

WORDSWORDS

‘...serrez ma haire avec ma discipline’,
Molière, *Tartuffe*, II, 2

— This title is unspeakable.¹ Or at least unpronounceable. To speak it means a decision has to be made (there’s no possible fudging here, it’s a true either/or): words/words or word/swords, with no middle ground. Which one is it? What did you mean by it?

— There’s no point asking me what I *meant* by it, if that implies I have to *choose* one pronunciation over the other: I don’t know which one is right or appropriate here—or rather I think I know that neither is quite right, that the point is to negotiate, or fight over, the decision between them, to maintain and even sharpen up the *point* or edge of that decision. (And don’t be quite so sure it’s an either/or: that’s just another way of forcing it into pronounceability. There’ll be other possibilities lurking here, you’ll see.)

— But you’re *saying* all that, so you’re not even really holding the either/or open: this is just false bravado and posturing—you’ve *already* chosen words rather than swords, discussion and debate rather than violence, and to

¹ A much shorter version of this previously unpublished paper was read to the closing plenary session (‘Crossing Disciplines’) of the 2000 IAPL conference at SUNY Stony Brook.

that extent you are committed, like it or not, admit it or not, to the *telos* of discussion, namely agreement. You come here unarmed, no sword in your hand or by your side, this space is the *agora*, not the arena or the battlefield, we're all really on the same side so long as we're still talking to each other, a virtual community already.

— But 'Wordswords' is *not* quite a word, and there's already something quite *offensive* about it. I *do* come here armed with it (and not much else, in truth), ill-prepared, ill-intentioned and ill-disciplined, looking for trouble again. Its double-edgedness, and the point of the decision it demands and resists, might make you want to think of it as much as a sword as a word, a word-sword that's not just a word-word. And don't assume too quickly that this will simply resolve into something that can be captured, ensnared and put to death, by the operators of speech-act theory: beyond the performative and the incorporeal transformations it effects, wordswords whirl and flail, affect the body, strike and hit and hurt and eviscerate...

— That's literature: Flaubert, Proust, Bataille... Shakespeare.

— Lancaster, in *Henry IV*, Part 2, Act IV, Scene II:

My Lord of York, it better show'd with you
When that your flock, assembled by the bell,
Encircled you to hear with reverence
Your exposition on the holy text
Than now to see you here an iron man,
Cheering a rout of rebels with your drum,
Turning the word to sword and life to death.

— But a sword is not a word, and a word is not a sword: ‘sword’ is a word, and ‘word’ is a word. You’re still in words.

The word “Excalibur”, say, is a proper name in the ordinary sense. The word “Excalibur” consists of parts combined in a particular way. If they are combined differently Excalibur does not exist. But it is clear that the sentence “Excalibur has a sharp blade” makes sense whether Excalibur is still whole or is broken up. But if “Excalibur” is the name of an object, this object no longer exists when Excalibur is broken in pieces; and as no object would then correspond to the name it would have no meaning. But then the sentence “Excalibur has a sharp blade” would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense. But it does make sense; so there must always be something corresponding to the words of which it consists. So the word “Excalibur” must disappear when the sense is analyzed and its place be taken by words which name simples. It will be reasonable to call these words the real names. (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §39)

We said that the sentence “Excalibur” has a sharp blade” made sense even when Excalibur was broken in pieces. Now this is so because in this language-game a name is also used in the absence of its bearer. (*Ibid.*, §44)

— What is Hamlet reading, in assumed or feigned madness? ‘Words, words, words’ (Act II Scene II). Or is that ‘Word, Sword, Swords’, or ‘Word, Swords, Words’? All the words in *Hamlet* point to the sword, provoke the turn to the sword. (Shakespeare ‘scholarship’ to follow courtesy of a version of the complete works downloaded

from the internet.) From the early ghost-scene, in which the Ghost, released from earlier silence by Hamlet's presence,

...could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

and whose departure provokes in Hamlet an immediate act of erasure, of writing, and of swearing:

Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:
[Writing]
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'
I have sworn 't.

And this first oath or act of swearing, from word spoken and heard to words written as witness to a word not to be spoken but to be *kept*—both remembered and fulfilled—leads to another: Hamlet's 'wild and whirling words' to Horatio and Marcellus after the encounter with the ghost

lead to an oath, a sworn word, then, explicitly taken upon the sword:

HAMLET	Never make known what you have seen to-night.
HORATIO	
MARCELLUS	My lord, we will not.
HAMLET	Nay, but swear't.
HORATIO	In faith, My lord, not I.
MARCELLUS	Nor I, my lord, in faith.
HAMLET	Upon my sword.
MARCELLUS	We have sworn, my lord, already.
HAMLET	Indeed, upon my sword, indeed.
Ghost [Beneath]	Swear.
HAMLET	Come on—you hear this fellow in the cellarage— Consent to swear.
HORATIO	Propose the oath, my lord.
HAMLET	Never to speak of this that you have seen, Swear by my sword.
Ghost [Beneath]	Swear.
HAMLET	Hic et ubique? then we'll shift our ground. Come hither, gentlemen, And lay your hands again upon my sword: Never to speak of this that you have heard, Swear by my sword.

— The sword turns words one says into a word one must keep, and in this case that word to be kept, in secrecy, will involve further recourse to the sword. Horatio and Marcellus swear by Hamlet's sword to keep secret a

scene that involves Hamlet's swearing something, giving a word that will engage him, later, beyond words, to use his sword.

This wordplay or swordplay, Hamlet's suspension between the word and the sword, the sworn word that literally *contracts* to and by the sword, haunts the whole play thereafter.

[For example, in the initial scene with the players, still in the 'Words, words, words' scene (Act II Scene II), Hamlet begins to recite the scene of Pyrrhus and Priam, but abandons it to the first Player just before the sword-word appears, to be repeated several times, in a context of *falling*:

The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smear'd
With heraldry more dismal; head to foot
Now is he total gules; horribly trick'd
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and damned light
To their lord's murder: roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks.'
So, proceed you.

Lord Polonius: 'Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion.

First Player: 'Anon he finds him
Striking too short at Greeks; his antique sword,
Rebellious to his arm, lies where it *falls*,

Repugnant to command: unequal match'd,
Pyrrhus at Priam drives; in rage strikes wide;
But with the whiff and wind of his *fell sword*
The unnerved father *falls*. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear: for, lo! his *sword*,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seem'd i' the air to stick:
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

But, as we often see, against some storm,
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,
The bold winds speechless and the orb below
As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder
Doth rend the region, so, after Pyrrhus' pause,
Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work;
And never did the Cyclops' hammers *fall*
On Mars's armour forged for proof eterne
With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword
Now *falls* on Priam.

Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod 'take away her power;
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,]
As low as to the fiends!'

LORD POLONIUS: This is too long.

HAMLET: It shall to the barber's, with your beard.
Prithee, say on: he's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he
sleeps: say on: come to Hecuba.

First Player: 'But who, O, who had seen the mobled
queen—'

HAMLET: ‘The mobled queen?’

LORD POLONIUS: That’s good; ‘mobled queen’ is good.

First Player: ‘Run barefoot up and down, threatening the flames]

With bisson rheum; a clout upon that head
Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,
About her lank and all o’er-teemed loins,
A blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up;
Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steep’d,
‘Gainst Fortune’s state would treason have
pronounced:]

But if the gods themselves did see her then
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his *sword* her husband’s limbs,
The instant burst of clamour that she made,
Unless things mortal move them not at all,
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods.’

Still in the same scene, after arranging with the players for the performance in which he hopes to incriminate Claudius by his reaction, Hamlet, left alone, in the ‘O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!’ soliloquy, is returned to words:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder’d,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!

Hamlet *falls* into words, and this downward vector returns in Act III, when Ophelia, in the ‘get thee to an nunnery’ exchange, bemoaning Hamlet’s apparent madness, finds ‘The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword... quite, quite down!’.² The rise and fall of sword and words, of sword into words, gives too the rhythm of Act III Scene III, when Hamlet, having duly ‘[caught] the conscience of the King’ through the play, is on the point of killing Claudius attempting repentant prayer:

HAMLET

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I’ll do’t. And so he goes to heaven;
And so am I revenged. That would be scann’d:
A villain kills my father; and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread;
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?]
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
‘Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season’d for his passage?
No!
Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:

² Cf. Act IV Scene V, when Ophelia, now ‘mad’, says, ‘You must sing “A-down, a-down”, and you, “Call him a-down-a”’. More generally, the motif of falling is an important one in the play, from ‘what a falling-off was there’ (I, V) to the ‘special providence in the fall of a sparrow’ (V, II). Ophelia herself ends in this way: ‘When down her weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook’.

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

[Exit]

KING CLAUDIUS [Rising]
My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.]

— And can't I suddenly hear a third possibility, haunting in on a silent apostrophe, like an unspeakable oath? 'Swords, like 'Sblood or 'Swounds (Hamlet, and only Hamlet, uses each of these twice during the course of the play³), God's words?

— So that's how you try to put an end to debate and discussion, by appealing to the word of God?

— Biblical 'scholarship' to follow courtesy of the databases and search engines provided on the Internet by the

³ "Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.' (Act I Scene II); "Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me.' (Act I Scene II); "Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be /But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall' (Act I Scene II); "Swounds, show me what thou'lt do: Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself?' (Act V Scene I).

Sword Project, under the auspices of the CrossWire Society.

— Crossed wires, crossed swords, cross words. Where's the discipline?

— God's word not only regularly involves the sword, the threat or injunction to use the sword, putting enemies to the sword, smiting with the sword and more especially the edge of the sword (see the literally hundreds of examples in the Old Testament, more especially in Jeremiah and Ezekiel); God's word *is* 'sword, becomes itself a sword in the New Testament, especially in the Epistles of Paul: 'And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:17) 'For the word of God *is* quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.' (Hebrews 4:12), but elsewhere too, so that Isaiah can say, 'And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword' (Isaiah 49:2), or John, in Revelations, 'Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.' (Revelation 2:16); 'And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.' (Revelation 19:15); 'And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which *sword* proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.' (Revelation 19:21)

— God's blood and God's wounds... Weren't *they* caused by a sword? Or rather a spear? (John 19:34). But one of the disciples (John specifies that it was Simon Peter), defending Jesus, takes a sword and cuts off the ear

of one of the High Priest's servants (Mark 14:47; Luke 22:50; John 18:10). The disciple's sword cuts off the organ of hearing the word. (In Luke, Jesus touches the wound and heals it.)

— So where's the discipline? Where's the voice of reason? You still haven't answered my objection about the *agora* and the *telos* of discussion

— You think discipline and reason will save us from the sword?

— A disciple wields the sword. *Discipulus*, from the same root as discipline, both eventually from *discere*, to learn. No disciplines without disciples somewhere crossing their wordswords and cutting off each other's ears. Is it an accident that the only sword in Kant's three *Critiques* ('scholarship' to follow courtesy of the Netzhaus CD-ROM of the German text of the three critiques, ordered over the Internet) should come out in the section of the first *Critique* devoted to the *Discipline* of Pure Reason? Here Kant has defined discipline as 'the constraint whereby the constant propensity to deviate from certain rules is limited and finally eradicated' (A709/B737), and continued:

Everyone will readily admit that a discipline is in many respects required for our temperament, as well as for those talents (such as imagination and ingenuity) that like to allow themselves free and unlimited movement. But that reason, which properly is obligated to prescribe its discipline to all other endeavours, itself needs a discipline—this may indeed seem strange. And reason has, in fact, thus far escaped such humiliation precisely because, given the solemnity and thorough propriety with which it deports itself, no one could

easily have come to suspect it of playing frivolously with imaginings in place of concepts, and with words in place of things. (A710/B738)

In the later subsection of the ‘Discipline’ devoted to the polemical use of reason, Kant suggests that given the *a priori* impossibility of proving dogmatic assertions or their contradictions in the fields of pure theology and psychology (the only possible field for what would be a *true* antithetic of pure reason (as opposed to the antinomies from the dialectic, which are shown to be based on a confusion of appearances and things in themselves), then polemics are not to be feared: the terrain is such that it ‘can bear no combatant in his full armour and equipped with weapons that we need fear’ (A743/B771), and so we can simply *observe* such combats:

Just let these people do as they wish; if they show talent, if they show themselves engaged in deep and new investigation—in a word, if they just show reason—then reason always gains. If you adopt other means than those of an unconstrained reason, if you scream about treason or call together the community as if to put out a fire, as it were, then you make yourselves ridiculous. For the issue is not at all what side among these is advantageous or disadvantageous to the common best interest, but only how much reason may achieve in its speculation that abstracts from all interest, and whether this speculation can count for anything at all or must rather be given up for what is practical. Hence instead of flailing about with your swords [*mit dem Schwerte drein zu schlagen*], you should rather watch this contest quietly from the secure seat of critique. This contest is troublesome for the combatants, but entertaining for you; and—given an outcome that is certain to be bloodless—it must turn

out to be profitable for your insights. (A746-7/B774-5)⁴

— As if. What violent fantasy of non-violent contemplation is this in Kant? What violent, sublime, pleasure, profit and complacency in the supposed ability to withdraw from the arena and watch from a safe seat. Violence *of reason to reason*, for the discipline of reason here is a discipline exercised by reason on reason, on its own tendency to go a bit wild and get a bit violent.

— And with the swords inevitably come the questions of power and justice, articulated by Kant in his writings on the philosophy of right. In the ‘Secret Article of a Perpetual Peace’ that forms the second supplement to the main body of the essay on Perpetual Peace (added for the second edition of that text), the problem for Kant is to locate the position of philosophical discourse in a context of right and power: the *only* secret article in a treaty of perpetual peace (and Kant is of course here, openly and even treasonably, breaking the secrecy of the secret by announcing that there is a secret and telling us what that secret is), states that ‘The maxims of the philosophers on the conditions under which public peace is possible shall be consulted by states which are armed for war’ (*Kant’s Political Writings*, 115). This has to be a secret, however, or should have remained a secret, because it is humiliating or belittling [*verkleinerlich*] for the supreme legislative authority, (‘to which we must naturally attribute the highest degree of wisdom’) to seek advice from mere subjects (the philosophers). The point is not to ask the philosophers for advice, but to allow them the freedom for discussion: this gives them a *hearing*. This hearing does not mean that

⁴ Cf. too the description from the earlier ‘Antithetic’, at A422-3/B450-51, with the analogy of ‘vigorous knights’.

what philosophers say acquires any power (power resides with the jurist, who represents the power of the state). But the problem with the jurist is what he does with his symbolic sword: ‘The jurist, who has taken as his symbol the *scales* of right and the *sword* of justice [*das Schwert die Gerechtigkeit*], usually uses the latter not merely to keep any extraneous influences away from the former, but will throw the sword into one of the scales if it refuses to sink (*vae victis*)’. That justice need a sword if it is to be enforced (that the transcendently absolute force of right need this empirical supplement) and that the philosopher not be entitled to wield it (‘since the possession of power inevitably corrupts the pure judgement of reason’ (115)) condemns the philosopher to the complex and shifty hope that the possessor of power will somehow *hear* his words.

— This is not essentially different from the situation described by Derrida in ‘Mochlos’: Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* needs, and fails, to draw what Derrida calls a ‘linear’ frontier between the responsibility to truth and the responsibility to action. Derrida says that because language is the common element of the two domains Kant is trying to hold apart, effects of parasitism and simulacra constantly blur that frontier:

Kant’s effort—this is the grandeur of the properly philosophical project and the demand for a judgement capable of deciding—tends to limit the effects of confusion, simulacrum, parasiting, equivocality, undecidability that are produced by language. In this sense, this philosophical demand is represented to the highest degree by that technology of computerisation which while appearing today to escape from the control of the University, i.e., in Kantian terms, from philosophy, is its most faithful product and representa-

tive. This is only apparently paradoxical and it is before the law of this apparent paradox that the ultimate responsibility would be to be taken today, if that were possible. (*Du Droit à la philosophie*, pp.418-9; tr. 18-9)

To say that language is the element of confusion and undecidability here may still appear to come down on the side of words-words. But of course once the frontier between truth and action is blurred or otherwise complicated, the place of the sword becomes indeterminate too, so that, at the limit, there would be no word that was not also somewhere an s-word, a sword. Language can be the 'element' of this type of undecidability only if it is not just made up of words. In language, words-words slip undecidably into word-swords, and to that extent are no longer quite in language any longer.

— All of this can, in a sense, only be *read*. But if it is *only* read, if reading meant merely deciphering words-words, then it hasn't really been read at all. Reading words alone is not yet reading, however disciplinarily or interdisciplinarily sanctioned it may appear to be. Reading or producing the sword in the words is always more than *just* reading.

— But democratic debate? Discussion? Argumentation? Agreement? 'Making conflict into community'? Isn't that why we're here?

— But that's the whole point and edge of the wordsword. All these (and all other) comforting teleological concepts collapse, however stoically and even heroically you pretend to know that they all aim towards something of the order of a Kantian Idea, that the *telos* will never *actually* be reached and that we'll never *in fact* reach agreement. Kant

comes to see that perpetual peace, exemplary *telos* of all these concepts, the *best* thing we could hope for, could only be achieved, even ideally, in the *worst* violence: so, supposedly working towards it, we are never quite working towards it, but also, simultaneously, away from it, because the end would just be the end and perpetual peace would be death. The end of all the ends proposed by such concepts is already inscribed in them from the start, cut into them somewhere, everywhere, unpredictably, chopping them up along the way. That's why there's reading to be done, disciplines to be crossed, and questions of responsibility to be raised.

— Cut.

Epilogue

When I emerged fully dressed from my room, my friends fell back in manifest alarm. 'What's that behind your head?' they cried. Since my awakening I had felt something preventing me from bending back my head, and I now groped for it with my hand. My friends, who had grown somewhat calmer, had just shouted 'Be careful, don't hurt yourself!' when my hand closed behind my head on the hilt of sword. My friends came closer, examined me, led me back to the mirror in my room and stripped me to the waist. A large, ancient knight's sword with a cross-shaped handle was buried to the hilt in my back, but the blade had been driven with such incredible precision between my skin and flesh that it had caused no injury. Nor was there a wound at the spot on my neck where the sword had penetrated; my friends assured me that there was an opening large enough to admit the blade, but dry and showing no trace of blood. And when my friends now stood on chairs and slowly, inch by inch, drew out the

sword, I did not bleed, and the opening on my neck closed until no mark was left save a scarcely discernible slit. 'Here is your sword', laughed my friends, and gave it to me. I hefted it in my two hands; it was a splendid weapon, Crusaders might have used it.

Who tolerates this gadding about of ancient knights in dreams, irresponsibly brandishing their swords, stabbing innocent sleepers who are saved from serious injury only because the weapons in all likelihood glance off living bodies, and also because there are faithful friends knocking at the door, prepared to come to their assistance?

Kafka, Diary entry for 20 January 1915.