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"The Thing Itself" Ironic Hermeneutics of the Subject in *King Lear*

Sergej Macura

- 1 This article will draw on the essential ideas expressed in Michel Foucault's ground-breaking series of lectures, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, delivered at the College de France in the 1981/82 academic year, treating the lesser known tradition of subject formation – *epimeleia heautou* or *cura sui*, "taking care of oneself." Unlike the much more famous, perhaps even time-worn instruction of *gnothi seauton* ("know thyself"), the *cura sui* principle served as a more general framework in the ethics of classical antiquity¹, to an extent superimposed to the more famous Socratic credo. That Foucault well understood the broader picture and common ethics of a society similar in time and government to that of *King Lear* can be illustrated with the following quotation including his own clarifying comments: "He [the accused Socrates] would usually say to those that he met: "My honest man, you are an Athenian, citizen of the greatest, wisest and most powerful polis, and you are not ashamed to take care (*epimelesthai*) of hoarding treasure, but of the well-being of your glory, honour, wits, truth, and soul, you care not in the least (*epimele, phrontizeis*)²."
- 2 James Marshall notices that in the later stages of his involvement with questions of subjectivity, Foucault's question was: "Who are we in the present, what is this fragile moment from which we can't detach our identity and which will carry that identity away with itself?" In Nietzschean fashion he was to answer this question by turning to experience, as opposed to starting from a committed and perhaps theoretical philosophical position, and ask questions about how we constitute the self. As he said:

What I rejected was the idea of starting out with a theory of the subject [...] What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another [...] it is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not always identical to itself [...] in each case one plays, one establishes a different relation to oneself⁴.

- 3 The frequency of second-person addresses in a vast majority of plays of the European tradition lies beyond any doubt, so firmly that we could even assume that a dialogue between two actants (let us provisionally name them 'I' and 'you') constitutes the backbone of the genre itself; the verbal discourse in a play has a pivotal point in the person of the speaker, against whom all the other subjects are set in a proxemic relation. As Keir Elam notes: "Two broad classes of movement, the 'proximal' (a movement *towards* the speaker's body) and the 'distal' (a movement *away*) are distinguished⁵." Elam reprints Birdwhistell's 1971 diagram of the two pronominal marker classes with the signifiers such as 'I', 'me', 'my', 'our', 'we', 'here', 'this' and 'now' in the centre of the figure, and with the distal ones circularly deployed around them – 'he', 'she', 'his', 'her', 'it', 'then', 'they', but he does not furnish us with any conceivable location of the 'you' marker class. On the example of the text of *King Lear*, we will discuss certain relations constructed through the I-you dialogue, analyse the shifts to the I-thou form, and attempt to elucidate (with as much sound judgement as the elusive main character allows) the layers of self-knowledge on the part of King Lear.

I

- 4 Northrop Frye asserts that Lear belongs to the group of characters whose isolation has intensified their consciousness. He has withdrawn from the social group and is now seeing it as objective, as facing him with indifference or hostility. "But he is seeing it, so to speak, from our own side of the stage, and his thoughts are for the moment ours. Most of the really titanic figures of Shakespearean tragedy are in this position for most of the play, Lear, Othello, Hamlet and Macbeth included, and it is the presence of this perspective that makes the tragedy authentic⁶". The isolation of King Lear occurs in stages from the very outset of the play, with the division of the kingdom mentioned in line 1.1.4, most probably as a consequence of the King's earlier decision the exact time of which does not concern us here. Lear's own justification is found in his years and the concerns of any king in a similar situation:

Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death⁷.

- 5 Some authors have seen through Lear's rashness, his whimsicality and passionate feelings. He is curious, he wants to see himself what is going to happen when he divides his kingdom, and wants to experience what would have been a period after his death. "He does not tempt fate, he wishes to see how its threads will be woven after his departure. For the departure from the throne to a king is as same as the departure for nothingness, for death⁸". Lear's credulity, which triggers off a series of peripeties through the famous love-testing scene, may have been developed due to the absence of a person that could have conferred, in Foucauldian terms, the discourse of truth, or *parrhesia*, upon him – "simultaneously both *techné* and ethics, both skill and morality⁹". Coupled with his age of over eighty and his long period of rule, Lear's dogmatism must have hardened to the point of impenetrability and to the exclusion of the two-way communication. Needless to say, Lear does not accept the commonsensical advice of his loyal Earl of Kent, and he drives him away unceremoniously in the same scene. That is just the beginning of a series

of dialogues which end in the severed channel of communication between Lear and his collocutors. In addition, Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* has two rival figures. Schematically speaking, the teacher's *parrhesia* (free speech, sincerity) has two opponents:

The first is of moral nature, which it directly opposes and should fight against. And the moral opponent of free speech is *flattery*. Second, free speech has a technical opponent. The technical opponent is *rhetoric*, in relation to which free speech occupies a much more complex position than in relation to flattery. Flattery is an enemy. Free speech should banish flattery and get rid of it¹⁰.

- 6 What we see in Act I, Scene 1 is a masterly example of rhetoric and flattery put to one sole use – cruel deception of the naïve, guileless collocutor (so far as his daughters are concerned, Lear puts the concept of *love* above that of *kingdom*, parts of which are rewarded to them as a natural course of action for such "faithfulness"):

Lear. Goneril,
Our eldest-born, speak first.
Gon. Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you¹¹.

- 7 The love test takes place in public, and it offers convenient grounds for the ambitious daughters to become revered thereafter by both the former King and the courtiers as the paragons of filial affection and shrewd politicians. After Regan declares herself an enemy to all other joys except those of loving Lear, poor Cordelia's speech is an anticlimax that her father least expected, supposing her to be ready to "draw / A third more opulent than your sisters¹²" ? Instead of earning a kingdom of her own with at least two possible royal matches for her, Cordelia "cannot heave / My heart into my mouth: I love your Majesty / According to my bond; no more nor less¹³". Lear hereby divests all his "paternal care, / Propinquity and property of blood¹⁴" and declares Cordelia his "sometime daughter¹⁵", we can suppose, even more rashly than he decided to strip himself of the kingdom. A careful reader soon gets in a position to follow the changes of the second-person pronoun from *you* to *thee*, indicating Lear's rage (the other expressive field where this pronoun could have been used has a quite opposite, love-professing nature). The King switches to *thee* in line 1.1.104: "But goes thy heart with this" ?, only to continue with "thy truth then be thy dower¹⁶". What matters most in the first scene of the play, according to Jayne, is "not the dissolution of the kingdom, but what happens to Lear himself, and this is that he is alienated from the person he most loves, and whose love he most needs, because he is unable at the critical moment himself to give the kind of love which he needs¹⁷". The King discards the paternal feelings for the sake of fake confession of love in public, which Cordelia does not stoop to, causing her own grief.
- 8 So far we have seen the double edge of Lear's half-way success in dealing with the persons nearest to him – he receives declarative favours from Goneril and Regan, while rejecting Kent's sound and painfully true advice: "be Kent unmannerly, / When Lear is mad. What would'st thou do, old man? / Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak / When power to flattery bows¹⁸ ?" The discourse of truth bears such an importance to Kent that he is willing even to wage his life in order to get some sense into Lear, but he in turn is willing only to command, not to listen to the voice of compassion. "Kent as a faithful

subject would normally have addressed Lear with *you*, but after two milder approaches to the King, he addresses Lear in the singular only. To an audience of the time, Kent's use of *thou* must have produced a spine-chilling effect of *lèse-majesté*¹⁹. Cordelia tries to explain to her father her true feelings by alluding to her sisters' "still-soliciting eye, / And such a tongue that I am glad I have not"²⁰, but she is rudely rebuffed.

- 9 The Gloucester subplot does not abound in such outbursts of violent behaviour as the dialogues in which Lear plays the preeminent role, but it contributes, in a minor key, to our understanding of the extent of deceit, treachery and greed through its more controlled train of thoughts. We learn immediately that Edmund serves his "goddess Nature", not the "plague of custom" – his mere mention of Nature's law does not indicate, however, any conceivable set of regulations that could be subsumed under the heading of natural law except that it opens up a vast manoeuvring space for every justification of his scheming. To an extent, as the chaos of the play is augmenting, Lear is sinking into madness and invoking Nature, and the sane Edmund is sinking into corruption and addressing the same entity. Gloucester remains ignorant of the quality of the treachery and the perpetrator's vicinity, and the reader views him in all his naivety; the textual sequence of these nouns is so inseparable that one wonders at the father's gullibility: "Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose you nothing: do it carefully"²¹. Both Cordelia and Edgar must cope with the monstrosity discourse imposed upon them by their natural and cultural seniors, having no chance to contradict the generators of the power discourse. They have been temporarily moved out of the way by means of more skilfully crafted dialogues of their siblings with their fathers – Goneril and Regan and Edmund respectively blind the King and the Earl with the replicas their vanity expects the children to produce, in a society where any deviation from this course is considered a violation of the eternal code of rank and degree.

- 10 When Kent returns to the stage in disguise, that event also offers us a brief glimpse into the extent of Lear's progressive derangement – the King does not recognise the servant he dismissed a short time before, and addresses him curtly:

Lear. How now! What art thou?

Kent. A man, Sir.

Lear. What does thou profess? What would'st thou with us?

Kent. I do profess to be no less than I seem; to serve him truly that will put me in trust.

[...]

Lear. What art thou?

Kent. A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the King²².

- 11 It is not strange that a rash man who is not quite at his senses should ask the same fundamental question twice: what art thou? The former instance shows high ambivalence of interpretation, since in normal circumstances it would be redundant, even impertinent, to reply with "a man". Kent understands that he needs to make a fresh start with his old master from the very bottom of social existence. On the other hand, Lear's first question may assume some aura of philosophical *quidditas*, and seems to far transcend the confusion in his mind. When the *genus proximus* has been established, they give more precise meaning to the same question in further conversation, the *differentia specifica* – "a very honest-hearted fellow". The King's world picture demonstrates a striking absence of fixed meaning and an increasing divorce from the cognition of reality, which his evil-wishers avail themselves of with brutal passion, shrouded in smooth-tongued flattery. All of his speeches and dialogues, especially as the play develops, may at

the same time have two basic directions – denotative, i.e. they indicate what is happening *around* him, and connotative, telling the reader so much about his insanity and how little he knows what he is doing while addressing the second person (to use a syntactic parallelism, what is happening *in* him). In fact, he has experienced a series of setbacks and emotional discharges that he can no longer trust his own eyes or mind; hence the question "what art thou" ? may also be interpreted as "what happened to you" ? or "what happened to my reason now that I see this miserable sight" ? In fact, Lear is rather examining his own ability to comprehend the world, now turned more and more natural, and less and less cultural, with worsening prospects in view. The miserable wretches he sees around him and has conversations with can be understood as gradual projections and reflections of his own mental and cultural states – an exiled vagabond, a fool, and a madman.

- 12 The array of Lear's message addressees is very large – in hierarchical formation, they include the heavens, nature, his daughters, servants, the fellow-sufferers on the heath (he never actually had friends in a strict sense while ruling), his clothes as the last rags of civilisation, even his eyes and head. With the exception of heaven and nature (at times capitalised), these entities are all potential foes to the King and often receive verbal chastisement in the process of his search for the truth. Unfortunately, the more social substance he loses, the more of a shadow he becomes, his consciousness also fading in the process.
- 13 The Fool is perhaps the only person subjected to Lear that does not have to fear his uncontrollable rage, and can be certain that a dialogue will not come to an abrupt end, although it is bound to meander away into excessive metaphor or allegory, since professional fools were not to be taken seriously. The Fool is communicating the essential truths of Lear's actions to the old King, sometimes at the risk of whipping, predominantly making use of the pronoun *thou*, socially restricted to the other subjects. The Fool manages to re-elicite the "nothing" answer from the King, so familiar to us from the scene of Cordelia's banishment; after singing a didactic song that ends in "And thou shalt have more / Than two tens to a score" , the Fool asks Lear if he can make no use of nothing²³ , to which he replies, not realising how far-sighted the Fool is by comparison: "Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing²⁴." The Fool also intimates another theme underlying the plot of *King Lear* – the onset of Lear's reversible psychotic phases: "When thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away²⁵."
- 14 The cleaving metaphor and the double crown image suggest a serious disorder like schizophrenia, and in the heat of his rage on the heath, Lear calls the disguised Edgar "a forked animal as thou art²⁶". The primary meaning is "two-legged" , but some overtones of mental cleavages can also be sensed.
- 15 It is in Act I, Scene 4, that Lear begins to understand that Goneril is treating him with brazen disrespect, and asks a seemingly absurd question: "Does any here know me" , answered promptly by himself: "This is not Lear²⁷." The Fool is closest to the truth when providing him with an answer to the question who he is: "Lear's shadow²⁸." The King is refused hospitality by his eldest daughter, and becomes aware that ingratitude "wrench'd my frame of nature / from the fix'd place [...] O Lear, Lear, Lear ! / Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in²⁹" , striking his head as he is reprimanding himself. The instance of using *thou* may indicate that Lear is beginning to understand fitfully his own reduction from

the state of a king to the state of a common human being, all the more fallen to the dregs of society having in mind his former royal *we* and the pompousness at the outset of the play. Deprived of the authority that would confer the *we/our/us* form on him, he examines himself with a simple, familiar *thou*. Having no one else to turn to in a fit of rage, he invokes Nature's intercession, the Goddess's curse on Goneril that should "into her womb convey sterility / [...] Turn all her mother's pains and benefits / To laughter and contempt, that she may feel / How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child³⁰" ! This frustrated will drives Lear to insane hatred, gathering momentum as the play unwinds towards its central act, where his powerlessness before the elements of nature and the altered social order is seen most fully.

- 16 In Act II, the faithful Kent is put in the stocks for assaulting Oswald, Edgar flees to his safety in the assumed identity of a mad beggar, and on finding Kent in a humiliating position, Lear again exchanges very short replicas with him, most probably due to the surprise at such a pitiful sight:

Lear.	What's he that hath so much thy place mistook To set thee here?
Kent.	It is both he and she, Your son and daughter.
Lear.	No.
Kent.	Yes..
Lear.	No, I say.
Kent.	I say, yea.
Lear.	No, no; they would not.
Kent.	Yes, they have.
Lear.	By Jupiter, I swear, no.
Kent.	By Juno, I swear, ay ³¹ .

- 17 Lear's sentences indicate his will to give the obvious things another meaning, to represent reality mimetically and subjectively, in the supposed unerring fashion of a king, not yet willing to recognise his status of a sometime monarch. The symmetry of the dialogue builds up without any torrent of expletives that have so far become common to Lear, but it is about 40 lines later that the King explodes and now objectivises the source of his rage as the *hysterica passio*, ordering the malady to return to the imaginary uterus, and finding another excuse for his inability to cope with his existential situation. While justifying her sister's action, Regan gives Lear a truer, albeit painful picture of his psychosomatic state: "O, Sir, you are old; / Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine³²." The evil sisters assume the role of the administrators in the kingdom, and authorise themselves to speak to their father in the capacity of physicians treating an insane person; this situation has a very similar set of relationships to the one in an example that Foucault gives in *Psychiatric Power*, while describing George III's treatment in an asylum: "He that supervises the treatment announces to him that he is no longer the ruler, but that he should be obedient and meek from now on. [...] One day, the patient in his outrageous madness gives his former physician a very rude reception during his visit, fouling him with vomit and excrement³³." On many occasions when his fury cannot be appeased instantaneously, Lear resorts to the mercy of the heavens to fulfill his wish – he does the same on Goneril's unexpected entrance into Gloucester's castle, soon lapsing into the animal/disease discourse when communicating to her. It seems that Lear invokes the heavens and other supernatural elements whenever he is in a hopeless position, like a child seeking the highest indisputable authority for protection; he is immediately able to

express his rage through the ghastliest curses, even in the same replica, where the second person assumes a broad spectrum of appellations. The alternation from a desperately hysteric phase occurs just as fast – when Regan offers accomodation to twenty-five attendants only, Lear turns to Goneril, declaring: "I'll go with thee: / Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty, / And thou art twice her love³⁴." When Goneril stabs him in the heart again, Lear delivers a thematically integrated speech, with addresses regarding beggars (he did not care of the wretched of the earth so explicitly earlier), the heavens (to give him patience), the Gods (who may be stirring the daughter against him), his daughters (unnatural hags), and the Fool. Deprived of a desired dwelling place fit for a retired royalty, he realises that "Man's life is cheap as beast's [...] You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man, / As full of grief as age; wretched in both! / [...] No, I'll not weep: / I have full cause of weeping [...] O Fool! I shall go mad³⁵". Bearing in mind some earlier examples of introspection, we may also regard the address to the Fool as potentially ambivalent, i.e. Lear could again be addressing his own self in these moments of anguish. A very important stage direction is inserted at the end of this monologue, portending the culmination of Lear's madness amidst the elements of nature in Act III: *Storm heard at a distance*.

II

- 18 In Act III, Scene 2, Lear is raving on the barren heath, engulfed in a storm that is not likely to end soon at all – on the contrary, the King himself is giving it encouragement; the implications of his speech centre on the paradigmatic images of floods from prehistorical times, with the "all-shaking thunder" asked to level the world. Even under this strain does he take into account and more fully grasp the idea of who he is here and now: "here I stand, your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man³⁶." The tide of pain in its turn also brings an understanding of who he is as he speaks:

Ripeness emerges in *King Lear* as a potentiality for everyone, as the existential starting point from which the protagonists of this tragedy of false appearances begin to be something more than mere shadows; and from the Fool to Lear, from Edgar to his father, from Cordelia, from Kent, from Gloucester to their sovereign, even from an obscure servant to his lord when the latter has his eyes plucked out, it is what gives the only real substance to human exchange which is otherwise reduced to concerns and desires that are only hypocrisy or illusion³⁷.

- 19 When his "wits begin to turn", Lear caringly asks his Fool how he feels, partially due to the coldness he himself is sensing³⁸. The reader is definitely witnessing a penitent change in Lear's personality, very much different now from the one that severed familial ties with Cordelia in the first act:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just³⁹.

- 20 This monologue abounds in second-person addresses, and Lear shows so much compassion at a moment when he could seemingly think only about himself; now he is

free from culture, immersed in nature more and more steadfastly. When he realises through his anguish that the chaos of nature can overthrow the structures of culture in a blink of an eye, he shows pure sympathy for the likes of him, universalising his pain in the plural form. But like with many other instances of his ambivalent meaning, we can also sense that Lear's 'natural prayer' deep down inside has an addressee that goes unmentioned even in the nadir of his grief – his child Cordelia and her plight underlie this and a number of other monologues both emotionally and thematically. If we only changed the form from plural to singular, it could be very hard not to notice that Cordelia is present in her father's language in every aspect except in name. It is consistent with this new recognition that Lear can kneel to Cordelia for her pardon, "a most striking contrast with the blindness of his choleric pride when he had banished her from the throne at the beginning of the action. There is no need to emphasise the function of the storm in breaking down Lear's physical and mental defences so that he can reverse his fault. In this there is common consent⁴⁰". The only use of the first person occurs in the statement "O, I have ta'en / too little care of this!" At first sight, it may appear as the confused prattle of a madman who is loosening reins on his free associations, without much logic. However, if we return to Foucault's concept of *cura sui*, we discover that Lear encapsulates his entire life as a king in a sentence filled with bitter remorse for not having conducted himself properly. What did he fail to do in his reign, now when it is obviously too late to make any amends? *Hermeneutics of the Subject* gives us some hints at the parallels that rarely changed in pre-industrial societies: "[The aristocrats] are the youths who have since early age been torn apart by the ambition to defeat the others, their rivals in the state, their rivals outside the state as well, in short, to enter into active politics, authoritarian and victorious⁴¹." The problem lies in the question whether the power they have gives them the ability to rule properly. The matter of 'taking care of oneself' is now related not to directing others, but to being directed oneself. Socrates consoles Alcibiades by telling him that he is still young and has time; with Lear, that is hardly the case. The truth cannot be reached without a certain practice, during which the subject is altered and perfected – one of the techniques is the "concentration of the soul⁴²", lest it should disperse at the moment of death. Another technique, perhaps the path to this enlightened state of a king, is *anakhoresis* (anchoretism, reclusion). Lear actually wants to perform the ritual of virtual death at the beginning and show his ripeness in order to wait for his last hour in serene isolation, but Cordelia triggers a reaction he has not been taught to ignore, and he begins to disintegrate, first as a royalty, then as a human. The millennial belief that the monarch actually embodies the entire kingdom and that his collapse causes an analogous event in the state is more than plastically presented in *King Lear*. When the old man leading Gloucester says: "O, my good lord ! / I have been your tenant, and your father's tenant, / these fourscore years⁴³," we can infer that one autocrat simply succeeded another and that no *cura sui* was instilled in that ruler's mind at all. According to Foucault's reading of Plato, the 'yourself' part of *epimeleisthai heautou* is the soul (*psyche*), which should be taken care of permanently. Lear obviously has increasingly more problems with his mental, not physical or political ability; in the centre of his pain are the unnameable Cordelia and his mistreatment of her. Cordelia is the human mirror presented to him in Act I, far purer than his own soul was, for which reason he cannot bring himself to admit his human inferiority to her, and denies his true feelings for the faithful and unflattering. One more issue that Foucault brings up is very relevant to this discussion – old age as the desired phase in man's life, the old man as a person finally able to accept himself, to find joy and pleasure in himself, not expecting

delights from anything else. "If well prepared through *cura sui*, old age should reach the point at which the 'I' has come together with itself, when it has a completely finished and integral relationship with itself, of both control and pleasure⁴⁴".

- 21 Perhaps the following dialogue between Lear and Edgar disguised as a madman possesses the most potential for conjectural analysis, as we are clearly dealing with a person that is feigning madness and another that is becoming its prey, so the connotative layer of this conversation can furnish the reader with multiple irony, depending on a compassionate standpoint of sympathising with Lear or a detached point of view of a person above the tumult of the storm, outside this "little world of man". However, Lear still sees an embodiment of his own anguish in the appearance of Poor Tom, and asks him: "Didst thou give all to thy daughters? / And art thou come to this⁴⁵," to which Edgar lists a series of nauseating images and actions, which stress man's discomforting position in a physical world: "Who gives any thing to poor Tom? whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire; that hath laid knives under his pillow, and halters in his pew; set ratsbane by his porridge⁴⁶ ..."
- 22 Lear wonders: "Is man no more than this?" The very name Tom is well documented in the *OED*, but another sense may give rise to an "animalist" interpretation – "tom" is the "male of various beasts and birds", according to sense 6 of Tom *n* 1; Edgar has been reduced to something that owes "the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume⁴⁷", a bare male specimen of the human species, his genitals covered with a rag as the last barrier between society and nature: "Poor Tom is trying to stand between Lear in front of him and the abyss of non-being inhabited by the foul fiends behind him, and provide, so to speak, a solid bottom for Lear's fall into nature⁴⁸."
- 23 Lear then ironically echoes a very famous phrase from Plato's seventh letter – the seventy-five-year-old Plato recalls Dionysius' desire to become a philosopher and summarises the attitude that a despot assumes towards "the thing": "thus, if he who listens is truly a philosopher and is equal to the thing, he will think that he has heard speak of a marvelous path, which ought to be travelled without delay, and he will think it impossible to live any differently⁴⁹."
- 24 Plato remains impenetrably secretive about an accurate definition of the pregnant concept "the thing itself", supplying the hint that it should turn into a way of life, not just into a means of acquiring practical profit: "It is not, in fact, in any way sayable, as in other disciplines, but, after much close attendance to the thing itself and much companionship with it, suddenly, like sparks shot out from a fire, it is born in the soul and by now nourishes itself⁵⁰."
- 25 On seeing his own self in the existential mirror, left at the mercy of the elements, bereft of all attributes of kingship, abandoned by his train of attendants, banished by his two daughters that he thought blameless, accompanied only with a professional fool, a fake madman and a heart-rent servant, Lear says to Edgar: "Thou art the thing itself⁵¹," equating human essence and human existence on the example of a single man, a concrete embodiment of a suffer that is at the same time the suffer of Edgar and the suffer of Lear and of all poor naked wretches, wherever they are. It is at this point that he breaks up with all the borrowed articles of civilisation and tears off his clothes, stepping into the order of nature, aware of the loss of items not necessary for the ultimate cognition of man's condition – he now follows suit of Edgar and exhibits himself both as the equilibrium of the subject and object of that natural philosophy, giving another meaning

to the above-quoted sentence, that Lear may be the thing itself, too. Shortly after this passionate initiation, Lear explicitly desires: "First let me talk with this philosopher⁵²," "this same learned Theban⁵³," "I will keep still with my philosopher⁵⁴." Not having taken care of his essence when he should have, Lear now embraces unpreparedly the signifier of philosophical wisdom, while we may see sheer lunacy as the signified. The attempts of defining 'man' are actually present in the whole text, and no definition seems to fit it – from blissful to ignorant, from heavenly to beastly, from animate to inanimate; we face tautology in the predicate "thing", and the mirror of otherness (*thou*) may well be a self-descriptive utterance of Lear.

- 26 Scene 6 of Act III presents Lear at the height of his torment on the heath, and paradoxically enough, more than willing to administer justice in the mock trial of his treacherous daughters, enjoying wisdom, "reason in madness", exhibiting love and generosity to the Fool and Poor Tom⁵⁵. The closer we get to the end of the play, the less control Lear has over his spoken discourse, which varies from master-servant authority to natural history to folktale imagery, to conclude in the sarcastic description of the blinded Gloucester as "Goneril, with a white beard! They flattered me like a dog⁵⁶". The faithful Gloucester wishes to kiss Lear's hand, but he demonstrates necrophilic symptoms: "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality⁵⁷." Lear in turn advises Gloucester to "look with thine ears" and "get thee glass eyes", surprising us by being able to identify his collocutor.
- 27 One of the last belated recognitions takes place in the French camp; on waking, Lear does not seem capable of telling where he exactly is, and takes Cordelia to be a soul in bliss, and himself "bound / Upon a wheel of fire" – for a long time after naming anybody so fondly, he manages to recognise his "child Cordelia", ready even to drink poison if required, asking her pardon at this cathartic (and abortive) reunion. When she has been executed, his last address to Cordelia is again out of phase with the events: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never⁵⁸!" The disappearance of his most desired collocutor abolishes any further reason for his staying alive; Lear has come full circle of empirically comprehended grief, caused by his own refusal to listen to the voice of the other. Poor Lear now has nobody else to live for, nobody else to exchange love with, and nobody else who could set him a living example of what a better self could look like and tutor his immature mind. With the demise of the second person, who seemed to him a pure spirit on awakening after exhaustion by madness, Lear's self loses its safe foothold and gives way to anguish, joining her in death. With Cordelia dead, Lear is shown mad with pain, saying that she is gone, and will never, never come back to him:

Perhaps he thinks that she is coming back to life again, and dies of an unbearable joy. But we do not see this: all we see is an old man dying of an unbearable pain. The hideous wrench of agony which the death of Cordelia gives to the play is too much a part of the play even to be explained as inexplicable. And whatever else may be true, the vision of the absurd anguish in which the play ends certainly is true⁵⁹.

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NOTES

1. Mišel Fuko, *Hermeneutika subjekta*, Novi Sad, Svetovi, 2003, p. 16.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
3. James Marshall, "A Critical Theory of the Self: Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Foucault", in *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 20, p. 83.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
5. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 66.
6. Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1967, p. 97.

7. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, London and Massachusetts, Methuen and Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 5, lines 1.1.37-41.
8. Miodrag Pavlović, *Poetika žrtvenog obreda*, Beograd, Prosveta, 2000, pp. 209-210.
9. Mišel Fuko, *op. cit.*, p. 459.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 465-466, my italics.
11. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7, 1.1.53-61.
12. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 9, 1.1.85-86.
13. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 9, 1.1.91-93.
14. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11, 1.1.113-114.
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20. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 19, 1.1.231-232.
21. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 31, 1.2.120-121.
22. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 37, 1.4.10-21.
23. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 43, 1.4.136-137.
24. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 43, 1.4.138-139.
25. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 44, 1.4.167-171.
26. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 122, 3.4.110-111.
27. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 48, 1.4.234.
28. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 48, 1.4.239.
29. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 51, 1.4.277-280.
30. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52, 1.4.287-298.
31. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 83, 2.4.11-22.
32. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 91, 2.4.147-149.
33. Mišel Fuko, *Psihijatrijska moć*, Novi Sad, Svetovi, 2005, pp. 35-36.
34. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 98, 2.4.260-262.
35. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99, 2.4.269-288.
36. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 107, 3.2.19-20.
37. Yves Bonnefoy and John T. Naughton, "Readiness, Ripeness: Hamlet, Lear", in *New Literary History*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Interpretations (Spring, 1986), p. 489.
38. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 110, 3.2.67-69.
39. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 115, 3.4.28-36.
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41. Mišel Fuko, *Hermeneutika subjekta*, p. 64.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
43. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148, 4.1.12-14.
44. Mišel Fuko, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-145.
45. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 116, 3.4.48-49.
46. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 116, 3.4.50-55.
47. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 122, 3.4.106-108.
48. Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
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51. William Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p. 122, 3.4.109.
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ABSTRACTS

The paper discusses the process of self-knowing experienced by the main character in King Lear, through the self-deposed King's dialogues with various protagonists of the play – his closest relatives, his servants, fellow-sufferers on the heath and even the forces of nature. His deepest knowledge comes from the encounter with Edgar in the disguise of Poor Tom, when his reason finally gives way before he can realize what he has done to himself.

Cet article examine le processus de "connaissance de soi" conduit par le protagoniste principal de la pièce de Shakespeare, *Le Roi Lear*, à travers les dialogues du personnage éponyme avec les interlocuteurs divers de la pièce – les membres de sa famille, ses domestiques, ses camarades de souffrance sur la lande, mais aussi les forces de la nature. Son savoir le plus profond dérive de sa rencontre avec Edgar, déguisé en "pauvre Tom", alors que Lear finalement devient fou, après avoir compris la misère qu'il s'est fait subir à lui-même.

Este artículo examina el proceso de "conocimiento de sí" que vive el protagonista de la obra de Shakespeare *El Rey Lear*, mediante los diálogos del personaje epónimo con distintos interlocutores de la obra (los miembros de su familia, sus domésticos, sus compañeros de sufrimiento en la landa, así como las fuerzas de la naturaleza. Su saber más profundo nace del encuentro con Edgar, disfrazado de "pobre Tom", que tiene lugar en el momento en que Lear acaba por volverse loco, después de darse cuenta de lo que se hizo vivir a si mismo.

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