

Shall We Strive to Be Pleased with Transcending the Persistent?

Repetition versus responding in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Persistent is what notoriously repeats itself, with no consideration for any other aspect or circumstance, except for its own pattern to be accomplished. Time which "travels in divers paces with divers persons" (*As You Like It*, 3.2) is such an obstinate phenomenon, transporting mankind from one age to the other. (*As You Like It*, 2.7) In *As You Like It* there is still, as Shakespeare has introduced, a whole ideal counterworld defending eternal values from the harms of limited social and spiritual existence. The forest of Arden contains all that is essential in human life on the one hand, and it contains only what is necessary in the same human life on the other hand. Freedom and happiness coincide, as well as plenty is enough for the characters here, surrounded by trees "mistaken" for volumes of love poetry. Natural and artificial cannot be separated. The opposed two notions of good and bad lose ground and disappear, since nothing and no one can keep being bad in the idyllic forest where even time loses its absolute control over people.

In his very next play, Shakespeare did not create an alternative sphere where happiness may be achieved. Instead, he offers his characters the last night of the "season of high revels,"¹ i.e. the twelve holy winter days from Christmas till Epiphany, as the only chance for some revelry and mirth. Subjects of this "closing time"² go through

¹ John Dover Wilson in his notes to *Twelfth Night*, second edition, Cambridge University Press 1949, 103.

² *Closing Time*, written and composed by Leonard Cohen, 1992 - some of this modern poet's verses quite dramatically suggest the absurdity behind our "last minute" sense of hasty life: "So we're drinking and we're dancing...and it's partner found and partner lost and it's hell to pay when the fiddler stops...We're lonely, we're romantic and the cider's laced with acid and the Holy Spirit's crying,

and, with the exception of two of them, all graduate from the school of deception. This schooling aspect, generously mingled with the holiday atmosphere does not necessarily mean that the characters in *Twelfth Night* (without Sir Andrew and Malvolio) acquire true knowledge and clear insight of themselves and others through their education, i.e. experience. Actually, the comedy works well and ends, in some conventionally expected ways, happily because acts of deception and illusion flourish and multiply around the protagonists. Among them, the most skilful ones learn how purposes are transformed by chance when rooted in illusions of the self. But whose illusions and what purposes are more real than "the rest" of intellectual fixities? - thus the Shakespearean puzzle rises. Interpretation cannot dissolve these ambiguities, only share the experience of reconciliation between objective and subjective time, that is between what happens and what is understood by what happens.

Holiday time in *Twelfth Night*, like all the special cases of allowed time-wasting in the Shakespearean comedies, is abundant in love-stories and intrigues as well. A comic time-vacuum generates love-stories, and love stops real time. On the plot level, this time through many obstacles leads to "lovers meeting" ("Journeys end in lovers meeting" Feste's first song 2.3.), and also to the unrestricted full manifestation of the various fancies, wishes, claims, dislikes and interests, nourished silently from the beginning in the dramatis personae divided thus in opposing and even self-contradicting groups. Dramatic "journeys end" when conflicts burst out and passions are consumed. With this we move on further, beyond or above plot level in a transdramatic dimension, to the special realm of witnessing (watching and feeling compassion, like in martyrdom, since martyr originally meant eye-witness). In the final act we as spectators become more present than Malvolio and a few other characters, since we share the full knowledge of the events acted out in front of us. In fact, we are bound to be so very present from the beginning, while in the end certain characters are refused by the author to take part, therefore they "miss" the resolving scene. Moreover, Malvolio is set free only by chance,³ and he "deliberately" remains fixed to his idea of revenge. He has to, as he is the odd-man-out of the farce plot.

The end does not bring general and hundred-percent happiness, no wonder since *Twelfth Night* dates back to the same year 1601 as *Hamlet* does and one year before *Troilus and Cressida*, and the author must have been already thinking ahead. Yet no doubt we are "transported" by sharing the performance time as opposed to real time.

'Where's the beef' ...with a mighty expectation of relief...looks like freedom but it feels like death it's something in between, I guess it's CLOSING TIME".

³ Lois Potter: *Twelfth Night. Text and Performance*. Macmillan, 1985, 27-33.

In this sense, the scenes of wordless communion in music (no matter who sings and what kind of music) constantly carried on through the whole play have a go-between effect on us. We may feel quite up-to-date with those ambiguities and the somewhat ridiculed happy ending. The epilogue-like song of Feste the clown concludes on a dark tone of *vanitatum vanitas*, and yet it satirizes the self-same melancholic attitude.

The final change in the refrain lifts the play, places its attendants into the sphere of artistic work and evidently, of human efforts in general. Literally, the hopeless weather forecast is replaced by the promise of daily recreated direct satisfaction in theatre. The jester's song concludes the series of variations on the basic theme of linear versus cyclic time.

With a slight exaggeration, one could argue that had Feste read Jacques Derrida's essay on the "cruel theatre"⁴ he would certainly have recognised an apt theorist for his company's practice. Derrida states that no piece of art, written or performed, should ever be repeated, since artistic creativity is abused when one particular artistic moment is applied for filling another such moment which by nature must contain its own validity. A poem once told or read should be forgotten or thrown away, similarly two performances of a single play are more than enough. If time and our life's moments cannot be stopped or turned back, why should we assume that we keep the world under control through artistic communication. If it is death that gives life any value, then similarly it must be the full stop of self-expression that might set the price of the expressive self. The traditional distinctions between art and non-art, high and low, form and essence lose ground, and the remaining questions sound like these: whether an act of communication is valid, intense and total, whether it involves the proper source of feedback or it does not, consequently is it going to hold on or to perish.

No doubt, *Twelfth Night* has been and may still be interpreted in many other ways. I feel inclined to see this play as the twofold story of growing definitely and with no hope to return mature on the one hand, and of remaining a never enough self-contained (and constrained) child forever on the other hand. The "story" is twofold; the presence of the characteristic Shakespearean twins echoes its relevance and meaning.

Whatever happens, it involves and affects two different attitudes, and leads on to consequences of two kinds. There is an open-minded generous creative spirit on the one hand, and a self-indulgent limited maniac "less (than) spirit" on the other hand, and the two with different variants and quantities are all exposed to the very same

⁴ Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*. trans. by Alan Bass, Routledge, 1990 two chapters: "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation", and "Theatre and its Double".

manifestations of existence. Dramas always sharpen things to the extremes, so there are these two clearly opposed modes of reacting, either acceptance, or refusal. The first tolerates and adjusts itself to circumstances, and in the meantime invitingly gives providence a chance to be favourable. The second neglects and denies facts, thus becomes abandoned and empty in front of the best occurrences of life. These two main attitudes draw the lines of the plot and move the characters in the play, and they are functional in the whole drama-structure.

Referring to the double title, we might feel perplexed a little: if the dramatic time coincides with the twelfth night of the winter festival season, how is it possible that in 1.4 Viola (Cesario) has already spent three days in Duke Orsino's service, and more strangely, how come Antonio has spent, within the same time-span, starting approximately from the same moment - the shipwreck - three months with Sebastian (5.1). Now, if we calculate well, between 1.4 and 5.1 three months minus two days pass. There is another motive, more serious one for us not to think we enter a real feast: Olivia's servants want and plan out for some revelry time as something missed and longed for, and when Malvolio scolds them for making noise, they do not justify their entertainment-practice with mentioning the properness of time for merriment and "misrule."⁵

So time in *Twelfth Night* is only like a holiday. This likeness explains the subtitle: celebration, stage drunkenness and madness are not permitted, therefore you do what you will. It is no holiday, so let us imagine we are free to do any thing. The subtitle "or what you will" as a recurrent pattern of the text first appears in the play when mourning Olivia in 1.5 tells Malvolio to send Orsino's love messenger away by all means, finding any kind of excuse. By fate's irony, some moments later the same self-willed rational lady, hurt by love at first sight, cannot help but admit that "must" is sometimes a greater authority than "will":

I do I know not what, and fear to find
 Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind...
 Fate, show thy force - ourselves we do not owe -
 What is decreed, must be: and be this so.

1.5.312-316

Olivia, representing a peaceful authority (olives - the symbol hidden in her telling name) learns the lesson quite quickly. From the end of 1.5 her house gradually

⁵ Potter, 14-20.

opens and at the end she is the warm hostess who invites everybody to be her guest. Olivia's sudden change almost provokes things, foolish or wise, to happen in her environment (her rooms, her garden, the street in front of her house).

But it is only Olivia who is transformed by the magic of love. Malvolio, the official "master of revels" will never accept such an irrational turn in the "court policy". Malvolio is worse than the models Shakespeare took when creating his figure. Historical documents tell us winter holidays were officially celebrated by the Elizabethan court. Moreover, even in the strictest "puritanical" years when many theatres were closed, performances were allowed to be held in great number on holidays.

The time given is like a holiday, but a simile is exactly the thing Malvolio, who is "worse than a Puritan being like a Puritan"⁶ will not understand. Truly, it is not only Malvolio who has false concepts and errs. It may be easier to see who is not misled all through the play. Perhaps the clown, for even Viola suffers from not knowing what fortune has prepared for her, i.e. her twin brother Sebastian saved and thus her own complications to be solved by happy match-makings. If only Malvolio remembered to set the sailor free and thus help Viola back to her maiden clothes. As the meaning of his name suggests, Malvolio is far from doing favours for anyone. It is absurd that he thinks he is in love and aims no lower than at wooing Lady Olivia. He is just a little more absurd than the other pretended conventional lovers, ranked high (Duke Orsino, Lady Olivia) or low (Sir Andrew Aguecheek). The four of them exemplify the paradoxes of love as the neoplatonic love concept versus everyday's trivialised commonplace. I am going to call these four characters "the repetitive ones", who represent the disregarding attitude. Viola and Feste, on the other hand, stand for understanding and tolerant intelligence, let them be called "the responding ones". Between their sharp extremes there are some able ones who understand one or two jokes and double meanings.

There are situations in different scenes, similarly there are sentences and words on the textual level which appear several times as challenging as they can, and meet a character bearing the marks of one or the other attitude. Then these "catches" are either merely repeated or creatively altered. Shakespeare has already used a conversing technique resembling our case, specialists call it stichomythia.⁷ It is the main structural element in Katherine's and Petruchio's first dialogue 2.1 *The Taming of the Shrew*, and in the two wooing scenes 1.2 Richard with Ann, 4.4 Richard with Elizabeth, or the ghost-scene at camp 5.3 *Richard III*. But the rhythm of recurring elements,

⁶ Potter, 14-20.

⁷ Potter, 14-20.

so basically important in musical composition and also in the way of manifesting rituals, traditions and conventions appears more powerfully in *Twelfth Night* than ever before. It links euphuistic wordplay and ironical wittiness with some deeper sense of communion. It tests the utterable part of any human bond, as selfish or devoted as possible and imaginable between “fools of love” with mistaken or disguised identities.⁸

On the one hand, the word-by-word repetitions represent selfish and self-deceived personalities who only think they are in love but in fact they do not know how to love. To exemplify what I have said, I would refer to Olivia’s three absurd wooers. Orsino’s, Aguecheek’s and Malvolio’s love are equally and all timeless because they will never get fulfilled. The irreality of the fourth wooer’s love is due to the fact that it comes too fast. On the other hand Sebastian is more spontaneous when “invited” to fall in love at first sight, and in fact there is neither time nor any need for him to pose.

Duke Orsino obstinately cries out for music. Music for him is a compensation for his unrequited love. Being in love with the mere idea of being in love, the duke feeds his senses with melancholy music with “dying falls.”⁹ He constantly mentions the sea as the metaphor of his tormented soul, and punning upon the words “heart” and “hart” he almost enjoys the idea of his heart broken or, to be more precise, torn into pieces. He twice sends Viola as his messenger to Olivia but he does not bother to go and never tries to directly woo and conquer his fictionalised, idolised love.

Andrew Aguecheek is more profanely absurd, entirely lacking self-knowledge and any sense of reality. He is no better than the gossip we learn about him before his first appearance 1.3 He is perhaps the slowest “wit” in the play, and he pays for it dearly. But in fact he has no bad intentions at all. His suggestion of setting about some revels makes him sympathetic although he, “the thin man”¹⁰ is permanently and

⁸ Northrop Frye in *A Natural Perspective*, 1965, speaks about Shakespearean comedies as the journeys towards obtaining personal identity.

⁹ John Dover Wilson’s *Notes to Twelfth Night*, 105-6.

¹⁰ Bob Dylan: “Ballad of a Thin Man”: “You try so hard / But you don’t understand / ... / Because something is happening here / But you don’t know what it is / ... / You raise up your head / And you ask, ‘Is this where it is?’ / And somebody points to you and says / ‘It’s his’ / And you say, ‘What’s mine?’ / And somebody else says, ‘Where what is?’ / ... / You hand in your ticket / And you go watch the geek / Who immediately walks up to you / When he hears you speak / And says, ‘How does it feel / To be such a freak?’ / And you say, ‘Impossible’ / ... / And he says, ‘Here is your throat back / Thanks for the loan’ / ... / There ought to be a law / Against you comin’ around.” In: *Blowin’ in the Wind*, Budapest, 1989.

gradually more severely ridiculed by his so called friend (“the fat man”) Sir Toby Belch.¹¹

In sharp contrast with the dying (somewhat morbid and somewhat perverse) mood of hopeless longing, these two men, sometimes joined by Mary, Fabian and Feste form quite a robust drinking and laughing company. Their time-wasting in 2.3 is an “excellent” pleasure, although a little too thick and dense with vulgar remarks and heavy drinking. Finding Malvolio disgusted and shouting angrily at the scene, we definitely prefer the “rogues”, and put our fingers crossed for the successful fooling of the hypocrite.

Malvolio never understands a joke and hardly ever considers anything except his own personal manias. His first appearance (1.5) is a preventive allusion in the sense that it is much like Hamlet’s first coming on stage (*Hamlet* 1.2) in a satirical variant. Both characters, dressed all in black, linger there on stage long before they speak a word, and finally they are forcibly drawn into conversation.¹² But Malvolio has more in common with Polonius the status quo man in a rotten world. Malvolio the aging man adores an excessively mourning young woman, and does so not only with his perverted and weakened senses, but also with his self-sufficient boastful pride and cruel ambition. From the very first answers he gives to Olivia in 1.5 Malvolio proves a deceitful courtier and a bore who changes his opinions when his mistress changes hers. Due to this limited cunning he may fall victim to Sir Toby and his company. His matter-of-fact mind can enjoy neither a love song, nor a “song of good life” or “of good manners” (2.3). Reading the ominous letter in 3.2 he scents no cheating but takes everything literally, which is not so characteristic of someone who is in love. He follows the stupid instructions word by word reproducing a Malvolio more disgusting than mild Olivia can endure (3.4). When closed in the dark cell in order to be cured from madness by the clown disguised into Topas the exorcist-priest, in 4.2 he cries for help and does not notice the improbability of the whole staged ceremony, he pitifully laments, repeating over and over the whole story which is not sad for anyone else but himself. He cannot think or act otherwise than suggested, therefore he repeats the letter-writing pose.

Our acquaintance with this letter comes in two phases. The scene - part of the hectic final accusation scene - mirrors how Olivia is gaining back her rational self. Love’s foolery cured by a husband, Olivia does not appreciate her old clown’s pres-

¹¹ Potter on p 35 writes: “Sir Toby and Sir Andrew must be the Fat Man-Thin Man team so dear to comic writers”

¹² Potter 35-6.

ence so much any more. The fall-away of her favours is foretold by Feste in 1.5. So here we meet a shrewd case of either a repetition or a variant. The question one might ask, however, is not so “technical”: Does Olivia simply perform here or does she really mean she has changed again, turning serious? We might presume, much to our fancy’s content, that the question need not be put and the answer need not be given, since for the happy ending visible there is still one condition open.

This open condition might be the sailor’s appearance with Viola’s clothes, but it might well be something else which is more difficult to verbalise or articulate. It is only Feste the clown who can do something about the matter: pretending to reach as high as where the mystery of our good or bad fortune is taking shape, he makes preparations for leaving. He introduces the stage, set for the last “measures”, to “the whirligig of time” that sometimes over-repeating, some other times recreating itself “brings in his revenges” for our mortality.

Malvolio meets nothing but his own fury. Taking the word revenge from the mouth of someone he has disappreciated the most, he refuses to hear and to see what happens around him when by chance he escapes, and he sticks to this last word before running off-stage (5.1), slightly as a precedence to Iago’s refusal to tell anything more in the final scene of *Othello*.

In the comedy, of course, the world will not be ruined by such potential villains, not even in the case of this darkening comedy. In 2.2 we find Malvolio and Viola, the two opposing attitudes face each other. When Viola is “chased” by the frozen-hearted, however suddenly awakening Olivia, she answers to the gasping Malvolio with some hint of irony, repeating his words.

Viola transforms Orsino’s absurd love messages one after the other (1.5 and 3.1) by talking directly to Olivia, eagerly to know her, and appreciating or scolding her in turn. Her sincerity breaks through the wall of mourning and self-indulgence, and Olivia falls in love with her non-aggressive and non-conventional being, that kind of a personality men by conventional manly behaviour do not even pretend to have in front of her. Defending Orsino’s point of view Viola in fact confesses her own feelings, thus again she cannot be rigidly following her master’s lines, although she mentions she should do so. No wonder she is charming both in the Duke’s and the Lady’s company. Just like Feste, she immediately gains access to both houses.

Her alternative responses stand for the “better” kind of personality, who can give up selfish ideas, boring or self-torturing as they can ever be, and replace them with “readiness” to know “the other”.

In neoplatonic love theories the beloved should respond to the lover's love as if it were an absolute imperative. It is also true that neoplatonic love is a voluntary death, a change of souls, which in case of responded mutual love is returned and doubled by two rebirths, those of the two self-abandoned and substituted souls.¹³ I would just mention two distant interpretations echoing Ficino, therefore close to relate them with Shakespearean plays around the theme of love. In the Ovidian sense metamorphosis stands for the personal involvement which in modern ethics coincides with the concept of substitution.¹⁴

All in all, nothing is more evident than the secret of love which, if going to be meaningful, ought to be responded and thus accomplished by communion. Total (ideal) communication is, in all cases, the (transcendental) solution which might free us from the persisting limits of our one-way existence.

¹³ Marsilio Ficino: "A szerelemről", in: *Reneszánsz Etikai Antológia*, Budapest, 1984, 191-212.

¹⁴ E. Lévinas: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, chapter 4: "La Substitution". Translation by A. Lingis. E. Lévinas: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 1987.