

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE BLACK LITURGY

Miruna Runcan

Murder in the Cathedral, the play that Eliot himself conceived as a modern allegory of the Medieval Mystery, offers the opportunity for Mihai Măniuțiu to build one of his most exciting productions, a performance similar to that of *Richard III* which seems to invite us to a special interpretation. My focus will be on the mystical function of the piece.

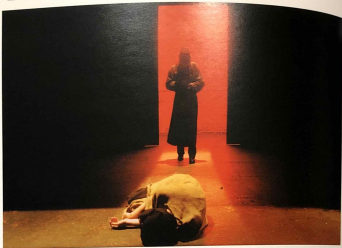
On stage, Măniuțiu's *Murder in the Cathedral*, from beginning to end, brings us no more than three really independent characters: the Mute Woman, Thomas Becket and the Devil. All the other apparitions are pluriform: the Chorus (out of which Coripheus only temporarily drifts apart, yet even then is not fully independent), the first of the two pairs of Tempters (for pleasure and earthly power), the four Knights (seen as a mirror of the Tempters), while the Priests form a secondary chorus. In opposition, the univocal characters are primary, and their play on stage is permanently tensioned by means of merging and separation. The Mute Woman, Thomas' voiceless double, his shadow, seems to represent the soul of Canterbury, the multiform body which is the Chorus. Throughout the play she fights with both the Devil and his derivative embodiments, whether Tempters or Murderers. Yet the fight is unequal because step by step, each victory by evil eventually ends in defeat.

In relation to her, Thomas is spirit, order, the bearer of mystery and sacrifice. Shepherd and lamb, he has a different kind of war to fight against. He knows the way to God, whereas the people and their mute soul do not. He knows that the awareness of self as the

ultimate sacrifice, is the only escape from the tempting traps of rationality and time, it being the last barrier to overcome. This is his reason for sharing bread with the Mute Woman when he arrives back from his wanderings to celebrate Christmas. It brings to mind the Holy Mysteries and the Last Supper. Meagre, humble, the unleashing of bread will celebrate the communion of man and woman, sinless, *animus* and *anima*.

Making his messengers more and more numerous as time passes, the Devil in his turn stands alone. Harassing the Mute Woman for supremacy over the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury, he resolutely confronts Thomas Becket. Actually the two only come face to face once when the Devil himself tempts Becket with the greatest of all temptations, vain glory. It is the symbolism of the steps leading to this equation of temptations that takes us to the real stake of the confrontation: the Archbishop, the sacrifice, the one to be blessed by his own death bringing about peace, is fighting neither King nor Messengers; he does not attempt, as would a lawyer, to assert his earthly righteousness. His war does not belong to this world, and nobody, not even the Devil, can tempt from the outside the one who 'knows'. The Devil that truly has to be defeated is the one within. For anyone who holds divinity in their hearts must surely have a place where evil dwells.

The Saviour, the Devil and the Mute Woman. Why three? Because any mystic accession to unity must appear as a Trinity. In *Richard III* the triad of the death was outlined by the hero in two embodiments:



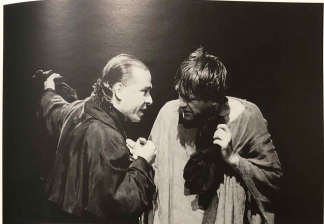
TEMPTER. I am only here, Thomas, to tell you what you know:
(*Murder in the Cathedral, part I*)

first, in Buckingham – still human – and secondly in the wolf – his androgynous animal variant, the embodiment that always brings death.

In *Murder in the Cathedral* the opposite happens: the Devil, who is the inner evil, is apparently, step by step, triumphing over his outside victories for the very reason that he is recognised and then rejected. One has to notice that half way through the performances of both *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Richard III*, Mănușiu focuses attention on the Double by having him help with the investiture of the hero: the wolf undresses Gloucester and then dresses himself up as Gloucester in his courtier's clothes. This leaves Gloucester dressed only in a simple black garment, so revealing the true nature of Richard. On the other hand, Thomas refuses the vestments of an archbishop brought in by Priests, and instead, the Mute Woman covers him with the white tablecloth from

the Last Supper. In both cases this is a moment of Communion for the hero and the Double – the two-in-one, a merging, while at the same time a definite separation between the hero and his post.

Last but not least, it is not by chance that the director in his production duplicates the liturgy officiated by the Archbishop with a second liturgy, that of the black mass, officiated by the Devil, and assisted by the pragmatic Knights, who are both murderers and commentators on their deeds. In their turn they also receive the Eucharist bringing them eternal damnation from the chalice that contains Thomas' heart. The sacrificial gesture is enlarged and made ambiguous by creating a distance between the two elements of the sacrament – bread and wine, body and blood in order to highlight the apparent uselessness and yet compulsory violence of martyrdom.



PEMPIER. What can compare with glory of Swiss
Dwelling forever in presence of God?
(Murder in the Cathedral, part 1)

THOMAS. *Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;*
Temptation shall not come in this land again;
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
(Murder in the Cathedral, part 1)



The performance starts and ends with the presence of the Mute Woman. She continually searches for a ray of light and only in the last scene does she discover it when placing the two swords used for the crime in the shape of a cross. Defeated, the Devil is driven away. The Divine Grace apparently comes upon the Mute Woman and heals her muteness so she is able to announce to the world Thomas' sacrifice and resulting salvation. It is obvious that for Minsztra, it is not Becket who is central to the performance but his relationship with his Double, the Mute Woman who signifies the souls of Canterbury. Through him she succeeds in achieving the earthly experience of revelation, and union with the spirit.