Othello and the Democrats

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Bad criticism is often the result of imposing on a work an unhelpful theoretical model: in the case of *Othello*, a tragic model developed by nineteenth-century critics out of Aristotle's *Poetics*. We are accustomed to look for a tragic hero with a fatal flaw, with *hubris* or with *hamartia* (in the non-Aristotelian sense of *moral* fault) that leads to catastrophe. Criticism of Shakespeare's *Othello* is still very much engaged in a long war over the personality and progress of the tragic hero. There are two conflicting schools, each of which offers an interpretation that is faithful to details but unsatisfactory as a final account; and if individuals have withdrawn from the contest, it was more because discussion had grown tedious than because it had reached solutions. A. C. Bradley might be taken as one extreme, giving us the noble Moor, virtuous, open and majestic, a "rough diamond"[1] whose only conceivable flaw might be that his generous nature prompted him to over-impulsive action. The problem with such a reading of the character, as Harley Granville-Barker found,[2] is that Othello's end must seem meaningless and non-uplifting. At the other extreme, we have T. S. Eliot and, after him, F. R. Leavis[3] offering us an unheroic Moor, a self-dramatizer and unconscious poseur, a life-denying romantic who retreats at the last into protective self-deception and avoidance of reality.

As Robert Hapgood put it in his admirable survey of criticism of the play up till 1973,[4] *Othello* has held its place in the theatre and in general esteem "by might not right" — at least, as the critics have seen that right. It is *Othello*'s continuous success on stage that prompted my opening remark about "bad criticism". We have all benefited from several centuries of sensitive writing about the play, and yet the divisions among the critics would seem to face us with a stark alternative: either to posit some radical failure on Shakespeare's part (which the stage success of the play

1 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904).
2 Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Fourth Series (London, 1945).
3 F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero", *Scrutiny*, 6 (1937), reprinted in *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952).
4 Robert Hapgood, "Othello" in *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford, 1973).

makes unlikely), or to presume that there is something seriously wrong with our critical approaches hitherto. Where producers have inclined to one or other of the critical schools, the results have rarely been good theatre: I imagine that I am not alone in feeling that Olivier's filmed production, which was declaredly indebted to an essay by F. R. Leavis, somehow shrunk the play and proved incapable of coping with its conclusion. What is needed is an account of *Othello* that can accommodate those features of the play which are overemphasized by critics in their one-sided readings, and yet leave room for a large measure of uncertainty. It may be that such an account will only be possible if we propose a new model by which to describe the play.

George Bernard Shaw thought that *Othello* was more operatic than the generality of Shakespeare's plays; but we already have Verdi's *Otello* (which inclines markedly towards a Bradleian reading of the central character), and opera is anyway too near the form of drama to provide a useful metaphor or analogy for discussing the play. For it is vital that our model should be seen as an analogy only, to be discarded when it ceases to be helpful; perhaps all such metaphors should have an element of the comic, to remind us of our temerity in substituting any schema for the living work of art. In that spirit, let me propose a metaphor for Shakespeare's tragedy: let us imagine one of those heavy Germanic tone poems, entitled *Othello von Shakespeare.* Naturally, it is programme music, narrational in its structure, with a programme note to explain the theme the composer had in mind when writing his symphonic poem: with Teutonic portentousness, he has outlined it at the head of the piece — "The Spirit of Man" (and note, *not* 'a man'), "noble, expansive, imaginative, levelled and corrupted by vulgar plebeian elements, but reasserting itself in and through death". Our tone poem is only a model, a metaphor for Shakespeare's play; but it does have some clear advantages over the usual model.

First, such a model might persuade us to talk about the play initially as a process, as a sequence of incidents and effects that creates a constantly shifting emotional attitude, a succession of moods in an audience. Themes are adumbrated, but the attitude of the auditor shifts as he hears the theme plain or confused, in unison from the clear brass, or with disturbing and clashing accompaniment, opposed to a counter-theme, or gradually suppressed, restated, blended, and resolved. The mood of an audience veers between depression and elation, confinement and expansion; but in the body of the piece the expansive element is

progressively soured by discords, vulgarized and coarsened by importations from counter-themes, torn apart by violence that still has something in it of expansive dynamism, then dissipated in weakness and inconsequentiality, only to return again in a muted yet still expansive form, but with remnants of that earlier, disturbing, querulous accompaniment.

If for a moment I can be allowed to plan for, if not to begin writing that heavy Germanic tone poem, it ought to begin with dark, sombre orchestral colours, to correspond to the darkness and squalor of the first Act, passing quickly to dialogue between a harsh, plebeian instrument and a thin, effete woodwind: jagged rhythms and coarse pooping and farting noises to match the vulgarity of Iago's attitudes, and little snatches of tune that might have been lifted from popular songs, to parallel his tendency to utter lame commonplaces and stale proverbs. And very early we would hear (I think from the saxophone) a nasty, flattened-out parody of a martial melody:

> . . . Three great ones of the city,
> In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
> Off-capped to him; and, by the faith of man,
> I know my price: I am worth no worse a place.
> But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
> Evades them with a bombast circumstance
> Horribly stuffed with epithets of war . . .
> (I.i.8-14)[5]

We would hear that martial note again a little later, but quite transformed, confident, rounded-out and coming from unmuted brass, so that our hearts lifted at its military grandeur — a moment matched in the play by our first experience of Othello and of his ability to cut through murk and confusion with a high, melodious note:

> Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
> (I.ii.59)

We should note in passing that musical metaphors are not unusual in criticism of the play: many writers describe Othello's poetry and Iago's prose in terms of musical contrast, and G. Wilson Knight[6] has shown how the Miltonic "music" of Othello, "highly-coloured, rich in sound and phrase, stately" is turned to discord as it takes on the tones of Iago. It has been noticed how Othello reassumes his characteristic note at the close of the play

5 References are to the New Cambridge edition of *Othello*, ed. Alice Walker and J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1957).

6 G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London, 1930).

— though there are different interpretations of what this might mean. To extend further the use of musical analogy in discussion of the play might help where current criticism finds difficulty. Take, for example, the uncharacteristic high poetry of Iago when contemplating Othello's burgeoning jealousy:

> Not poppy, nor mandragora,
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
> Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
> Which thou owedst yesterday.
> (III.iii.332-5)

This out-of-character utterance has troubled those who have concentrated on the individual accents of characters in the play; it may be more explicable as a case of musical attraction, as the reflection of a rounded style associated with Othello by another instrument, for purposes of enhancement.

A further merit of a musical analogy for discussing the play might be that it would get us away from obsessive analysis of character, from concentration on the imagined development of a single figure, and direct us toward our own experience in the theatre, where we are shown first one side of a character, then another, presented with varying aspects of a theme, a theme conceived musically rather than intellectually, and not intended primarily for rational discussion. Hapgood observes that "the play has appealed less to the reflective reader than to the responding spectator": "it has resisted consideration as a form of dramatized moral philosophy",[7] and it has not rewarded precise cogitation on details of character. Instead, the play exposes us to a process of mood.

To move from a model that invited us to consider the development of a tragic protagonist to one that talked of clashes of attitude and mood might alert us to minor patterns which reflect the main pattern of the action. I imagine few critics would want to quarrel with this description of the process of the play: that we hear the high, heroic tones associated with Othello (whether or not we suspect those tones of being somewhat tinny) and the related notes of idealizing romanticism (whether or not we feel those notes to be at times a little lush and over-sensual) gradually invaded and dragged down by the vulgarity, coarseness and aggression associated with Iago. What may, if we are obsessed with the character of Othello, seem a unique process is in fact foreshadowed or echoed elsewhere in the play. At the end of

7 Hapgood, pp. 161, 160.

Act I Roderigo hits the high romantic strain, which is an echo and comic parody of Othello's love theme: for love of Desdemona he "will incontinently drown" himself, since his lady loves another. Iago levels and debases this, as in language and action he levels and debases Othello's relationship with Desdemona — he suggests love to be "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (I.ii.334-5), a vulgar and common itch; and by the time he has finished Roderigo has been quite invaded by his attitudes and consents to try to be the cynical adulterer, waiting till Desdemona's sexual urges follow the faithless pattern of the rest of humanity.

Again, Cassio is in some ways a parallel to Othello, and what happens to him at Iago's hands is a thematic preview of Othello's fate. Like Othello he is a proven soldier, noble, courteous and controlled, with something of the Moor's romantic idealizing in his attitude to Desdemona (though my tone poem, whilst echoing Othello motifs, would bring out an element of exaggeration, a slight inflation with undertones of coarseness and swaggering). Iago detests him because he is a stranger, a Florentine, an artist in war rather than a practical slogger; and "he hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly" (V.i.19-20). As with Othello, Iago by trickery plays on a weakness, reducing Cassio to an unthinking violence untypical of his better self, bringing him to degradation, to the loss of temporal position and of the esteem of his fellows. For convenience, I will transpose what are recurring dramatic patterns in the play into a musical analogy: again and again, in small episodes and in the general shape of the whole piece, we get exalted, expansive, noble strains dragged down to a commonplace level, flattened, coarsened and distorted under the influence of the Iago theme. The pattern can be seen immediately after Othello has dismissed Cassio; and on the level of plot development and of characterization it is an episode of major importance. Cassio's first reaction on dismissal is to hit the high, idealizing note, to be as little able to shrug off or accommodate to his corruption as Othello is able to accommodate to the corruption of others — or finally, to his own. Cassio cries that his reputation is lost, that he is unfit to serve the Moor. Had he persisted in this perfectionism, this noble self-disgust, it would have been difficult if not impossible for Iago to use Cassio to arouse Othello's jealousy. But Iago's motifs gradually invade: he mocks Cassio's respect for reputation and he communicates the sense that Cassio has displayed only a common limitation of humanity, that he is making a great pother about nothing. Cassio's own compliment

to Desdemona — "our captain's captain" — is coarsened by Iago to the suggestion that Othello is uxoriously enslaved by a common or garden infatuation:

> Our general's wife is now the general: I may say so in this respect, for that he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark and denotement of her parts and graces.
>
> (II.iii.307-10)

Cassio ought to resist this notion but fails to do so; and by it Iago suggests to Cassio a route and a means by which he may sue again for the post that a few moments previously he had thought himself unworthy to hold.

A concentration on Iago's role as Vice might incline us to see this coarsening, levelling, vulgarizing effect as instigated solely by the Tempter figure for the testing of mankind to destruction. In fact, the motif of exaltation opposed to a levelling, flattening counter-influence is present where one would least think of looking, in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. We are used to Iago's nihilism, to his denigrations of romantic love, of idealism, of reputation, and so on. Iago suggests that the strange marriage of Othello with Desdemona, black with white, barbarian with sophisticate, can only be explained as kinky, depraved sexual appetite: the unusual is debased by commonplace explanations, as Brabantio will in his own commonplace way explain it as the influence of witchcraft. But outside the moral sphere, so that little or no blame attaches to it though its consequences are disastrous, we find Desdemona also attempting to reduce, vulgarize and subdue the outstanding, the unusual. Verdi gave the heroine a note of exalted innocence; I should choose something altogether more housewifely. The Moor is a free spirit. As he says to Iago:

> But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
> I would not my houséd free condition
> Put into circumscription and confine
> For the sea's worth.
>
> (I.ii.25-8)

Othello is a commander, a strange barbarian derived from men of royal rank — and yet Desdemona, after Othello has indicated that Cassio will in time be restored, must push home her advantage and demonstrate openly that the Moor is as other men, unable to deny his wife anything, cosseted and controlled by her. Forgiveably, she seeks a demonstration of her power over the previously untamed lion, and her unnecessary insistence on Cassio's restoration nourishes the seedling of suspicion which Iago has planted.

Little or no blame attaches to Desdemona for her contribution to the catastrophe at this point; and this leads me to another and final advantage of the "tone poem" model for talking about *Othello*. Some of the most important oppositions and contrasts in the piece transcend the merely moral, though moral contrasts remain significant. Critics have long emphasized an ironic opposition between the Christian black Othello and the white but atheist and demonic Iago. But to see the action largely in those terms commits one to a pessimistic reading of the play, for there is no sense in which Othello's suicide can be reconciled with Christian behaviour: the better course for a Christian is to admit corruption, repent, do penance, bear punishment, and sue for undeserved grace. But the contrasts epitomized by Othello and Desdemona as opposed to Iago are such as cannot be wholly accommodated to a Christian account: clashes between amplitude and narrowness, beauty and ugliness, oddity and the commonplace, the exotic as against the home-grown, physical courage and prowess as opposed to cowardice and the average performance, emotional range and power as against emotional attenuation, love versus carnality, idealism versus cynicism, religion versus secularism, imagination as against factualism, mystery opposed to matter-of-factness, poetry versus prose, colour versus drabness, noble versus pleb, the power of leadership as against the cunning of followership, directness versus indirections.

Metaphors drawn from other arts are dangerous in literary criticism, and it is time to abandon our musical analogy and talk directly about the play, though with the occasional helpful metaphor. Our Germanic composer had given an opening programme note:

> "The Spirit of Man" (and note, *not* 'a man'), noble, expansive, imaginative, levelled and corrupted by vulgar plebeian elements, but re-asserting itself in and through death.

The pattern of exaltation followed by levelling has its most extensive presentation through plot in the fall of Othello himself; but as I have said, there is a pre-echo in the fall of Cassio, an analogy in the case of Roderigo — and we see the pattern again in the presentation of Desdemona. On the level of dramatic action, the spirited girl of Act I, who can maintain publicly and without excuse her loyalty to her new husband, and yet avoid a hurtful rejection of her father, the wife who can speak up and win from her husband and from the state of Venice recognition of her right to accompany Othello to war, sinks under the impact of Othello's jealousy to a silly, fibbing schoolgirl over the fate of the handker-

chief, someone so knocked from her self-possession by the charge of "whore" that she is bemused, "Faith, half asleep" (IV.ii.98). But the pattern of exaltation followed by reductive levelling is to be found also in the individual appearances of Desdemona. She arrives in Cyprus to Cassio's tribute:

> Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
> The guttered rocks, and congregated sands,
> Traitors insteeped to clog the guiltless keel,
> As having sense of beauty, do omit
> Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
> The divine Desdemona.
>
> (II.i.68-73)

The moment when Desdemona touches the soil of the island is greeted by a gesture of submissive adoration and an invocation of the grace of heaven:

> O behold,
> The riches of the ship is come on shore!
> You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.
> Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,
> Before, behind thee, and on every hand,
> Enwheel thee round!
>
> (II.i.83-8)

And yet we will see the divine Desdemona some minutes later attempting to assuage her anxiety over the fate of Othello by encouraging Iago in bawdy innuendoes, countenancing his coarse rhyming reflections on the foolishness of virtue:

> *Desdemona:* Come, how wouldst thou praise me?
>
> *Iago:* I am about it; but indeed my invention comes from my pate as birdlime does from a frieze — it plucks out brains and all. But my muse labours, and thus she is delivered.
> If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit,
> The one's for use, the other useth it.
>
> *Desdemona:* Well praised! How if she be black and witty?
>
> *Iago:* If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
> She'll find a white that shall her blackness hit.
>
> *Desdemona:* Worse and worse . . .
>
> (II.i.123-34)

Such leaden exchanges continue for some sixty or so lines, ending in verse that mocks all attempts by women to be exceptional:

> *Iago:* She that was ever fair, and never proud,
> Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud,
> Never lacked gold, and yet went never gay,
> Fled from her wish, and yet said 'Now I may';
> She that, being angered, her revenge being nigh,
> Bade her wrong stay, and her displeasure fly;
> She that in wisdom never was so frail

To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail;
She that could think, and ne'er disclose her mind,
See suitors following, and not look behind;
She was a wight, if ever such wight were —

Desdemona: To do what?

Iago: To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.
(II.i.148-60)

A similar dialogue between the exalted and the coarse occurs towards the end of the play at Act Four, scene three, though here the scene moves from exaltation to low reflections chiefly as the audience experiences it, and Desdemona herself is far less tainted. Desdemona has ordered her wedding sheets to be placed upon the bed, and she now asks to be buried in them should she die before Emilia. She recollects her mother's maid Barbara who died for love, and sings the Willow Song that Barbara died singing—but a verse from the song provokes a question to Emilia about the possibility of faithless wives:

Desdemona: Dost thou in conscience think — tell me, Emilia —
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?

Emilia: There be some such, no question.

Desdemona: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

Emilia: Why, would not you?

Desdemona: No, by this heavenly light!

Emilia: Nor I neither by this heavenly light: I might do't as well i' th' dark.

Desdemona: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

Emilia: The world's a huge thing: it is a great prize for a small vice.

Desdemona: In troth, I think thou wouldst not.

Emilia: In troth, I think I should; and undo't when I had done't. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition. But for all the whole world — ud's pity, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for't.
(IV.iii.60-80)

The exchange continues right to the end of the scene, and Emilia delivers herself of a curiously modern-sounding attack on the "double standard" of morality: women have affections, weaknesses and a desire for sexual "sport" equal to that of the men, and if men do ill by their women they must expect appropriate retaliation. The dialogue extends over forty-six lines, and critics have

commented adversely on the time spent this late in the action on illustrating Emilia's coarse lack of principle. But the passage is there, I think, to dissipate the atmosphere of tragic pathos that surrounds Desdemona in her last scene before she is murdered: the intention is to produce one more episode that follows a pattern of exaltation and then decline, leading to the commonplace.

Desdemona stands out from the ordinary in this penultimate scene, as she does finally at her death by her refusal to blame her husband:

> *Emilia:* O, who hath done this deed?
> *Desdemona:* Nobody: I myself. Farewell;
> Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!
> (V.ii.126-9)

The occasional critic who objects to Desdemona's exoneration of Othello has always seemed like a stray from Sunday School, bringing an inappropriate regard for absolute truth to a gesture which goes beyond the merely moral. But the major opponent of the plebeian, vulgar and commonplace in the play is of course Othello. His presence on stage destroys Iago's sexual vulgarities of the first scene, the crude racist slanders, the charges of witchcraft: his explanation to the Duke and Senators of the course of his wooing of Desdemona presents a relationship begun through Desdemona's fascination with the life of heroism, fed by her sense of wonder and desire for the unknown, based not on perverted sexual tastes but on the nobler emotion of pity, something which gives to the Moor a softness and solace which he has not experienced in the harshness and isolations of military life.[8] Iago's mockery of Othello's martial manner is for the moment dissipated by the audience's sense of a man of self-control and discretion, a man the state can most rely on in a crisis where only military prowess will defend Christian Venice against the barbarous Turk. He is a man who knows when fighting is unavoidable and when it

8 It is tempting, if one is over-assiduous in hunting the "fatal flaw", to make too much of the apparent inadequacy of Othello's grounds for returning Desdemona's love: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her *that she did pity them*" (I.iii.166-7). Iago warns us often enough that Othello is naïve about the motives of others, and we have ample evidence elsewhere that he is not good at analysing his own motivation. I see no reason to presume that Othello is able to give us the whole story about either himself or Desdemona: here as elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare seems to have left his audience a wide latitude in interpreting the motives of his characters, and this because he is not engaged in making precise moral discriminations.

is not: Brabantio attempts to arrest him by force, and Othello prevents a fray:

> Hold your hands,
> Both you of my inclining and the rest:
> Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
> Without a prompter. Where will you that I go
> To answer this your charge?
>
> (I.ii.81-5)

When we first see Iago with Othello, Iago is attempting to stir Othello's resentment against the father Brabantio by reporting insults and pretending Iago's own passionate indignation at them: Othello refuses to be stirred, either then or later by Brabantio's direct accusations. Similarly, when Iago suggests a politic retreat before the enraged father — "Those are the raiséd father and his friends./ You were best go in" — Othello discriminates between wise evasion and dishonourable dodging:

> Not I; I must be found.
> My parts, my title, and my perfect soul,
> Shall manifest me rightly.
>
> (I.ii.29-32)

Othello as we experience him on stage (and despite doubts and uneases we may have over aspects of his character) epitomizes the exalted image of man which we see only fitfully through other characters. He is the noble as opposed to the pleb: "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (I.ii.22). He is, in Hopkins' phrase, "all things counter, original, spare, strange": the black primitive among the "wealthy curléd darlings", the man of power and command, who has experienced the round of military success, of slavery, of release and restoration. He has seen "antres vast and deserts idle", space enclosed and space extended, and he has scanned depth and height, "rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven." He knows

> . . . of the Cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders.
>
> (I.iii.140-5)

He has those qualities which the Elizabethans expected in a magnanimous man: directness, openness, romantic idealism and amplitude of emotional sensibility (for it was an age when men of feeling were expected to weep greatly when the cause was great). Othello's language has the proper magniloquence, for as Puttenham knew but Dr Leavis forgot, kings should "speak kingly". He has *virtu*, a quality which the period valued but which has little to do with conventional "virtue" — it might best be translated

"oomph", "zing", "star-quality". Othello does the unusual, the extraordinary to which ordinary minds cannot accommodate, like making a runaway match with a girl from another race. But he has also conventional virtues: responsibility, self-control, a passion for strict standards in others and in himself. If on occasions we doubt his perfection, there is no doubt as to the exalted ideal of manhood he sets up for himself.

He is not, I think, a man to appeal to a democratic age — and that is our major difficulty with the play. One of Iago's first complaints against Othello is that he does not promote in the good old New South Wales fashion, by seniority; he favours military theoreticians rather than those who have slogged away in the field for their experience, he prefers "prattle" to "practice". Hapgood has observed that critics "in their detached and sceptical rationality, are by profession all too Iago-like. They know him like a brother."[9] And I would add that they have all too often done the work of Iago. For Iago is a leveller whom Othello offends as a tree does a town-planner — he must be pulled down. Iago begins with verbal assaults on what Othello stands for. The origins of Othello are mysterious, he comes from barbarian kings, his mother bequeathed him a handkerchief endowed with powers to command love that was given her by an Egyptian who derived it from a two-hundred-year-old Sibyl: Othello's experiences are outlandish, beyond the common apprehension. And so, for Iago, Desdemona "loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies" (II.i.219-21).

Iago soon effects more than a merely verbal degradation of Othello: Othello's idealized love is reduced to vulgar, commonplace jealousy, his noble sentiment to Iago's low expression, his self-control to mindless violence and actual loss of his senses. As Iago had uncovered in drunken Cassio a ridiculous pride that insisted that lieutenants must be saved before ancients, so in Othello he exposes a strand of brutal egotism: "I will chop her into messes — cuckold me!" (IV.i.199). The untypical hero kneels on stage with Iago to swear vengeance like any common or garden Italianate revenger from a Jacobean play. High-mindedness and a passion for knowing the facts give way to coarse imaginings and a degrading wish for ignorance:

> What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?
> I saw't not, thought it not, it harmed not me:
> I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips . . .

9 Hapgood, p. 166.

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known.
(III.iii.340-9)

The degradation of Othello is not in dispute: the lion is dragged down, seduced into becoming commonplace, made foolish, and deprived of power. Self-control proves impossible: his intention to effect a just punishment, with the supposed adulteress given time to make her peace with heaven, breaks down when Desdemona appears to admit guilt, and he smothers her without giving her chance to say "one prayer" — justice has degenerated to unprincipled revenge. Discovery of the facts makes him a fool to the world and to himself: "O fool! fool! fool!" He must endure Emilia's contemptuous railing — "O gull! O dolt! / As ignorant as dirt" — without any right of reply. A first attempt to avenge himself on Iago fails, for Montano manages to disarm the former hero:

. . . I am not valiant neither,
But every puny whipster gets my sword.
But why should honour outlive honesty?
Let it go all.
(V.ii.246-8)

A second attempt to kill Iago likewise fails: "If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee . . ." — "I bleed, sir, but not killed". The last of Othello's many demands to know the facts plain and simple is similarly frustrated:

Othello: Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

Iago: Demand me nothing: what you know, you know;
From this time forth I never will speak word.
(V.ii.303-6)

Othello is stripped of his functions, his "power and command is taken off": the commonplace, having brought the exalted to share commonplace vices, will lead him off prisoner.

It cannot be asserted that Othello has learned much more than his own folly: "For nought I did in hate, but all in honour" is a comment which indicates a considerable failure in self-knowledge. For those who have not followed the actual motifs of the play but have shrunk their response to a purely moral one, the climax of the play, Othello's suicide, must be simply depressing. Those who insist on applying theoretical canons for "good tragedy" may find Othello's very limited progress in self-understanding to be an inadequate compensation for the catastrophe. But an audience that has followed the actual patterns of the play and its recurring motif (as an audience in the theatre must do) is by now longing

for a variation in the debilitating sequence of exaltation followed by levelling to the vulgar and commonplace. Othello's history seems to be that motif writ large, but an audience may well have picked up hints by now that this is a familiar process *with a difference.* For example, the heroic poetry of Othello has not been entirely submerged or blended with the vulgar accents of Iago, even though it now gives expression to degraded sentiments and the actions of a commonplace revenger:

> . . . like to the Pontic sea,
> Whose icy current and compulsive course
> Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
> To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
> Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
> Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
> Till that a capable and wide revenge
> Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,
> In the due reverence of a sacred vow
> I here engage my words.
>
> (III.iii.455-64)

A "capable and wide" revenge only will satisfy the dimensions of Othello's craving. Moreover, Othello's motives have not been entirely degraded to the commonplace. If his emotions of aggressive sexual jealousy do not distinguish him from the common herd, or even from a herd of cattle, nevertheless it is the corruption of perfection that most torments him in Desdemona's apparent whoredom. He is revenging the reduction of the ideal to the level of this corrupted sub-lunar world: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!" (V.i.1-2). Even in his murdering of her, he will not be party to yet more marring of the perfect:

> It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
> And smooth as monumental alabaster —
> Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
>
> (V.ii.3-6)

Justice and perfectionism combine to make it necessary that she be smothered with the pillow that knew their first kisses. "The pity of it, the pity of it" Othello exclaims to Iago, for Desdemona's apparent corruption is the destruction of the pearl of great price on which the idealist had set his heart:

> Nay, had she been true,
> If heaven would make me such another world
> Of one entire and perfect chrysolite
> I'ld not have sold her for it.
>
> (V.ii.146-9)

Othello is disarmed and made ridiculous, exposed as a fool, about to be led off prisoner — and then the audience gets a sud-

den reversal, a rescue of the tone of the action from the levellings of average man, from that depressing and debilitating decline of the outstanding towards the commonplace. Othello calls a halt, asserts by his action that compromise with his own corruption is for him intolerable: he refuses to be a Cassio, to accommodate to his degradation. He asserts his perfectionism, his right to exact the highest standards, to execute justice as he had exacted it from Cassio, from Desdemona (as he thought), and long ago from an unnamed Turk who (like Othello) had traduced and done violence to a holy thing. The irony is that only through destroying himself can he punish and expiate the corruption he finds within himself: standards of perfection can be asserted only by destroying his own imperfection, exacting from himself the punishment he exacted from others. He refuses to sanction a world which levels down to the commonplace all that is distinguished, and so he exerts his right to withdraw from it. The Christian might say this was proud, the moralist like D. A. Traversi does say that such idealism is "anti-life" — but that is the judgement of the tribe of Iago. What an audience experiences is an assertion of human value, an act of *virtu*, "star-quality", a release from gloomy and depressing levelling. Othello is a martyr, a sacrifice to the ideal, to the notion of standards: he is a noble who refused to be a pleb, and hence his voice regains the heroic tone:

> Soft you; a word or two before you go.
> I have done the state some service, and they know't.
> No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unuséd to the melting mood,
> Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinable gum — Set you down this;
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
> And smote him — thus. [*he stabs himself*]
> (V.ii.340-58)

"He was great of heart" is Cassio's comment: not moral, mark, not right, not Christian, but "great of heart" — but then Cassio had shreds of nobility himself.