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Carl Schmitt's 'Hamlet oder Hekuba' and the question of a philosophy of history

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Concluding Remarks

The aim of my investigation has been to reconstruct the internal and external theoretical dimensions of Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba*. While I have intended to offer a plausible exposition of Schmitt's monograph on Shakespeare's drama, the genesis of *Hamlet or Hecuba* involves a major question regarding Schmitt's late thought: namely, the possibility of a philosophy of history. Recently, Andreas Höfele has thoroughly tackled Schmitt's relationship with literature⁵⁷¹. Höfele has systematized such a liaison chronologically, convincingly demonstrating how crucial a theme was literature for Schmitt's method of thinking. However, the link between literature and Schmitt's main philosophical goal during the 1950s—divided across a fairly extensive number of essays, reviews, articles, and think-pieces—, that is, a philosophy of history⁵⁷², remains concealed. Thus, my investigation explores an essential and yet non-thematized area of Schmitt's late thought.

Chapter 1 provided a structural revision of *Hamlet or Hecuba*, giving a detailed analysis of its methodology and displaying a point-by-point review of Schmitt's main interlocutors as well. Likewise, **Chapter 2** unfolded a conceptual study of *Hamlet or Hecuba*, from which Schmitt's "philosophy of history" profoundly takes shape. In this perspective, the first two chapters of this thesis have expanded a philosophical problem that has been held as secondary according to Schmitt's interpreters: how the bond between history and art (or tragedy) gives rise to a very particular way of philosophically—in Schmitt's terms, spiritually—understanding history. I once again quote at length Schmitt's *The Historical Structure of the Contemporary World-Opposition*:

The concrete-historical image (...) contains a dialectic tension, namely, the sequential succession of a concrete question and an equally concrete answer. This dialectic of the historical-concrete defines the structure of unique historical situations and epochs. Indeed, we shall later show that this historical dialectic, as it is meant here, may be understood neither as a general conceptual logic nor as a general law governing temporal events.⁵⁷³

571 Höfele 2022, 9-17.

572 Schmitt 2015e, 247: "(Philosophy is History)".

573 Schmitt 2018d, 114.

As I have shown in this thesis introduction, such a way of comprehending history was prompted by Hegel's own philosophical project. Nonetheless, Schmitt also transformed the Hegelian scope, reframing it into a philosophy of concrete history—as he aimed to unconceal the uniqueness of every historical event. These events were politically fueled as well, conducted by a people (*Volk*) who ruled themselves according to a certain order (*nomos*). Hegel's "spirit" recoils at the moment of facing the portentous and unrepeatable power of historical forces rising and falling. However, such concreteness must be chained to a greater and defining *événement*. Schmitt saw the year 1848 as the weathervane for the future of Europe, ominously foreshadowed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Thus, a complex comprehension of history came to the fore.

I have called this dialectic of a concrete historical situation "philosophy of history". Likewise, the operational function of this standpoint covers a dimension of history that operates beyond and above its very immanent plane. Such a dimension can be rightly named as "ultra-history", as—according to Schmitt—history is politically driven by spiritual forces that go beyond the immediate and causal comprehension of different events. "The enmity between humans contains a tension that far transcends the natural. With the human, the transcending always punches through, irrespective of whether one calls it transcendent or transcendental", states Schmitt, just to sentence: "One can call this surplus value 'spiritual'"⁵⁷⁴. This "spiritual" feature characterizes Schmitt's comprehension of history, namely, a polyhedric phenomenon where greater events cannot be devoid of transcendence. Such a vision of history compels a philosophical configuration. In the case of Schmitt, a philosophy of history necessarily demands a set of existentially-driven juridical concepts: order, enmity, concreteness, etc.

Moreover, Schmitt's outlook involves the homologation between politics and seriousness. In this sense, the intention of **Chapter 2** has been to address the theoretical elements that sustain such an equation by reading *Political Romanticism*. These elements remain almost unfettered in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, for they render a methodological enclosure from where Schmitt can elaborate further his comprehension of "historical truths" according to the concreteness of political events. This theoretical angle broadens itself during the 1950s,

⁵⁷⁴ Schmitt 2018d, 117.

to the point of reaching a structural way of surveying history. **Chapter 3** and **Chapter 4** chronologically account Schmitt's angle regarding philosophy of history, demonstrating not only the continuity of his approach, but also showing how *Hamlet or Hecuba* appears as an intellectual hinge amidst Schmitt's thought in the 1950s.

Finally, **Chapter 5** establishes the connection Schmitt's essay on *Hamlet* with one of his most essential influences, namely, Kommerell's takes on Schiller and the place of the German playwright in Germany's political turmoil of 1933. Schmitt saw in Kommerell's monograph a formal method of approaching contemporary history. And while Schmitt departs from Kommerell's viewpoint, the former utilizes the latter stance: Modern politics are better understood through an examination of political mirrorings on stage. In conjunction, these five chapters aim to articulate an explicit account of one of Schmitt's unfinished projects, that is, a philosophical-juridical framework designed to interpretate—and even anticipate—historical events.

So, what to make with Schmitt's unguarded annotations registered in his *Glossarium*, implicitly connected with both his biographical whereabouts during the 1950s and the course of the world amidst Cold War? How do they enforce Schmitt's non-cohesive and at times rather fragile considerations on world events? What the reader is facing at the moment of reading *Hamlet or Hecuba*, his texts from the 1950s—including *Glossarium*—, and part of his private correspondence, is Schmitt's final intellectual installment: a philosophical comprehension of historical events, deeply enrooted in a concrete appreciation of the political nature of it. Art, according to Schmitt, serves as a means of political recognition, as its configuration demands an almost synchronized awareness of the political zeitgeist. His views on history, art, and politics, can be rightly summed up as an unconcluded “philosophy of history.”⁵⁷⁵ *Hamlet* was its symbol and 1848 its modern origin.

Furthermore, what underlies Schmitt's diverse array of statements on history, art, politics, and the spiritual fate of Europe? A possible answer might be: a hard-hitting concept of reality. When Schmitt talks about “historical reality” in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, a pre-conceived homologation of politics and reality expands into the aesthetic realm. Even more, all of Schmitt's noteworthy—and, up to this point, canonical—remarks on law and history

575 Schmitt 2015e, 220: “Weder Die Juristen noch die Theologen scheinen begriffen zu haben, daß alle wesentlichen und aktuelle Fragen inzwischen geschichtsphilosophischen Fragen geworden sind...”

ultimately depend on a fixed notion of reality. Such a concept transforms the creative forces of art into a historical regulated process of political representations. Aesthetics are culled from decisive political events. Thus, a hermeneutic viewpoint is needed to correctly interpret the artistic value of this or that artwork. Moreover, this hermeneutic approach can distinguish different forms of art, to finally grasp an essential feature: the mythical aspect of the work of art.

Put differently, *Hamlet* is the one and only modern myth. In this perspective, Shakespeare's most acclamated drama reveals itself to be a massive mirror, where modern politics can recognize its own identity. Schmitt's game plan during the 1950s is best summarized in *Hamlet or Hecuba*: a concise set of reflections about the actuality of a mythical artwork that would it been unconceivable without the intrusion of a political event. By assessing this little book on *Hamlet*, the reader is not lost on Schmitt's skeleton key: human existence is nothing but a juridical event. Thus, the proper hermeneutics to understand the core aspect of this event, is a philosophical account on history. These dialectics were drawn-out of Hegel's thought, to then be properly modified according a concrete historical episode: the Revolutions of 1848 and its subsequent series of events. Reality is the world theater of politics.

Carl Schmitt—as any authentic philosopher—was always interested in reality. His theological background did not impede him to acknowledge the insurmountable uniqueness of different historical events. His juridical tracking for the concrete aspect of political situations soon led him to create several concepts, substantive—and even plastic—enough to circumscribe the social turmoil of pre- and post-Weimar period. Schmitt saw in World War I and World War II as the echoes of a greater spiritual and historical event (the year 1848). *Hamlet* served as an artistic script to day-to-day modern politics. His *Glossarium*, a devotional testimony of universal decay amidst a word where the earth itself has become a “space-ship”. And while his prognosis was certainly apocalyptic, he managed to describe the concrete origins of our modern political crisis.