



The Unequal Exchange: from Ulysses to Shylock

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Abstract

The hypothesis of the following essay is that any relationship, even a friendship, is asymmetric. At the beginning of the essay, I will analyse asymmetry as the basis of any exchange. Where surplus and subtraction are viewed as interactions' continuous plateaux. I will focus on surplus and subtraction as a way of local *strategizing* with no general *Strategy*. Homer's Ulysses is the paradigm of subtraction (*Metis*) while Shakespeare's Portia the one of surplus (*Mercy*). As Marcel Mauss (1990), Georges Bataille (1976) and other authors claim: *the gift is never free*. Subtractions and surplus are always constitutive parts of the exchange, even though the surplus is not always exploitation (as seen with Portia) and the subtraction is not always submission (as in Ulysses). This implies that the rational exchange, in which I sell you something and you buy something from me—providing an adequate quantity of goods, money, or else—is utopic and ideological. The aim of the essay is to support a trans-disciplinary investigation concerning the exchange and to approach asymmetry from different scientific and literary perspectives, an essay on what Gilles Deleuze (1997) called “critical and clinical”. So literary critics and clinical approach are mingled, both of them belong to “life as we know it” (Bérubé 1998).

Keywords Justice · Systems · Ravage · Surplus · Subtraction · Mercy · Metis

Introduction

If I give you a gift, you think: “Oh! What does he want in exchange?”, and so you say: “No no, thanks I cannot accept it! It is very kind of you though” [laugh from the audience], “Yes yes yes, I care for you to have it!” What a power struggle! I put the gift in your hands and stuff it in your pocket: “Yes, I must insist! Keep it!”; the reply: “No,

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thanks! I don't need it, really!" [laughs]. It is a fantastic power interaction where no violence is shown at all (Deleuze G. 2018, p. 47. My translation, from the Italian version).

This discussion is about the inequality of the exchange. In my proposal, is that any relationship is a continuous plateau of intensity (Bateson 1958, Bateson 1972a, 1972b, Deleuze and Guattari 1983), an ongoing process, moving in horizontal way. Indeed, a continuous change and interchange just like underground rivers, which sometimes spring out from the soil and then continue underground again, and so on. What viability has this understanding to offer to the pondering of human relations? In the following pages, I will try to expand and further hypothesise concerning the issues of inequality, asymmetry and power in any exchange, including gratitude. My main interest will not be everyday life and friendship, even though I think that the work of Jacques Derrida (2006) concerning friendship is one of the most inspiring conceptions in relation to this essay. As such, I will return to discuss Derrida's investigations in the last pages of this paper. Nevertheless, my main focus will be on "professional relations", where "asymmetry" is constitutive of the relationship. I recently came across some interesting insights, which changed my position on symmetry/asymmetry. Roughly, they are the following: (1) gratitude is asymmetric, this does not intend that there is a "wrong" or "bad" version of gratitude rather more in general; (2) besides "gratitude", there are only asymmetric interactions and (3) the practice of *strategizing* (Tomm 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Deleuze 2018) is the core of any professional relationship that claims to be ethic. Starting from these three points, in the first part of my essay, I shall develop a discourse concerning the unequal exchange.

In the second part of the essay, I shall introduce *Metis* and *Mercy* as two different ways for strategizing, which implies from my point of view: taking care of the "Self" (*Metis*) and increase the positive power variation in taking care of "Others" (*Mercy*) (Foucault 1990, 2001). The lectures, held by Gilles Deleuze, on Michel Foucault, titled *Il potere* (Ivi, in the exergue),¹ had a challenging effect on what in psychotherapy is called "dialogic" or "collaborative" practice (Anderson 1997). The first challenge consists in this question: is power an idea—as in Bateson's argument against Haley (Sluzki and Ransom 1976)? Is it, as some evolutionary psychologists uphold, an instinct of all mammals and even other animal societies? Or is power a kind of positioning, an *historical a priori* that shapes the ontology of Western Society? When Bateson claims that the idea of power is always corruptive, what does he mean?

Bateson probably means that the epistemology of power, within the Western Society, is so strong to the point that it *becomes* an *ontological* issue. Talking about power, in the dominion of Western Society, is already exercising it. Even when you argue against power, you are exercising a discourse concerning power, pretending to be outside the discourse while actually you are included in it as theoretician or practitioner. For example, when you say: "I avoid entering the ongoing conversation with any word or thought that does not come from the client", you are exercising the power of avoidance.

In modern Western Society, power has taken a different form. The Power of the Sovereign for the death penalty has been slightly transformed into the power of the "expert" in saving lives, because of the utility, adaptation and integration of bodies in modern society. The vertical issue, intended as lineage, has been transformed into a horizontal one: alliance. At the beginning of Deleuze's lectures concerning the issue of power in Foucault, the question is

¹ These lessons have been held in 1986 and published in Italian and Spanish recently. I have no news about any English version of it. Even in French, I saw the lessons online, but no text found.

if power comes from filiation—as in Lévi-Strauss structuralist approach—or from a system of relations of strength. These lectures invite you to reconsider the issue of power as a horizontal movement instead of a vertical lineage. The two anthropologists confronted by Deleuze are Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) and Edmund Ronald Leach (1961). According to Lévi-Strauss, any relationship is “structured as a lineage”²; opposing, Leach considers power starting from different kind of exchange. Indeed, Deleuze agrees with Leach (1961) claiming that Foucault considers power as a microphysics of forces—alliances, coalitions, strategies and plots. Nevertheless, knowledge in modernity has the most important role³ by taking or receiving power. The problem then shifts from power, as ascribed to people, to power as something that people acquire during the process of exchange and competition in the domain of alliances and coalitions.

Another source of interest for this article is the recent essay by Valentina Luccarelli, titled “The Asymmetry in Gratitude” (Luccarelli 2018). Such an essay appeared on one of the last issues of *Human Arenas*. Luccarelli describes gratitude through the illustration that the word “gratitude” is composed by an ongoing process of asymmetric relationships. Indeed, she reminds us that “gratitude” derives from “gratia”, which leads us, through a series of connections, to the word “gratis”, plural of “gratia”. A word which is used in some Neo-Latin languages and holds the meaning of “for free” (and we could open here another chapter about the ambiguity of “freedom” but it would derail the purpose of this brief discussion, so I shall abstain). Following Luccarelli, I intend to conclude that the ethic problem of freedom is connected with *Mercy* and, at the same time, meets the economic issue of exchange, as we will see when I will *treat* the question of surplus (Marx 2016). Here, again, the question is whether gratitude could be an equal relationship or a continuous, unequal and *multilateral system of gifts that are given and taken*. Gratitude is a continuum between ongoing dis-balances of power, gestures or intercourses within the “particular minutes” of a relationship (Manning 2016). Exactly, the matter at hand, that I have chosen to focus on, is not Strategy, as understood in mainstream politics or war (Clawsewitz 2008, Schmitt 2007, Tronti 2013), it is a matter of *giving* power, or, as in Spinoza (1677), a matter of increasing power vibrations. Also, Mariaelena Bartesaghi,⁴ in a seminar held recently at the Milan Centre for Family Therapy, challenges an old dogma, attributed to Gregory Bateson, and shared by family therapists—a category of people I belong to. The dogma says that there are only two types of interaction among human beings: the symmetric type and the complementary one. A dogma challenged by the same Gregory Bateson in the anthropological investigation in Bali, together with Margaret Mead (Bateson and Mead 1942, Bateson 1972a, b). Bateson claims—after observing the system of interaction between mother and child—that in Bali there is a different kind of interaction not contemplated within the Western Society: a vibration with no climax. Bartesaghi (2009a, 2009b) challenges the same family therapy dogma subtracting “symmetric relationship” as a way of interaction. As in Luccarelli (Ivi), and Deleuze’s Lectures about Foucault: any relationship is more or less a continuous dis-balance of authoritative practices. In this essay, I will try to apply these insights to the arena of psychotherapy.

² From here comes the deep influence of Lévi-Strauss on Lacan

³ See also Foucault (1976).

⁴ Mariaelena Bartesaghi is one of the most important researchers in discourse and conversational analysis; the circumstances I mentioned above are referring to a seminar on analysis of conversation of Family Therapy.

Ulysses and Metis

Zeus, king of the gods, took as his first wife Metis, a mate wiser than all gods and mortal men. But when she was about to bear gray-eyed Athena, then through the schemes of Gaia and starry Ouranos, he deceived the mind of Metis with guile and coaxing words, and lodged her in his belly. Such was their advice, so that of the immortals none other than Zeus would hold kingly sway. It was fated that Metis would bear keen-minded children, first a gray-eyed daughter, Tritogeneia, who in strength and wisdom would be her father's match, and then a male child, high-mettled and destined to rule over gods and men. But Zeus lodged her in his belly before she did all this, that she might advise him in matters of good and bad. (Hesiod, *Theogony*)

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) present Ulysses (Odysseus) as the one who possesses the virtue of *metis*. *Metis* is the goddess of prudence and providence, and Athena, her daughter, teaches Odysseus to use such a virtue to face the destructive power of the Gods, and survive. When Ulysses deals with Polyphemus, the exercise of *metis* provides, him and his companions, a protection that shields them from being cannibalised by the Cyclops. *Metis* is subtraction; instead of facing the Other directly, in an antagonist position, *metis* helps Ulysses to subtract his body from the power of the Other—as in the case of Ulysses' and his companions, escaping from Polyphemus' cave through the belly of a sheep, or when, getting Ithaca, Ulysses disguises himself as a beggar. Ulysses uses his *sixth sense*—another word for *metis*—to conjecture the arrival of something dangerous in the future, so to mediate his potential actions. For example, continuing with the story of Ulysses and Polyphemus, Odysseus changes his name, slightly, from Odysseus into *Oudeis*—meaning “nobody”—precisely sensing the possibility of the other Cyclops asking Polyphemus for the name of the one who made him blind.⁵ *Metis* is the viable line of flight that protects Ulysses from the destructivity of the divine forces, or the Arcane Powers—Cyclops, Sirens, Wizards, Spells—or, as in present times, to protect us from the totalitarian institutions: Asylums, Clinics, Prisons, Pornography and Forbidden Sexuality, Schools, Retirement Homes, Dictatorship, Genocides, Authoritarian Families, Wars, Tortures, Slavism.

The starting points of these issues, during the twentieth century, are probably Marcel Mauss (1990) and George Bataille (1976).⁶ Both of them claim that *the gift is never free*. This is the field of research in which, during the first part of the last century, thinkers such as Mauss, Bataille and the School of Frankfurt⁷ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) were exploring, with different perspectives and positions, the subtraction of a part of the whole, as the substitution of the human being with the goat-scape. The Gods have their human sacrifice as one whole flesh, except for the human, which is substituted by the goat. It is what, more recently, Jacques Derrida means when he writes (Derrida 1999)⁸ that the gift cannot exist and appear as such in the same moment. This happens because the gift has some halo, which goes far beyond the

⁵ *Metis* is not just the virtue of prudence, it is also the virtue of providence; we can call it also *the art of subtraction*, because any virtue requires an art; a *Virtuoso* possesses the *Techné*.

⁶ *The Gift* has been written by Marcel Mauss in 1925. *La part maudite* and the fragments titled *La limite de l'utile* (both in Volume 7 of the Complete Works in French) were written by Georges Bataille during the 1830s of the 19th Century.

⁷ Horkheimer & Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published in 1947 in the Netherlands.

⁸ See also the discussion between Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in Caputo & Scanlon (1999).

pure economic horizon. It is, as in the French title of Derrida's (Ivi) mentioned book: *Donner la mort*, Giving Death.

When Mauss, Bataille, the Scholars of Frankfurt and other Scholars were investigating the issue of *Metis*, it was a time of war and destruction, all across Europe. These Scholars were trying to understand why the élites and the masses were persisting in the construction of the European catastrophe. Many were the scares left: the disaster of colonialism, the rebirth of unfiltered anti-Semitism, World War I, the massacre of Armenian people in Turkey, heavy sanctions for the losers of the war—making everyday life in Germany impossible—fascism in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Austria, the Shoah, the Aktion T4 and World War II. All these events made it necessary to entirely rethink the philosophy and anthropology conception of “Human”, in the shadow of what was happening in the social dis-order (*chaosmos*). It became clear that social order, the way it was thought until then, was untenable. The conclusion is that we never entirely overcame the goat-scape “position”; it goes back and forth between what exists and what appears.

The thinkers whom mostly influenced such enquiries during the first half of the previous century were Karl Marx (2016) and Friedrich Nietzsche (2009). In *Das Kapital*, Marx uses the word *surplus*. The proprietor pays the worker, gets the tools and raw material then, pays the mill's toll and, when he sells the goods he gets a surplus. The enigma and, at the same time, the engine of capitalism was/is: how does the proprietor get the surplus? How, in the ongoing process of capitalist production, faultlessly ensues that the sum of all production costs, including the worker's salary, is minor than the obtained income. Marx names this enigma with the word “exploitation”, even though he admits that in such a process there must be something uncanny, what he calls “metamorphosis”. Nevertheless, the proprietors claim that such a surplus is the enterprise income, the profit, the sign that the company is doing well. So, when the workers enact a strike, asking for a salary increase, the proprietor replies that they are not *grateful* to him for the job they have, thanks to his enterprise. In describing this process as exploitation, Marx creates a new concept for the working class view of the world (*Weltanschauung*): the proletarian philosophy. In order to end the process of exploitation, the working class had to change the “power relations” within society, by becoming the ruling class. From this point of view, sooner or later, the working class shall be able to constitute a rightful society, where no exploitation will be ever seen again. We now know that this prospect was made to become impossible, the Realm of Utopia is totalitarian. Mauss, Bataille, the School of Frankfurt and other scholars were already facing the disaster of authoritarianism and eventually that of totalitarianism coming from the socialist societies.

The School of Frankfurt was not solely influenced by Marx, another important thinker of the nineteenth century—who particularly influenced also Bataille—and was the other point of reference for Horkheimer and Adorno is Friedrich Nietzsche (1994). As Marx, Nietzsche was also unsatisfied by the Justice of the European world of his time. Precisely, claiming that modernism had turned the moral order upside-down. However, unlike Marx, Nietzsche eliminates any nuance of Enlightenment from his philosophy and, instead of looking for a new world in the future, he turns his gaze back to the Archaic Greece of Archilochus, Hesiod, Homer, until Aeschylus and Sophocles, and the balance between Apollonian and Dionysian (Nietzsche 1994). One of the most important issues raised by Nietzsche (2009), in *Genealogy of Morals*, is the heterogeneity between origin and function. Summed briefly, what we call function is the technology of making everything right, even exactly to adjust, repair and to order things in a stable way. For Nietzsche, in modern times, the moral order is conceived as a way of balancing, as in the image of justice: a balance with two scales depicted with the same

gradient. The origin of morality has nothing to do with what we call “moral” in present times. Justice, knowledge and war are all inhabited by feelings of vengeance, rivalry, envy and jealousy. The compulsion to be equal comes from *Ressentiment*, the spirit of the modern justice. Influenced by Nietzsche, Bataille creates the concept of *dépense*: the idea that any exchange is constitutively unfair, and any surplus is also a subtraction. In French, this concept is called: *la dépense*, a word that cannot be translated into English as “expense”. The right translation is *ravage*. During his time, Nietzsche was chiefly considered as an isolated existentialist writer opposed to a social philosopher, even when he was considered a social philosopher, he was completely misunderstood by the Nazi censure. Nevertheless, all throughout the twentieth century, Nietzsche’s influence on social thought has been extensive: from Bataille (1945) to Deleuze (1962) and Foucault (1971), Nietzsche crossed the mainstream of the so-called French Thought.

What Marx and Nietzsche have in common is the idea that justice, in modernity, is a trick for submitting the masses, the illusion of reciprocity of gratitude between people. Marx’s thought was that such a reciprocity should be conquered in the future world so subtly opposing Nietzsche who thought that this had always been an illusion, except in the Arcadia, when such an illusion was not even contemplated at all. Additionally, both thinkers share commonalities of thought concerning power. Power is not an ascribed status. Filiation is not the key for understanding the dynamics of power. To the contrary, power deals with alliance and there are always strengths in relationships. The bitter conclusion of this is what I was announcing at the beginning of this essay: any relationship is unequal; there is always someone in a higher and someone in a lower position and any relationship requires a certain approach for conquering the higher position. There are a series of strategies: antagonism, with all its variations; seduction, which also includes a range of possible strategies; the Masochistic position of being the pedagogue of the *femme bourreau*; the sadistic position (institutional, familial, *mafiosa*); hypnotic and, more in general, any other kind of similar suggestion.

Let us set the scene of a classic brief sequence between two spouses, I call it the “familial strategy” (which I also include into the sadistic ones):

- I did it for you, and you did not even say thanks!
- Thanks!
- Now it’s too late!

This is a possible dynamic of gratitude within a “genuine” Western family. From the other side, in Western modernism, gratitude is solved with flattery. Everybody knows how this conversation would continue, and there are few possibilities, since this exchange is typical of the conflict in the right thinking *pétit bourgeoisie*, the so-called middle class. In order to get the fairness of the other, you have to use flattery. From here on, unfairness can be treated in educational processes where every conversational exchange becomes an attempt to put the other down and gain control. An example, reminiscent of our childhood: “Say hallo to uncle John!” or one later on in life: “Remember to thank Miss Helen for recommending you for job!”. During the 1970s, in all the Western World, young people decided, here and there, to reorganise families in what was called “the collective”. Giorgio Gaber, an Italian singer, made a song concerning everyday life within “the collective”. It is about the very moment when the free love consists into the fact that “your woman” [sic!] has an affair with another member of “the collective”. The words of the man—who “posses” [sic!] the woman—are, more or less these: “I didn’t expect this of you, I thought you were a healthy girl [sic], and I appreciated

you! And you behave like a bitch!” and then, later on “Inside the collective, your [sic] woman prefers another guy, but you don’t care!” in a musical dramatic crescendo in which Gaber creates a contrast between the words and the feelings.

We can see all the interactions I mentioned earlier as examples of a starting point for symmetry, or complementarity, as in the ideology of strategic therapies. Actually, they are not symmetric at all. There are insertions of asymmetric positioning, authoritarian attempts of putting the other down and an attempt by the other of recovering the upper position. Nevertheless, this argument still belongs to the game of power: you and the other as competitors. These conversational exchanges are not just “family games”. People are not characters or puppets; they have feelings and they care. It is a matter of recognising whether people have or not interior feelings that, beside any “game”, can be wounded. The issue is where is *Metis*—in the above conversational exchange—that protects the couple from the moral wounds they infer to themselves and the other, how can the two be *merciful* and recover their self-relation with the other, and, on the top of that, ponder if it is at all possible or not. Is there, if any, possibility to *forgive* our tiny (as in the family) or great (as in any kind of institutional abuse) perpetrators?

Strategizing as a Minor Gesture (a Clinical Case)

It is, more than fashionable, it is inculcated by the universities, who believe there is something like psychology which is different from sociology, and such things of anthropology, which are different from both, and such things of aesthetic or art criticism, or whatever, and that this world is made of separate items of knowledge in which, if you are a student, you could be examined about a series of disconnected questions of true or false bits. The first point I want to get over to you is that the world is not like that at all, or perhaps to be more polite, the world in which I live is not like this at all, and if you want to live like this you are free to live the world you want (Gregory Bateson https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_8tngh7LhA).

Jay Haley,⁹ one of the founders of strategic therapy, claimed that people enter relationships with the other in order to gain control back from the other they entered the relationship with, as in the conversational exchange I mentioned earlier, in the example of familial strategy. In such a case, the only possibility for the therapist is becoming a strategist of power. This leads to crucial questions in therapeutic settings: what about mandatory contention of persons in psychiatric wards, for example? What about using physical force, medication without consent, electroshock? What about hypnosis, imposing a diagnosis, telling the patient that she/he is going to get worse if she/he does not take the prescribed medications, or secretly telling relatives to hide the medication in her/his food? Are these reasonable strategies “for the patient’s greater good” or for “the greater tranquillity of the family”? If we singularly analyse all the above-mentioned possibilities so to maintain the higher position within the relationship, we would probably come to the same conclusion as Gregory Bateson¹⁰ when commenting Haley’s claim about control: “the idea of power is always corruptive”.

⁹ To know the terms of the controversy between Jay Haley and Gregory Bateson, see Sluzki and Ransom 1976

¹⁰ See also Bateson (2002)

Until the beginning of the 1970s, the Milan Model for Family Therapy was oriented by the Mental Research Institute (MRI), at Palo Alto. Gregory Bateson was working at the Palo Alto Veteran Institute, from 1949 to 1962, with the same group of psychiatrists and psychologists who eventually founded the MRI. Nevertheless, the Haley-Bateson controversy made Bateson unsatisfied of the way Palo Alto was evolving. The question was about power in therapy (Visser 2003). Bateson decided to be external to the MRI. Eventually in times, at Milan, the four Family Therapists of the Milan Centre for Family Therapy split. Selvini followed the MRI approach unlike Boscolo and Cecchin, who decided to transform Bateson's epistemology into therapeutic practice. Fascinated by the Observing Systems Theory—a methodology for scientific approach proposed by Heinz von Foerster (1982)—Boscolo and Cecchin decided to launch a Psychotherapy school. When their first students arrived, they decided to show them their therapies. The immediate reaction of the new students was asking them, at any moment, the particular minutes of the exchange. Every and any detail was questioned and inquired. The trainers discovered the reversal of the idea of power in academic relationships: the expert therapist was listening to the question made by the student about her/his way of doing therapy. This did not come out from any handbook of therapy. The power-knowledge, in front of such questions, began to be deconstructed during the ongoing practice of training. The same was going to happen also with the therapeutic process. A Canadian observer of it, Karl Tomm (1987a, b, 1988), made an attempt to frame the Milan Approach into the way of questioning, during the ongoing process of therapy in Milan. From these days on one of the most important epistemological premises of the Milan Centre was “Never fall in love with my/our hypotheses”. Circular questioning is a way of inviting people to describe the system of relationships from within, creating a gaze on the relationships within the system, instead of keeping information about the subject. Reflexive questioning is a way to explore possible—even impossible—worlds with the people who attend therapy. A meeting with a family is one of the examples I choose for describing the practice of the Milan Approach. Three of the five family members are entering their first therapy session, the father is a fully retired Mathematics Professor in one of the most important universities of the area, the mother is a very important architect and the daughter who is accompanying her parents is an MD. The son and the other daughter were not attending this session. In this first session, when the son is absent, the mother recounts that, several years ago, he was diagnosed as schizophrenic. The family members at the session describe him as living in a retired manner, sometimes observed by them, or other family members or co-workers he is seen talking by himself, apparently angry and describing the university system as a “mafia”. More than twenty years ago he was applying for admittance for a Math course run by a university as prestigious as the one where his father was teaching at, but he failed. Nevertheless, he insisted and pursued a similar course at another less prestigious, university. The grades he was achieving were far below from the ones he had expected and, as time went on, he continued to consider himself as a part of the university system. Telling his parents he was preparing for exams that never actually took place. Nonetheless, at the same time, he was able to sustain himself renting out apartments that were given to him by his family. Currently, he lives in a big beautiful villa, which was inherited from the mother's family, far from the big city, in the countryside where nobody disturbs him, so living more like a dandy than like a schizophrenic guy.

For this reason, the therapy group calls the “identified patient” Jacques. The name given when presenting a clinical case can help to see the so-called *identified patient* as a literary one. To the group, up until now, the guy, more than a schizophrenic, becomes *Jacques le fataliste*, as in Diderot's novel. At the end of the session, the therapeutic group asks why the two other

members of the family were not present. Immediately, everyone gives their own potential explanation to the absence and potential showing up of the other sister. Nevertheless, everyone is absolutely sure of the impossibility of Jacques' arrival, who, during the last twenty years has met a lot of psychiatrists and psychologist unanimously convinced on a diagnosis concerning his stance on the schizophrenic "spectrum".

The group decides to send both the absent siblings the identical letter of invitation; a tender letter where we consider the feelings of all the members of the family and ask them if they can consider the idea of coming and joining the subsequent therapy session in order to help us understand what is going on. The letter is not a strategic move to catch the schizophrenic guy and cure him with a trick; it is actually a request for help, in a situation where the other three family members had the chance to express their own preoccupation and angst, concerning what was going on in the family.

During the second family meeting, all the five members were present, even though the other sister, whom is professionally involved in the fashion world and lives alone with a baby, appears to be irritated about being here. Nevertheless, she chooses to stay although we are not insisting on it.

The time for the summer vacations are approaching and usually the family spends their time at the villa, so joining Jacques, for at least a whole month. After a few conversational exchanges, a simple circular question to Jacques is posed by one of the therapists:

- And now, when all the family comes to the villa, joining you, what will happen?
- An invasion! A mess! I mean, I am happy to see my relatives, but they carry with them all the issues about my business at school, in life, about work, and so on. They know that they make me terribly angry and upset when they probe searching answers about my own business.
- Who is more curious about your life?
- My sister (the MD), she is worried about my schizophrenia, I told her, I am not schizophrenic, I am schizoid, or, if you want, autistic. I keep my business very strict. What is the matter? I am the opposite of my sister [indicating the one employed in fashion], she likes superficiality, glamour, whatever. I cannot stand it. I am part of my mother's family: noble and reserved.
- You mean that you are more similar to your mother?
- No, I am similar to my father as well! I am intelligent as him, maybe more than him. He was able to make himself understandable by the others, I wasn't [pause, then: to the therapist who is questioning] you know what I mean! You also work at the university you know the way of being included or excluded by the system, is not it?
- I know what you mean, thank you.

In this brief conversational exchange, one can see the dis-balance of power that is going on when, in this particular situation, the group of therapy uses a letter not just for catching the fish, and then framing them into the cure system, so validating the diagnostic process of the institutional health system. Rather, the letter that asks for help must maintain the promise of giving power to the receiver, to maintain the curiosity that only the receiver can satisfy. The letter protects the person, it is a *Metis*: "you can come, there is no danger of being diagnosed or *shrunked*", and *Mercy*: "you have the power of coming, and you will help us in coming".

The conversation begins with a circular question concerning the relational system that is going in one particular moment of the family's life, when they are all together at Jacques'

house. The conversation goes on with Jacques; he is helpful and points out the differences between the family members, he knows what happened, and all the family, in this very moment, is listening to him as an authority, a person who has the power/knowledge to describe the family relationships. Moreover, he gets the critical position about the university system, which is a very powerful system of exclusion/inclusion, in front of his father, whom was a Professor and the therapist who inquires him, who also is a University Professor. Finally, regardless of the potential influence, the group agrees completely with him about the University system, Jacques cannot forgive the University system. This is the reason why he has been talking to himself in such an angry manner, at any time, it is as if he were repeating Shylock's monologue to Antonio, which will be shown a little later in the essay.

We are moving from a family which has a "schizophrenic" member into a situation where the resonance between the therapy group and the family is going to sound the invisible part of what happened to Jacques: the mythological oppressive systems of adequacy in the University Institution, and the unveil importance of "intelligence" that covers and substitutes the hidden manoeuvres of power, which remain invisible. The diagnostic judgement is "severe" (schizophrenia) because Jacques is not one of the many persons whom were trying to make the grade while belonging to a lower class environment. Jacques comes from a noble and very successful family in the Academia. Exactly, as may be understood by the "thanks" previously mentioned in the conversational extract by the inquiring therapist: "I know what we know concerning my position inside the university, you know how many bullets I (and probably your father) had to take".

Mercy and Tenderness

Let us spend here a few rows on Shakespeare's piece *The Merchant of Venice* and the "pound of flesh nearby the heart". The exercise, I am proposing, is not for erudition. The purpose of it is to show how the unveiled feelings, cancelled by strategic therapists, matter in any kind of exchange. As well as how characters, in the most brilliant works of art, become persons.

As everyone knows, Antonio, friend of Bassanio, guarantees for his friend and obtains a huge sum of money from Shylock. Before deciding on the making of the contract, Shylock reminds Antonio of his anti-Semitism with these words:

Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
 In the Rialto you have rated me
 About my moneys and my usances.
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
 You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
 And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine—
 And all for use of that which is mine own.
 Well then, it now appears you need my help.
 Go to, then! You come to me and you say,
 "Shylock, we would have moneys." You say so!—
 You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
 And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur

Over your threshold! Moneys is your suit.
 What should I say to you? Should I not say,
 “Hath a dog money? Is it possibl
 A cur can lend three thousand ducats?”

The scene of the contract’s signing shows Shylock proposing an uncanny exchange: if the loan will not be returned within a certain period of time, the guarantor, Antonio, shall give a pound of flesh, to be cut around the heart, as a guarantee for reimbursement. When Antonio signs the document, he is absolutely sure about his money to come, at the same time, the contract appears as a game; the quantity of money is huge, but a piece of flesh to bet cut from the body belongs to a different order of things, something impossible to be conceived. We know the events that lead Antonio to misfortune, as well as the fact that, in the due moment of reimbursement, the money is missing. So here comes the moment of the Court’s decision of whether Shylock’s claim of cutting a pound of flesh from Antonio’s body was due or could possibly be avoided. Since, Shylock is now seriously intentioned to get his pledge, the tone of the verse above seems to mean that the point is not the money, the point is “the badge of all our tribe”: oppression. So the unequal exchange is double, from one side: you are asking me a loan, although you despise and oppress me and my tribe, this is unequal, I give you a loan notwithstanding that you despise me—the level of the loan is different from the level of the despise; from the other side: I give you a loan, although I ask you to honour your debt with a pound of flesh to be cut from your body, this is also unequal as the level of the loan is different from the level of your flesh.

Shylock requires his right of having Antonio’s flesh, and the Court of Venice cannot deny Shylock’s right, even though the bizarre content of the contract should suggest at least a substitution of Antonio’s flesh with something different, as in *metis*, or in Abraham’s episode of Isaac: a substitution with a goat. In this dramatic moment, other people and friends are proposing to mend the debt with money in the name of Antonio. Nevertheless, Shylock’s stubbornness claims the exact quantity of good—a pound of flesh—from Antonio’s body because of the inequality above mentioned, because different levels stay with different levels. The figure of Portia, Bassanio’s fiancé, changes the climax of the drama. Portia, when becoming aware of the whole affair, organises a trick: she disguises herself as a young male Judge coming from the academy of Padua, and runs the trial.

In this very moment during the trial, we are placed exactly in front of the philosophical issue raised—above in this essay—by Mauss, Bataille, the Frankfurt scholars and, more recently, by Derrida: the inequality of any kind of exchange, the pure fact that the exchange is not a pure economic act, but something that involves ethics. Jacques Derrida (2004) in *Pardoner: l’impardonnable et l’imprescriptible* gives us a very controversial message before dying. Any one of us can decide the level of perpetration that can be forgiven, because—as in the words of Portia—mercy “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” and comes “upon the place beneath”, being “twice blest: It blesseth [whom] that gives and [whom] that take”. Derrida, as Portia’s Shakespeare, questions whether—exactly starting from the impossibility of forgiving—any one of us in the singularity of a minor gesture (Manning 2016) could, or should, do it.

The episode is going to be concluded with the tragic death of Antonio. We know that Portia recognises Shylock’s right to have his own return, consisting in a part of Antonio’s body. However, exactly at this point, when Shylock is about to prepare his knives to undertake the

act of the cut, Portia, still under her disguise as the young Judge, asks Shylock if he does consider mercy. And when Shylock asks if this consideration is an obligation, she answers:

The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes The thronèd monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; But mercy is above this scepterèd sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings; It is an attribute to God Himself; And earthly power doth then show likèst God's When mercy seasons justice.

The phrases: “The quality of mercy is not strained/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” are directly connected to the discussed subject. Mercy is a surplus given, not taken, “as the gentle rain from heaven”. If, as Marx, the surplus is a trick orchestrated by the proprietor who makes an unequal exchange by taking advantage of the workers, mercy is the opposite; it is a surplus given by the owner for free, it introduces freedom. In this sense, mercy cannot be other than a free act coming from the subject. As in the letter sent to the two brothers in the mentioned clinical case, mercy is not a trick for submission; it is an invitation of empowerment.

And the phrase: “Mercy seasons justice” holds a multiplicity of meanings, but it is granted that the statement is also related to freedom. If you decide for Mercy, you take a line of flight from Justice; you are not forced to stay within the limits of the rules of justice. As such, the scales of the balance are not evened by a pound of flesh it is that they are constantly reversed. The body of oppression—Jewish despise as the cut of flesh from Antonio—cannot be exchanged for money. For Shylock, mercy is impossible because he enters trouble when playing the monologue “Signor Antonio”, Shylock with Antonio is the reversal of Ulysses with Polyphemus, Antonio is the powerful one, as Polyphemus. Ulysses is in the position of using *metis* as a line of flight; Shylock's trick has another intention: one that transforms Justice in vengeance. As in Nietzsche, the Merchant of Venice shows the invisible part of Justice: *Ressentiment*. The problem posed by Derrida in *Pardoner: l'impardonnable et l'imprescriptible* is exactly the same: Shylock is in his plain right when he refuses to be merciful, nevertheless, to forgive the unforgivable is something else, it belongs to a hyperbolic ethics, and has nothing to do with the juridical act of prescription and only becomes possible when the persecutor is death.

Conclusion

Ultimately: imagine that you find a thief in your home, suddenly—instead of attacking him, or calling the police—you welcome him, and invite him to take something from your home, whatever he likes, but not a flesh of your body. In this very moment, you are transforming a subtraction of something yours by the thief into a gift of yours to him. You are taking care of him, recognising that his act of robbing is just an event (Barbetta 2018) among others and that he is not in danger in your home. After all, the act of stealing can be considered as a redistribution of money among social classes, a job, although forbidden by law, a visit at your home, a crime, or whatever. You can take it for granted that the thief lives in misery and you are rich; you can acknowledge the social differences by recognising his needs to have

something more and your possibility to have something less, with no feigning, honesty and you can also be wrong, and discover that the thief is much wealthier and richer than you. Nevertheless, you are with the thief in the same relation of any mother when feeds her infant, any MD when curing a wounded person, any therapist when using the art of therapy, you are protecting the thief from the danger he constantly runs in while doing such a job. Also, think how lucky you are with your job, as for example, being a Professor at a University, legally stealing money from the university administration, with the only risk that some colleague could damage you with some slender, as it happens, from time to time, in this viral environment. So, immediately, during the fine conversation with the thief, you realise that, more or less, you two are on the same level. This should be an ethical experience!

Shakespeare's Portia, as well as Ulysses, are unveiling that, although any exchange is unequal, there is also the reversal of this inequality; mercy and metis are the two ways for strategizing and not being framed into the structure of power, which is the economic (as in Marx), the parental (as in Lévi-Strauss) or the linguistic (as in strategic and collaborative therapies). At the same time, metis and mercy are, first of all, body experiences; you have to feel the moment, you have to have the sixth sense of such a minimal gesture in that very moment, you cannot learn it through a lecture, your body produces *It*, as the unconscious at work. *Metis* is a shelter from Power, and when power is oppressive, you can choose to transform your power in a gift for the other. You can decide to be honest with yourself recognising the inequality of any relationship, instead of making an asymmetric relationship stronger, you can reverse the asymmetry of the relationship. In psychotherapy, as in other relations, metis and mercy take the name of "tenderness".

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