SHAKESPEAREAN FIGURATIONS OF LINCOLN AND BOOTH: TOWARD RELEASING IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE IN TRAGEDY AND HISTORY

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This paper presents a critique of a relatively recent development in historiography consisting in the appropriation by intellectual historians of the analytical tools of literary criticism to explain discontinuous historical formations. Thus, attempts have been made to interpret the English civil war, the French Revolution, and the American civil war by highlighting the role played by the media, the arts, and other ways of symbolic production in shaping the varying responses by historical agents to the vicissitudes of their time and place. I argue that this historiographic practice, in principle a very legitimate and productive one, cannot succeed so long as the interface of criticism and historiography remains grounded in a universalist project that looks for a correlation between what happens to protagonists (and antagonists) of great books and what happens to great *heroes* (and *villains*) of history. This seems to be the case with the several books written on the premise (in itself problematic, as I will show) that Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth identified themselves with a broad range of Shakespearean characters. What is at stake in this practice is the survival of a historiography that seeks to demonstrate the continuity in Western history of universalist ideals of community, individuality, and virtue at the expense of the historical particulars of ideology, class, and ethnic or regional difference encountered in any given cultural text.

The humanistic school of literary criticism emphasizes the language of value, universality and totality; an emphasis which often results in the monumentalizing reading of rather problematic species of writing, namely, autobiographical and historiographical discourses, and the lyric and epic modes.[1] The humanistic exegesis of such texts is rarely preceded by the theorizing of a self-conscious model of psychohistorical interpretation; on the contrary, more often than not the universalist interpreter resorts to rigid notions of ego psychology and historical continuity. As a representative case study of this writing I have selected a very recent humanistic account of identity formation in tragedy and history, Albert Furtwangler's *Assassin on Stage: Brutus, Hamlet, and the Death of Lincoln* (1991). I will use this study for

the purposes of contrasting my own Lacanian view of psychohistory, with its emphasis on the relative unpredictability of historical breaks and the power of words in conditioning agency, to the teleological account of historical succession propounded by humanistic critics.

According to Furtwangler, the relationship of Booth to Lincoln on the historical plane parallels those of Hamlet to Claudius and of Brutus to Caesar on the Shakespearean stage. Although he admits that it is a simplistic reduction to look at Lincoln as a "melancholy good man" (i.e., a proverbial Hamlet figure), Furtwangler has no trouble defining the President's unwanted role in the 1865 American post-war horror in these poetic –yet hardly critical– terms:

> But the power of [Lincoln's] words derives from their hope, for their promises still unfulfilled. Lincoln seems to see all, if we regard him as "a great man at the crisis of his fate." But what he sees here has not come to be. Nor could it have, if he had lived. Whether it was *a personal*, *a national*, or *a prophetic modern vision*, Lincoln as tragic hero could give us a flickering epiphany. That is all any tragic hero can do. He dies, while the laws that showed through him remain eternal and mysterious. (Furtwangler 94; my emphasis)

Among the unexplained assumptions that Furtwangler makes here about Lincoln's self-figuration as both a subject of tragedy and an agent of history we must note at least the following two: (1) the coupling of Lincoln and Hamlet as mutually illuminating mirrors of exemplarity, even though Lincoln himself professed the highest admiration, of all tragic heroes, not for Hamlet, but for Shakespeare's regicidal usurper, Macbeth, and sanguinary tyrant, Richard III (Fehrenbacher 237); and (2) the conceptual conflation for exegetic purposes of three different versions of a humanistic epic history –the "personal" or heroic, the "national" or transhistorical, and the "prophetic" or scriptural– which implicitly construct Lincoln as the anointed representative of the divine impulse directing the historical destiny of a depoliticized world.

As it is understood here, psychohistory treats the subject's verifiable actions and posited psychic responses as signs of dividable and often mutually conflicting forces whose referent is the larger socio-cultural text in which the subject himself circulates.[2] When confronting the similarities and divergences between the literary and the historiographical discourses, psychohistory should not concern itself so much with deterministic narratives that aim at detecting and tracing the origin of traumas as with the communicative and interpretive exchanges that structure the subject's actions and conceptualizations. In a similar manner, the writing of psychobiography cannot be reduced to the use of psychoanalytical tools to understand a historical agent's identity conflict (putting him "on the couch"), nor can subjects of discourse be regarded as purely an effect of the larger forces of social and economic history (LaCapra 11-12).

The task of psychohistoriographic commentary involves the dialectical interpenetrations between at least three realms of experience: (1) an empirical text proper (the material and agential eventfulness of the subject's context); a primary symbolic text (the cultural constructs into which the subject is born); and (3) a secondary symbolic text (the historian's interpretation of the empirical and the primary symbolic texts). This hermeneutical model places under suspicion not just the narrative sequence of trauma, symptom, and cure of ego psychology; it also exploits, in an overtly Lacanian fashion, the spatial ruptures and temporal discontinuities generated in this three-way

process of "textual" exchange, where psychic, linguistic, and agential events are played out against one another.[3]

In the remainder of this paper, I explain the consequences that this humanistic movement toward unity by assimilation, domestication, and co-optation of subversive historical forces has for the construction of a model of psychohistorical interpretation that may be operative in both literary criticism and historiography. To this end I subject Furtwangler's book to a psychohistoriographic analysis that seeks to evaluate this author's problematic handling of the main written materials, historical developments, and psychosocial conflicts that played a part in John Wilkes Booth's assassination of Lincoln. At every step of the way in this critique I also propose an alternative set of interpretive strategies, which, taken together, illustrate the model of psychohistoriographic commentary outlined above.

As an interpretation through literary discourse of a poignant episode in American political history, Furtwangler's *Assassin on Stage* on the surface appears to incorporate an implicit theory of cultural poetics. The author explores in this work the connections between role-playing in drama (primarily in *Hamlet*), professional acting in nineteenth-century America, and role-playing in history. More specifically, Furtwangler's main focus is on the single most controversial event in nineteenth-century American historiography, i.e., the sequence of events leading up to Lincoln's assassination: "Booth's assault upon Lincoln is the point where...politics, poetry and theater all converge" (Furtwangler 152).

Furtwangler's own emphasis on the convergence of empirical and symbolic realms of experience alerts us to the complexity of the social discourses, voluntary affiliations, and individual aspirations that marked Booth's life. Consequently, it comes as a surprise that Furtwangler nevertheless attempts to explain Booth's "tragic" demise by resorting to a simplifying figure of speech. Thus, he invokes fellow Canadian Northrop Frye's notion of "epiphany of law" to signify how in the assassination of Lincoln "the plot of a tragedy...unfolds a revelation of law through a long, heavy turn of cosmic irony" (Furtwangler 2).

Instead of narrativizing transitional moments of action, in which and through which a non-essentialist notion of the subject of history can be formalized, Furtwangler superimposes a rigid model of historical evolution and identity construction on his juxtaposition of archetypes, genres, and periods. This model, unstructured as it is, purports to historicize and explain the interrelations between: (1) classical, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century notions of subjecthood; (2) stage performance and historical violence; and (3) drama writing and historiography. As far as triad (1) is concerned, for Furtwangler civilizations undergo a cycle of growth, plenitude, and decay, each moment being marked by the appearance and disappearance of tragic heroes that embody archetypal human values. Accordingly, this critic privileges three transitional moments from cultural plenitude to cultural decay: the last years of the Roman republic, Shakespeare's England, and Lincoln's presidency. Each of these moments features heroic individuals facing their respective tragic destinies with the sole aid of their own spiritual strength (which is figured as public virtue) and the intervention of providence (which in turn is figured as the quintessential pattern of human action represented in Shakespearean drama).[4]

Furtwangler's book even makes the bold claim that Caesar, Hamlet (whose psychosocial identity Furtwangler strangely conflates with that of Shakespeare), and Lincoln were all aware of their respective tragic destinies, which in the last analysis

attests to their participation in this self-reproducing cycle of human virtue. Attributing psychological and historical changes to forces other than individual agency and socio-political formations is tantamount to letting an all-powerful historicist design turn history into providence. Not surprisingly, Furtwangler emphasizes the thematic and structural principles of a pre-ordained dialectics of order and chaos that posits the unreachable anteriority of a golden age of cultural unity and the urgency of downplaying the subversive (or, to say the least, non-hegemonic) intervention of historical particulars in an effort to speed up the new coming of another golden period. This is how Furtwangler manages to contain the historicizable, dialectical connections between different forms of discourse –e.g., between historiography, drama, journalism, diary writing, and so on– and between different historical formations of identity.

To be sure, to the extent that he does not attempt a materialist interpretation of such cosmic powers, Furtwangler appears to regard magnicide as a universal rather than contingent political event. Accordingly, he proceeds to study the Northern press' accounts of the Ford's Theatre assassination only to conclude that they can be faithfully identified with a globalizing sense of cultural identity. For Furtwangler, the Union's program of reform embodies the essence of American democracy. Yet this explanation fails to recognize that both the Northern press and Booth's own *Northernized* family of performers had an obvious interest in dismissing the possibility that John Wilkes might have been the repository of a coherent anti-Federalist discourse.[5] Just as a mildly political poetics of culture acknowledges that a discourse of truth always generates its own resistance, so could Furtwangler at least have outlined the ways in which the Federalist discourses of power constructed around Lincoln's death were themselves contradictory and continued to be contested by the Southern press long after the War was over. Instead, he neglects the opposing Confederate force almost to the point that its existence as a stigmatized but long established order is nearly forgotten. Factious partisanship thus becomes universal aspiration. What is more, the Union's ambitions are said to represent and serve not just America's but the world's aspirations: "Lincoln nevertheless served worthwhile principles, for America and the world...and he rightly understood that the Constitution embodied ideals of permanent value" (Furtwangler 89).

For Furtwangler, while Lincoln truly and unequivocally understood the American people's loftiest aspirations, his assassin at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday in 1865, John Wilkes Booth, could only believe (*wrongfully* and *tragically*) that it was he who in reality embodied those same principles. According to this account, Booth constructed himself as an isolated modern-day Brutus ready to free the recently reunified America from another tyrant. This theory not only challenges the collective effort of historians who have argued for Booth's active militancy and longtime revolutionary plans (see, in this respect, *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln*). More importantly, Furtwangler's theory is not accompanied by the appropriate evidence supporting the assumptions made about Booth's complex character.

Rather than focusing primarily on Booth's self-image, Furtwangler's narrative emphasizes his behavior after the assassination, as observed by family members, Lincoln's proponents, the sergeant who apparently shot Booth –killing him– and even the poet Walt Whitman. The portrait of Booth resulting from a consideration of these documents is skewed without the additional careful examinations of original accounts of the younger Booth written before 1865. Since no analytical assessments of the

assassin's personal identity seem to exist prior to 1865, Furtwangler's interpretation relies unconditionally on longer retrospective accounts written after Lincoln's and Booth's deaths. Thus, instead of conveying a fully historicized narrative of Booth's process of textual self-fashioning (how his identity was discursively constructed in contact with the legal and emotional burdens of political militancy), *Assassin on Stage* reiterates a monolithic reading of Booth's sense of his own personal and historical identity based on his public image as a versatile Shakespearean actor.

For Furtwangler, the subject of tragedy is immutable, and therefore transcends the political moment in which it is situated, thus achieving a universal significance that the historian can recapture from his *locus scribendi* in the present time. It is indeed very tempting to think of Booth as a self-fashioned tragic hero, one who became intoxicated by reading and acting in Shakespeare's tragedies. His pattern of behavior would presumably then have been shaped by dramatic spectacles, which he would rehearse compulsively in order to escape from his personal frustrations. This is Furtwangler's view of John Wilkes Booth, but the degree of theatrical self-consciousness attributed to him is once again not supported with textual evidence included in the book. In contrast with inductive, fact oriented accounts of the assassination (for instance, *Come Retribution*), which dwell exclusively on original records and primary sources, *Assassin on Stage* invests with factual authority any bit of information that supports a heavily deterministic plotting of events. The author's notion of history thus entails a surrender not just to the humanistic tradition's privileging of exemplary life histories but also to a seemingly disinterested formalist tradition that disguises the importance of complex socio-political formations as the work of structural irony.

Thus Furtwangler notes that Lincoln belongs to a past with which we no longer identify. However, he goes on to claim that Lincoln was also the last leader capable of addressing America as a unified nation, which in turn determines our understanding of this unique personality as something that can be approached *exegetically* but not fully comprehended in analytical terms. What is more, Lincoln is referred to by Furtwangler, in the space of two pages, as alternately a "puzzle," a "historian," a "poet," a "statesman" and a "tragic hero" (90-91). The bold assumption that Lincoln is nothing less than an historical cipher may help to explain Furtwangler's resorting to an implicit religious hermeneutics: "The question to ask about the Lincoln tragedy is not whether or not it is historically substantiated, but what deep significance it still carries" (75). By shifting the burden of proof from a rhetoric of demonstration to a rhetoric of persuasion, Furtwangler downplays the role of empirical and deductive historiography. This strategy is nevertheless contradicted by his own assertion that history becomes meaningful when it is deliberately altered for the purposes of connecting an irretrievable past to the present. Thus Lincoln "could, and can, become tragic only by a very selective arrangement of details and circumstances from history" (Furtwangler 74). In an inadvertently self-debunking moment in his argument, Furtwangler goes as far as to justify not merely the ideological narrativization of history, but also its alignment in a structure of predetermination:

> Part of this work of suppression is simply a necessity of history. To understand anyone from the past we have to select some details and forget or subordinate others. We hold on best to details arranged in a pattern, and the pattern of tragedy serves to fit Lincoln together with the Civil War as a meaningful part of our heritage. (Furtwangler 74)

When Furtwangler introduces in his discussion "hard" evidence proving Booth to be an unstable youth, a frustrated actor and a resentful son, he does probe areas of inquiry that would have posed fascinating questions for cultural and political historians, even more so than for materialist literary critics. To name only a few of these questions, Furtwangler does not ask, in David Simpson's succint formulation, "what can be said about how things, and texts, 'happened,' as well as about how they have come down to us and how they are currently expressed" (Simpson 29). Undoing the allegorical constructs of Aristotelian tragedy would have exposed a repressive discourse of power intended for social indoctrination. For Furtwangler, the formalistic universals of tragedy seem more important than the politicized particulars of history. As a result, his account of Booth is plausible only if we take at face value the existence of those "epiphanies of law" that demand a categorical imperative when rational understanding collapses.[6]

By positing Shakespeare's tragedies as the referent of the Lincoln conspiracies, Furtwangler not only invests overtly fictional texts with documentary value, but he also neutralizes the distinctions between linguistic and empirical reality:

> The Lincoln assassination therefore touches lines of tragic possibility stretching backward through Elizabethan England to the foundations of ancient Rome. To see it clearly means...weighing a curious overlapping or intersection of politics, history, and literature. In a sense, Shakespeare wrote the tragedy of Lincoln long before it occurred, and Caesar and Brutus performed it centuries before Shakespeare. (Furtwangler 9)

Nineteenth-century American society is thus posited in an ontological relationship to both Elizabethan England and ancient Rome. Not surprisingly, Lincoln as a tragic hero "embodies a noble society [and] is the one good man who consciously acts out his people's strengths and aspirations" (Furtwangler 6). This epic model of history is clearly univocal and exclusionary, and does not admit that, despite Caesar's, Queen Elizabeth's, and particularly Lincoln's charismatic leadership, there were "many people in the North, as well as in the South, who agreed that Lincoln was a tyrant and the author of the country's sufferings" (Hanchett [1979] 56). Furthermore, William Hanchett's investigation of the mutilation of Booth's pocket diary concludes that he was deceptively portrayed as an isolated fanatic whose violent act was set off by his personal frustration (i.e., as actor, son, and Southerner) and not as the result of a conspiracy involving the engineering and sponsorship of a Confederate clandestine apparatus (Hanchett [1979] 56; Tidwell, Hall, and Gaddy 5-24). In contrast with this Booth, who is moved by political conviction, Furtwangler's Booth is set into motion by psychological compulsion.

More attention should have been be devoted to Booth's letters and to his diary –which itself has been edited, with a scholarly apparatus, by William B. Hanchett. In both documents the assassin-to-be engages in the process of constructing a subversive subject-position within the space of national political debates. By contrast, Furtwangler's downplaying of Booth's self-image has the effect of reducing Booth's political and ego-expanding motivations to the status of a psychological crisis. According to Furtwangler, Booth was not lacking in moral fiber, but his vision of Lincoln was damaged by a misapprehension of the President's political ideals.

Building on this argument for Booth's militancy I proceed to outline a pyschohistoriographic model for analyzing individual agency in historical formations at moments when legitimation crises are likely to lead into individual or collective violence. The subject of this action is a temporal construct whose mode of operation is based on the principles of duration, frequency, and repetition. The model is inspired by Lacan's argument for considering the ways in which desire (which demands immediate action) always interferes with deductive logic (which demands a slow process of deduction) in the planning and execution of historically situated actions.

The temporal deployment of desire, which in Lacanian terms posits the coincidence of the *temps pour comprendre* (the duration of linguistic conceptualization) and the *temps de conclure* (the beginning of historical action) influences the hero's subject construction in the tragedy of *Hamlet,* and the subject construction in utopian discourse of Lincoln and Booth (Lacan [1966] 200-07; [1968] 18-19). The time to understand entails, quite literally, the deferral of action that linguistic articulation (as a structure of sequential succession) imposes on the subject's desire, which in turn seeks to gain immediate access to its object. Thus Booth's actions against Lincoln must be examined according to how they are timed within the frame of linguistic, libidinal and psychosocial conditionings that he experiences as a historical subject. For just as Hamlet's verbal action through the closet scene of Act III entails both the hero's own deferral of action and his empowerment through the alteration of the other subjects' responses to him, so Booth's previously unsuccessful attempts at silencing Lincoln should be looked at as rehearsals and deferrals of the Ford's Theatre episode.[7]

Booth's truncated plans of kidnapping Lincoln may well have been transformed, in Booth's own perception, into performative statements. Thus, a carefully planned political action (i.e., planned according to the temporal deferral of the *temps pour comprendre*) precedes performative inaction,which in turn precipitates the realization of another attempt against Lincoln through the collapse of Booth's *temps pour comprendre* with the appointed *temps de conclure*. From the letter to his mother that he left at the home of his sister Asia at some point during the fall of 1864 (several months before the assassination) we know of Booth's personal frustration and humiliation at seeing his previous six months conspiracy called off by higher authorities of the Southern cause. What we cannot find in these texts is the trace of a corresponding frustration at being a mediocre actor, as Furtwangler would have us believe (Hanchett [1983] 51). That Booth chose an evening at the theater to carry his words into action suggests that he perceived the analogy between the *temps de conclure* of a play and the *temps de conclure* of a revolutionary or terrorist action. It is easier to link logically the planning and the execution of an act within the well-defined boundaries of a stage performance, and perhaps Booth's long-deferred desire to act politically overcame his ability to think out lucidly the appropriate course of action, which, as poststructuralism contends, is *always already* an impaired process anyway.[8]

This is how far a reading of the events leading to the Ford's Theatre assassination can travel without addressing the interrelated issues of discursive deferral, ethical responsibility, and ego discontinuity. Booth's choice for his attack on Lincoln of the familiar scene of a stage does not prove by any means that he was either insane or a frustrated actor who resented the decline of his career. For one thing, Booth's well publicized success during his last acting season before the assassination conspiracy

seemed to augur well for the future (Hanchett [1983] 151-57). In addition to this circumstance, we also know that Booth made every attempt possible to explain through narrative the motives and intended effects of his attack, and to link them to other Southern efforts at overthrowing Lincoln (Chamlee 49). These apologetic writings include: (1) a long letter written approximately one year before the assassination and addressed to Clarke, his brother-in-law and fellow activist, which he entrusted to his sister Asia (Hanchett [1983] 45-47); (2) his diary, written during his escape from the assassination site, where Booth expresses his fear that his intentions will be misconstrued as the politically insignificant act of an immature man agitated by his own personal troubles (Hanchett [1979]); and (3) a lengthy explanatory article to which he alludes in his diary, but which unfortunately never reached the press and has not survived in its manuscript form –if it was indeed ever written (Chamlee 49). Taken as a whole, these writings unveil a pattern of repetition in Booth's verbal and political actions, all of which seem to aim at vindicating his own degree of commitment to the South's political emancipation from the Union.

The interplay between the two most conspicuous domains of Booth's experience –the theater and politics– should not be simplified; on the contrary, these two poles of speech and action should be played off against one another. From a speech-act viewpoint, acting is discursive performativity: the experiences conceptualized by the actors' speeches construct a reality whose chief spheres of action are themselves consensually acknowledged as fictional symbolic spaces, namely, the script and the stage. This structure is reminiscent of that *other* space, the arena of political activism. For with each failure in its program for political emancipation from the Union, the Southern cause becomes (in Booth's own perception) a performative discourse –more and more a sphere of textual simulacra and less and less a sphere of historical action. It is certainly worth noticing this structural resemblance between Booth's Shakespearean acting and his own Southern activism (a resemblance so far neglected by historians of the assassination prior to Furtwangler). Yet we cannot argue either, as Furtwangler does, that the theatrical drama *on* the stage indeed created the historical drama *off* the stage without also introducing the mediation of Booth's deliberate self-construction into a subject of militancy and political action.

In this connection, I wish to bring into my discussion Jacques Ehrmann's suggestive couplings of individual identity with temporality and of collective identity with historicity. The first coupling defines the province of tragedy, since it emphasizes the subject's desire to feel reunited with what he perceives as his origins or *arché*. Tragic form thus has as its aim to project its "true origin." The subject's past, once interpreted, makes up the future of the present. Conversely, utopian form emphasizes how the thinking of change aims toward its origin as if toward its own end. The future thus explains the present,which leaves the utopian voyager (or, generally speaking, the prophetic figure of utopian discourse) uprooted from his own history, from the present, eccentric to himself (Ehrmann 28-29). Therefore, to the extent that Booth regards the future as a way to change the past he may be said to be a tragic figure in the context of individual temporality. By contrast, in the context of collective historicity, Booth may be seen as a utopian: he looks at the past as a way to gain a future.

Disregarding Booth's self-portrayals as a conscious and conscientious revolutionary, Furtwangler goes on to imagine Booth's emotions and intentions on the stage of Ford's Theatre on the evening of the assassination. Our humanistic critic here resorts to a didactic mixture of free indirect speech and authorial omniscience:

> There, out of the dark box and into the glare of the footlights, who was he? What was he? In at least one flicker of horror or satisfaction he must have known that he was what he had long been reaching for: John Wilkes Booth, the well-known actor, on stage in his most unforgettable appearance. (107)

While *Assassin on Stage* does not demonstrate that Booth, on the non-Shakespearean stage of Ford's Theatre, was seeking a triumph both theatrical and political, it shows how Furtwangler's own superimposition of a tragic pattern on a sequence of political actions allows for an edifying, even if ahistorical, reinscription of violent conflicts of interest into a humanistic frame.

Although this blurring of the distinction between aesthetic discourse and social discourse, between the artistic and the real, can and should be a central concern of a new historiography more attentive to symbolic and linguistic constructions, the way Furtwangler approaches this promising material seems far from satisfactory. Other practitioners of the interdisciplinary study of culture have insisted on the necessity of historicizing the consequences of this overlapping of social and textual spheres. Thus, Stephen Greenblatt's interpretive model asks for a sufficient degree of "methodological self-consciousness" that avoids ahistoricity, blatant conceptual leaps, and the appropriation of one order of discourse by another. Greenblatt's practice does not posit an implicit hierarchy between the two orders of reality (social and textual) that he is studying (Greenblatt 11-13). Unfortunately, all too often critics like Furtwangler tend to bestow upon texts such colonizing powers that they reduce other circumstances –political indoctrination and social and historical formations, to mention just a few– to marginal contextualizations.[9]

Furtwangler's closing chapter, "Ave atque Vale," glorifies the end of a heroic era in military and political history that extended from Caesar to Lincoln and was characterized by "the pull of honorable masculine warfare and respect" (151). Not only was Lincoln the last political hero to "assimilate and symbolize the identity of an entire people," but he also expressed "the clarity of first principles in high and indelible phrases." Apparently, this clarity has now been replaced by "the *noises* of polyglot controversy" (Furtwangler 152; my emphasis). The humanistic critic's anxiety over the discursive polarization of American literature has been criticized in strikingly similar terms by one of the proponents of the so-called New American Studies, Sacvan Bercovitch, who teasingly exploits the *topos* of the Roman Empire's decline to illustrate the conservative politics behind the humanistic adherence to monolithic models of cultural identity:

> To use a once-fashionable phrase, the paradigm [of American literary history, as established by Mathiessen and Spiller] has become inoperative. What we have instead is a Babel of contending approaches, argued with a ferocity reminiscent of the polemics that erupted in the last, great days of Rome, and that Augustine lamented as the barbarism of the scholastics. (Bercovitch 633)

The current breakdown of the literary-historical consensus has opened up a *Romanizing* space for discussions of ideology, which Bercovitch locates "at the intersection between the terms *literary* and *history*" (636; Bercovitch's emphasis). This ideological consideration of textual production and transmission begins with a questioning of the New-Critical assumption that the extant canon of American literature

solely and faithfully reflects the humanitarian and democratic aspirations of the common person.

Furthermore, although Furtwangler situates himself in the same conceptual space between literature and history, he does not articulate Bercovitch's terms dialectically; rather, he reduces history to myth. What is especially alarming about Furtwangler's project is not his blurring of distinctions between orders of reality (i.e., his implicit equating of what I have called the empirical text and the semiotic texts), but the way in which the intervention of non-linguistic conditionings (ethnic, geographical, institutional, and economic, among others) is replaced by a few select cornerstones in the canon of Western literature.

My critique of the uses of universal humanism in *Assassin on Stage* has been twofold. On the one hand, I have questioned Furtwangler's unexamined belief, a form of socio-historical agency legitimated by notions of cultural homogeneity, and of a self-contradictory subject of history who is at the same time a free individual and an instrument of a quasi-providential collective destiny. On the other hand, I have argued that this vision of a homogeneous set of collective aspirations cannot be given historical continuity in a teleological frame, as Furtwangler does.

With their respective emphases on grand epic designs and the identification of individual heroes with entire peoples, both the historiographic narratives of nation building and the genre of tragedy lend themselves in a rather unproblematic way to the project of resuscitating the values of universal humanism.[10] Accordingly, I have critiqued in my discussion Furtwangler's treatment of the literary category of tragedy, and on his reconstruction of Booth's personal identity, which favors overtly solidified notions of a flawed tragic hero over subversive individual agency. Furtwangler's simplistic three-stage model of history features both individuals (e.g. John Wilkes Booth) and civilizations (e.g. the United States in its period of nation building) that undergo a period of growth, a period of plenitude, and a period of decline. According to this model, Caesar, Hamlet, and Lincoln mark the turning-point from plenitude to decline in their respective historical and geographical coordinates. Correspondingly, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Lincoln (in his capacity as both an agent of historical change and a "poet"), and Furtwangler himself assume humanistic prophetic voices intended to warn their audiences against the deadly threat posed by ideological dissent.

The result of examining literary and historiographic texts with an eye more attentive to continuities than discontinuities is the objectification and repression of the marginalized individual or collective subjects aspiring to become agents of history. Is it not then paradoxical that Shakespeare's tragedies, as exemplary fictions of individuality perpetually in the making, are still regarded by many as pedagogical tools for the inculcation and circulation of the so-called *value of the individual*? For as Philip Rahv wrote a few years before Northrop Frye's own assimilation of myth into a formalistic anatomy of genres,

> individuality is in truth foreign to myth, which objectifies collective rather than personal experience. Its splendor is that of the original totality, the pristine unit of thought and action, word and deed. The sundering of that unity is one of *the tragic contradictions of historical development, which is never an harmonious movement* but 'a cruel repugnant labor against itself' as Hegel described it. (Rahv 1965, 12; my emphasis).

Historical change is dialectical, and so should be our interpretive recapitulations of both literary and political historiography. Following Rahv, I propose that the epithet *tragic* be used to describe, both in literature and in historiography, not a deterministic view of individual and collective identity, but rather the emotional and social tensions arising from the clash of interpsychic and discursive forces. This valorization of conflict at the expense of resolution need not impede our interpretation of tragedy and history; rather, it should only alert us to the necessity of always historicizing dialectically the psychohistorical interpenetrations of linguistic and empirical realities. To do otherwise would be to confuse the relative slowness of social and epistemic changes in ancient and medieval Europe with their total immobility, which from our own vantage point would be a theoretical impossibility. It would hinder our ability to see that the celerity of cultural change can effect not only the fall *into* history of misleadingly messianic voices (and Shakespeare's two Richards and Hitler quickly come to mind each in their own context), but also the physical and cultural salvation of entire peoples *through* time and history. These are but a few of the humanistic indulgences –and irresponsible and uninformed ones they are– that we academics, either as critics of literary texts or a writers of historiography, can no longercontinue to afford.

Notes

1. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff enumerates the most conspicuous features of this humanistic literary criticism, namely, its resistance to theorize its own practice, its reliance on traditional poetics, its failure to historicize dialectically either poetic conventions or political events, and its expressed nostalgia for a unified society that is itself a fiction (Graff, 252-56).
2. My use of the term "subject" departs from the narrow sense it is sometimes given in psychoanalytic theories, and is rather intended to designate, in a broader cultural materialist context, the representation in discourse of a position of "ephemeral identity that allows us to narrativize transitional moments in systems of action" (Liu, 735).
3. These poststructuralist views of the temporality of the subject, like the other interpretive strategies that I use to argue my case against an ahistorical humanistic criticism, are all founded on one or several of the following premises: (1) the problematizing of hierarchical distinction between texts that represent the world as it is and texts that represent it as it should or could be; (2) the decentering of the psychic agency of narration (and thus we speak of a split subject and of a plurality of subject positions even in a seemingly straightforward narrative); and (3) the eschewing of the belief in the continuous unfolding of historical time, which is now seen as continuous only insofar as it succeeds in suppressing the significance of forces potentially subversive of that linear ordering.
4. After arguing at the outset of his book for a reading of Lincoln's death filtered through the poetics of tragedy, Furtwangler proceeds to define the genre as "a vision of a strong soul encountering the adversity of cosmic powers and recognizing its own unalterable limitations, and either seeing into the workings of law, or enabling us to see into them" (5-6). Furtwangler implies here that the hero must die so that the audience can be enlightened: Lincoln is thus turned into a Christ figure. This notion comes from Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, where the genre theorist calls the moment of resolution and enlightenment in tragedy an "epiphany of law," a moment of both awareness and acceptance "that which is and must be" (Frye, 206-16).
5. It is a well-known fact that the Booths' acting careers were built on and sustained by their performing engagements in the booming urban areas of New England and California,

where the Northern press was an uncontested ideological force. Asia and Edwin Booth wrote biographical narratives of their brother's misfortunes, portraying him as someone who since his childhood days had indulged in gratuitous outbursts of violence, and therefore was not truly responsible for his own reckless actions. Furtwangler uses these questionable sources without pausing to explain that such narratives are as much an apology for the good name of the Booths (altogether a Lincolnian family) as an unbiased assessment of John Wilkes' early years.

6. Along similar lines, Howard Felperin has suggested that one of the dangers inherent in constructing "historical reality" as a "plausible narrative of representation" is that "the very term 'representation' at once recuperates and sublates [the] older historicist and naïvely realist objective of 'making present again' a past culture conceived not only as chronologically but *ontologically* prior to any construction of it. In so doing, it partly rehabilitates a residually referential aspiration, if not to 'commune', at least to correspond with the past" (Felperin 150).
7. Margaret Ferguson has studied the changing behavior of Hamlet in a way that accounts for this character's repeated gestures of verbal violence in the first half of the play (through Act III.4, the closet scene where he slays Polonius), as well as for his gestures of physical violence in the second half. For Ferguson, the performative rehearsal of this violence by an individual subject prepares other subjects for believing in the inevitability of a future physical attack. (Ferguson). A similar case can be made for Booth, whose own repeated gestures of verbal violence (in, e.g., his letters, his diary, his newspaper article) entail not just a deferral and sublimation of physical violence into words; they are also a form of reinforcing through ritual repetition the legitimacy of the empirical action that is yet to take place.
8. In his own reading of *Hamlet* Lacan suggests that the eponymous character's experience of division and alienation from an imaginary source of meaning (one that explains, for instance, his mother's sudden remarriage to Claudius soon after his father's death), prompts him to choose the most undecipherable signifier for narcissistic identification and violence. Claudius soon becomes that unreadable sign. Gertrude's infatuation with Claudius is what Hamlet cannot understand, just as Booth cannot comprehend Lincoln's growing popularity even among other Southerners like himself (Lacan [1977], 28-31). Furthermore, neither Claudius nor Lincoln can be divested of their assumed majesty through words, even though both Hamlet and Booth are very vocal about their frustration at trying to make the others see that they are following an illegitimate leader. From this Hamlet and Booth conclude that their antagonists will have to be vanquished through physical violence (Lacan [1977], 50-51).
9. Furtwangler also seems unaware of all the contemporary readings of Shakespeare (by Berger, Montrose, Greenblatt, Fineman, Marcus, Belsey, Cavell, Ferguson, Garber, and Dollimore & Sinfield, among others) that suggest that not even Shakespeare held a reductionist humanistic view of ancient Rome or medieval England. These pre-modern spaces were no less subject to ideological mystifications than Shakespeare's own Elizabethan-Jacobean times, not to mention post-Civil War America.
10. Michel Foucault has defined "universal humanism" as "a form of our ethics [that is also] a universal model for any kind of freedom...a model of humanity...and an idea of man [that] has become normative, self-evident, and is supposed to be universal" (Foucault, 15).

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