

Of Prospero's "cold mouth": Discourse of the Passions in *The Tempest*

we know God himselfe to bee affected with anger
Thomas Wright (1630: 21)

For as the ancient politiques in popular estates were wont to compare the people to the sea, and the orators to the winds; because as the sea would of itself be calm and quiet, if the winds did not move and trouble it; so the people would be peaceable and tractable if the seditious orators did not set them in working and agitation: so it may be fitly said, that the mind in the nature thereof would be temperate and stayed, if the affections, as winds, did not put it into tumult and perturbation (Bacon 1974: 163).

In *The Advancement of Learning* Francis Bacon uses a now all-too-familiar metaphor of "storms at sea and tempests in the air," in virtually one stroke of his pen linking the image of the turbulent sea with the emotive power of language on the one hand and the distempered human mind on the other. The theme of tempestuous mind recurrent in Western thought since the ancient Greeks seems to form an axiom of Renaissance philosophy. Affections or passions of the mind would after all conform to the notion of spiritual materialism of the early modern thought which still operated within the network of causal relations between language, passion and the physical world. As Gail Kern Paster writes: "affective discourses in the period always presuppose embodiment just as bodily references always assume an affective context or consequence" (2001: 45). This material dimension conflating language, the body and the soul finds its concrete realisation in the choice of metaphors used in *The Tempest* to speak of emotions and the control that the mind can or cannot attain over them. My basic claim is that the world of the play is indeed shaped by the "somatic precariousness of the age" to use David Hillman's phraseology, i.e. "radical instability in the relations between *psyche* and *soma*" (2007: 1–4), which is to say that it is conditioned by its demiurge's inner turmoil. As a man torn between passions and reason, Prospero

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uses constrained discourse to exercise control over the others *and* his perturbed self, *speaks* his mind and undergoes a major metamorphosis in the process – a shift and a turn of mind which occurs in and through the language of the play and is especially visible in the narration of his coming to the island on which I am going to concentrate in this paper. The artistic pattern for *The Tempest* is then propelled by a conflict between reason and emotions – and the site of this turmoil is its poetry.

Pathological Language, or Workings of Prospero, the Seditious Orator

There is common critical consent that *The Tempest* is preoccupied with language to the extent unprecedented in other Shakespeare's plays¹ (in this it is matched perhaps only in *King Lear*). However, the focus of contemporary critical attention is predominantly on the limitations and inadequacies of language: as Mark Thornton Burnett justly observes, the primary concern of the play is imperfection "in all [its] manifestations" (2002: 140). I would like to add one significant qualification here: as I see it, *The Tempest* is first and foremost a play about imperfection and the struggle for its very opposite, and the site in which that theme manifests itself most strongly is language in its emotive function.

From the very onset of the play "verbal appropriateness" (Garner 1979: 179) is pitted in dialogue against the passionate discourse of the body and the corresponding distemper of the natural world: on a highly symbolic plane the play can be read as a secularised *psychomachia* of one character that commands the elements of the air and the earth by the virtue of possessing language that exerts power over reality. Already in Act one, Scene one the Boatswain insists that the passengers' presence on the deck "assists the storm" (1.1.14),² that he himself cannot be patient when the sea is not (1.1.15–16); that "these roarers" (both the vehement waters and the sailors in distress?) do not care "for the name of the king", in one sentence linking the world of the body with its immediate material surroundings and the absence of feeling ("cares") with the authority in/ of language. The somatic aspect of speech is made even more visible when against all his efforts the passengers still cry out in fear, and he curses: "A plague upon this howling!" (1.1.38). The Boatswain's admonitions are in turn met with Sebastian's strong words: "A pox o'your throat, you bowling, blasphemous, incharitable dog" (1.1.39–40) that encapsulate the very same metaphor which the Boatswain utilised, namely that of a sickened mouth/ throat that is rendered incapable

¹ See e.g. Stanton B. Garner, Jr. 1979: 177; Anne Barton 1971: 19–30.

² All citations from: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, Arden Shakespeare, 2007.

of speech in a situation in which language is deemed transgressive as a vehicle of one of two excessive emotions: fear or anger. In both cases forced silence is demanded from a subordinate that is out of place; the words that are given here have a transformative potential affecting the material reality of the addressed, whose bodily/ linguistic impertinence is to be curbed linguistically/ somatically.³ Metaphorically speaking, emotional language is constrained here by disease; inordinate words are treated like blasphemy and therefore need to be punished in kind.⁴ The conflation of a diseased body, controlling discourse and affective language is continued further on in the passage: just a moment before the wreck Mariners scream "All lost! To prayers! All lost!", which elicits a curious response on the part of the Boatswain: "What, must our mouths be cold?" (1.1.50–51). The reading proposed by some editors who claim that here the Boatswain has a drink or two rests on the premise the passage can be read in isolation from the ongoing dialogue, but this assumption does not hold water and not only because the textual evidence is scant: if we consider the interaction between the characters, it will turn out, as Vimala Herman rightly observes, that the Boatswain is central to what she calls an "auditory configuration" of the dialogue and that his question concludes the whole turn-taking sequence, after which the turn distribution pattern changes and he does not speak again in the scene (1998: 115). For this reason his rhetorical question should be treated as a reaction to what has been said and a comment on the whole life and death situation, and not as a mere quip on drinking that would accompany the relevant gesture. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden Vaughan cite in their note on the passage R.W. Dent who in *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language* stipulates that this uncommon phrase might be an allusion to the proverbial expression "to be cold in the mouth", i.e. to be dead (qtd. in Shakespeare 2007: n.51). Both this and other annotated editions of the play provide another instance of the use of the phrase in the passage from *The Scornful Lady*, where we read:

O my head, o my heart, what a noyse and change is here! would I
had been cold i'th'mouth before this day, and ne're have lived to see
this dissolution (Fletcher, Beaumont 2004: 44).

The passage is usually cited in isolation, and therefore it is easy to oversee that the "cold mouth" is mentioned here again in the context that brings together ex-

³ These two instances of cataplexis are followed in the play by other cataplectic expressions, most notably used by Prospero, forming a discourse of prayer that pervades the whole of *The Tempest*. See McAlindon 2001: 335–355.

⁴ Indeed, as Ernest B. Gillman contends, in the early modern plague writing plague was treated as a sign from God and therefore acquired a metaphorical status to be projected onto theological and political disputes: "Plague exegetes noted that in the biblical Hebrew, the three-letter word for "plague" רבד (= DBR) is orthographically identical to the word for the "word" itself, proving that the disease was not a mere thing of nature, but the medium of God's speech" (2011: 221).

ternal commotion and a sense of overall disturbance both in the “head” and the “heart”, as their very – and more desired – opposite treating cold inertia and its ultimate realisation, death. Both in this example as well as in *The Tempest* the metaphor elicited in the text is that of numbness as if from cold/ death, but its location in the mouth as the site of speech is significant. Later in the scene Antonio speaks of the Boatswain as a “wide-chapp’d rascal”: this attribution again does not fulfill a purely descriptive function:⁵ even if we interpret it along the metaphorical lines proposed in the Vaughans’ edition, the insolent “big mouth” of the “wide-chopped” Boatswain remains a liminal space, made rough (“chapped”) with cold and prone to distemper. Read together with earlier remarks on plague that is to be used as a punitive measure curbing linguistic excess, this kind of wording builds in the scene an extended metaphor that consists of an image of a cold sore/ canker sore which spreads all over the face and the mouth, obstructing speech and the outpour of emotion. What the metaphor points to is a disciplining exercise of the body that closes itself to inward impulses while closing them within, and is called upon to chastise the passionate self and force it into silence; indeed the very extreme of that control would be the absolute absence of emotional language which in bodily terms can be understood as death of the subject. At the same time “cold mouth” is linked in the passage with penitential prayer which as a supplication has to be looked at as a regulatory discourse that is meant to restore the lost (somatic) order. However, from the Boatswain’s perspective which is the perspective of an active man of the world who has the will to survive, but – as we have seen – does not give much credit to words, or, in this case, the Word, supplication does not have the potential to save the lives of the supplicants. In the immediate context of the call to prayer as a last resort for the souls that in the face of death fear for their lives, “cold mouth” connotes a lack of action that is associated with the control over emotion achieved through the medium of ritualised, formal language. The language of a “cold mouth” is overtly rational and formal, but it covers emotion, in this case fear, and the Boatswain does it justice by disregarding it as impotent and imperfect, as the metaphor of sickness underlines its truly *pathological* nature, in the original sense of the word.

The term “pathology”, for all its contemporary connotations with “the study of the essential nature of diseases and especially of the structural and functional changes produced by them,”⁶ etymologically is to be understood in its primary sense as a study of *páthema*, “affections” or more properly “passions” which Cicero likens to diseases of the body (1931: 3.10.35) whenever their template is fear,⁷ as they affect the state of the soul and perturb the mind. Half-expecting

⁵ E.g. Mahood and Luce support the notion that “we might conjecture that the man opened his mouth wide when he drank” (Luce 1919: 7, n. 58; cf. Mahood 1992: 212).

⁶ In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pathology> (18.01.2012).

⁷ Cf. Fisher 2002: 4.

the answer, Prospero asks Ariel: "My brave spirit,/ Who was so firm, so constant, that this coil/ Would not *infect* his reason?" (1.2.207-2-9; italics mine). It is fear that overwhelms the Mariners and their portlier passengers, and it is its "cold mouth" that both the Boatswain and Prospero disparage. Fear then disturbs the mind and "ravishes reason from its proper seat" (1991: 81), as Montaigne would want it; fear that "to every article" (1.2.195) is instigated on Prospero's bidding by Ariel, a character that is fittingly fashioned into the spirit of the air that like "winds... put[s] it [human mind] into tumult and perturbation" (Bacon 1974: 173). Prospero's art must be then seen as the primary cause of the tempest that is aroused in the hearts and minds of "the fraughting souls" (1.2.13) who resort to prayer as another artful discourse allowing them to cope with their reality. It has to be stressed here that both Prospero's art and the Mariners' supplication are akin: Prospero's theurgical enchantment is intertwined with the transforming power of language as an oratorical incantation whose aim is to control the isle; Mariners' prayers are to fulfill a similar controlling function, albeit it is somewhat more limited to their immediate surroundings. One major difference between them resides in the fact that while the Mariners strive to control their own feelings with the use of a petitional prayer, in his act Prospero wishes to control the feelings of others in order to incite their fear and carry out his plans. It is noteworthy that Ariel is cajoled into fulfilling his master's wishes only with the use of Prospero's rhetoric, and where gentle words do not suffice, a forceful command will do.⁸ Such use of rhetoric is in line with the bulk of classical rhetorical writings, where effective orators are believed to need to evoke fear on the part of the less sophisticated audience. For example, Aristotle and after him Cicero and Quintilian explicitly state that the stirring of emotion is an effective persuasive device and write that a skillful orator can arouse fear in the listeners by making "them feel that they really are in danger of something" (Aristotle 2010: 71). Prospero must then be seen as the Baconian "seditious orator" who sets his spirit of the air "in working and agitation" (Bacon 1974: 173), in order to reach general commotion and a universal state of controlled confusion from which he is the one to gain. He does so by skillful use of the language of "cold mouth", the pathological language of passions that he has been learning to curb and control all his life *via* the medium of the liberal arts:

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 (1.2.72-90).

⁸ Cf. Terry Eagleton's reading of *The Tempest* in which he likens Ariel to language (1986).

The two excerpts that I am citing here oscillate round the notions of totality and unity of Prospero's endeavour: he is "without a parallel" in the field of the liberal arts, and they are "all his study"; the Duke is "all dedicated", "transported", taken out of his place and "rapt" (etymologically "seized by") in them – and his primary purpose is "closeness and the bettering of [his] mind". What draws my particular attention here is the peculiarity of Prospero's enterprise: the "closeness" of the mind that he aspires to, especially in the context of the exchange with Miranda, in which he repeatedly implores her: "ope thine ear" (1.2.37), "be attentive" (1.2.38), "mark me" (1.2.88), "Dost thou hear?" (1.2.105) to which Miranda answers: "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness" (1.2.106), thus complicating the idea of absolute singularity of the human mind and the influences that shape and build it.⁹ Prospero's endeavour to "close" his mind and to ward it off from the impact of the outside world strikingly resembles the stoic insistence on divine imperturbability and rational action which are supposed to aid the process of attaining human goodness by habit and perseverance in *apatheia*.¹⁰ Still, nowhere in the stoic exercise of will and reason guarding the mind against inner and outer turmoil can we find any advice on how to act *politically*: how to excite fear in others and how to achieve one's ends with the use of anger while remaining impervious to emotion oneself. Even though post-Aristotelian rhetoricians assume just like Quintillian that the orator might need to appeal to emotion of the ill-educated audience lest he "be unable to vindicate the claims of truth and justice" (Quintillian 1985: 336), they fall short in providing any real advice on taking action other than oratory.

It would seem that in his exile Prospero instigates the former while repeatedly falling prey to the latter, his anger being evident especially in Scene two, in the recollection of the events preceding his coming to the island, in which he uniquely allows himself to speak of his emotions and uses somatic vocabulary that welcomes strong identification with the past. As F.D. Hoenerger admits: "In the second scene Prospero does not merely narrate his past: he relives it. Emotions are by him recollected in anything but tranquility" (1956: 34). His are then the Aristotelian *pathēmata*, "the pathos [which] is an act which is destructive to life or painful" (Aristotle 1997: 68). It is *pathos*, or suffering, that in this passage shatters his stoic attitude but also imbues him with fortitude born out of hardship and the feeling that he has for his daughter:

When I have decked the sea with drops full salt,
Under my burthen groaned; which raised in me
An undergoing stomach, to bear up
Against what should ensue (1.2.155–158).

⁹ Cf. Evelyn B. Tribble 2006:151–168.

¹⁰ For the sake of this argument I am not going to involve into a discussion of the possible overlap and differences in the use of the terms *apatheia* (as absence of passions) and *ataraxia* (as freedom from disturbance).

The whole recollection of the injustice received is marked by repetition, syntactic chaos, its "interruptive mode" so striking that it was even deemed a sign of "undigested elements of an old play" (Magnusson 1986: 5) (here the somatic enters the stage again). In *The Arden Shakespeare* edition the flashbacks are twice marked in the notes, for "Prospero's syntax is slightly jumbled in this emotional recounting of his fall from power and eventual exile by Antonio"; the other passage "shows Prospero's continuing agitation" (Shakespeare 2007: n.74, n.90–92). If restrained words continue to falter and fail the exiled Milan, it is because he is susceptible to the very discourse that he is so prodigiously using on others and warding off himself. The consecutive verbal encounters with Ariel and Caliban evidence further absorption into the inner universe of emotions, when Prospero resorts to threats of brute force, which is usually commented on as a loss of temper – an interpretation strengthened by Miranda's exclamation: "Never till this day/ Saw I him touched with anger so distempered" (4.1.144–145).¹¹ What is then characteristic of the wronged Duke is the "cold mouth" of anger that he never speaks directly, only in an address to Ferdinand after he has disrupted the masque:

Sir, I am vexed;
Bear with my weakness; my brain is troubled:
Be not disturb'd with my infirmity (4.1.158-160).

The prevalent critical attitude towards the passage as well as to other displays of Prospero's tempestuousness is to take his words at face value; that however would be tantamount to an interpretation in which the exiled Duke is indeed incompetent, "infirm" and too senile to put the task he has set for himself to a successful ending, the outbursts on his part being the evidence of that very failure. In my opinion his disrupted discourse and what we can read as his abrupt stage behaviour are not a sign of vexation of an old man, neither are they the outcome of disappointment with inaccuracy of language or his own performance.¹² Contrary to what is said about "distempered anger evidencing Prospero's deficient self-awareness" (Sokol 2003: 166), my claim is that the passage – just like the passages in which the wronged Duke scolds his disobedient spirits – is yet another instance of an artful use of "seditious oration" that controls the pathological discourse of passions and behind the vestige of a "vex'd old mind" hides firm resolve and an important exercise in the *deliberate and moderate* use of anger

¹¹ See the stimulating discussion of the passage in Lindenbaum 1984: 161–171.

¹² More than that, it seems that such an approach to the figure of Prospero is grounded in a time-honoured Aristotelian assumption that the intensity of emotions abates with age and that a wise man demonstrates coolness of judgement that comes only with senescence, once the heat of youth is gone (what is noteworthy here is again the bodily dimension of the expressions referring to reason). Not to conform to this paradigm at a certain age and indeed, to have an intense emotional life, would be a transgression of the socially accepted norm. See, Aristotle (2010).

that propels Prospero into action. That is a behaviour that truly becomes a virtuous, albeit troubled, nobleman.¹³

“To compose our character is our duty”: Prospero and the Ethical Question¹⁴

From the onset of the play it is plain that Prospero is caught in a moment of deliberation whether and how to take action, i.e. to reach out of his “closed” mind and relate to the external world. His is a voluntary act, stemming out of a good turn of fortune, but it is necessitated by Prospero’s awareness of singularity of the chance he has been given:

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.

The question that the wronged Duke must answer is how to act in the world if the very substance of the self is shaken by tempestuous anger that finds its concrete realisation in words uttered to command the natural elements of the air and the earth – and how to do so virtuously. The whole “safely ordered” wreckage and marriage plot bears therefore inevitable signs of coping with the affect aroused by the very memory of grievances suffered. That attempt seems to follow a truly Senecan threefold pattern of ethical guidance:

- (1) assessing the value of each thing,
- (2) adopting an appropriate and controlled impulse toward objects pursued, and
- (3) achieving consistency between impulse and action” (*The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* 2003: 42).

It is not without a reason that Prospero orders Miranda to put aside his magic robes: in the scene he acts virtually “out of his character” of the orator in order to confront his most urgent perplexities, measure his needs and ultimately bring himself out of misery by taking moral responsibility for the actions that

¹³ Cf. James E. Phillips 1964: 147–159.

¹⁴ The title of this subsection comes partly from Montaigne (III, 13); the other part is an allusion to Geoffrey H. Hartman’s essay.

he has already planned.¹⁵ Prospero's recollection does not have an informative function only: it is a therapy of passion in the sense of *therapeia*, curing with language (let us remember Miranda's answer in that scene: "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness").¹⁶ At the same time however, it is a recollection of the things past that serves Prospero to gain self-knowledge. In its very core it serves as an anamnestic statement which is a figure of *ethos*. The need to take a definite stance towards the ensuing events reflects itself in language that struggles with poetic *decorum*, but once the *pathos* has been expressed, Prospero regains his composure, puts on his robe and addresses his *spirit*: "I am ready now, come".

Prospero feels anger, and has to come to terms with it. The feeling itself is not a debilitating weakness as the stoics would want it: Milan accepts it in the mode of the Aristotelian *thumos*, i.e. the soul, spirit, the principle of thought and feeling; high-spiritedness reserved for intentional offence, or a slight of a better man, propelling him into action. Indeed, Aristotle's classic description of anger in the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not list anger among extreme emotions or vices. Anger is a continuum with a desirable mean:

The person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised. This, then, will be the mild person, if mildness is praised. For [if mildness is something to be praised,] being a mild person means being undisturbed, not led by feeling, but irritated wherever reason prescribes, and for the length of time it prescribes. And he seems to err more in the direction of deficiency, since the mild person is ready to pardon, not eager to exact a penalty. (Aristotle 1999: 61)

Thus, the Duke is truly angry with Caliban, Ariel and other spirits, but his *thumos* abides once his inferiors have subordinated themselves to him. He is rightly and justly irritated (in the etymological sense of the somatic *irritatio*), and yet, after he has achieved his ends, Prospero can shed the role/ robe of the artful "seditious orator" and become his "proper" self, the merciful Duke of Milan who "is ready to pardon, not eager to exact a penalty" (Aristotle 1999: 61). His "high spiritedness" gives way to courage: the ability to act "for the sake of what is noble" (Aristotle 2010: 68), as befits a nobleman. Once he has gained upper hand over his enemies and demonstrated his superiority to them, his passion can give way to com-*passion* and the art of passionate oration can be replaced by the art of living.

¹⁵ In the scene it is the vehement discourse of passions that makes him move outside his ostensibly rational "cold-mouthed" self, or *vehe- mens*, "out of the mind".

¹⁶ Cf. Fisher's astute observation: "Anger is the necessary bridge between a purely internal account of the passions and an interest in action, because it is with anger that the aroused state in the soul or spirit has the most immediate links to the physical acts of our fists or our body in the outer world" (2002: 173).

Technē tou biou: The Sweet Food of Sweetly Uttered Knowledge¹⁷

The play opens with a storm but it ends with a promise of “calm seas” (5.1.314) and a return home (*ethos*). Prospero accordingly transforms the pathological language of the “cold-mouthed” “seditious orator” into the ethical discourse of a forgiving nobleman: his *pathos* (firstly, as the emotional appeal to be used on others, then as a sense of suffering with the old self and high-spiritedness it arouses in him through the remembrance of the past) gives way to *ethos* which must be understood as the ability to act and feel by practising virtues in agreement with one’s true character. In the process he reinvents himself and arrives at a realisation that his aesthetic “project... which was to please” (Epilogue, 12–13) – the passionate and self-revelatory narration of the story of his life – cannot exist in the “closedness” of his mind, for to be truly *poietic* a story and life itself have to be shared and exist in the company of emotion, in *compassion*. Prospero’s own *Advancement of Learning* resides then in the realisation that true wisdom does not consist in the warding off emotions or mastering them i.e. manipulating them to one’s own benefit, but rather in facing them responsibly and with care.

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¹⁷ The title of the section comes from Philip Sidney (1909: 30). *Technē tou biou* is literally “the craft of existence” or “the art of living” that Foucault discusses in his “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” (1984).

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„Zimne usta” Prospera. Dyskurs namiętności w *Burzy*

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest omówienie miejsca, jakie w Szekspirowskiej *Burzy* zajmuje gniew oraz powiązana z nim metafora „cold mouth” (dosł. „zimnych ust”, 1.1.50–51), stanowiąca odzwierciedlenie ówczesnego dyskursu religijnego, somatycznego i afektywnego, a wskazująca na jednoczesną niezdolność do działania i przemawiania w spójny, logiczny sposób. Punktem wyjścia do rozważań w tym względzie jest założenie, że świat przedstawiony dramatu

w gruncie rzeczy oscyluje pomiędzy *psyche* a *soma*, a na jego kształt ma wpływ afekt jego demiurga, burzliwy gniew. Jako człowiek rozdarty między namiętnościami a rozumem Prospero posługuje się dyskursem namiętności, aby sprawować kontrolę nad otoczeniem, ale też aby stawić czoło swoim lękom i zyskać samowiedzę, która pozwoli mu uświadomić sobie, iż szlachetne postępowanie musi iść w parze z akceptacją własnych uczuć. Jest to zmiana, która pozwala mu na rzeczywisty powrót do domu, do swojego *ethos* w arystotelesowskim znaczeniu tego słowa – to znaczy do prawdziwej natury litościwego szlachcica.

NOTA AUTORSKA

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