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*Violence tragique et guerres antiques  
au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma  
(XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*

sous la direction de  
Tiphaine Karsenti & Lucie Thévenet

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THE OBSCENITY OF VIOLENCE, THE OBSCENITY OF THEATRE.  
THE DRAMATURGY OF CARMELO BENE'S LAST  
*PERFORMANCE DISCONCERTMENT*

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**Résumé :** Cet article porte sur la dramaturgie du dernier spectacle (2000) de Carmelo Bene, *L'Invulnerabilità d'Achille. Impossibile suite tra Ilio e Sciro. Spettacolo-sconcerto in un momento* (*L'Invulnérabilité d'Achille. Suite impossible entre Ilios et Skyros. Spectacle-concert en un moment*), qui explore le thème de la violence et de l'obscénité à travers plusieurs versions du mythe d'Achille traitant particulièrement de la conduite amoureuse du plus grand héros de l'*Iliade*. À travers cette thématique, Carmelo Bene met en question, pour la dernière fois, le phénomène théâtral lui-même.

**Mots-clés :** Carmelo Bene, Achille, *Penthesilea* de Kleist, représentation/irreprésentabilité, réécriture dramaturgique.

**Abstract:** This paper is on the dramaturgy of Carmelo Bene's last performance (2000), *L'Invulnerabilità d'Achille. Impossibile suite tra Ilio e Sciro. Spettacolo-sconcerto in un momento* (Achilles' In-vulnerability. Impossible suite between Ilios and Sciro. Performance-disconcertment in one moment), which explores the theme of violence and obscenity through many versions of the Achilles' myth regarding especially the love behaviour of the greatest warrior of Iliad. Through this theme, Carmelo Bene questions, for the last time, theatre itself.

**Keywords:** Carmelo Bene, Achilles, Kleist's Penthesilea, representation/unrepresentability, dramaturgical rewriting.

A major figure in contemporary theatre, Carmelo Bene shook Italian stages from the 1960s to 2002, when he died. Bene was more than a traditional actor: totally independent, he always remained the director and dramatist of his own performances and wrote extensively about his art and philosophical vision<sup>1</sup>.

Carmelo Bene conceived staging as a critical essay and variation of the text. For Bene, the stage had to be an “operating theatre”. Deleuze speaks about him as a “theatre operator” (“*opérateur du théâtre*”<sup>2</sup>) so as to highlight the continuous process of experimentation and dismantling, or dissection, in Bene’s work. From his very first performance, he fought against representational theatre, and in particular against the representation of the self. His artistic quest was built on the dichotomy between Representation and the unrepresentable. Regarding this, if Representation belongs to the domain of illusion and to the domain of a regulated shape, then the unrepresentable would be the domain of what cannot be captured in any shape or form, of what is unspeakable. His intellectual references were philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Bergson and Deleuze, among others. Since childhood, Bene had also been passionate about opera as well as the popular tradition of biographical writing on mystics and saints. Thus, on the one hand, his work consisted in breaking down traditional theatre and its coherent, logical system of dialogue, characters, action and plot, whilst, on the other hand, his art sought the paradox of the convocation of absence. In other terms, his research sought to bring sensation, the invisible and evocation to the stage, rather than illustration. More generally, his theatre sought vision—not vision as an image, but, borrowing from the mystical imaginary, vision as the revelation of what is normally hidden. According to this point of view, theatre is the no-place, the nowhere, in which what is on stage is not there. As Bene repeated, theatre is like the ascent of Mount Carmel by Juan de la Cruz, who climbs and climbs, and, finally, at the top of the hill, he finds nothing—the nothingness of a vision, not the nothingness of nihilism.

By playing on words in a Lacanian way, Bene affirms that theatre is *obscene*, “*osceno*”<sup>3</sup>. He separates the prefix *ob* from the rest of the word, making an etymological figure with the word for stage, “*scena*”<sup>4</sup>, in order to indicate what is off stage, or better and closer to the etymological meaning of *ob*, what is against the stage, and so what cannot be on stage.

Thus, in Bene’s theatre, there is no representation. This is not because of any morality, self-censorship or a desire to be “poetic” (his theatre is not symbolic); the reason is philosophical: this theatre does not show because it is impossible to show nothingness, in the same way as it is impossible to show air. We could say that for Bene the stage is like a balloon that we must pierce in order to feel just for a fleeting moment the passage and movement of the air. The nothingness does not show itself because it exceeds, it goes beyond—because it is obscene.

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<sup>1</sup> Carmelo Bene’s texts are collected in one volume: Carmelo Bene, *Opere*, Milano, Classici Bompiani, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, « Un manifeste de moins », in Carmelo Bene, Gilles Deleuze, *Superpositions*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Carmelo Bene, « Autografia di un ritratto », *Opere, op. cit.*, p. XI.

<sup>4</sup> In Italian the word “*scena*” has two meanings: “scene” and “stage”.

In order to achieve a theatre beyond representation, Carmelo Bene has made orality the main axis of his work<sup>5</sup>. Pioneer of an experimental use of sound technology in theatre since the 1970s (after his experience of filmmaker<sup>6</sup> and influenced by electronic music), he made the action of saying a process which recreates the text pronounced in the present by focusing on the materiality of voice and language. If at the beginning of his research his theatrical work consisted in exploring great classic drama plays, especially Shakespeare, with several actors on the stage who performed their replies as a sum of monologues or as solos in an opera, from 1980 Carmelo Bene made mainly what he called « spectacles-concerts », in which he was most often standing alone in front of the public, reading poetic texts with great sound amplification, as a sort of great singer, bard or priest.

According to Bene, text is but the trace of orality, his dead remains. To restore the “live” dimension of what is written, the actor has to forget the significance and let his attention go exclusively on the sound of what he interprets. However, this focus on sound materiality does not mean that Bene leaves out dramaturgic reflection. On the contrary, all his productions and poetic performances are based on an extensive literary study of the textual material, as will be seen with the example of his last scenic work.

For his last performance, on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2000, at the Argentina Theatre in Rome, Bene took three texts: the unfinished epic poem *Achilleid*, by Statius, *Penthesilea*, the play by Kleist, and the episodes about Achilles from Homer’s *Iliad*<sup>7</sup>. The texts were freely rewritten and woven together – *digested*, as Bene might say – but the main dramaturgical place is given to Kleist’s play.

The title of this performance is *Achilles’ Invulnerability. The impossible suite between Ilio and Sciro, performance-disconcertment in one moment (Invulnerabilità d’Achille. Impossibile suite tra Ilio e Sciro, spettacolo-sconcerto in un momento)*. The first word, invulnerability, highlights the condition of Achilles, whose whole body is immortal, invulnerable, except for his heel. But I would like to dwell briefly on the second part of the title: the suite, which in music signifies “collection of movements, of structured pieces” or “a piece modelled out of many parts”, is impossible, probably because many versions of the Achille’s myth have been put together without being compatible: from a logical point of view, they exclude each other. And this is very telling of the way Carmelo Bene *déjoue*, foils the plot or narration, by going beyond a linear logic, in successive stages, to reach a condition in which many time periods coexist, but also in which the subject evaporates and many doubles emerge instead. We can read the expression “in one moment” in the same way: the successive stages of a suite are thwarted by the fact that everything seems to happen in *one* single moment. Lastly but not least, the Italian word *sconcerto*, which I have translated as *disconcertment*, can be interpreted in two ways: if we follow the first, we can read the first letter “s” as a privative s in front of concert—the concert is there to be dismantled (dismembered...). The second interpretation would be to take the full word, *sconcerto*,

<sup>5</sup> I’ve developed this aspect in: Cristina De Simone, « Ventriloquies », Cristina De Simone, Christian Biet, (dir.), *D’Après Carmelo Bene, Revue d’Histoire du Théâtre*, n° 263, juillet-septembre 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Carmelo Bene has done some experimental films from 1967 to 1973 : *Barocco leccese* (1967), *Hermitage* (1968), *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (1968), *Capricci* (1969), *Don Giovanni* (1970), *Salomé* (1972), *Un Amleto di meno* (1973).

<sup>7</sup> In 1997, Carmelo Bene made a film of this spectacle for the public Italian television (RAI): *Invulnerabilità d’Achille (tra Sciro e Ilio)*. This film is available on youtube : <https://www.youtube.com>

which in Italian means “disconcertment, disorientation, stupor”; thus, we have at the same time, in this single word, the idea of both a dismantled concert and the image of a state of stupor.

And the stupor comes in the middle of Kleist’s play *Penthesilea*. In love with her adversary, in an Amazon society which is founded on the prohibition of falling in love with the desired or captured prey<sup>8</sup>, Penthesilea’s whole being is struck by an overwhelming fury which exceeds her, a fury in which opposites—love and hate, life and death—merge and implode.

In a spasm and a paroxysm beyond all measure, Penthesilea ends up tearing Achilles apart, ripping his body into pieces: she is no longer a woman but a bitch surrounded by dogs. In this way, she kills Achilles beyond death, because she has not only murdered his soul but also eliminated his body by devouring it; as a result, the memorial ceremony, the rite of burial, the representation of distress, is impossible. In this act, Penthesilea’s fury exceeds her: she is mad, unaware, not conscious of what she has done. When she goes back to her encampment, met with the horror and the disconcertment of her fellows, she is like a sleepwalker. Her eyes staring into emptiness, she is expressionless, oblivious: *stupid, stupefied*. Her awakening is terrible: the thought of the accomplished act annihilates her, and kills her like a poison with an instant, fatal effect.

In Kleist’s text, the horror of this unimaginable, unperformable act corresponds to a kind of “deferred” playwriting, which is driven by witnesses’ reports given at the same time or after the events described. Throughout the play, messengers testify to the events they have seen, or they refer to them with *teichoscopy*. The crucial moment when Penthesilea rushes at Achilles in blind rage with her elephants and ferocious dogs is told first in real time; then, it is narrated by the Amazon Meroé, torn between her duty to inform and the shock, accompanied by the risk of falling into the unspeakable, into aphasia.

With this process, Kleist follows the style of ancient Greek tragedy<sup>9</sup>. Regarding the story of Penthesilea and Achilles, Kleist reverses the post-Homeric version: in the tradition represented by Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica*, it is Achilles who kills Penthesilea. Moreover, Achilles falls in love with the Amazon at the very moment she expires; he is wounded by her eyes as she is passing away. In love with her, Achilles possesses her near-dead body. So, with this episode of necrophilia, we have once again a profanation of the body, and in reversing the terms of the story, Kleist transposes and develops the inhuman side of the posthomerian version. Finally, for Penthesilea’s dispossession caused by her cannibal fury, he derives inspiration from three plays by Euripides: *Medea*, *Bacchantes* and *Hippolytus*<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that Roland Barthes, in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* talks about the obscenity of love in the context of modern opinion, in which sentimentality is discredited and felt by the subject as a transgression. (Roland Barthes, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1977, p. 208).

<sup>9</sup> In connection to this theme of unperformability, it is relevant to recall the voluntarily utopian stage direction of Kleist’s text, which is impossible to conform to, especially when Penthesilea is present on stage with all her animals and preparing herself for battle.

<sup>10</sup> In *Hippolytus*, the body of Hippolytus is not eaten, but it is horrifically tormented: this atrocious episode reminds of the one in the *Iliad* in which Achilles, impious, beyond measure, drags and rips apart Hector’s dead body, which he has tied to his chariot.

Hence, unlike his contemporaries, Goethe, Schiller and Winckelmann, Kleist does not take classical myths as figures of order, which protect against chaos. In the classical repertoire, he chooses to work on irrationality as a force reacting against a rational and unfair power. More precisely, rationality is here considered as an oppressive power.

The *Achilleid* by Statius does not mention Achilles's love for Penthesilea, but tells how Achilles, when he was a young boy, was hidden by his mother Thetis on the Scyros island in order to protect him from the Greeks, who were going to fight against Troy. So, Achilles's mother dresses her son up as a young girl and entrusts him to the king, a father who only has adolescent daughters. Thetis introduces her son Achilles as his sister, who, because of the emulation with her strong brother, now behaves as if she/he was an Amazon: thus, she/he needs to be reeducated by being in the company of girls of "her" age. But Achilles, in the meanwhile, has fallen in love with Deidamia, the king's eldest daughter. When they dance and play together, he gazes lovingly at her and holds her a little bit too tightly, she who is unaware of the fact that her new friend is in fact a boy. In the end, Achilles rapes her. Thus, in this version, there is, on the one hand, the theme of disguise travesty and of sexual ambiguity which this episode plays on, an ambiguity that makes Achilles the feminine double of himself; and, on the other hand, the plot gives rise to the brutality with which this love is declared, in a context of innocence and children's games, like a dirty obscene stain on a white sheet.

If we go back briefly to Kleist, Penthesilea and Achilles stand in front of one another like each other's double: both powerful and proud, neither wants to be subjected to the other, except when it is too late, after a series of misunderstandings (which recalls Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*). Moreover, the cannibal act annihilates—in the most extreme way—the distinction between an I and a You. In this connection, it is interesting to remember how the life of Kleist ended. Kleist fell in love with a woman who agreed to commit suicide with him. Her name was Adolphine Vogel: Heinrich von Kleist renamed her Henriette, and Heinrich and Henriette took their own lives by shooting themselves on lake Wannsee.

Therefore, these three texts chosen by Bene are deeply linked to each other, with the themes of extreme love, violence, the idea of feminine/masculine doubles strongly expressed through disguise travesty and rape in Statius, necrophilious love in Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, cannibalism and suicide in *Penthesilea* and impious rage in *Iliad*.

If we consider now Bene's *performance-disconcert*, the actor is alone on the stage, surrounded by white lace, white ribbons and white clothes, as if he were in the room of a young princess. On his right, there is an open book; on his left, there are some articulated dummies and puppets, some lying twisted, crumpled on the floor<sup>11</sup>. Bene disassembles and reassembles the limbs of his monstrous puppets. The stage looks like a camp after an explosion, contrasting sharply with the immaculate white fabrics and the lace-covered cradle. Therefore, it looks as if it is Achilles who tears the body of Penthesilea to pieces. But at the same time, this act also reminds us of the text by Statius: Achilles raping Deidamia. In any case, from the point of view of a simple description, what the spectator sees is a serious-looking man playing absentmindedly with a puppet, as if he were doing the act unconsciously and as if he were beside himself.

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<sup>11</sup> Since *Pinocchio* (1961) and *Richard III* (1977), Carmelo Bene's theatre is rich in its use of masks, puppets and prosthesis, which participates in the deconstruction of acting dramatic characters.

These puppets and dummies with oniric postures remind of the *Doll* by Hans Bellmer, the surrealist artist, a friend of Bataille's and reader of Sade. One of the first and main inspirations for young Bellmer was an exchange of letters between Kokoschka and a puppeteer, Hermine Moss, whom he asked to build a life-sized puppet. Kokoschka is also the author of a collection of drawings based on Penthesilea.

According to Hans Bellmer, there is continuity between the inside and the outside of a being. Because of this continuity, there is a direct connection between, for example, a toothache and the reflex to clutch the painful area and dig one's nails into the skin: by creating this new pain, we divert and free ourselves of the original pain. "*L'expression*", writes Bellmer in his *Anatomy of the physical unconscious*, "*avec ce qu'elle comporte de plaisir, est une douleur déplacée, elle est une délivrance*"<sup>12</sup>. The labyrinth-like bodies of his puppets are used to trace the paths which carry external expression from the inside and vice versa.

Si l'on pouvait dire que la main crispée s'oppose à la dent, on est porté maintenant à dire que l'image de la dent se déplace sur la main, l'image du sexe sur l'aisselle, celle de la jambe sur le bras, celle du nez sur le talon. Main et dent, aisselle et sexe, talon et nez, bref : excitation virtuelle et excitation réelle se confondent en se superposant<sup>13</sup>.

The body is, for Bellmer, like a sentence, which needs to be broken up, disarticulated, in order to reassemble its real contents through a series of never-ending anagrams. There is not only a connection between the inside and the outside, but also reversibility—a reversibility which concerns every pair of opposites and which is, for Bellmer, how language originated<sup>14</sup>.

Les langues primitives s'expriment à ce point de vue-là comme le rêve ; elles n'ont au début qu'un mot pour les deux points opposés d'une série de qualités ou d'actions (fort-faible, proche-lointain, lié-séparé). Les termes spéciaux pour désigner les contraires n'apparaissent que tard, par légère modification du terme primitif. Au même sujet, Freud rappelle l'existence des mots de la même signification, dont la suite des caractères a été renversée : pot-Topf, Ziege-Geis<sup>15</sup>.

In this connection, this recalls Penthesilea, in Kleist's play, who confuses *Küsse* (kisses) with *Bisse* (bites): *So war es ein Versehen. Küsse, Bisse / Das reimt sich, und wer recht von Herzen liebt, / Kann schon das Eine für Andre greifen.* ("So it was a mistake. Kiss and bite, / They rhyme, for one who truly loves / With all her heart can easily mistake them.")

According to Bellmer, we can find this reversibility also in the love relationship, which for him is a process of splitting and doubling:

Il est certain qu'on ne se demandait pas assez sérieusement, jusqu'à présent, dans quelle mesure l'image de la femme désirée serait prédéterminée par l'image de l'homme qui désire, donc en dernier lieu par une série de projections du phallus, qui iraient

<sup>12</sup> Hans Bellmer, *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'anatomie de l'image*, Paris, Éditions Allia, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> « Le goût de la réversibilité qui est à l'origine des mots. », *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



progressivement du détail de la femme vers son ensemble, de façon que le doigt de la femme, la main, le bras, la jambe ne soient le sexe de l'homme<sup>16</sup>.

From this point of view, the game plays an important role: thanks to games, it is possible to discover new combinations, which reveal unexpected interrelations between the inside and its expression. Surrealism gave great importance to games and the imagination, which are linked. Parallel to this, in surrealism we also find a rehabilitation of violence as the expression and the mystery of the subconscious. Violence is eroticized – with the major example of Georges Bataille – and Sade becomes an author of reference.

La curiosité de l'homme de vouloir voir et de faire scandaleusement voir l'intérieur, cet intérieur qui restera toujours caché, deviné, derrière les couches successives de la construction humaine et ses dernières inconnues<sup>17</sup>.

To resume the main points: Bene's dramaturgy convokes the question of the reversibility of opposites, which concerns the I and You (cannibalism, necrophilia), life and death, the inner-self and the outer-self, the inside and the outside (which implies the fact of *seeing what is impossible to see*). A reversibility which is explored through games, violent games which might remind us of a little girl taking her puppet to pieces, only to find the nothing inside.

Going back to Bene's performance, we find once again this confusion between life and death, and between subjects: the game with the puppet is, in a way, necrophilious (this action of dissembling and reassembling limbs) and evokes a real violence: the violence of disarticulation. Moreover, we do not know who is talking (Achilles? Penthesilea? A mad man?), nor when, where, or why. We do not know from which point of view and from which point of hearing Bene speaks, not least because his voice is constantly deferred due to microphones which work on different sounds and different tones.

In this performance, we find the presence of silence. The silence is heavily loaded because Bene, and the spectator through him, are listening to it. As Piergiorgio Giacchè says, in this performance the spectator listens to a listening<sup>18</sup>. The action of saying turns into the action of listening. And through this strange silence, it is as if we were listening to the arrival, or the return, of something imminent. In connection with this, it is interesting to look at the double definition of "horror" in psychology: horror can be induced by the violent rejection of the consequences of a catastrophe; or it can be provoked by the presentiment of an untimely or imminent death. This silence participates in producing a state of horror as presentiment. The words that Bene says, the sentences—which often go unfinished—seem to come and go from this heavily charged silence and seem to disappear into it, without discontinuity. Regarding the sound, the spectator can hear sudden tearing noises, which flash on and off like sonorous phantoms, abruptly imminent and present, and at the same time already gone.

Thus, everything happens in a virtual way, or better, "elsewhere", and we have the impression that this performance reveals the presence of an absence. In this way,

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Bellmer, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Piergiorgio Giacchè, *Carmelo Bene. Antropologia di una macchina attoriale*, Milano, Studi Bompiani, 2007, p. 195.

obscenity plays with mystery and enchantment, and becomes ob-scene, ob-stage. In this respect, we can remember that *obscenus* signifies above all something fatal, and, moreover, that the name Penthesilea means “compelling men to mourn”. But ob-scenity also plays with a fundamental lack of memory: Bene seems to interrupt himself and to mix one story with another, because of an oversight. And one of the last sentences of this performance is precisely: “I have a pain, as it were a pain which, once woke up, we have forgotten.”

Kleist’s reflection on Friedrich’s painting “The Monk By the Sea” in his essay “Sentiments Before Friedrich’s Seascape” may be an important key to understand both Kleist’s and Bene’s operation. Friedrich’s painting represents a capuchin-friar standing in front of the sea. The figure is tiny compared with the sea-sky, and hence sea seems to be the main subject of the composition. Kleist talks about the great sensation of being in front of the sea, a sensation in which the “I” gets lost in the feeling of both plenitude and nostalgia. Friedrich represents this sensation by the small size of the capuchin compared with the immensity of the sea. But, at the same time, according to Kleist, it is precisely *because* the situation is represented that it stops the spectator from getting lost in the feeling of *Sehnsucht*. The presence of the capuchin prevents the spectator from forgetting the “I”. That is why representation might be avoided, in order, we could say, to have the sea directly: for this purpose, the context of the beach and the presence of the capuchin, and perhaps also the frame of the painting, must disappear.

In Kleist, as in Bene, the concept of what exceeds and what is invisible is explored through the theme of extreme violence, and vice versa. From this point of view, the theme of extreme violence reveals the impossibility of representation. Both Kleist and Bene chose not to represent this extraordinary violence in order to fully convey all its power.

Thus, for his last performance, which is representative of his in-depth dramaturgic research, Bene explores the multiple ties between different versions of the Achille’s myth and in particular their rewriting by Kleist through the terrible love story with Penthesilea. In doing so, he composes an intersection between theatrical and philosophical research and the chosen themes: dis-concertment overtakes disconcertment; representation is dismantled by stupor; violence here is like a tear in the invisible, a laceration in what is forgotten, in what is unspeakable.

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