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The Earth's Bubbles and Slaughter's Pencil: *Macbeth* and the Philosophy of Imagination

This is — I must warn the reader — in many ways a failed text. If little else, it is a testimony to the ambition and immodesty of a youthful (i.e. inexperienced) researcher; and — as we know from Shakespeare's equestrian metaphor — ambition usually "o'erleaps itself." I have decided to reprint it for a number of reasons. First, a great deal of sound research had gone into producing it; the reader may benefit from the informative element of the text. Second, some readers may find interesting, indeed intriguing — as I did as a Ph.D. student — the links, connections, and affinities between a Shakespeare play and a philosophical treatise. The basic idea was — as far as I am able to recall it — to engage drama and philosophy in a dialogue, perhaps a quarrel. *Macbeth* is a fascinating play; also — chiefly? — due to its preoccupation with fantasy and its concern with fantasy's role in human life. Fantasy has been a fascinating if troublesome subject for philosophical reflection; it forces a philosopher to open herself onto the unknown and the uncharted. The issue that I still regard as worth reopening is this type of utility of fantasy; that is, the way it haunts the understanding. Lastly, upon rereading this text I discovered to my surprise that the theme of fear, which I wander into here with much relish, anticipated my future interest in the literature of terror.

During his sojourn in Oxford in the summer of 1605, immediately preceding the composition of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare may have heard a debate held before King James I on the question "Whether the imagination can produce real effects."¹ It seems then that the haunting impression of the tragedy as a play that pursues the mysterious nature of the imagination is no coincidence.

For a number of reasons the imagination is of interest in connection with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. First, I am not familiar with a study of the role of (the concept of) imagination in Shakespeare, and in *Macbeth* in particular. The problem has been detected yet never analysed at length despite the enormous potential for theorising the imagination. For instance, Marjorie Garber in her book *Dream in Shakespeare*,

¹ See Kenneth Muir, "Introduction," in: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, The Arden Shakespeare (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), xxiii.

makes many interesting remarks concerning the illusory nature of the represented world of the play and yet fails to address its relation to the Renaissance conceptions of imagination.²

Second, ideas found in a Renaissance philosophical treatise devoted to this problem might shed light on the idiom of Shakespeare's plays and *vice versa*. To this end, I have decided to refer to a tract entitled *Liber de Imaginatione* by Gianfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola (b. 1470, d. 1533).³ Recently made available for the Polish reader in a bilingual edition,⁴ Pico's treatise is an attempt to utilise the ample philosophical legacy which the concept *phantasia* or *imaginatio* had accumulated since antiquity. In this way the work not only combines the Peripatetic philosophy with Neoplatonism but is permeated with the spirit of Christianity. The "presence" of Plato and Aristotle in Pico's *opusculum* cannot be ignored; it takes us back to the origins of Western reflection on sensory perception. Such philosophical archaeology tends to be regarded as yet another, admittedly futile, attempt at "philosophising" Shakespeare. However, demonstrating the striking correspondence which Renaissance ideas and their philosophical embedding bear to a Jacobean play seems to be a worthwhile endeavour.⁵ Via Pico's treatise we shall seek to trace some archetypal conceptions back to their roots in their ancient sources in Plato and Aristotle. These, in turn, will lead us to meta-philosophical and meta-theatrical problems.

First, however, the persistent concern of *Macbeth* with imagination has to be made evident.

² "Dream in *Macbeth* is related to the entire realm of witchcraft, omen, and the supernatural and imagination." And further: "The two worlds [real and imaginary] merge into one, and the interior visions of voices, ghosts, and daggers become palpable realities [Macbeth] tries in vain to share. He is trapped in the dream world, a world which is for him more like nightmare. From the moment of the murder he stands in the balance of his own equivocation, isolated by conscience." Marjorie B. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare. From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 109. Garber makes no references to either the ancient or the Renaissance conceptions of the imagination, philosophical or otherwise; no systematisation of the imagination problem is ventured, either.

³ See Gianfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola, *Liber de Imaginatione*, ed. and trans. by Harry Caplan as *On the Imagination*, in: *Cornell Studies in English*, XVI (1930). All quotations from Pico are taken from Caplan's edition.

⁴ Gianfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola, *O wyobraźni*, ed. and trans. into Polish by Agnieszka Fulińska (Kraków: Universitas, 1995).

⁵ Pico's treatise and *Macbeth* share, in my estimation, over 60 general assumptions concerning the nature of imagination.

I

How crystal clear everything would be in our philosophy if only we could exorcise these spectres, make illusions or object-less perceptions out of them, keep them on the edge of a world that doesn't equivocate!

Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind"

The difficulty of the task lies in the subject matter. Our preconceptions concerning the imagination can be misleading and cause us to make hasty statements about the ontological status of elements of the play's mimetic repertoire. Hence, this part of our consideration will have to be descriptive rather than analytical; we shall try to show what falls within the compass of the imaginary by the standards of classical philosophy rather than classify phenomena according to what we intuitively understand by "reality."

Leaving God out as *the* Cause of things, Pico enumerates four causes of "the variety of imaginations:" (1) the temperament of the body (the so-called humours, black bile among others, responsible for the melancholy temperament); (2) objects of sensory perception; (3) our judgement; (4) "the ministration of the good and bad angels."⁶ It is of course impossible in concrete circumstances to ascribe one cause to a given phenomenon, but the point is now successfully to avoid psychologising *Macbeth* into a tragedy of ambition. Being a "shadow's shadow," as an adage from *Hamlet* instructs us, ambition is a state where man is carried away by the force of imagination.⁷

The heath scene, in which Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches, establishes preliminary thematic connections between the themes of visibility, imagination, futurity, and truthfulness. These links are further strengthened with the aid of "illusionistic" contraptions such as the floating dagger (II.i.33 ff.), the ghost of Banquo (III.iv), the Apparitions (IV.i.69 ff.), the irremovable blood-stain (V.i.30 ff.), and so forth. Even the extraordinary events during the siege of Dunsinane (V.v.30 ff.) bring their contribution. All delineate the protagonists' passage from initial immer-

⁶ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. VIII, 51.

⁷ That *Macbeth* is a play "about ambition" is perhaps one of the most straightforward arguments for the tragedy's preoccupation with the imaginary. The following exchange in *Hamlet* could shake our complacency over our knowledge of ambition: "(*Hamlet*): Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space — were it not that I have bad *dreams*. (*Guil-denstern*): Which dreams indeed are *ambition*; for the very substance of the ambitious is mere *shadow of a dream*. (*Ham.*): A *dream* is but a *shadow*. (*Rosencrantz*): Truly, and I hold *ambition* of so *airy* and *light* a quality that it is but a *shadow's shadow*." (*Hamlet*, II.ii, 254—262) Pico, of course, devotes ample space to imagination as the seat of all moral corruption: "the depraved imagination is the mother and nurse of ambition. [...] Cruelty, wrath, and passion are born and nourished by *the imagination of an ostensible but deceptive good* [...]" (Pico, *On the Imagination*, Ch. VII, 45—47). On ambition as the principal sin see *Henry VIII*, III.ii. 440—441.

Unless specified otherwise, all emphasis in quotes has been added.

sion in the unreal to the final disillusionment. Shakespeare enriches the idiom of his play with the widest possible range of “psychic cases,” such as fortune-telling, sense illusion, hallucination, nightmare, ghost-haunting, sleep-walking etc., all finding a unifying framework in the imagination.

The witches, to begin with, are ontologically ambiguous; they “straddle the line between the real and the imagined;”⁸ they deal in the imaginary and communicate a part of their substance to Macbeth.⁹ Banquo’s warning (“And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequence.” I.iii.123-6) draws on the Renaissance commonplace concerning the agency of evil spirits or bad Angels:¹⁰ Pico supplies the theological-philosophical background by thus relating the supernatural to the imaginary:

By *bad angels*, again, false prophets are made, prophets who are wont to offer the false for sale instead of the true, who occasionally utter some truths so that by some vendible superstition they may ensnare the minds of the foolish. They *run riot in the phantasies* of men, and of women called witches, and most ruinously *seize upon their senses*. Still more than *images of future things*, the good angels form in us *images of things present*, and *images* of things which lead to the discharge of the duties of life. The same power is possessed by bad angels, but the *images* are either always or often bad. If these angels should seem at any time to advise good, they do so with the shrewdest cunning, so that, if trust be placed in them, they may afterward the more easily delude, and the more cruelly entrap us.¹¹

⁸ Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare*, 110.

⁹ Conventionally, a prophet or a divine would pass for a dreamer. Lexical connections between dreaming, fantasy, and prophesying are not restricted to *Macbeth*. In *King John* (IV.ii.143ff.) a prophet is called “an idle dreamer,” and according to the Arden editor’s notes “a dreamer could be a recognised prophet;” E.A.J. Honingman, ed., Shakespeare, *King John* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 103–104; see also *Julius Caesar*, II.i.195–201. To discuss exhaustively how dreaming and prophesying relate to imagination on a comprehensive philosophical basis would entail interpreting Aristotle’s *On Dreams*, *On Memory and Recollection*, *On Sleep and Waking*, and *On Prophecy in Sleep*. Such an interpretation, which it is impossible to undertake here, would uncover a common ground for many seemingly discrepant phenomena. Suffice it to note that the terminology in all those small tracts retains relations to the Platonic concepts of “mental pictures” (*phantasmata*) or images (*eikona*). Imagination is the faculty underlying such mental operations as recollecting and dreaming.

¹⁰ All quotes from *Macbeth* are taken from The New Cambridge edition: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. A.R. Braumuller (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. VIII, 57. As concerns “bad angels” see Macduff in V.viii.14: “And let the angel, whom thou still hast serv’d [...]” On Lady Macbeth as a “witch” and a “melancholic” see below, note 68.

Macbeth himself comes to see through the sham of the demi-demons who “lie like truth” (V.v.43).¹² In the idiom of philosophy, where perception is customarily stripped of its natural circumstances before it is analysed, Macbeth’s problem, and indeed the perplexing nature of the Weïrd Sisters, their prophecies and their shows — all these can be subsumed under one heading, that of “semblance.” They are fabrications, aggregates of features not capable of real existence.¹³ As such, they fall beyond one’s power to pass judgement and are not apt to be the basis for one’s future conduct. As Pico puts it: “Now we can imagine at will even such things as are not, and cannot be; opinion concerning what cannot exist, or knowledge of it, is not in our power.”¹⁴ But what if the incongruous and the equivocal do hold sway in human affairs? Our warriors voice their mounting distrust:

Are ye *fantastical*, or that indeed
Which *outwardly ye show*?

I.iii.51

Ban. The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?¹⁵
Macb. Into the air; and what *seemed corporeal*,
Melted, as breath into the wind.

I.iii.77—80

The only “rationale” for the encounter seems to be a malfunction of the body giving rise to a deceptive vision:

Ban. Were such things here, as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That *takes the mind prisoner*?¹⁶

I.iii.83—85

¹² Irena Kałuza has provided an extensive linguistic analysis of the duplicitous nature of the Witches and their utterances; see Irena Kałuza, *The Language of Deception in Macbeth* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 1985), 53—54.

¹³ For an interpretation of the cauldron scene as a “quasi-artistic performance” see Richard Marienstras, *New Perspective on the Shakespearean World*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 85.

¹⁴ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. II, 31.

¹⁵ Commenting on the “auger-hole” (II.ii.120), Muir quotes Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584): “[the witches] can go in and out at awger holes;” see Muir, ed., *Macbeth*, 67. Robert Burton’s comments on the “aerial devils” have many motifs in common with *Macbeth*, especially the putrefaction of air; see Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975), Pt. I, Sec. 2, Mem. I, Subs. 2.

¹⁶ See Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, l. 1068: “For oft the eye mistakes, the brain being troubled.” Shakespeare, *The Poems*, ed. John Roe for The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

By the same token, the floating dagger is a “fatal *vision*,” “a dagger of the *mind*,” and apparently its cause is “the heat-oppressed brain.”¹⁷ Shakespeare’s description of the vision of the dagger can sustain thorough criticism without losing its unquestionable dramatic effectiveness. According to the classical theories of sensory perception, the mind can be misled by one sense but in case of doubts the other senses either confirm or cancel the dubious perception.¹⁸ The imaginary dagger materialises once Macbeth draws a real one. In this way, Shakespeare makes us aware of the future-shaping role of imagination: an envisioned, “apparent,” object assumes actuality, due to an illusion of unknown origin.

Macbeth’s cognitive incertitude may be said to anticipate the method of Descartes, who will set off “like a man who walks alone and in the shadows.”¹⁹ The show of Apparitions put on in Act IV, extensively analysed by Irena Kałuża, is a case in point. The audience may well suspect a hallucination or another such trance, as there is no objective confirmation to Macbeth’s experiences (see the exchange with Lenox in IV.i). The sham of the moving wood falls under the same critique of unreliable sensory perception due to unfavourable circumstances. Macbeth curses the “infected air whereon [the witches] ride,” once more emphasising the role of the air as not only the “physical” element and requisite of vision but also a possible cause which raises and sustains phantasms.²⁰ Again, our attention is drawn to the “material” circumstances of seeing or truthful representation. We read in Pico: “Now a sense in unerring, if *at the proper distance*, it receives in itself impressions of its special sensible through media which are sound and unimpaired.”²¹ It seems logical to blame fantasy for any disturbance of perception. As we shall see, with his poetry of the air and light Shakespeare bridges the Cartesian gap between the thinking subject and the object of perception. This does not stop him employing the stock repertoire of rationalistic explanations (found in abundance in Pico’s treatise and Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*), such as mental hyperactivity, unfavourable circumstances (both external: unwholesome air, darkness, distance; and internal:

¹⁷ Traditionally, either the heart or the brain was propounded as the seat of the imagination; see Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. IV. Hence either was also regarded as the physical source of deceptive visions: “in correspondence with the diversity of humors, one’s imagination is stimulated to diverse images [...]. Influenced by these humors in the act of cognizing, the spiritual eye of the soul, the intellect, changes and is deceived, just as the bodily eye experiences illusions through tinted, parti-colored lenses” (*On the Imagination*, Chap. VIII, 51).

¹⁸ “[T]he imagination is generally deceived when, on the evidence of but one sense, it passes judgement upon an object which is the concern of more than one” (*ibid.*, Chap. VIII, 55).

¹⁹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1637), trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), Part Two, 9 (16).

²⁰ Earlier on we heard about the “sightless couriers of the air” that, mounted by cherubim, will “blow the horrid deed in every eye” (I.vii. 22–23). Burton in his *Anatomy* devotes ample space to the quality of the air as a cause of melancholy.

²¹ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. II, 29; see also further on, Chap. VIII and IX, where Pico analyses circumstances unfavourable for perception, such as, among others, the movement of objects perceived and large distance between the observer and the object.

intoxication, agitation, sinfulness), supernatural agency, even semantic ambiguities obstructing the process of communication. The corruption of Macbeth reaches the ultimate stage of the abuse of judgement, at which point he is no longer able to tell being from nothingness. The rupture effected by imagination is accompanied by rapture,²² or “ecstasy.”²³ The royal greeting, or promise of greatness as Macbeth understands it, refers him to “the coming on of time” (I.v.8). Transported thus into the future, Macbeth starts living “ecstatically.” But existence ejected into the future is suspended over a vacuum. The future hovers in the vaporous bubble from which the spectres have alighted. The terms “vain” or “idle” conventionally used to vilify imagination, apart from their didactic use and meaning, point to the ontological dilemma posed by fantasy. Life given over to imagination becomes a “shadow” and a fictitious affair, “a tale told by an idiot.”²⁴ Notoriously in *Macbeth* “thought” means something far removed from the domain of reason; thoughts are phenomena, such as dreams and visions, that belong to the breed of fantasy.²⁵

The future is thus ontologically suspect and potentially corruptive.²⁶ None the less, the human actor has to take decisions and shoulder the responsibility. Practice does not tolerate the vacuum of indecision. The hope that Chance may crown him

²² See *Macbeth* I.v.5 and I.iii.56. Both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre speak about the enchanting, imprisoning power of the imaginary: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Imagination. A Psychological Critique*, trans. Forrest Williams (Ann Arbor, 1962).

²³ Ecstasy, according to a Renaissance definition, is “every species of alienation of mind” (Nares, *Glossary*, cited in Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Muir, 82, editor’s note to line III.ii.22). This understanding goes back to Aristotle, who describes *ekstasis* (Gr. *ek stasis*) as an aberrant state of mind, as a consequence of perversion, bad-habits, etc., which have ejected the psyche from its normal functioning; see Arystoteles, *Dzieła [Works]*, ed. Paweł Siwek, Vol. 3., 277, editor’s note 18. The other occurrence in *Macbeth* is in IV.i.170.

²⁴ The meta-theatrical dimension of these lines has to do with the meaning of the word “shadow,” commonly used for an actor; see Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Muir, 154.

²⁵ See the circumlocution to signify nightmarish visions in *Ban*. “merciful powers, / Restrain in me *the cursed thoughts* that nature / Gives way to in repose.” (II.i.7–9). In Shakespeare “methinks” / “methought” are, as a rule, used to report on the illusory, as in Hamlet’s “Methinks I see my father [...] In my mind’s eye” (I.ii.183). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Titania says upon awakening: “What visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamour’d of an ass” (IV.i.75–76).

²⁶ In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle has this to say about the truth value of statements about future events: “[W]e see that both deliberation and action are causative with regard to the future, and that, to speak more generally, in those things which are not continuously actual there is a *potentiality in either direction*. Such things may *either be or not be*; events also therefore may either take place or not take place” (19 a 5 ff). And further on: “Since propositions correspond with facts, it is evident that when in future events there is a *real alternative*, and a *potentiality in contrary directions*, the corresponding affirmation and denial have the same character. [...] One of the two propositions in such instances must be true and the other false, but we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must *leave the alternative undecided*” (19 a 35); Aristotle, *De Interpretatione [On Interpretation]*, trans. E.M. Edghill (Chicago, London, Toronto, Geneva: Enc. Britannica Inc. & the University of Chicago, 1952).

without his stir (I.iii.144) hardly satisfies Macbeth. The future may not be bodily there, yet the eye of the mind brings it within easy reach and makes it as palpable as the floating dagger soon supplanted with its real counterpart. This vision is meant to show how easily dreams take substance. To embrace prophecies is to leap down an ontological gap, to follow them into the “awger hole” whence they have emerged. Macbeth’s rejection of actuality in favour of the unreal (“nothing is,/But what is not [...]” I.iii.140—141) implies a breach of the axiom of classical ontology: the law of contradiction.²⁷ The “image-fancy” may have the effect of a stimulant, but as the ground, the “reason”, is snatched away, the power to act is suppressed:

Macb. [...] why do I yield to that *suggestion*,
Whose *horrid image* doth unfix my hair [...] ? Present fears
Are less than *horrible imaginings*.
My thought, whose murder *yet is but fantastical*,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother’d in surmise,
And *nothing is, but what is not*.

I.iii.134—142

These lines are delivered as an aside, which is one of the ways in which the imaginary can be rendered palpable on stage.²⁸

Apart from its orientation futureward, the imagination is a receptacle of what has already been experienced, an eye-witness of the past.²⁹ The regicide is a moment when the past replaces the future, and when recollections (“sorry fancies,” III.ii.9) begin to haunt the minds of the protagonists. A number of Shakespeare’s sonnets

²⁷ According to Aristotle, the fact of one’s seriously harbouring such an assumption reduces him to the level of vegetable life. “There are some who [...] both themselves assert that it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be, and say that people can judge this to be the case [...]. But we have now posited that it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be, and by this means have shown that this is the most indisputable of all principles”; *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, 1005 b 35—1006 a 5. In Chap. X—XI of *On the Imagination*, Pico enlarges upon the abuse of judgement which reduces men to the level of unreasonable beasts. The most interesting parallel is the following passage: “I have known a man so disposed to vacillation and uncertainty from his disordered imagination that he thought he was somewhat dubious concerning the validity of that greatest and highest maxim [...], to wit, that in the same subject, at the same time, both affirmation and negation cannot be truly uttered.” For another Shakespearean instance of such vacillation see *Othello*, III.iii.390 ff.

²⁸ The syntactical involution in line 137: “suggests not only that Macbeth’s thought is concerned with murder, but that his power of thought is itself being murdered”; C.C. Clarke, “Darkened Reason,” in: *Macbeth. The Durham University Journal* 22 (1960/1961), 12.

²⁹ “Imagination [...] performs its function when the sensible object is rejected and removed. [...] [I]n dreams we imagine but do not employ sense. Here, too, we may note that those who have lost their sight perceive colors through the imagination [...]” Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. II, 29.

register a similar state of mind, one in which illusions fuelled by memory have the characteristic dream-like, riveting resplendence:

For then my *thoughts* [...]

[...] keep my *drooping eyelids open wide*,

Looking on darkness which the blind do see.

Save that *my soul's imaginary sight*

Presents thy *shadow* to my *sightless view*,

Which like a jewel hung in ghastly night,

Makes black night *beauteous*, and her old face new.

Sonnet 27³⁰

This brief presentation was meant to expose connections between *Macbeth* and the Renaissance philosophy of imagination. By no means have we exhausted the subject; but having proved the pertinence of a broadly understood philosophical perspective for an interpretation of the tragedy, we can now deepen our insight into the nature of imagination as such.

More or less superficial affinities between drama and philosophy, astounding as they are, will not dominate our subsequent pursuits. Philosophy puts forth, as its most substantial, the go-between function of fantasy, resulting from its positioning between the sensual, or corporeal, and the spiritual.³¹ Imagination provides the intellect with “activating” material, i.e. “species” of sensible things. This uniqueness is inalienable but is counterbalanced by a fundamental defect: the unobstructed licence of which the imagination can avail itself, and which has always made it a special concern of moral philosophy and aesthetics.³²

II

The figurations of literature and philosophy are no more settled than those of painting.

Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”

The Scottish play in certain important aspects broadens the received philosophical perspective. It is interesting to observe how Shakespeare builds up an idiom which dynamically interacts with ideas propounded in Pico’s tract and represent-

³⁰ Quoted from Stephen Booth’s edition, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977).

³¹ See Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. IV.

³² The Polish editor of Pico’s tract pursues an unrewarding, in my opinion, task of providing an “aesthetic” interpretation of the philosopher’s views. Shakespeare’s ideas on the aesthetic role of imagination can be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (V.i.2–22), *Romeo and Juliet* (I.v.53–103), and *The Tempest*. They would certainly require an extensive treatment, on which to embark here is not my intention.

ing the wide context of his eclectic work. A way to appreciate this dynamics might be to relate it to our contemporary attempts at theorising the relation between the thinking subject and the outside world. With this purpose in mind, I have decided to usher in Martin Heidegger's conception of the human being-in-the-world, conceived in terms of unconcealment,³³ and Merleau-Ponty's idea of anonymous visibility.³⁴

To define imagination, philosophy resorts to figurative language. Pico's description presupposes the nature of representation, suggested by an extended family of words which are virtually synonymous: "image" (*imago*), "likeness" (*similitudo*), "impression" (*species*), "imitation" (*imitatio*), "picture" (*pictura*), "appearance" (*effigies*).³⁵ Moreover, Pico employs a metaphor which seems to be of secondary importance; he compares the imagination to a painter. As a matter of fact, pictorial vocabulary permeates his extensive "definition."³⁶ This figurative shift is paradoxical: Imagination is posited as the principle of representing and, indeed, of appearing. As such, it must also be the foundation of figuration, and hence, too, of artistic creativity. This painterly simile used to elucidate the nature of imagination is not what it seems: a digression to illustrate an issue or perhaps an aid with which to smooth out the stitches in reasoning. Explanatory visualisation of a philosophical "point" (anticipative of phenomenology with its methodological conception of the free variation performed on the sensual material to secure access to pure essences) is a veiled recognition of the fact that the indispensability of imagination in any philosophical discourse is not exclusively "technical."

There are also further disquieting complications. No perception is possible without the intervening function of imagination. Sensory perception is truthful by nature, but imagination is regarded as arbitrary and potentially, even notoriously,

³³ Of special importance is here Heidegger's essay *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* (*Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit*, 1942); trans. into Polish by Seweryn Blandzi, in Martin Heidegger, *Znaki drogi* (*Wegmarken*, Warszawa: Aletheia, 1995), 97–128. A critical presentation can be found in W.B. Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion. Martin Heidegger's Notion of Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

³⁴ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. by Carleton Dallery, in: Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology. Selected Essays*, ed. by John O'Neil (London: Heinemann, 1974), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

³⁵ "And this name is received from its function; from the *images*, that is, which it *conceives* and *forms* in itself. To it there are carried through the instruments of the five exterior senses [...] the *likenesses* and *impressions* of things which are from without — a very rich harvest of *phantasies*; for whatever the object of sensation [...] the object *produces* [...] a *likeness* and *image of itself*, in *imitation* of incorporeal and spiritual nature. [...] Phantasy likewise has sometimes been called "*picture*" by Plato, and for the reason [...] that in its sensorium are *painted* the impressions of things [*pingantur rerum species*], and the various *appearances* receive *form* and are *fashioned* [*fabricentur*] *at will* in a manner not unlike that in which *painters* depict [*pictores delineant*] the various and dissimilar forms of things." Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. I, 25.

³⁶ For a poetic employment of this motif see Shakespeare's Sonnet 24 ("Mine eye hath play'd the painter [...]).

deceptive. This ambiguous, creative-receptive nature of fantasy is manifest in Pico's vacillation between two possible principles of spontaneous operation. On the one hand, it is the imagination, as it conceives and forms images of things in itself. On the other hand, the likenesses of external things are carried "inside," and it is an object that produces or deposits its likeness in the mind. This passive-active double-dealing of imagination is transferred onto the simile of the painter.

This ambiguity can be viewed as a consequence of the initial, Platonic, subversion of the nature of representation: the severing of representing from appearing. In his allegory of the cave or den (*The Republic*, Book VII),³⁷ Plato argues for the illusory status of material things, which he reduces to vague likenesses or shadows of otherworldly ideas. The principle of perceptive accessibility, the original unhiddenness, becomes "the visage."³⁸ *Aletheia* (unconcealment or uncoveredness: *Unverborgenheit*)³⁹ "comes under the yoke of *idea*."⁴⁰ No longer is it enough to appear to be a truthful representation. Later (on the timeline of the history of Western philosophy), this narrow or indeed distorted sense of appearing will supply the foundation for the Cartesian turn in philosophy. A wider understanding brings us closer to the understanding of truth as showing forth. As Heidegger puts it: "[...] appearing in the sense of showing itself, pertains both to *Schein* as radiance [and to — J.M.] *Schein* as semblance, and not as a fortuitous attribute, but as the ground of their possibility."⁴¹ In *Macbeth*, we can find numerous examples of a semblance which partakes of the universal properties of appearing: the prophetic greetings "shine" (III.i.7), their prophecies "enkindle [Macbeth] unto the crown" (I.iii.120), Apparitions sear the tyrant's eyeballs and cause his eyes to start (IV.i.111–115), etc.

Heidegger called Plato's parable of the cave a model discourse in which philosophy dictatorially lays down the tenets of truthfulness. Plato's understanding of a (truthful) representation as *idea* or *eidos* established a pattern for Western thought.⁴² Representations become emancipated into the Being of material things,

³⁷ Plato's allegory might be said to anticipate Shakespeare's "auger holes," openings in the earth through which the imaginary and the probable creep in/out. In Polanski's film version of *Macbeth*, the witches' coven do assemble in somewhere reminiscent of the Platonic cave.

³⁸ See Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion*, 149.

³⁹ Among other terms used to translate *aletheia* are: "unhiddenness," "non-concealment," "disclosedness," and "discoveredness"; see Joseph J. Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being. Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, quoted in Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion*, 152.

⁴¹ Quoted in Tadeusz Ślawek, *The Outlined Shadow. Phenomenology. Grammarology. Blake* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1985), 90.

⁴² Heidegger comments on this shift in the notion of truth: "Unhiddenness is still referred to [...] but it is considered only insofar as it renders what is to appear accessible in its visage (*eidos*), making visible what manifests itself (*idea*) in this way. [...] The essence of the idea is its manifest character and visibility" (Heidegger, *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, quoted in Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion*, 149). Ultimately, of course, the idea assumes the role of the principle of all perceptibility; it becomes the making-it-possible-to-see.

now reduced to shadowy copies. The ensuing subversion is radical: the representation and the represented undergo a separation and an about-turn; what is more: the original sources of representation (the sun, the fire, etc.) are re-interpreted and henceforth doomed to fall into the domain of poetic figurativeness. In positing ideas as the principle of appearing, the philosopher obfuscates appearing as such and its relation to the seemingly external circumstances and sources.

However, in availing himself of a parable, Plato “technically” relies on — and hence remains indebted to — imagination. The aforementioned book of *The Republic* begins with Socrates’ giving his interlocutor the following instruction: “And now [...] let me *show in a figure* how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: *Behold!*”⁴³ Here he starts painting the allegory of the underground den in the mind’s eye of his listener.⁴⁴ Thus the imagination serves as a visualisation-aid. It has to be used if we want to be able to follow the argument as we did earlier on when reading Pico’s definition. This is exactly what we are doing when reading the relevant pages of *The Republic*. Thanks to the exquisite vividness of the images that spell out the meaning of our inner-worldly condition, we are able to picture for ourselves the cave, its inhabitants, the fire, the shadows cast on the wall, etc. We are meant to carry on until, like a ballast, fantasy is jettisoned and the supremacy of the *invisible*, the *non-imaginary*, and *non-pictorial* is firmly established. In all this, the pre-eminent position of the imagination as the primordial seat and archetype of all representing does not seem to be realised, let alone recognised. Yet, the indispensability of the imagination for the Platonic conception of anamnesis is clear. Pico states this as follows: “The Platonists affirm that the soul descends, imprinted with ideas, into the body, yet they admit that the soul forgets these ideas, and as a result, for reminiscence requires the help of sense and phantasy.”⁴⁵

Plato not only implies that things as we see them are mere shadows. The fundamental distortion has to do with the mistreatment of light and its source. Imagination is disconnected from its relation to light as a consequence of the philosopher’s demoting of sensory perception. Our critique is in keeping with contemporary attempts to restore sensory perception to its proper, i.e. fundamental, place in the hierarchy of the modes of human knowledge. Trivial though it sounds, things are

⁴³ Plato, *The Republic. An Ideal Commonwealth*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Willey Book Co., 1901), 209.

⁴⁴ Harold Jenkins, editor of *Hamlet* for The Arden Shakespeare, traces Hamlet’s “my mind’s eye” (*Hamlet*, I.ii.185) back to the 7th book of Plato’s *Republic* (533 D); see William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 191. As indicated above, Pico uses the “metaphor” to signify the spiritual “organ” of perception, the intellect; see Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. VIII, 51.

⁴⁵ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. VI, 43. In the book *Saturn and Melancholy* we can find allusions to the association made by Albrecht Dürer between artistic imagination and Platonic ideas, but these connections are not submitted to further analysis; see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (Nelson, 1964), 361–362.

colourful opaque objects which in broad daylight can be seen clearly. But Plato metaphorised the source of light (and visibility) by transforming it into the idea of good: “[...] the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world.”⁴⁶ To be able to recover the original sense of appearing we have to rethink certain lexical stereotypes.

The essential relations between imagination, light, and its sources emerge from the etymology of “fantasy.” “Since sight is the chief sense” — writes Aristotle — “the name *fantasia* (imagination) is derived from *faos* (light), because without light it is not possible to see.”⁴⁷ Pico adds to this: “Phantasy, as Suidas represents it, is ‘a condition of light,’ so to speak [...], for he says phantasy is ‘the state of things come to light.’”⁴⁸ Both Heidegger’s unconcealment and Merleau-Ponty’s universal anonymous visibility largely confirm the substantial intuition behind this etymology. Western philosophy as Heidegger sees it has allowed unconcealment to become harnessed by the Platonic *idea*, but Heidegger also shunned the very concrete character of the relation between light and appearing which in Aristotle lay at the foundation of a theory of perception.⁴⁹ The translocation of light into the domain of the intellectual and spiritual can be illustrated by Pico’s views. Pico distinguishes four types of light (*lumen, lux*), all of which are spiritual. It is thanks to a gleam of “higher light” that we can attain cognitive certainty.⁵⁰ Consequently, the realm of physical light as the element of perception is reduced to a mode of darkness which itself needs illuminating. The imagination, the breeder of illusions, tends to be conceived as the opposite of spiritual light in both its natural and supernatural varieties.⁵¹ According to the so-called metaphysics of light developed in the Middle Ages, light is the common nature found in all bodies, both heavenly and terrestrial. Thus the medieval philosophy draws and makes explicit the consequences of the Platonic subversion of light into an ontological principle: Depending on the extent of their participation in light, corporeal substances have a truer and more dignified position among beings.⁵² Consequently, a departure from light implies

⁴⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, 212.

⁴⁷ See Aristotle, *De Anima [On the Soul]*, 429 a. All quotations from Aristotle’s *Parva*, if not specified otherwise, are taken from: Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva naturalia, On Breath*, trans. by W.S. Hett (London: W. Heinemann Ltd., 1957).

⁴⁸ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. I, 27.

⁴⁹ “Light is the activity of this transparent substance *qua* transparent.” Light is “the actuality of the transparent”; what brings the potentiality of the air into actuality is fire: “it is because of the fire that the transparent becomes transparent”; Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 418—419. Yet the theory of cognition conventionally conceived searches for *nonempirical* conditions of empirical knowledge so as to steer clear of the fallacy of *petitio principii*.

⁵⁰ See Werner Raith, *Die Macht des Bildes. Ein humanistisches Problem bei Gianfrancesco Pico Della Mirandola* (München: W. Fink Verlag, 1967), 84—85.

⁵¹ This devaluation of natural light is stated in very strong terms in Chap. XII of Pico’s tract, a section largely devoted to the supremacy of the light of Faith; see *On the Imagination*, 93.

⁵² So St. Bonaventura, “Light is common by nature to all bodies, celestial and terrestrial. [...] Light is the substantial form of bodies; by their greater or lesser participation in light, bodies acquire

departure from Being. An immersion in darkness means falsehood and virtual non-existence. Yet colour, thanks to light, pleases the eye of the beholder no matter how lofty their position in the hierarchy of Creation. "Light was thus the principle of all beauty, not only because it is delightful to the senses, but also because it is through light that all the variations in colour and luminosity, both in heaven and on earth, come into being."⁵³

Macbeth, where light, colour, and perceptibility (visi-audi-bility) in general, come into focus, is a natural participant in the debate over imagination, perhaps the most arcane among our mental faculties. The nocturnal aura of *Macbeth* is a commonplace.⁵⁴ Until the conflict between good and evil has been resolved, night is continuously "at odds with morning, which is which" (III.iv.126).⁵⁵ Simplifying the issue, we could say that Shakespeare turns off daylight to emphasise the obfuscation of reason by hyperactive imagination. This contamination of cognitive faculties is further accompanied by other modes of darkness roughly corresponding to the various types of light: moral and metaphysical.⁵⁶ These are conventional interpretations but we shall see that the most concrete meanings, despite being the most significant, are also the most confusing.

The play juxtaposes the visible and the invisible.⁵⁷ The action of concealing is counterbalanced by a universal, impersonal leaning towards disclosure. The full ontological pattern is made up of this contrast between cloaking and disclosure, concealment and unconcealment. Whenever one thing is hidden, another becomes

the truth and dignity of their being"; quoted after Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 50.

⁵³ Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 50.

⁵⁴ See Clarke, "Darkened Reason," 11–18, and Muriel M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), 141.

⁵⁵ See a controversial analysis by Brian Richardson in his article "Hours Dreadful and Things Strange: Inversions of Chronology and Causality in *Macbeth*," *Philological Quarterly* 69 (Summer 1989), 283–294.

⁵⁶ See for instance: *Macb.* "False face must *hide* what the *false* heart doth *know*" (I.vii.83). The heart is "false" not only because its possessor weaves deceitful plots. The foremost meaning of the falsity would be: distance from visibility, from the "show." The other meaning of "false," namely the one referring to the face, relates straight to the idea of the *adaequatio* of the classical definition of truth: facial expression ought to inform the onlooker of the contents of one's self, which remains invisible.

⁵⁷ The couple's yearning to conceal has dictated the use and the significance of what was called "cloaking imagery" in *Macbeth*, a long-appreciated critical "discovery." The term was introduced by Cleanth Brooks in his essay "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness," Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn. Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1975), 23 ff. According to a definition supplied by Kałuza, "cloaking" refers to a particular desire, entertained by the protagonists, of "*masking* something evil or false, so that though it *exists* it is not *seen* by the world" (Kałuza, *The Language of Deception*, 112, emphasis in the original). The relevant passages from *Macbeth* can be furnished in abundance; the most prominent examples are: I.iv.50ff ("Stars, hide your fires [...]); I.v.50ff ("Come, thick Night [...]); III.ii.46ff ("Come, seeling Night [...]).

visible. The idea that the stalking murderer is seen or heard by the surrounding objects is more than a figure of speech. Moral responsibility depends on one's share in the common perceptibility of things. Perhaps we need to suspend at this point our modern belief that light is electromagnetic radiation which has a certain wavelength, and that vision is produced when this radiation hits the retina of the eye. In Shakespeare's times "[v]ision was thought to reside in a beam of light issuing from the eye."⁵⁸ According to this obsolete conception, light can reside in the physical organ, in the eye of the mind (the organ of imagination), and finally in the eye of eyes, the sun.⁵⁹ It is no surprise that the assassins in *Macbeth* fear the revealing, denunciatory properties of light. And imagination partakes of the properties of its "element." Despite his critical attitude, Pico unambiguously states its role as a companion and witness:

The light of reason is imperfect and weak in man [...]. The imagination, on the other hand, is in him more perfect, and stronger than in other animate beings. It continually brings up for him the impressions drawn in by the senses; it *witnesses all his actions as a comrade and inseparable companion*, and is so much a partner in all his affairs that, apparently, *no deed or action at all can be without it*.⁶⁰

And witnesses are potential indictors.

In his philosophy of visibility, Merleau-Ponty endeavours to describe a pre-cognitive situation as an ontological presupposition for the intellect and "thinking."⁶¹ We all partake of a common world of the sensual and this sensibility is the medium in which beings appear.⁶² The visibility of my own body "reverberates" through the whole perceptible world, becoming a fragment of a universal sensory accessibility.⁶³ "The enigma is" — writes Merleau-Ponty in his essay "Eye and Mind" — "that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself."⁶⁴ Illusion

⁵⁸ Editor's note in William Shakespeare, *The Poems*, ed. F.T. Prince (London and New York: Routledge, 1961), 79.

⁵⁹ See Shakespeare, *Lucrece*, ll. 356 and 1088.

⁶⁰ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. XI, 83; in this context, Macbeth's desire for "The eye [to] wink at the hand" (I.iv.52) sounds especially futile. The expression "invisible hand" (III.ii.48) is thus a contradiction in terms.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*; in this presentation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of visibility I am indebted to Jacek Migasiński and his book *Merleau-Ponty* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1995), 79 ff. To neutralise the ophthalmic character of both Merleau-Ponty's terminology and the idiom of *Macbeth*, I have chosen the term "perceptibility" instead of "visibility" in contexts requiring a more universal meaning.

⁶² Migasiński, *Merleau-Ponty*, 81

⁶³ Migasiński, *Merleau-Ponty*, 80.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 283.

occurs only in the all-encompassing context of reality; dis-illusion being conceived as a recovery of reality rather than the loss of it.⁶⁵

But, as we have seen, visibility is conventionally related to colour. For Aristotle, visibility consists in being colourful: “The visible, then, is colour, i.e. that which overlies what is in itself visible.”⁶⁶ For St. Bonaventura colour is “the light of terrestrial bodies.”⁶⁷ This connection takes us one step further in our search of the nature of imagination. The etymology of “fantasy” has led us to the ideas of light and perceptibility; but light is colour. “Picture” and “painting,” which help Pico visualise the nature of imagination, have to be considered in more depth.

III

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece [...].

Macbeth, II.iii.65

Painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.

Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”

So far, it has transpired that the imagination cannot be conceived outside pictorial representation, which in its turn necessarily involves light, colour, and the virtual identity of their characteristics. However, the Renaissance connects imagination and painting more effectively than the strength of a simile could do. A *causal* connection is posited between the melancholy humour or black bile (Gr. *melaina hole*), the imagination and “mechanical” arts. Let us consider the following passage from Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia*:

For when set free by the *humor melancholicus*, the soul is fully concentrated in the *imagination*, and it immediately becomes a habitation for the lower demons, from whom it often receives *wonderful instruction in the manual arts*; thus we see a quite unskilled man suddenly become a *painter or an architect*, or a quite outstanding master in another art of the same kind; if the demons of this species reveal the future to us, they show us matters related to natural catastrophes and disasters [...].⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 40. Macbeth’s career can be philosophically described as passage from Sartre to Merleau-Ponty, from reality-sequestering illusion to the reinforcement of the truth of appearing as such.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 418—419.

⁶⁷ Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 50.

⁶⁸ Quoted after Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 357 ff; see also Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979), Chapter 6. In *Saturn and Melancholy* we find a table showing a connection between lower spirits, mechanical arts, and the gift of prophesying natural events (359). This lowest type of melancholy is called “imaginative melancholy” (363) due to the intense visions it inspires. The relation between

In a manner not anticipated by Thomas De Quincey, author of the provocative essay "Murder as one of the Fine Arts,"⁶⁹ *Macbeth*, makes us rethink this ghastly problem: the artistry of murder. The play contains a number of well-known allusions to painterly representation. At the least opportune moment, at the scene of the crime, we see Macbeth entrapped and cornered by his thoughts (II.ii.70). Earlier, he was "rapt" when he started contemplating the killing. There and then, he could not avert his mental gaze from the hair-raising motion picture featuring himself at the moment of murdering Duncan; *now* the image has become reality. As such, it has involved all present at the scene as witnesses themselves transformed into phantoms:

Macd. Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm, awake,
Shake off this downy sleep, death's *counterfeit*,
And *look* on death itself. Up, up, and *see*
The great doom's *image*. — Malcolm, Banquo,
As from your graves rise up, and walk *like sprites*
To *countenance* this horror.

II.iii.73—78

In a sweep of poetic gusto, Shakespeare fuses several aspects of imagination. The dividing line between reality and its representation is blurred. It seems that reality, even in the *Grenzsituation* of the violent death of the sovereign, cannot be confronted unless metaphorically reworked into a phantasmal artefact. Arguably, only thanks to this emblematising of the event, the moral meaning can come across.

Contrary to our conclusions, Macbeth's "aesthetic" or visual hypersensitivity ("I am afraid to *think* what I have done; / *Look on't again* I dare not;" II.ii.50—51) testifies, according to the received philosophy, to a decline of his powers of reasoning:

Macbeth and the Renaissance conceptions of melancholy is complex and worth exploring. Comments on the "imaginative" species of melancholy can be found as early as Aristotle's *On Prophecy in Sleep*. Braunmuller's Introduction to the latest New Cambridge edition of the play contains interesting remarks concerning Lady Macbeth's amenorrhoea (cessation of menstruation) and the way it affects her psyche by turning her into a "fantast" (a "melancholike") and making her susceptible to hyperactive imagination; see Braunmuller, ed., Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 33 ff. Certain speculations in Aristotle's *On Sleep and Waking* about the way menstruation affects vision could explain the hallucination of Lady Macbeth's blood-stained hands. Also the chapter "Of the Force of Imagination" in Burton is worth consulting (Pt. I, Sec. 2, Mem. 3, Subs. 2), esp. the comments on sleepwalking.

⁶⁹ See Thomas De Quincey, *Works*, vol. VI (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862). Throughout the pamphlet, De Quincey uses the jargon of fine arts criticism to describe murder: "unfinished design," a murderer's "chief work," "sketch," "bold outlines," etc. (see especially 37). The way he extols the description of the murdered Duncan and Banquo (9), makes us attentive to the emphasis Shakespeare puts on aesthetic qualities of violence; see *Macbeth*, I.iii.97 and I.ii.41. instead of killing, Macbeth was "making strange images of death" or "memorizing another Golgotha."

Now who doubts — writes Pico — that a child more strongly abhors the commission of homicide if into his phantasy has crept the likeness of the blood-stained victim, cruelly transfixed and torn to pieces — if into his phantasy has rushed the fear of the reappearance of this likeness to pursue him, whether by night or day, when he is alone — than if the precept of God and nature, that injury should be done to no one, is set before him, and there is forced upon him the prohibition of divine law that no one should slay another on his own authority.⁷⁰

The sight of the slain Duncan make Macbeth — his gory hands, “plucking out his eyes” — quake with fear (II.ii.62 ff). Is this babyish affectability? Lady Macbeth’s lines explicitly employ an “artistic” simile:

The sleeping and the dead
 Are *but as pictures*; ’tis *the eye of childhood*
 That fears the *painted devil*. If he do bleed,
 I’ll *gild* the faces of the grooms withal,
 For it must *seem their guilt*.

II.ii.56—60

The uncanny punning (*paronomasia*) in the shift from “to gild” to “guilt”⁷¹ expresses her hope of being able to outsmart others, to cook up a suitable visual version of the incident. She will use the victim’s blood as artistic material with which to fabricate its false representation and successfully oust the truth. The world seems to be easily manipulated if stripped of its reality and treated as a canvas to throw a pretence on. But the play’s ontological pattern helps us denunciate such shallow rationalism and makes us predict its ultimate corrosion. The psyche for which images or “pictures” are the element, is not so easily handled. Lady Macbeth may share her cool-minded rationalism with Pico and other philosophers,⁷² but her speeches bring no comfort. The trivialising simile — “but as pictures” — indicates her suspicion that

⁷⁰ Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. XII, 91. The original meaning of “aesthetic” refers to sensory perception in general. The Greek etymology, *aisthesis*, points to direct sensory contact with the object perceived. With our terminology here we do not assume a nihilistic attitude to the moral dilemmas posed by the tragedy. The original sense of the aesthetic creates a new footing for an *ethical* re-appraisal.

⁷¹ For guilt to be transferred, the incriminating object has to be adorned (“gilt”) and thus rendered more conspicuous! Braunueller gives other instances of this red-gold substitution in Shakespeare; see Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Brunmueller, 146.

⁷² See Brooks, “The Naked Babe,” 42—43. In Brooks’s opinion, Lady Macbeth shares her “shallow rationalism” with many Shakespeare’s villains. Her viewpoint harmonises with that of rationalistic philosophy. Pico, for instance, has this comment on how awesome pictures affect the beholder: “[...] when we opine something fear-inspiring, we are shaken with terror. When we imagine, we are no more affected than if we were looking at some horrible picture, unless opinion follows upon this imagination.” Pico, *On the Imagination*, Chap. II, 31.

Macbeth thinks the object (the dead) to be more than this. Indirectly, the expression points towards the double-bind of simultaneous concealing and showing forth. Macbeth's spiritual imbalance is generated by the murder having become a mental picture. If moral categories are rephrased in the terms of the metaphysics of light, the moment of murder brings on a solar eclipse. In psychological and aesthetic terms, it is a moment of resplendence. "Horrible imaginings" turn into actuality and then imagination copies them and makes them accessible to memory. In this way, actuality achieves the status of hyper-reality, of an image (a photo-copy!) for the memory repeatedly to access and replay. Accordingly, Macbeth takes no heart from the fact that the dead endure as pictures and the playwright promptly puts on the banquet scene to prove him right.

Shakespeare's poetics of blood is based on his visual sensitivity.⁷³ In *King John*, revenge — in a manner anticipating the gruesome artistry of Lady Macbeth — paints with "slaughter's pencil."⁷⁴ "Sorry fancies," the cause of the Macbeths' insomnia, borrow their resplendence from his victims' blood. Speaking of "gilding," Lady Macbeth fails to see that a painting can neither be reduced to a mere illusion nor treated instrumentally. Thus we arrive at Merleau-Ponty's argument for the metaphysical supremacy of aesthetic vision over non-aesthetic perception: In a painting, reality is more seeable, as it were, and more truthful. A painting "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible."⁷⁵ By definition, because it is made of light and colour, an image — outward or inner — cannot be suppressed in its visibility, which makes it available for public divulging. From his being "enkindled to the throne" by prophecies to his defeat made manifest when his head has been severed and produced for all to see and learn the moral (V.ix.20), Macbeth has walked in light. Public disclosedness was Macbeth's worst fear and the threat posed by such monstrification — his ultimate challenge:

Macd. Then yield thee, coward,
And live to be *the show and gaze o'th'time*:
[...] as our *monsters* are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit,
"Here may you *see* the tyrant."

V.viii.24—27

Macbeth here confronts the prospect of becoming an effigy of himself, an emblem open to common inspection, a type epitomising tyranny. And, to raise the

⁷³ Shakespeare's idiom of death abounds in artistic effects: The brilliance of nightmarish visions causes the "fantast" to go pale, to become an image of death. In giving oneself over to imagination, one becomes "aesthetically" similar to death ("invisible commander"). The "picture" of death (or the dead as pictures), antithetical to the colour of life, brings about associations with bleeding. Death and the images of inflicting it or suffering it, seem to be aesthetically related.

⁷⁴ See *King John* (III.i.162). "Pencil" of course means a paintbrush.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 287.

argument to the meta-theatrical and meta-theatrical power, the play has eventually succeeded in making him one.

IV

[...] and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

Plato, The Republic, Book VII

Rather than create anachronistic associations between the Renaissance and 20th-century ideas, my purpose has been to expose the meta-theatrical impact of *Macbeth*. To address the problem of imagination (*Vor-Stellung*) is to problematise the idea of representation, of which theatrical representation is a species. In its concern with the imaginary, *Macbeth* illuminates the nature of the theatre as such. This statement urges further queries: the relation can be inverted, and since *Macbeth* problematises imagination in a self-contained fashion, it stimulates another theoretical concern, putting in a new perspective the problem of imagination in the era of the simulacra. In this sense, *Macbeth* as a meta-drama speaks to our contemporary concerns with the status of the imaginary.

Our interpretation of *Macbeth* has described a circle and we are now taking recourse to Plato. The allegory of the cave contains a detail that deserves a mention. We have seen that the parable relies on the virtues of imagination, which makes us reach for the theatre. Some “theatrical” experience of crude puppet shows appears to have given rise to Plato’s famous vision: “[...] and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.”⁷⁶ Not only does Plato insert a visualising picture into the head of his listener, but the image itself is constructed according to some basic rules of staging. Would it be true to say one ought to search for the nature of imagination in theatre?

To compose a spectacle on the motif of imagination, Shakespeare uses a net of interrelated visualisations. Since, however, visualisation involves the use of fantasy, can such an endeavour enlighten us on the nature of what it has to presuppose? Plato had to resort to imagination but renounced it in favour of a higher mode of cognition. The theatre relies upon the sensual, avails itself of the “physical materiality” of the stage and what it contains.⁷⁷ The functioning of imagination can be indicated, but can it be staged? Shakespeare’s frequent use of “séances” and other devices that make the audience look beyond what is materially given, indicates the

⁷⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, 209.

⁷⁷ Krzysztof Plaśniarowicz, *Przestrzenie deziluzji* [The Spaces of Anti-Illusion: Models of Contemporary Theatre] (Kraków: Universitas, 1996); see the summary, trans. William Brand.

authorial desire to confront the nature of imagination. This could only be achieved by letting the spectators be carried away by it. The question of how to present the ghost of Banquo is not merely a technical problem for the film director to solve. Any solution will automatically be an artistic manifesto. More than this: it will entail a philosophical credo in the same manner as, according to Merleau-Ponty, “any theory of painting is a metaphysics.”⁷⁸ As that of philosophy, the medium of the theatre is imaginary, and disputing the nature of the medium falls beyond the scope of the means the theatre has at its disposal. But the theatre does not seek to depreciate its artistic medium. The meta-dramatic problem concerns the material foundations of the performance. Even more simply than this: it is the problem of the source of light, hence of visibility. In Polanski’s film of 1971, both the dagger and the ghost of Banquo are rendered visible on the screen, obviously thanks to the advancement of the filming technique. In Trevor Nunn’s 1977–1978, RSC production both phenomena remain invisible to the spectator. Too hastily this would be regarded as a deficiency of the theatrical medium. That Polanski decided to put illusion onto the screen confirms his self-consciousness as a *film* director. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, is true of Trevor Nunn, whose element is the theatre.

In the Platonic cave, things are reduced to two-dimensional dark patches on the wall, shadowy reflections cast by the artefacts displayed behind the prisoners’ backs, where the fire is burning. Our contemporary reception of *Macbeth*, also Trevor Nunn’s production available on video and DVD, is affected by the technological wizardry of the cinema and television. Our reception thus enacts the allegory. In the theatre, things and actors appear in person and play their mimetic game, whereas in the film this is no longer the case. Instead, the darkened theatre-room of the cinema, the bedimmed room for TV—VCR—DVD viewing *materialise* Plato’s *vision* contributing to the proliferation of simulacra. For a film the material substratum is negligible and *immaterial*: the roll of film or the video tape as sources of shadows, the light bulb or the television tube as sources of visibility, etc. These media are fated to visualisation. The theatre theoretically cannot simultaneously visualise and transcend visualisation in order to embrace the imaginary. Yet this seems to have always been its objective. Having detected in *Macbeth* an endeavour to bring onto the stage the clash between fundamental ontological categories we have seen the theatre laying bare its limitations: It endures as the earth’s bubble that contains a metaphysical vacuum.

Source

Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Rachwał, *Memory and Forgetfulness. Essays in Cultural Practice*, eds., 1999, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 292.