

# The Racism of the Nazi Lager: The Boundaries Between Reality and Fiction in Moravia's *Dio Kurt*

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If we consider the juridical notion of «the state of exception» and if, as Agamben affirms in *Homo sacer*, we consider the «relation of exception» (from *ex capere*) as an «extreme form of the relation that includes through exclusion» (Agamben 2005: 22), we can see why Agamben, adopting a term from Carl Schmitt, defines the concentration camp as an «absolute space of exception» that is «topologically different to a simple space of reclusion» (ibid: 24). In the concentration camp, that which regulates the spatial relationship between inside and outside is a relation of «inclusive exclusion» (ibid: 26), in that it includes that which is excluded by the juridical order. The «state of exception» indicates, in other words, a «zone of indistinction» (ibid: 23) between what is inside and what is outside, and «when our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp» (ibid: 24).

The concentration camp is defined not by «ordinary law», but by «the state of exception» (ibid: 186), more precisely it is «the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule» (ibid: 188). Its paradoxical status consists precisely in the fact that it is «a part of the territory that is located outside of the normal juridical order», notwithstanding the fact that it is not an «external space» (ibid: 189). As a «desired state of exception», the concentration camp is a «new paradigm of juridical-political space», in which «the rule is indistinguishable from the exception». For this reason, according to

Agamben, questions surrounding the legality or illegality of what occurs within it are senseless, the concentration camp being a «hybrid of rights and facts, in which the two terms become indistinguishable» (ibid: 190). The concentration camp, then, is «the structure in which the state of exception, decided by sovereign power, becomes the norm» (ibid: 190). Sovereign power, that makes the «decision of exception», is identified in «the point of indistinction between violence and rights». It is «the zone in which violence transforms into rights, and rights into violence» (ibid: 38). With the term «bare life», that he takes from Walter Benjamin, Agamben describes the dimension in which a simultaneous relationship between violence and rights exists. It is biological life, that which the Greeks defined as *zoe*, extraneous to the sphere of political decision making and distinct from *bios* which is that part of life conditioned by the polis.

The principle thesis of *Homo sacer* is that authentic knowledge of the nature of totalitarian power and of the Nazi death camps can be found only in a biopolitical context, that is, only by apprehending that Fascism and Nazism are biopolitical movements in that they have made biological life «the space par excellence of sovereign decision» (ibid: 142). The concentration camp is «a paradigm of political space in the point in which the political becomes the biopolitical», because «its inhabitants are deprived of all political status» and are reduced to a state of «bare life» over which sovereign power applies its rule without any form of mediation.

In the light of this interpretation, the concentration camp as «state of exception» and as «the space in which bare life and the state of right enter into a zone of indistinction» (ibid: 195), it is possible to attempt a reading of Moravia's *Dio Kurt*, his 1968 play set in a Nazi concentration camp. The “cultural experiment” that the Nazi Colonel Kurt organizes in the play, appears similar to the exercise of sovereign power over bare life. It also appears to confirm Abensour's proposition that Nazism «is not so much “the production of politics as art” as the abyssal reduction of politics to a bio-logic» (Abensour 2005: 77-78). The camp commander, Kurt, plans to stage a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in the concentration camp in such a way that the events

are lived directly by the actors, the deported Jews, and that, with himself as director, the fiction of the Greek tragedy substitutes the real life of the characters. In this way the concentration camp becomes the state of exception and space in which sovereign power manifests itself as a ferocious arbitrator at work on the biological dimension of the detainees. In the Prologue, Kurt himself explains that in the performance there will not be «la solita scissione tra essere e parere, tra finzione e realtà, che si verifica in ogni rappresentazione teatrale» (Moravia 1998: 451) . The tragedy will be lived by a family of imprisoned Jews. Kurt plans an artifice through which Saul, an old school mate deported to the camp with his family, will become Oedipus and will really kill his father and will really become his mother's lover, unaware of what he has done until his appearance on the 'stage'. A further aspect of the annihilation of the boundaries between fiction and the reality of the Greek tragedy, is enounced by the presence of Kurt himself in the play in the role of Fate, a figure that does not really appear in Oedipus Rex. Kurt says: «Sarò il Fato nella finzione in quanto ne interpreterò la parte; ma sarò anche il Fato nella realtà della vita, in quanto sono il comandante del campo, cioè appunto, per i deportati, quella forza misteriosa che decide della loro vita e della loro morte» (ibid: 453) .

«The power that penetrates the bodies of the subjects and their life forms» (Agamben 2005: 7) manifests itself in the biopolitical power of Kurt who has absolute agency over «life that is absolutely expendable, that becomes politicized through its expendable nature» (ibid: 99). Kurt represents «il Fato Tedesco che punisce Saul non già perché ha ucciso suo padre e ingravidato sua madre, ma perché è nato» (Moravia 1998: 507-508). The theatrical performance corresponds to the reality of the concentration camp, a reality that sees on one hand German Fate and «dall'altra i rappresentanti di una razza che il Fato Tedesco ha condannato irrevocabilmente» (ibid: 508).

Apart from the annihilation of the zone that separates violence and rights, that manifests itself in that state of exception that is the concentration camp, in the plot of the Moravian tragedy another indistinction appears, that between reality and fiction. With his

experiment, Kurt wants to reveal «l'inconsistenza e irrealtà del Fato della finzione» and «la consistenza e realtà del Fato della vita vissuta» (ibid: 453), because the theatre is «sì fatto di parole; ma dietro le parole hanno da esservi le cose» (ibid: 490) .

Already in the prologue to the play, Kurt senses that the fate of the fiction, destiny, will not come true; he will not be able to ensure that the tragedy of Oedipus, enacted in the camp, will fulfill the cathartic function of the Greek tragedy: Jocaster will not commit suicide and Oedipus will not blind himself. In fact, having discovered the truth of Kurt's machinations, Saul kills Kurt with the gun he had given him, the same gun used to kill his father. In this way the Fate of the fictional tragedy, Greek Fate, gives way to the Fate of reality, German Fate. Before dying, Kurt devolves his characters from their exemplar roles in the Greek tragedy, ordering his successor to reinstate mother and son into the mass of Jewish deportees, each one numbered, ready to take up new roles in the collective drama of the real: «il Fato Tedesco ha sostituito il Fato Greco» given that «alla tragedia individuale, familiare, è subentrata la tragedia collettiva» (ibid: 510). Oedipus-Saul opposes his logic of art to Kurt's logic of the German mission: he maintains that art consists «proprio nel contrario della cruda e sanguinosa realtà della vita vissuta» (ibid: 503). Art is capable of «non già nel fornire una copia della realtà o addirittura nel vivere questa realtà [...], bensì nel darne il simbolo innocuo e liberatorio» (ibid). To Kurt, however, the German mission is to construct – in reality – a new heroic civilization in the name of which he eventually immolates himself. «Sì, la guerra è perduta – Kurt says – ma la nostra idea, appunto perché la guerra è perduta, ha vinto» (ibid: 509).

Kurt expresses the conviction that «la cultura, non meno della scienza, anzi forse di più, contribuirà in avvenire a creare quell'umanità nuova» (ibid: 440) and it is for this that the Germans wage war. His “cultural experiment” was able to prove that Greek Fate, that of fiction, no longer exists, not just because he was unable to lead Jocaster and Oedipus to their self-punishing ends, but that by killing Kurt, impersonating the Fate of fiction, Saul effectively kills Greek Fate, leaving the way clear to German Fate which will reposition

him within the mechanism of the death camp. In the Nazi Reich, Kurt affirms, «l'educazione è basata sui fatti» (ibid: 454) and not on cultural values. Education implies a «indurirsi» (ibid: 455) given that Nazi education is «fatta col ferro e col fuoco», ready to «entrare nel sangue, formare una seconda natura» (ibid). Kurt maintains that when faced with one's own fate, only two responses are possible, "love" or "rebellion". With his rebellion, Saul has not expressed an act of freedom against destiny, like in fictional tragedy, but has acted within the canons of German Fate, he has "confirmed its existence" (ibid: 508). Thus, in Kurt's view, pure humanity can, in the future, be nothing more than that "heroic" one that he himself represents: as the practical executor of German Fate and the sovereign power over the real lives of millions.

Sovereign power transformed into «thanatopolitics» (Agamben 2005: 135), as it appears in Moravia's work, seems to allude to the very destruction of tragedy that is based on the relationship fate and freedom and expressed by the hero's rebellion that contributes to convert death into sacrifice and to bestow rational meaning onto reality.

In *Dio Kurt*, "guilt" and self-punishment, in the classical sense of tragedy, are absent and Saul's rebellion, in as much as it represents the rebellion against fate typical of the tragic hero, is stripped of its sacrificial function. In this sense, Moravia's work finds resonance in Agamben:

The Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of homo sacer in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. The truth-which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils – is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust, but exactly as Hitler had announced, "as lice", which is to say, as bare life. The location of this extermination is not to be found either in religion or rights, but in biopolitics. (Ibid: 126-127)

Beyond the rough, rudimentary and miserable 'anti-politics' of Kurt and Nazism, Moravia's work raises disquieting questions about the role of art that can transform itself into a dangerous instrument of power when stripped of its essential status as fiction and performed, instead, in real life. Levinas maintained that the novelty of Hitlerism consisted in its positing a new relation of inherence to the world, a relation that presupposed a "new concept of man", whose essence is no longer to be found "in freedom" but in "enslavement" (enchainement) to the body (Levinas 2005: 31-32). In contrast with Western traditions, that in some form or another have expressed the relation between the I and the non-I as an inquest into freedom that seeks to liberate man from «the immobility of the factual» (Abensour 2005: 47), Hitlerism expresses a new «sentiment of the body» (Levinas 2005: 31) that as Abensour writes, has performed «a sinister confusion between a movement towards the concrete and the brutalization of existence» (Abensour 2005: 48).

In the light of these reflections, the implications for a reading of Moravia's work become evident: the exaltation of concrete existence on the part of Kurt can be explicated, according to Levinas, as the modality of being that Nazism refers to, the attempt to "rivet" the body to the facticity of existence. From this perspective, Kurt's project consists in an attempt to prove that no other dimension exists except the biological, and it is on this premise that the new civilization desired by Nazism must be founded, a new civilization in which culture is deprived of its function of cognitive mediation. In Moravia's play, the Nazi project to construct a new civilization is revealed to be a form of anti-civilization, based on the barbarity of facticity, if we consider Levinas' assertion that «every civilization that accepts being, the tragic despair that it entails and the crimes that it justifies, deserves the name of barbaric» (Levinas 1982: 90).

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