ON PROSPERO'S ABJURATION OF HIS "ROUGH MAGIC"

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In act five, the plot of ***The Tempest*** is at its climax: Prospero's enemies are all at his mercy: they will finally be punished for their evil doings and his project will come to an end. Suddenly, in scene one the Magus changes his mind and decides to forgive his enemies. The reader is taken aback and his surprise is even bigger when some lines later (50-1) Prospero rejects magic. These are but the results of a much deeper change of attitude that develops throughout the play. To analyse this process considering some of its reasons is the purpose of this study.

The plot of ***The Tempest*** is well known. To begin our essay somewhere, let us move to the lines in which Prospero tells his daughter Miranda the reasons for their being isolated in an island. The lines, though familiar, deserve close attention:

> [...], and to him put
> The manage of my state; as at that time
> through all the signories it was the first,
> And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed
> In dignity, and for the liberal Arts
> Without a parallel; those being all my study,
> The government I cast upon my brother,
> And to my state grew stranger, being transported
> And rapt in secret studies [...]
> [...]
> I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
> To closeness and the bettering of my mind
> With that which,but by being so retir'd,
> O'er priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother
> Awak'd an evil nature; [...]
> [...]

> Me, poor man, my library
> Was dukedom large enough: of temporal royalties
> He thinks me now incapable; [...]
> [...]
> Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnish'd me
> From mine own library with volumes that
> I prize above my dukedom."
> (I. ii. 69-77, 89-93, 109-111, 166-8).

These words have provided many scholars[1] with a solid support to claim that Prospero is a clear example of the quintessential Renaissance philosopher-magus, or "theurgist" to use Curry's words, of whom Cornelius Agrippa gave such an accurate portrait. His book, ***De Occulta Philosophia,***[2] is not exactly a manual of magic, but rather, as Frances Yates clarifies, "a useful and -[...] clear survey of the whole field of Renaissance Magic". The "theurgist" was a kind of priest-magician who used ritual magic to invoke natural superior powers; it is a term frequently used to distinguish the "good" or "white" magician from the "goetist" or "black" magician[3] (of which Sycorax in ***The Tempest*** is an example).

According to Agrippa, the dignity of a magus is something almost sacred and sublime: magicians are above the rest of mortals, a kind of elite. They are wise men removed from the pettiness of this world, drawing close to the gods. For the real magus, studies of secret things stand in contradistinction to mundane concerns, to Trithemius's "vulgar" and Dee's "transitorie & momentanie". In the correspondence held between Agrippa and Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of St. James of Herbipolis, the first refers to the latter as a "man very industrious after secret things"; Trithemius, on the other hand, commends Agrippa for having "penetrate[d] into such secrets as have been hide from most learned men," and exhorts him to keep these secret things hidden from the "vulgar".[4] Prospero's words are much in the same line:

> those being all my study,
> The government I cast upon my brother,
> And to my state grew stranger, being transported
> And rapt in secret studies [...]
> [...]

I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which,but by being so retir'd,
O'er priz'd all popular rate,"[5]
(I. ii. 74-77, 89-92).

"Worldly ends" mean little for a man who is devoted to the "bettering of [his] mind"; the things of the world are precisely the goals of Prospero's brother, Antonio, who turns traitor both to Prospero and to Milan.

But if we go on reading Prospero's long narration to Miranda, we find something odd in his speech:

but by being so retir'd,
O'er priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature;
[...]
Me, poor man, my library
Was dukedom large enough: of temporal royalties
He thinks me now incapable; [...]"
(I.ii. 91-93, 109-111).

We can not help feeling that such expressions as "by being so retired", "Me, poor man," or the previously quoted "And to my state grew stranger" betray a kind of self-recrimination on Prospero's part. In other words, is he not implying that all his studies, his retreat into magic were obsessive, morally wrong? Does he not feel blameworthy for the fact that in his brother "awak'd an evil nature;?"

A change of view may help us to understand this point. If we consider all the matter from Antonio's point of view, a new perspective of the problem arises. Prospero himself claims that "of temporal royalties/ [Antonio] thinks me now incapable". Prospero was too obsessed with his "secret studies" to pay attention to the government of Milan. He himself recognizes this: "my library/ Was dukedom large enough". Politically speaking, the situation was unbearable and had to be mended. There Antonio enters into action, putting an end to the problem: he did the proper action when it was necessary. The end justifies the

means. It is the *virtú* of which Machiavelli is so fond of; in a way, then, Antonio's behaviour is perfectly "virtuous", but in a Machiavellian sense.[6]

Prospero's scorn of human concerns was, in more than one way, what brought on Antonio's treason: an act which when considered in this light does make some sense. He, like Adam, was punished for an inordinate thirst for knowledge: expelled from his paradise. The Renaissance venerated those who, like Scipio, were able to be studious and contemplative, but also able to translate knowledge into power in their active lives. As E. M. W. Tillyard puts it, "To know yourself was not egoism but the gateway to all virtue".[7]

Prospero was in the right way, however he failed to combine the "closeness and bettering of [his] mind" with his "temporal royalties". For a moment, as we have stated, he seems to recognize there is something wrong in his magic; but it is not yet time for abjuring, because promted by the proximity of his enemies, he has to make use of his art:

> By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune,
> (Now my dear Lady) hath mine enemies
> Brought to this shore; and by my prescience
> I find my Zenith doth depend upon
> A most auspicious star, whose influence
> If now I court not, but omit, my fortunes
> Will ever after droop [...]
> [...]
> Come away, servant, come. I am ready now.
> Approach, my Ariel, come.
>
> (I. ii. 178-184, 187-188).

Let us now return to the "theurgist". Prospero assures that it was "by providence divine" (I. ii. 159) that they arrived to his island. Little is said about the space of time spent between their arrival and the moment in which the action begins; we only know that Prospero has spent much of his time bringing up his daughter:

> "[...]; and here
> Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit
> Than other princess' can, that have more time

For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful.
(I. ii. 171-174).

Later on, we read about the results of his magic during the referred lapse of time (V. i. 41-50); but he never makes reference to any feeling of vengeance nursed in his heart: isolated on that island, he would soon understand the vanity of breeding such purpose. In fact, the possibility of punishing his enemies takes him aback. We rather think, on the other hand, that he was given the chance to develop his magic further and he did it.

The real Magus needed hard study; the vigour of his art depended exclusively upon the disciplined and permanent exercise of virtuous knowledge. Magic increased or diminished, being intellectual effort the only way to make it grow. Prospero knows this[8] (I. ii. 166-168), but he is not unique for Caliban feels the same (III. ii. 85-93).

Through study the Magus can achieve his purpose. We quote Agrippa's words again: "an intellect pure and conjoined with the powers of the gods, without which we shall never happily ascend to the scrutiny of secret things, and to the power of wonderful workings."[9] But learning has also a moral aception. Virtuous knowledge helps the magus to liberate his soul not only from passions but from the workings of nature. The magus needs to go through a process of purification, making sure he leads a strictly pure life, since he is always in danger of falling victim of his personal demon, thus becoming a "goetist" like Sycorax.[10]

Tradition has attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, an ancient magus,[11] an idea which Frances A. Yates paraphrases in ***Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition***: We can not have firmness of spirit without purity of life, piety, and divine religion, for the holiness of religion purifies thought and renders it divine."[12] Prospero, of course, is aware of this need. Sycorax and her son, Caliban ("got by the devil himself"), are a permanent reminder of what he could become if he were to let himself go. As Curry (glossing Plotinus) writes, the theurgist's soul "must slough off passion and transcend its former life, exchanging it for the life of the gods".[13]

The emphasis put on the need of restraint, though such an affirmation may sound dramatically simplistic, is no other than the neoplatonic sense of virtue, a sense which Christian tradition shared and dignified. Saint Thomas

Aquinas and all the doctors of the Church viewed Saint Dionysus's philosophy as an integral part of the orthodox Christian theology.

At this point there seems to be no contradiction between being a magus and a devoted Christian. Such was the opinion of the Pope Alexander VI who, in the sacred Egyptian Bull, gave his blessing to Pico. He and Ficino, another "Christian magus", as Yates calls them, were at pains to show that their magic practices had nothing to do with the terrible dark power inherent in Cabalist magic, and therefore it was harmless. Frances A. Yates's opinion on this point brings out the main problem, that of differentiating between negative and innocent magic:

> Thus Ficino's natural or *spiritus* magic, aiming no higher than the planets and particularly at the Sun, would yet have an angelic continuation stretching out beyond and above it. Though Ficino, or so I believe, would make no attempt to "operate" with angels, beyond the normal christian prayers and supplications, nor try to reach the Virtues which move the heavens in order to become a maker of miracles."[14]

Prospero's character is indeed a complex one. We would like to come back now to our initial point: the need of self-restraint. How does Prospero live up to this standard? A close analysis of the following conversation between Prospero and his daughter will cast some light on this point:

Pr. Twelve year since, Miranda, twelve year since,
Thy father was the Duke of Milan, and
A prince of power-

Mi. Sir, are you not my father?

Pr. Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and
She said thou wast my daughter; [...]"
(I. ii. 53-7).

Prospero's usage of the third person confuses Miranda, for she is unaware of the fact that his father was the Duke of Milan. Therefore, she

innocently asks Prospero if he really is her father. This question is also misunderstood by the magician, who considers it an insult to his wife. So he immediately declares that Miranda's "mother was a piece of virtue". Here, Prospero is giving a precise, but restrictive sense, to the word virtue, i. e., chastity. A few lines later, we know for the first time about Caliban. He is the son of a devil and a witch: an abominable being due to his disordered lust and unchastity:

Pr. Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness ! I have us'd
thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care; and lodg'd thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child.
(I. ii. 348-350).

This seems to irritate Prospero above all; later on, Stephano's unchaste designs on Miranda enrage her father to the point of uttering a terrifying command:

Fury, Fury ! there, Tyrant, there ! hark, hark
Go charge my goblins that they grind their joints
With dry convulsions; shorten up their sinews
With aged cramps; and more pinch-spotted make them
Than pard or cat o' mountain.
(IV. i. 257-261).

It seems as if Prospero had a deformed and limited concept of virtue. There is no doubt that for the Christian tradition chastity has always occupied a prominent place among virtues. Saint John Chrisostomus explicitly commends this virtue:

> Guardan un corazón sano los que poseen una conciencia completamente limpia o los que aman la castidad. Ninguna virtud es tan necesaria como ésta para ver a Dios.[15]

But obviously chastity was never either the only or the most important virtue. In his ***First Letter to the Corinthians***, St. Paul wrote one of his most famous and memorable epistles, in which he established for ever which was the most important of virtues. It is worth including some lines here:

13, 1.-I may speak with every tongue that men and angels use; yet, if I lack charity, I am no better than echoing bronze, or the clash of cymbals.

2.- I may have powers of prophecy, no secret hidden from me, no knowledge too deep for me; I may have utter faith, so that I can move mountains; yet if I lack charity, I count for nothing.

3.- I may give away all that I have, to feed the poor; I may give myself up to be burnt at the stake; if I lack charity, it goes for nothing.

4.- Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent;

5.- Does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury;

6.- Takes no pleasure in wrong-doing, but rejoices at the victory of truth;

7.- Sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last. (13, 1-3).

Miranda, on the other hand, is virtuous in a much wider sense, for she is not just modest, but also "perfect and peerless" (III. i. 47) and "has the very virtue of compassion" (I. ii. 27). This is precisely what Prospero lacks. Curry writes that when the theurgist has managed to control all his emotions, he becomes completely assimilated to the gods, "impassive like them and [...] able to exercise [their] powers".[16] The theurgist, thus, is able to ignore human feelings, being unaware of the motives that usually move people.

In his ordered paradise, Prospero could feed the idea that he had reached that sphere. But suddenly, the presence of a ship in which his enemies are travelling demonstrates he has failed. To analyze in full this last statement will occupy us now.

Some lines before we talked about the Machiavellian sense of virtue, which we named *virtú*. Considered from this point of view, Prospero's immediate decision to take revenge on his enemies would be necessary, even virtuous: that would be the best way to secure his dukedom against possible threats. However, Prospero is not just the politician to whom Machiavelli's

advices are aimed; he is a magician in search of self control, and vengeance has much deeper implications for him. It implies Prospero is looking "in the dark backward and abysm of time" (I. ii. 50), that he is breeding a very common human passion: hatred.

As a revenger Prospero assumes the powers of a godhead, setting himself up as a substitute for heaven. As Robert Egan puts it, "he is in constant danger of mistaking his own passionate resentment of the wrongs he has suffered for righteous indignation, thereby perverting his own goodness."

Prospero's project of vengeance is fundamentally misguided in the first place, since it contaminates the purity he requires as a theurgist and debases his powers. To continue his misguided project any further would be to realize a degrading goetic nadir, rather than the cherished vision of a theurgic zenith. Sometimes, we can not help feeling distress about Prospero's behaviour, we can not avoid thinking he has fallen to his demon. Even his use of language has a contaminating quality. At times his diction is almost indistinguishable from Caliban's. His threat to Ferdinand,

> I'll manacle thy neck and feet together:
> Sea-water shalt thou drink; thy food shall be
> The fresh-brook mussels, wither'd roots, and husks
> Wherein the acorn cradled.
> (I. ii. 464-467).

recalls Caliban's earth-rooted language. And his "Go charge my goblins that they grind their joints/ With dry convulsions; shorten up their sinews/ With aged cramps; and more pinch-spotted make them/ Than pard or cat o' mountain", suggests comparison with Caliban's, "All the infections that the sun sucks up/ From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall,/ and make him by inch-meal a disease!" (II. ii. 1-3).

Prospero's close verbal approximation to Caliban contaminates him and raises doubts in our minds about his achieved level of purification. Further more, he is introduced to us as an irritable old man unable to control his emotions: thus, he is openly angry at Miranda's apparent lack of attention (I. ii. 78 ff) and at Ariel's premature request for freedom (I. ii. 242 ff). As Ferdinand observes: "This is strange: your father's in some passion/ That works him strongly" (IV. i. 143-4). Miranda, who has always lived with him, claims

that he has never been like that before: "Never till this day/ Saw I Him touch'd with anger, so distemper'd" (IV. i. 144-5).

Prospero has embarked himself upon a project that not only is morally wrong but is affecting him deeply; he, himself, seems to be aware of this fact when he says; "Sir, I'm vex'd;/ Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled:/ Be not disturb'd with my infirmity:" (IV. i. 158-160).

This is likely to be taken far too seriously, treated thus in a far too ponderous a manner. Some scholars have argued that since all magic is evil, Prospero is actually "a type of the potentially damned sorcerer" who shows "in [his] actions something infinitely more malevolent" than the positive magic claimed for the magus.[17] We will not go so far. Prospero is not a goetist. However, his project, like his irritability and his Caliban-like diction, introduces certain impurities into his theurgy. Prospero is a powerful magus, but his powers are going in the wrong direction. Far from being holy and impassively just, they have been applied to mean and personal ends. His enemies were brought within his reach and this funtions as a kind of test for him. He could not help yielding to the temptation that his "most auspicious star" presented him. It recalls the opportunity for murder given to Antonio and Sebastian, when the rest of the court party are sent into a magical sleep (II. i). It also recalls the period of pre-nuptial chastity that Ferdinand and Miranda are to live, in addition to the opportunity for sedition placed in Caliban's hands by the helpful arrival of Trinculo and Stephano.

Prospero himself has failed his test. He is aware of the fact that both he and his project are wrongly biassed. It is a painful birth into consciousness, a birth into a higher degree of self-awareness, for he recognizes that to "slough off passions", the impassivity he aimed at as a theurgist is ultimately irreconcilable with his humanity, something he had tried to transcend. His volte-face, his decision to forgive his enemies passes through the acknowledgement of his human condition, of his human limitations. This acceptance has been pointed out in his words to Ferdinand:

> And, like the baseless fabric of a vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall disolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(IV. i. 151-158).

and fully confirmed in his dialogue with Ariel, a dialogue that is immediately followed by his decision to forgive his enemies (V. i. 13-32).

The consequence is a logical one. Prospero has misapplied his theurgy, and in the light of his failure, he must reject it.

[...] I have bedimm'd
The noontide sun, call'd forth mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong bas'd-promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up
The pine and cedar: graves at my command
Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let'em forth
By my so potent Art. But this rough magic
I here abjure; and, when I have required
Some heavenly music,- which even now I do,-
To work mine end upon their senses, that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fadoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound,
I'll drown my book. (V. i. 41-57).

Throughout *The Tempest* Shakespeare depicts Prospero in different ways: as the magician with the magus's pride in his secret knowledge, as the enchanter with power over the elements, or as the sorcerer controlling spirits. In the final act of the play, Prospero's recantation makes him enter, still, in another well defined tradition, i. e., that of the wizard -the pagan enchanter brought into the Christian world with its concerns over the fate of the soul. Duality defines this character. On one hand, he is a magician who delights in

his magic powers and uses them to affect other people and to effect wondrous happenings. On the other, he is a human being with moral concerns who must eventually admit the "roughness" of his magic and abjure it (being this term linked to the Christian Church through association with the word "heresy"). This moral imperative sets him apart not only from his pagan predecessors and his hermetic contemporaries but also from such figures as Shakespeares's Oberon, who shares many of the characteristics of the wizard, but, not being mortal, need not recant and give over his power.

NOTES

1.- See Walter Clyde Curry, "Sacerdotal Science in Shakespeare's ***The Tempest***" in ***Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns*** (Baton Rouge: 1959); C. J. Sisson, "The Magic of Prospero", ***Shakespeare Survey***, 11 (1958), 70-77. Frances Yates, ***Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition***, (University of Chicago: Routledge and Kegan, 1964); and Frank Kermode, "Introduction", ***The Tempest***, Arden Edition (Cambridge: Mass., 1954), pp. xlvii ff.

2.- The ***The Occulta Philosophia*** was first published in 1533. I have used the translation made by J. F. in 1651.

3.- Nowdays some scholars, as Frank Kermode or Frances Yates, prefer to refer to Prospero as an "hermetic magues". Both terms are not exactly synonymous; however "magues" and "theurgist" describe magicians who use ceremonial magic to achieve spiritual ascendancy. We will use, hence, both terms indistinctly.

4.- C. H. Agrippa, pp. 341-42.

5.- All quotations included in this essay are taken from ***The Tempest***, Arden edition, (London: Methuen, 1986).

6.- Machiavellian *virtú* equally justifies vengeance or political murder, whether it is ethic or not. Obviously, this concept of virtue stands in clear contradiction with the Christian or stoic sense of the word. This opposition provides a proper field for dramatic exploitation; as Frank Kermode points out: "the conflict between these two concepts of virtuous action in a certain situation had for long been a feature of the Elizabethan drama." ("Introduction", ***The Tempest***, p. liii).

7.- ***The Elizabethan World Picture***, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), p. 79.

8.- We may wonder what were those books about. Frances A. Yates's study of ***De Occulta Philosophia***, included in his work ***Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*** (see note 1), helps us to answer this question. She writes that, for the Agrippan magus, the Universe was divided into three worlds: the elemental world (plants, animals, stones), the celestial world (stars) and the celestial world (angels). The Creator's virtue descends downwards through the different worlds to the elements in the elemental one. He goes on to assure that: "Magicians think that we

can make the same progress upwards, and draw the virtues of the upper world down to us by manipulating the lower ones. They try to discover the virtues of the elemental world by medicine and natural philosophy, the virtues of the celestial world by astrology and mathematics; and in regard to the intellectual world, they study the holy ceremonies of religions" (Frances A. Yates, ***op. cit.***, p. 131). Medicine, natural philosophy, astrology, mathematics and ceremonial magic, were probably the disciplines covered by Prospero's books.

9.- Cornelius Agrippa, ***op. cit***, III, iii.

10.- This danger is specially apparent for the Agrippan magus. Ficino took care to avoid the demonic side of this magic by aiming at attracting only stellar influences and not the influences of spiritual forces beyond the stars. As Frances A. Yates writes, the Agrippan mague took another step "aiming at the full demonic magic of the *Asclepius*". The magus is aware of the fact that there is an evil kind of this magic, "practised by 'gnostic magicians' and possibly by the Templars", and he decides to cross the "door into the forbidden which Ficino had left only slightly ajàr". Agrippa will quieten suspicious minds by claiming that "the divinities which he names in his hymns are not evil demons but divine and natural virtues established by God for the use of men." (Frances A. Yates, ***op. cit.***, pp. 133, 136).

11.- Hermes Trismegistus is a rather obscure figure. Frances A. Yates comments that he is at least identified with five different personages: Greek Hermes, Egyptian Toth, the supposed author of ***Hermetica***.

12.- Ibid., p.138.

13.- Walter Clyde Curry, ***op. cit.*** p. 180.

14.- ***Op. cit.*** p. 120.

15.- In ***Mattheum Homilium***.

16.- ***Op. cit.***, p. 182.

17.- D'Orsay Pearson, " 'Unless I be relieved by Prayer': ***The Tempest*** in Perspective", ***Shakespeare Studies***, VII (1974), 253-283, p. 256.