures must make of Shakespeare, "a certain transparent ether," and that without falling back on Platonic universalism or cultural relativism?

The question, arising as it does from the dilemma of universalism or relativism, is as such an aporia characteristic of the modern or modernity and by all accounts is too big to grapple with in its generalities and too complicated to bear a systematic analysis in its particulars. But the occasion of an international conference on humanities such as the present seems to demand some considerations or, at the least, some suggestions in connection with this problematic. And my suggestion, albeit naturally limited, is that the above-mentioned problematic was given its inception and conception in *Julius Caesar*. It was when the death of Caesar was envisaged as a project-not a mere project but a representational project-there presented itself the problem of the "representation that all the participants must make of a certain transparent ether," in fine, the problem of humanism and cultures.

"Liberty": Project for Political Incarnation

"Peace, freedom, and liberty!" These are the words Brutus wants to promulgate through the streets of Rome as watchword for the post-Cae-

2. Cf. Allan Bloom's Introduction to his *Shakespeare's Politics* (with V. H. Jaffa) (Chicago & London: U. of Chicago P., 1964).

sarean regime. The watchword is memorably repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, on the fatal occasion of the killing of the king, first by Cinna's ("Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!") immediately after the event, then followed by Cassius's ("Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement!"), and thirdly and lastly by Brutus's ("Peace, freedom, and liberty!"). It is evidently a political and strategic necessity to have it first of all proclaimed and repeated, and thereby accepted by sheer force of reiteration and vociferation. But it is also obvious that what is to be accepted by the body politic in general and by the people in particular must not be a set of meaningless words, a mere string of airy vibrations, but the spirit of republican ideal.

"Peace, freedom, and liberty!," it must be emphasized, is a project with its own ends. To our modern or post-modern eyes, these ends look inevitably entrammelled and already invested with universalist connotations and aspirations, perhaps thanks mainly to the Enlightenment movement and the subsequent French Revolution. That is, we tend to regard "freedom and liberty" not as culture-bound but as meta- or transcultural ideal or even assumptions, which constitute the better part of "universal homogeneous state" (Kojève), [3] a terminus ad quem of the modern history, or if you like, "the end of history." [4] But the project, in the original Roman context, was in its essentials politico-cultural, a matter of *Romanitas* [5]; the site of the project was not "universal homogeneous state" but a body politic which was culture-specific. The project for liberty was a cultural incarnation.

Romanitas and Subject

Beginning with what is obvious, the site proper to the project of incarnation is first and foremost to be found in the body politic called Rome.

3. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the "Phenomenology of Spirit,"* assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans.J. H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP., 1969).
4. The expression made polpular by Francis Fukuyama ("Have We Reached the End of History," *National Interest*, 1989) but the idea is poorly and loosely formed on the basis of Kojève's more rigorous thought.
5. The word, incidentally, is of the post-classical origin.

It is expected that the project take place and take the place where Caesar's body was seen to be threatening to become total and divine—or approaching the potency of "King's Two Bodies," to use the terminology of Kantrowiczian medieval political theology [6] —, so much so that there almost was not room enough in Rome for imperialistically bloated Caesar. In Cassius's phrase, punning on Rome and room: "Now is it Rome indeed and room enough/When there is in it but only one man" (I. 2. 156–57). The project for liberty then was essentially a cultural move to make room in Rome, to make public room to render Rome Republic, where the rule of only one man should be envisioned as avoidable. It was a vision where power was decentered. If the Caesarean body politic, as Brutus and Cassius saw it, was a site where the divine and totalitarian subject was enshrined alone, the expected Republican Rome/room would be a body politic where not only power but also subject in general was to be decentered.

The project for liberty, it is important to note, is closely bound up with the production of a cultural subject which is largely to be characterized by the opposite traits of the Caesarean subject: the cultural subject to be produced in the expected republican regime, if I am allowed to follow a simple logic here, should be distinguished, like the nature of the regime itself, by being "public," "decentered," and above all "human" (as against divine)—human here, though, being still defined in terms of culture, *Romanitas*. And it is no coincidence that we find a typical instance of such cultural subject-self-decentered, unidentifiable with the divine and total, and of public making-in Brutus. Brutus's self-fashioning is made in the mirror of the other, that is, the public. It is, to be precise, the discovery of the self in the mirror of Rome, which is represented by Cassius: "since you know you cannot see yourself/So well as by reflection, I, your glass, /Will modestly discover to yourself/That of yourself which you yet know not of" (1. 2. 67–70). Such production of public self is largely made against the autonomist grain of Stoicism, Brutus's philosophy, and there is a proof, as a dialogue between Brutus and Cassius before the battle of Phillipi shows, that this produced self, a cultural product, has become his second nature: whereas the rule of Brutus's

6. Cf. Ernst H. Kantrowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP., 1957).

philosophy demands that he not commit a suicide, asked (by Cassius) if he will bear the humiliation of being "led in triumph/Through the streets of Rome," Brutus promptly replies, "No. Think not, thou noble Roman, /That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome" (5. 1. 100–11). His philosophy, his belief, turns out to be at odds with his fashioned-self, and the private dimension comes under the occupation of the public domain. His self is decentered and disseminated in Rome.

It marks a good contrast to the Caesarean subject, whose characteristic self-centeredness is expressed in Caesar's own words as unmoved fixity in the world: "I am constant as the northern star, /Of whose true-fixed and resting quality/There is no fellow in the firmament" (3. 1. 20). The Caesarean subject is the world itself where the distinction between private and public collapses into the selfsame world. This collapse of distinction in the Caesarean subject/world is given a telling expression in the eloquence of Antony upon being exposed to the dead body of Caesar, in Antony's view, a hart bayed and killed: "O world! Thou wast the forest to this hart, /And this indeed, O world, the heart of thee" (3. 1. 207–8). The Caesarean subject is situated at the centre of the world, hence total and divine. Its exact opposite is the subject of Brutus; it is a cultural production, basically a product of human endeavour.

The subject of Brutus, the subject expected to be produced for the project of "liberty," is then of a complex constitution. It is, however, further complicated by yet another element, i.e., the structure of renewal. The Brutian subject is an issue not only of cultural production but also of cultural reproduction. The public room, Roman Republic, Brutus among others aims to incarnate is not a political virgin land, *terra incognita,* but precisely a lost land to be recovered. There is a legendary origin for the idea of liberty in Roman history, i.e., the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus by Lucius Junius Brutus, the founder and champion of Roman Republic. The action of this original Brutus, constituting as it does one of the crucial moments of Roman history, presents itself as the model on which Brutus and his followers are expected to turn for their project. It is therefore symbolic that the whole project for liberty is conceived of as reproduction of Brutus the founding father in the person of Marcus Brutus, one of his offshoots—the genealogical link between the two Bruti, suggested but as a version of the story by Plutarch, is adopted with some emphasis by Shakespeare. Thus, the liberating project, the making of

room/Rome, and the concomitant creation of public subject proper to it, all these moves converge in a moment when Brutus is brought to "piece out" the fragmentary letter, thrown in at the instigation of Cassius: "Thus must I piece it out: /Shall Rome stand under one man's awe? What, Rome? /My ancestors did from the streets of Rome/The Tarquin drive when he was called a king" (2. 1. 51–54). Brutus's reading here is an instance of the "writerly" (*scriptible*) reading, and through this process is created and re-created not only a room in Rome but also the public self of Brutus.

From Romanitas to Humanitas

But, does this structure of renewal, one of the elements that constitute Brutus's subject, have anything to do with the general structure of the historical phenomenon called the Renaissance? Or, differently put, does the structure of reproduction in *Romanitas* have bearings on that of renewal in *Humanitas*? The question may seem abruptly posed; it looks even irrelevant since the subject of Brutus, essentially a cultural product as has been discussed, does not require such universalist extension both in its constitution and in its production. And yet we are led almost inevitably to pose the question, especially when we recollect the scene immediately after the death of Caesar. It is the scene in which the project of *Romanitas* makes its take-off for the project of *Humanitas*.

Cassius: Stoop then and wash. How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
Brutus: How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
That now on Pompey's basis lies along
No worthier than the dust!
Cassius: So oft as that shall be,
So oft shall the knot of us be called
The men that gave their country liberty.
(3. 1. 110–18)

Their plot of assassination, their project for liberty, being accom-

plished, Brutus and Cassius in their excitement imagine that the spirit of liberty will survive many ages and transcend the prison-house of language and culture. It is indeed a way of self-justification to try to convince oneself of the universal validity of the deed one has committed. But the project for liberty, as has been repeatedly noted, has no need of qualifying itself with any universal validity in order to attain its aims: the republican project to make room in Rome remains a matter of *Romanitas* even if it is at the same time a matter of reproduction. It may be possible that the structure of reproduction inherent in the republican project, to a certain extent, paves the way for a culture-free representation; as a matter of fact, one of the theories that account for the Renaissance adopts this view, namely, the good old theory of "the civic humanism" (Hans Baron). [7] A sheer formalist view perhaps may not be denied that it is by virtue of the mode of reproduction, the form of representation, alone that *Romanitas* transcends itself into *Humanitas*. And again it can be argued that the project for liberty is enveloped in dramatic paraphernalia; it is patently inscribed in such concepts as plot, act, scene, and even theatrical reproducibility. Besides, the act of the killing takes place in a theatrical setting, as Shakespeare's reference to "Pompey's basis" reminds us of Plutarch's detailed description: "one of the porches about the [Pompey's] theatre, in the which there was a certain place full of seats for men to sit in" (Plutarch). [8] Almost everything seems to bid fair to argue for the formalist explanation that the mode of representation is responsible for the universalist aspirations in the scene. But that does not seem sufficient to account for the whole impact and fascination with which the scene holds us. There remain certain forces, immediate and intimate to us, which cannot be fully explained by such a formalist understanding. What are the forces at work in the scene which trigger off the transcultural aspirations?

7. See *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP., 1966; 1955).
8. *The Life of Caesar*, in *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, ed. T. J. B Spencer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964).

The Modern Project

These I take as the subtextual forces of the Renaissance. Since the liberty Brutus, among others, envisions belongs in its essentials to *Romanitas*, and since there is therefore no particular necessity on his own part to have it on the level of *Humanitas*, the sources and origins of the forces that make the project in the transcultural mould should and could be sought, I think, in the historical energies contemporary with Shakespeare-historical energies which have been largely grasped as humanism or under the label of the Renaissance. There is, I have to admit, no positivist proof for these forces; the proof, if any, can be found in our reception (I am fully aware that this "our" is crucial to the matter in question). Is it not our shared experience that while reading or listening to the lines ("How many ages hence/Shall this our lofty scene be acted over/In states unborn and accents yet unknown!), we tend to embody the representational prognostication with actual instances of modern history? It is certainly difficult to go through the scene without being reminded, for example, of the execution of Charles I or the French Revolution. Framed as it is in the theatrical imagery, the whole scene in our reception turns out to reverberate what could be perhaps best characterized as the modern. To make a long story short, the liberty here not expressed but represented as a transcultural humanist ideal has every possibility to be interpreted as what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "the Grand Narrative," [9] the modern project.

Let us return where we started: question concerning the possibility and necessity of an international conference such as the present, in Derrida's words, "the establishing of relations between differences" which "is also the promised complicity of a common element." And to make such an international conference possible and viable, all the participants are expected to make of this "common element," "a certain transparent ether," the representation. What could be the representation in our case? As can be expected, it is the project for liberty, not the ancient one structured in the text but the modern one made out in our reception, not as a textual matter of *Romanitas* but as a subtexual manifestation of humanist aspirations.

9. See *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1984).

It is then these forces which began to make themselves felt in the age of Shakespeare and had him, if subconsciously, present or rather represent the matter of Rome at one level higher as the matter of *Humanitas* —it is these forces that eventually make possible the representation, by virtue of which we get together here surmounting our cultural differences.