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PRECIOSA DE JOYA

The Punakawans Make an Untimely Appearance

In Praise of Caves, Shadows, and Fire (or A Response to Plato's Doctrine of Truth)

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ABSTRACT: This paper begins with a Bakhtinian reflection on Javanese shadow puppet theatre (wayang kulit), and explores errancy through carnival laughter embodied and performed by the wise, grotesque figures of clown-servants (punakawan). I argue, however, that here the real subversive power lies not in a combative position that erupts in a social revolution but in offering an alternative way of thinking and being, a deviation from the philosophical (Platonic) obsession for truth and heroic/historic gestures that claim to overcome ignorance and hegemonic/normative structures. Responding to the critique of so-called feudal elements in 'Javanism', I explore how the Javanese mantra, 'manunggaling kawula gusti' (the union of servant and lord), incessantly rehearsed in the stories and life of the people, reveals neither blindness nor self-dissimulation.

KEYWORDS: Wayang; Wayang kulit; Humour; Grotesque; Kejawen; Theatre–Philosophy; Plato's cave (Allegory); Bakhtin, Mikhail

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Wayang is good to think with.

A. L. Becker

It is way past midnight, and the dhalang (puppeteer) takes the kayon, the leaf-shaped puppet symbolizing the tree of life. To the quickening drumbeat and agitated sound of metallophones and gongs, he vigorously shakes the kayon as it swoops back and forth across the screen. Against the light of the blencong (lamp), the movements of the kayon project quivering shadows, as though the shadows themselves were caught on fire.

This marks the beginning of the scene known in Javanese shadow puppet theatre or *wayang kulit* as *gara-gara*, a time when the world, plagued by disease, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, is 'as dark as a dust-clouded night'.¹ Fortunately, the turmoil eventually subsides, and in its place appears the androgynous clown, Semar, known not

1 *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*, ed. by James R. Brandon (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), p. 115.

only as the servant and wise counsel to the Pandhawa hero, Arjuna, but also the ancient god, Ismaya, descended on earth as the protector of Java.² *Gara-gara* is therefore not merely a time of chaos but also the *punakawan* (clown) scene, the moment when Semar, along with his wacky sons, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, enter the stage and delight the audience with a repertoire of social critique, slapstick, and obscene jokes. But while their humour has never failed to win the hearts of spectators, the importance of these clowns to people's lives extends far beyond the time and place of the performance. As the shadows (*bayang-bayang*) give way to the everyday and fade into the morning light, the *punakawan* lose their material form and sink deep into the mind, as a way to imagine (*mbayangke*) an errant and erring life.

Entering the world at the brink of complete annihilation, the clowns dance their way into the stage at the most inappropriate time. They are the untimely ones, the antithesis to the climax because they interrupt the plot and mock the seriousness of what is deemed eventful or historical. They exist at the margins of history, not only because they are of no concern — in most *wayang* plays, their actions have no significance at all in the development of the plot — but also because they lack concern by being seemingly oblivious to the crisis of the times. Hence, the lightness of their gait and their propensity for laughter, banter, and carefree dance. And so as the brave hero Arjuna meditates in the forest to gather strength for an impending battle, we find his entourage of clowns at close distance, trying to outwit each other as they happily fool around. Unlike their masters, who are endowed with spiritual and mental acuity and often depicted with graceful movements and sexy, slim bodies, the clowns are shamelessly corrupt and materialistic, extorting and begging for money whenever they can. They are offensively obscene as they brag about their sexual adventures and act out their perverse fantasies. Though they may sometimes appear dull-witted, they often defeat their enemies in battle, either by throwing fecal matter or gassing them with their smelly farts. And as their beautifully eccentric shapes reveal, they are the perfect embodiments of the inappropriate form and the uncontainable and unrestrainable spirit of

2 Ibid., p. 120.

the grotesque, dramatized in body parts that either bulge out, droop, or elongate to exaggerated lengths.

By evoking the idea of the untimely, I am proposing a way to understand the temporal structure of *wayang*, particularly of the *gara-gara* scene. In this regard, one must take into account the excellent analyses done by A. L. Becker and René Lysloff.³ Juxtaposing the *wayang* plot to Aristotle's notion of the narrative, Becker explains that while the latter is constructed on causality and a series of linear sequences, the former allows, from time to time, the possibility for coincidences (i.e., events that *just* happen, for no causal reason). Thus, for example, there is no causal explanation for why Arjuna meets the demon Cakil in the forest. It just happens, and 'because they are who they are, they fight and Cakil dies'. This chance meeting, however, is not just a physical encounter, but the clash of two different epistemologies, of two different conceptual worlds. While Arjuna attacks Cakil because he recognizes him as a demon and is compelled by his duty (*dharma*) to defeat evil, Cakil attacks Arjuna who, having raised the heat of the forest through his meditation and thus causing thermal pollution, has made his life uncomfortable. Neither can really claim a higher moral ground; for while Arjuna kills Cakil dispassionately out of *dharma*, Cakil is only passionately 'defending his forest home against the intruder'.⁴ René Lysloff takes Becker's idea and claims that the *gara-gara* is one of the scenes where such coincidence happens, when the epistemology of heroes exists side by side with the epistemology of the clowns. He describes it as a 'wrinkle in time' that brings about 'a peculiarly sustained moment of timelessness' in the middle of the *wayang* performance.⁵

With the idea of the untimely, however, I would like to emphasize not how everything comes together but the interruption, the disturbance, the distortion, the disjointedness of time, which arises from the phenomenon of the grotesque. Lysloff takes Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of

3 See A. L. Becker 'Text-Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theatre', *Dispositio* 5.13-14 (1980), pp. 137-68 and René Lysloff 'A Wrinkle in Time: The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Banyumas (West Central Java)', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 10.1 (1993), pp. 49-80.

4 Becker, 'Text-Building', p. 146.

5 Lysloff, 'Wrinkle in Time', p. 49.

chronotopes, which literally means time-space, describing it as time that ‘thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible.’⁶ But what I am proposing here is slightly different: it relates not just to how time informs or makes itself visible in space but to how it takes particular spatial qualities, in this case, the grotesque, the ‘grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable’ growth of the material form.⁷ This is time that is constantly othering, generating multiples of itself, and in doing so, what sometimes emerges as exaggeration, as monstrosity, a distortion, a gross interruption, a time out of joint.

Through monstrous distortions and absurd proportions, the grotesque celebrates the bodily element: capturing what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the ongoing, transmogrifying, ‘grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable’ growth of the material form.⁸ From this arises what he calls a carnival, festive laughter — a laughter that is, in its ambivalence, both joyful and mocking, destructive as it gives life. It is laughter that temporarily suspends hierarchic distinctions, social norms and prohibitions by degrading and dragging back to the ‘lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs’ everything perceived as ‘high, spiritual, ideal, abstract.’⁹ Deprived of status, and completely lacking a sense of propriety, the *punakawan* speak and behave irreverently towards authority, exposing the foolishness and hypocrisy of heroes and gods. But it is precisely through comic relief, the interruption to both the drama of *wayang* and the seriousness of a social order and its prevailing ‘truths’ that the clowns offer their spectators a ‘second life’, a fleeting moment when ‘time enter[s] the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.’¹⁰

The grotesque, however, manifests itself not only through physical malformations. It resurfaces with greater threat when we least expect it or when it appears at the most inopportune time as the expression of the *id* — that ‘alien, inhuman power’ to which a certain madness

6 Ibid., p. 52.

7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p. 19.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 20.

10 Ibid., p. 9.

governing people's behaviour is sometimes attributed.¹¹ This loss of control over one's own faculties is one of the things the Javanese fear the most; and they believe that the lack of consciousness makes one susceptible to the possession of spirits. Thus, defying the temptation of sleep (often more in theory than in practice) becomes key to enacting one's ability for ultimate self-control and consequently to achieving concentration and great spiritual power. In staying awake and delivering an eight-hour performance without interruption, the *dhalang* displays such prowess and transforms *wayang* from a mere theatre space in which stories are told to a theatrical spectacle in itself.

At a performance held at the Art Institute in Solo, the dhalang Ki Tristuti Rachmadi Suryasaputra makes a parody of the ascetic practice of wakefulness. It is one of the last scenes towards the end of Ramayana, and the demon Indrajit had cast a sleeping spell on King Rama's entire kingdom. No one is spared, everyone falls prey to the seduction of sleep; not even the great monkey hero Hanuman can resist, despite the desperate measure he takes at propping his eyes open with matchsticks. Deep in the forest, Semar, the wise one, slumbers almost throughout the whole scene, occasionally rousing from his sleep only to yawn and complain that staying awake is too great a feat for an old man like him. Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong keep themselves busy with games and puns, but eventually, one by one, succumb to the world of dreams. Only Petruk manages to keep awake, at least for a while, although not out of ascetic calmness, but due to the grotesquerie of his uncontrollably errant and troubled mind as he worries about tuition fees for his children's schooling and the enormous debts he will inevitably incur. Meanwhile, the king of the monkeys, Sugriwa, shouts at his army (and at the audience as well) that a thief is on the loose and that everyone should stay vigilant and awake. But even he proves no match against Indrajit's spell. As he yells at everyone, his words gradually grow faint and garbled, until he finally dozes off mid-sentence. He jolts back into wakefulness, but only to realize that it is a lost cause. As he feels himself slipping back into deep slumber, he makes a final, heroic gesture to take full control of the twilight moments of his consciousness: through lucid (self-)observation, he declares that his eyes are about to close, and reasons that his failing can only be due to the fact that he never performs. At

11 Ibid., p. 49.



Figure 1. Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong (a and b), and Semar (c) in stills from Enthuis Susmono, *Dewa Ruci* [The Resplendent God], Contemporary Wayang Archive, Singapore <<http://cwa-web.org/en/DewaRuci>> [accessed 4 July 2021].



Figure 2. Installation at Sonobudoyo Museum, Yogyakarta, 2017.
Image credit: Miguel Escobar Varela.

*that moment, the audience bursts out laughing, realizing that Sugriwa had suddenly become the alter-ego of the dhalang Tristuti who, after decades of being banned from performing by President Suharto (1967–98), is himself struggling to stay awake as he delivers an eight-hour long show.*¹²

12 This scene is taken from a recording of a performance by the puppeteer Ki Tristuti Rachmadi Suryasaputra, entitled *Brubuh Ngalengko*, at the Art Institute in Solo, Indonesia. While the exact date of the performance is unknown, it most likely happened in the late 1990s when Tristuti would again perform after fourteen years of exile on Buru island and twenty more years of being banned from the stage despite the amnesty that proclaimed him a ‘free’ man. His associations with the cultural organization *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (LEKRA) had linked him to the Communist party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* or PKI), whose members and sympathizers became political targets during Suharto’s ‘New Order’ regime (1965–1999). In light of the massive killings and disappearances that were happening at that time, Tristuti was one of the luckier ones who, after prison, only had to suffer the stigma of having the words E.T. on his identity card (E.T., not for extra-terrestrial — and here, one cannot but think of the *id* — but *ex-tawanan*, which literally means ex-prisoner). Nevertheless, the stigma caused him serious financial troubles as he could barely make a living from ghost-writing for well-known *dhalangs* such as Ki Anom Suroto, Ki Manteb Sudarsono, Ki Purbo Asmoro, and the like. Ki Tristuti Rachmadi, ‘My Life as a Shadow Master under Suharto’, in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. by Mary S. Zurbuchen (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), pp. 38–46 (pp. 42–43).

Carnival laughter is the laughter of the people that, unlike satirical humour, does not place anyone at a higher moral ground. No one is spared, everyone becomes the object of derision. But while the *punakawan* may be constantly testing the limits of the current order, and always come across, beyond what is tolerated or tolerable, as gross, rude, obscene, and stupid, they do not champion the cause of the marginalized, at least not in the radical way that some people would like. Often, we think of marginality as an alternative discourse, a combative position, which could erupt (at least we hope) into a serious social revolution. But with the clowns, one gets the impression that at every moment they strike, they retreat. They poke, criticize, turn things upside down, get a good laugh, but in the end reaffirm Javanese values, calling for the need to respect one's elders, for egalitarianism and mutual helping of each other (*gotong royong*), and the necessity of social propriety encoded in Javanese etiquette (*tata krama*). As Ward Keeler argues, the *punakawan* may be 'non-structural', but it does not mean that they reject the structure altogether.

They do not affirm pan-human or pan-social values in conflict with heroic ideals and strictures. They simply present a contrast with them, an alternative rendering that does not put the normatively dominant one into question.¹³

The *punakawan* are therefore the non-heroic characters who will never make history. While they offer humour that wreaks havoc, laughter is the turmoil that always eventually subsides.

Caught in a self-perpetuating feudal structure, *wayang* reeks of the ahistorical. Renowned Javanese novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer condemns his own culture, claiming that Javanism is a form of fascism that generates an 'unthinking loyalty and obedience to superiors' and 'tolerates no opposition.'¹⁴ Indeed, when one sees how the Javanese love to rehearse and reduce everything to their philosophical formula of *manunggaling kawula gusti* (the union of servant and lord, of human and God), one realizes that it not only begins to sound like a broken record; from the constant repetition of this mantra-idea arises a cultural monster that forces everything to fit into a harmonious order. This was the

13 Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Play, Javanese Selves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 210.

14 Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Exile: Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Conversation with Andre Vltchek and Rossie Indra* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), pp. 85–86.

reason why, according to John Pemberton, former Indonesian President Suharto was able to ingeniously create an uncanny ‘appearance of order’, ‘political stillness’, and a lack of public demonstration despite the tumultuous events of the peasant movements and politicized killings that accompanied the establishment of his New Order government in 1966.¹⁵ And this political indifference, this ‘ideal absence in which nothing, as it were, happens’, could have only been possible by reaffirming Javanese core values, such as ‘the mutual adjustment of interdependent wills, the self-restraint of emotional expression, and the careful regulation of outward behaviour’¹⁶ all of which are expressions of the kind of refinement that the Javanese love.

Wayang was, of course, very much part of Suharto’s political propaganda, as it had been and will always be for a society where language and behaviour are profoundly imbued with theatricality. But while *wayang* is deeply feudal and the *punakawan* complicit in the constant renewal and affirmation of this world, censorship and control were still necessary to ensure that both *dhalang* and the clowns did not overstep their bounds.

In her essay on the ‘Portrayal of National Leaders as Clown-Servants’, Helen Pausacker explains how Suharto associated himself with Semar in the early days of the New Order, as well as in the last decade of his regime, in his desperate attempt to hold on to power. On 21 January 1995, Suharto invited several *dhalang* ‘to rediscover the Javanese values of “individualism, mysticism, and social-pragmatism”’ by creating a new *lakon* (story) with Semar as the central character. The aim of the story, entitled *Semar mbabar jati diri* (Semar discloses his true self), was to show the clown not merely ‘as faithful servant but someone who was critical and represented the voice of the *rakyat* [people].’¹⁷ And the point was to represent Suharto as the ‘super version of Semar, the *dhanyang*¹⁸ of Java and protector of the people.’¹⁹

15 John Pemberton, *On the Subject of ‘Java’* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 4.

16 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (London: The Free Press, 1960), p. 29.

17 Helen Pausacker, ‘Presidents as Punakawan: Portrayal of National Leaders as Clown-Servants in Central Javanese Wayang’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35.2 (2004), pp. 213–33 (p. 220).

18 A spirit that protects a particular locality.

19 Pausacker, ‘Presidents as Punakawan’, p. 219.

In the mid to the late 1990s, writers of the New Order sought to transform and rework *wayang* narratives and wrest them from the clutches of Suharto's political propaganda by challenging the *kawula-gusti* ethos. As Marshall Clark explains, this was achieved not only by modernizing and humanizing the heroes, depicting them as “ordinary” Indonesians who performed their tasks in a routine manner;²⁰ in his study of Emha Ainun Nadjib's *Gerakan punakawan atawa arus bawah* (The clown-servant movement or the undertow, 1994), for instance, Clark further shows how the *punakawan* take a more radical role in ‘reject[ing] the Javanese court culture's traditional hierarchical principles and promot[ing] a more democratic social and political system.’²¹ Marshall cites a scene where Gareng starts to complain that he has been ‘Gareng-ing’ for too many centuries only to find ‘the same old things: the viciousness of power, exploitation, slavery, oppression, stupidity, lack of foresight and ignorance.’²²

Another interesting analysis with regard to the reworking of *wayang* narratives is the redefinition of Semar's character, which writers have done as a critical response to Suharto's appropriation of the clown. Pausacker cites Nano Riantiarno's *Semar gugat* (Semar accuses), a performance staged by Teater Koma in December 1995, where Arjuna steals the forelock of Semar, which possesses not only magical powers but the child-like qualities of honesty and lack of prejudice. Here, Semar is no longer depicted as a symbol of Suharto ‘but rather of the people, who suffer because of the elite's actions’, referring to the corruption of Suharto who here is represented by Arjuna.²³ In another story, in Sindhunata's *Semar mencari raga* (Semar in search of a body, 1996), Semar disappears in search of his identity and mistakenly believes that the solution would be to return to his pure spiritual form

20 Marshall Clark, ‘Shadow Boxing: Indonesian Writers and the Ramayana in the New Order’, *Indonesia*, 72 (2001), pp. 159–87 (p. 161).

21 Marshall Clark, “Smells of Something like Postmodernism”: Emha Ainun Nadjib's Rewriting of the Mahabharata’, in *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, ed. by Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 273–92 (p. 274).

22 Emha Ainun Nadjib, *Gerakan Punakawan Atawa Arus Bawah* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 1994), p. 28, quoted in Clark, ‘Smells of Something like Postmodernism’, p. 275.

23 Pausacker, ‘Presidents as Punakawan’, p. 222.

and abandon his earthly suffering and grotesque body. But Sang Hyang Tunggal, the supreme *wayang* deity explains to Semar that he must remain *samar*, and that once he abandons his suffering, he gives up his *samar* quality for clarity and certainty: 'Suffering never gives you clarity and certainty. But suffering gives you hope [...] and only if you courageously endure suffering, Semar, then you can live in *samar*, which brings happiness.'²⁴

Clark ingeniously connects this passage from Sindhunata to an essay by Goenawan Mohamad, where the latter explains *kesamaran*, the state of having the quality of *samar*, as a refusal to be homogenized, defined, or explained.²⁵ But in his entire discussion, Clark consistently translates *samar* as formlessness, which is problematic and misleading, given that the word means 'dim, vague, indistinct'. This (mis)translation surreptitiously enforces a stock assumption that being 'dim, vague, indistinct' has no form, and that form can only be clear, certain, and well-defined. But then one remembers that it is precisely for an earthly body that Semar gives up the idea of existing as a pure, spiritual form. Thus, to think of this slippage of meaning, of Semar as *samar*, one might have to reflect further on how these qualities of dimness, vagueness, and indistinctness have their own materiality (a slippery quality both in actuality and in the mind), how they are enfleshed in specific operations and how they impinge on our senses with a certain force.

When one reads the literature on Semar and sees how people have reflected on his character in a philosophical manner, we find *samar*, this quality of obscurity, invoked repeatedly. It is sculpted into the very name of Semar and consequently what allows for the capacity for disguise (*menyamari*), as well as what gives the clown his spherical

24 Sindhunata, *Semar Mencari Raga* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1996), pp. 49–50, quoted in Clark, 'Smells of Something like Postmodernism', p. 280.

25 Ibid. The word *samar* may be, for some, uncannily similar to Édouard Glissant's idea of 'opacity', for example in 'For Opacity', in Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 189–94. But while it is curious to see where these ideas converge, I would also alert the reader to think where they differ. In resisting the tendency of a certain humanism to disembody, homogenize, and universalize ideas, I am hoping here to present the idea of *samar* as something that arises from its own historical context, exploring how it has been used, developed, and problematized within its own culture and politics.

shape (*semat*). Despite the semantic playfulness, these explanations depict Semar in all his seriousness and essentialize him as an enigma, a profound vagueness which does not come from confusion or chaos but from being able to embody all contradictions. He is spherical in shape, both male and female, because he is complete, which according to Sri Mulyono is the reason why anyone who Semar assists is ensured victory and success.²⁶ This emphasis on a spiritual or mystical interpretation of Semar can also be seen in the work of Sumastuti Sumukti, who criticizes foreign scholars for being 'superficial and fragmentary' in their analysis of Semar as a trickster. In presenting Semar 'as understood by Javanese', she insists that we focus on the power of his wisdom, which includes 'the quality of unselfishness and the conviction of the necessity of justice'. Similar to Siddharta and Christ, Semar rejects the life of a god-king and transforms himself into a servant. This, according to Sumukti, is Semar's way of restoring social and natural order and that, by exhibiting a life of humility, he demonstrates 'that even those who are humble should be respected'.²⁷

There is, however, something to be said about this propensity to mysticize as an obsession to impute a spiritual meaning to everything. Historically, one could say that it was partly the result of an important collaboration between the conservative *priyayi* (Javanese nobility/intellectual class) and 'sympathetic Dutch Javanologists' to codify and 'purify' Javanese culture in an attempt to inculcate the values of *adiluhung* (the beautiful sublime) and *halus* (refinement). The result was the creation of 'Java' as a 'cultural spectacle', which some scholars claim was part of the reaction and resistance of the Javanese to a colonial power that had made them politically impotent. *Vis-à-vis* their Western colonizers, the Javanese felt the need to assert cultural superiority. By exoticizing the Javanese soul, it presented itself as what could never be fully subjugated or comprehended.²⁸

26 Sri Mulyono, *Apa dan Siapa Semar* (Jakarta: CV Haji Masagung, 1989), pp. 29–30.

27 Sumastuti Sumukti, 'An Analysis of Semar Through Selected Javanese Shadow Play Stories' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hawaii, 1990), p. 1.

28 To know more about *halus*-ination, or the hallucinating emphasis on refinement in Javanese culture, see Pemberton, *On the Subject of 'Java'* and Nancy K. Florida, 'Reading the Unread in Traditional Javanese Literature', *Indonesia*, 44 (October 1987), pp. 1–15. See also Mangkunegara VII, *On the Wayang Kulit (Purwa) and its Symbolic and Mystical Elements*, trans. by Claire Holt (Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Far Eastern

But not only scholars speak like this. In one of my visits to Yogyakarta, I invited my host's driver, Pak Ego,²⁹ and his friends to a conversation about the *punakawan*. Over black tea and cigarettes, I coaxed them into telling me what they loved about the clowns and in what ways they thought they were funny. Curiously, none of the grotesque, obscene, and rude nature of the clowns, as one sees them on stage, was ever raised. They insisted, despite my stubborn attempts, to speak 'philosophically' or to analyse (*mengupas*, to remove or strip off the peel of something, to get rid of the outer covering), the spiritual significance of the clowns. *Itu ada filsafatnya* (This has its [own] philosophy) — the Javanese love to say this about everything, whether it be the way a dancer walks with bended knees on stage or how a small dagger (*kris*) is kept under the pillow to establish some spiritual connection with its owner. And so that evening, Pak Ego and his friends would proudly teach me how the clowns were representations of the stages of one's spiritual journey: Bagong, born from the shadow of Semar, being the dumbest and therefore the opposite of his wise father, is supposedly a reminder of the ugliness that co-exists with the goodness in the human soul. Petruk is known to have a gaping hole on his side, which signifies a stage of emptiness that drives one to search for God. And finally, in the end, is Gareng, whose deformed feet are a sign not of physical defect but of long hours sitting in meditation. The longer we talked, the further I felt I was from the *wayang* of their childhood.

Seeing Semar on stage, with his grotesque figure and shadowy texture, I wondered if there was something missing in these conversations that too easily took leave of the body and expedited the clown to the lofty realm of the spirit. But was I, by simply doing away or underestimating the Javanese's love for mystical interpretations, equally obscuring or denying understanding? Here, I began to realize that the way they keep returning and bringing everything back to the

Studies, Cornell University, 1957) on how mysticization affirms a certain opacity of the Javanese as other. Here, Mangkunegara proudly explains in his analysis of *wayang* how he is merely lifting a tip of the veil in revealing the secret of Javanese knowledge 'concerning the deepest significance of life'.

29 Ego is the shortened version of Bagong, which was the nickname given to him for being plump when he was young.

idea of *manunggaling kawula gusti* may not be so much a way to explain a truth as to rehearse what needs to be remembered (*kudu eling*), which in this case, as Keeler points out, relates to a constant mindfulness of God. To be mindful would be to have a kind of wakefulness that is only possible through ‘emotional invulnerability’ and self-control, the capacity to remain ‘calm, untroubled, unmoved’, in the midst of great adversities.³⁰

Like sleep, laughter for the Javanese is something that one should try to avoid (again, at least in theory). In moments of boisterous laughter, it is common practice, Keeler observes, for the audience to let out a ‘stylized hoot’. Such stylization ‘puts a stop to the humor’s effects’ enabling spectators to regain their self-control.³¹ To understand further this ambiguous relation that the Javanese have with laughter, we turn to the *wayang* story, *Murwakala* (Birth of Kala), where we find the blood-thirsty ogre Batara Kala struck by the beauty of the *dhalang*’s words (*kena ing sabda*). Kala, which is the allegorical representation of time, arises from the seed of Batara Guru, which was accidentally spilled into the sea as a result of the god’s uncontrollable passion for his wife and an untimely ejaculation. Kala, not knowing his father, grows up to become destructive, having an insatiable appetite for children. Vishnu is sent to earth to manage the crisis and incarnates himself as a *dhalang*. It is said that only he can read the writing on Kala’s body, which is the only way to effectively subdue (for one can never vanquish completely) the demon. Vishnu stages a *wayang* performance as Kala is passing by, and the latter is irresistibly drawn to the *dhalang*’s storytelling. He finds himself bursting into peals of uncontrollable laughter that he gives up his weapon in exchange for the *dhalang*’s promise to keep the show going. Here, the *Murwakala* narrates not only the myth of human ill-fortune as the condition of being devoured by time, but also the origin of *wayang* itself, and how, through the seductive power of speech and laughter, it causes a forgetfulness that suspends time and puts it momentarily off track.³²

30 Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Play*, pp. 219–220.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

32 Jan Mrázek, *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre: Contemplations on the Art of Javanese Wayang Kulit* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005), p. 354.

However, to complicate further the relation between laughter and forgetting, one must keep in mind that the Javanese also regard the comical (*lucu*) as *aneh* (odd).³³ One encounters the *aneh* not only in the odd faces and bodies of the clowns but in language as well. In an essay by Hildred Geertz, we learn about the phenomenon of *latah*, which she describes as follows:

An involuntary blurting of obscene words or phrases, compulsive imitation of the words or actions of others, and compulsive unquestioning obedience when ordered to perform actions which may be ridiculous, improper, or even dangerous. The stimulus to such behaviour is any sudden loud sound, a tickling prod in the ribs, or an abrupt gesture.³⁴

Thus, for instance, a Javanese woman would be forced to respond 'in, out, in, out, in, out' when someone utters the word 'penis'.³⁵ Such a phenomenon, according to James Siegel, arises because of the constraints of High Javanese (*Kromo*) on Low Javanese (*Ngoko*). Contrary to the 'quick, abbreviated, abrupt, and usually harsh' *Ngoko*, *Kromo* is a manner of speaking whereby a person uses 'slow, soft, long sentences and full of archaism'.³⁶ It is a skill where one is able to create 'a pleasing vacuity', that is, to 'speak for so long and say nothing'.³⁷ While *Ngoko* is spoken among friends and to children, *Kromo* is a way of deference towards people whose status demands recognition, and in doing so, the speaker replaces the words he ordinarily uses for words deemed appropriate and respectful. To have this ability is to have refinement or *halus*, which is the very essence of *being* Javanese. From time to time, however, *latah* occurs, and in that moment when the speaker briefly loses control, the rude and crude *Ngoko* appears causing him great embarrassment. *Ngoko* is therefore sometimes the language spoken when one loses control, either by being excited or

33 James Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 98.

34 Hildred Geertz, 'Latah in Java: A Theoretical Paradox', *Indonesia*, 5 (April 1968), pp. 93-104 (p. 94).

35 Siegel, *Solo*, p. 28.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

when one talks in one's sleep, which makes the *ngoko* speaker into 'the perpetrator of errors' due to an untimely appearance.³⁸

One could perhaps easily interpret the relation between *Kromo* and *Ngoko* as a form of subjugation, where the former becomes a second language that inhibits or suppresses the speaker's 'own' tongue. But as Siegel points out, such deference 'lacks all sense of subservience'. In language that is seemingly affirming a feudal, hierarchical structure, the use of *Kromo* is in fact a kind of self-protection: that in consciously replacing the words one ordinarily uses, one practices an emotional detachment, which in turn frees the speaker from having to experience a feeling of embarrassment and inferiority.³⁹

Sugriwa finally manages to wake up and runs to the forest, where he happens to find the sleeping punakawan. A thief is on the loose; he needs all the help he can get to catch the perpetrator, so he tries to wake up the clowns. As he feels his way through the darkness, however, he touches Gareng's 'stick', which is proudly erect, as the punakawan lies on his back. Sugriwa, who all this time had been shouting, falters and in that awkward moment, mutters, 'Saru' ('Obscene'). Gareng is woken up, and unaware that it is Sugriwa, snaps angrily: 'Leave me alone, I can do whatever I like!' He suddenly realizes it is the king of the monkeys and apologizes, but immediately after, he again falls back to sleep.

Becker would interpret a scene like this as a coincidence, something that just happens, an event without causal explanation. It is a moment when the world of kings/heroes and clowns briefly coincide, which I would say not only brings different epistemologies together but causes an 'error' in time, an interruption to the progressive, dramatic narrative of dharma as part of a temporal, grotesque transmogrification, enacted by the sudden appearance of the *ngoko* speaker, the untimely one.

As I contemplate the shadow of Semar and see this philosopher clown with his sons, causing a riot on stage, I am reminded of Socrates who was condemned to death by hemlock, the buffoon who they say got himself taken too seriously. But would Socrates have wanted anything less and deprive the philosopher of the NOBLE sacrifice of his own life in the name of truth?

38 Ibid., p. 25.

39 Ibid., p. 27.

Nietzsche says that a physiognomist once revealed that Socrates, beneath his Apollonian guise, was 'a cave of [...] evil passions', which leads me to believe that the wise philosopher himself may have actually belonged to the ranks of the grotesque (a word which comes from grottesca, or cave paintings). But the fear of being completely ruined by decadence had forced him to take the drastic measure of making a tyrant out of reason. Virtuous reason, the crowning glory of humanity, was therefore never a creation of free choice, but the 'last expedient' in a very desperate situation. By putting 'a permanent daylight' to his obscure desires, Nietzsche claims that Socrates had wanted nothing more than 'to be rational, clear, and distinct, at any price', believing that 'yielding to the instincts, to the unconscious' could only lead downwards.⁴⁰

In discussing the problematic relation between 'Western' thought and the medium of theatre and theatricality, Samuel Weber explains that the antagonism can be traced back to Plato, who 'exchang[ed] the cave, its fire and shadows, for the bright sunlight and its direct, if dazzling illumination'. In his myth, the cave is depicted as a theatre stage where shadow images and phantasmagoria appear, like a narcotic that causes the dwellers to forget that the real is elsewhere. But the enslaved condition of the cave dwellers is the result not so much of oppression as it is a consent and their 'desire to remain the same, [...] in the same place'. Thus, the cave for Plato is 'a place not just of dissimulation and delusion but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion'.⁴¹ The escape from this cavernous hell is dramatized in the myth as 'the liberating if painful ascent into the open and natural light of the sun'. This world of ideas and truth, Weber claims, is a space that 'need no longer be localized'.

For what counts is never a particular place but rather the ubiquity of daylight itself. No shadows or obscurities, no echoes, projections, or simulacra: only light as it is and things as they are, in and of themselves: such is the dream of a liberation that would leave behind the cavernous nightmare of theatre in which enslavement appears as freedom.⁴²

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Twilight of the Idols', in *The Works of Nietzsche*, trans. by Thomas Common (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), p. 11.

41 Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 8.

42 Ibid.

In the course of his discussion, Weber makes an insightful reference to *wayang*, showing how it poses an alternative, perhaps even an objection, to Plato's allegory of the cave.⁴³ While the cave dwellers in Plato's myth are chained in one place and depicted with a certain fixity and lack of freedom, the spectators of *wayang* are free to move from one side of the screen to the other, to witness either the puppets themselves or their shadows. And to add to Weber's observation, the Javanese, as I've explained above, are in fact quite aware of the seduction of the *dhalang's* speech and make efforts to resist its power.

What seems to be at stake here is a notion of truth that Plato asserts in exchanging cave, fire, and shadows for the illuminating light of the sun. In his essay 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', Martin Heidegger explicitly sets his aim, not without a tinge of irony, 'to learn and henceforth know what [Plato] has left unsaid':⁴⁴ to *grasp* the real significance of Plato's allegory of the cave, to *exhaust* its content and *make visible* the essential aspect.⁴⁵ To achieve this, one must realize that the allegory 'does not just report on the abodes and situations of man inside or outside the cave', but narrates a series of incidents, transitions, movements 'from the cave out into the light of day and back again from the latter into the cave.'⁴⁶ It is therefore a story of a 'constant overcoming' of ignorance, of being uneducated, and that this movement is the underlying operation that leads one from 'the standardly unhidden' (i.e., shadows), to the 'most unhidden'. Given that the unhidden is not only what makes something shine, visible and accessible, but what *overcomes* the 'hiddenness of the hidden', truth (aletheia) therefore becomes a way of uncovering what Heidegger describes as 'a perpetual wrenching-away',⁴⁷ i.e., wrenching something from its hiding.

For Heidegger, the unhidden refers to what Plato calls the Idea. The Idea, which is the emerging that makes an outward appearance (eidos) visible, is

43 Ibid., p. 6.

44 Martin Heidegger, 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', in *Philosophy of the Twentieth Century: An Anthology*, ed. by William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken, 4 vols (New York: Random House, 1962), III: pp. 251-70 (p. 251).

45 Ibid., p. 255 and p. 260 (my emphasis).

46 Ibid., p. 255.

47 Ibid., p. 260.

pure shining in the sense of the phrase ‘the sun shines’. The ‘idea’ does not just let something else (behind it) ‘make an appearance’, it itself is what appears, and it depends upon itself alone for its appearing. The ἰδέα is the apparent. The essence of the idea lies in the qualities of being apparent and visible. The idea achieves presence, namely the presence of every being as what it is. Each being is continuously present in the What of beings. Presence however is really the essence of Being. Being, then, for Plato, has its real essence in its What.⁴⁸

Heidegger then alerts us to a subtle movement, a change in orientation, a transition that ‘the inquiry into unhiddenness is shifted to the way outward appearance manifests itself and with that to the associated ability to see: to what is right and the correctness of seeing.’⁴⁹ With the emphasis on the recognition of beings, Idea becomes the master of *aletheia*, and correctness, not unhiddenness, becomes the basic feature of Being.

Elsewhere, Jacques Derrida presents a similar critique of Plato, this time by reflecting on the myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*. In the story, the inventor, Theuth, presents to the king, Thamus, the gift of writing (grammata), claiming it as a remedy that induces remembering and increases knowledge. But the king, the father of *logos*, will deprecate and reject this gift, condemning it as poison that causes people to forget, by discouraging them from knowing things by heart. But the *pharmakon*, Derrida explains, is also what refers to *mythos*, to the *logoi en biblios*, ‘words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under cover of a solid object, letting themselves be desired for the space of a walk’. Contrary to speech that is ‘purely present, unveiled, naked’, it is *logos* that lends itself to mystery or to the unknown, making it powerfully seductive and causing one to be led astray.⁵⁰

In presenting writing as this movement of deferral, Derrida critiques Plato’s notion of truth as self-presence and offers in its place the ‘ambiguity or duplicity of the presence of the present’ as both

48 Ibid., pp. 261–62.

49 Ibid., p. 265.

50 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 71.

‘that which appears *and* its appearing’,⁵¹ i.e., a present that does not completely coincide with itself. Taking the notion of the present participle, Weber argues that the present is always ‘after’ itself, ‘in hopeless self-pursuit’, and its ‘*appearing* [...]’ is the grammatical index of those disjunctive “goings-on” that make the “present” into a “tense” in the most intense sense: “coming before” (*devançant*) or anticipating (the future) by “remembering” (the past).⁵²

As I think of the myth of Theuth, I am reminded of how wayang is also an invention, granted by Batara Guru and enacted by Vishnu, in order to subdue the blood-thirsty demon, Kala. But unlike in Plato’s story, wayang is a pharmakon that regards itself not so much as a cure but as a narcotic, a temporary fix in the form of a seduction that causes one to forget and lose control. But in this moment of forgetting, this momentary suspension of time, does remembering not also occur? And if so, does remembering necessarily make one wiser?

I am again thinking of Socrates, the philosopher par excellence, whom the oracle proclaimed not so much the wisest as the measure against whom no one can be wiser. As god-fearing, he was compelled by a divine call to remind everyone of their ignorance. But following Nietzsche’s cynical assessment of the philosopher, I wonder if Socrates’s noble and humbling affirmation of our epistemological human condition was not merely a device to rule out every possibility of an erroneous assumption, either that one knows something or that one knows anything at all. To be fool-proof, to be completely immune to one’s own foolishness so that one would never have to make a fool of oneself — this indeed forces a permanent daylight of sense and reason to cast upon one’s every act. But how different everything is when one looks at Semar! He is the wise clown who we can never take too seriously. Because despite efforts to ‘clean-up’ his act, Semar’s grotesque, disfigured physique will always remind us of his greed, of how he once swallowed up a mountain to prove to his brother Togog that he was the rightful heir to their father’s throne. And we can definitely be certain that his folly, which profoundly marks his body, anticipates future bungs, an ongoing testimony to the stupidity that ‘continues to haunt and heckle, creeping up as the other work in progress’.⁵³

51 Ibid., p. 192.

52 Weber, *Theatricality*, p. 15.

53 Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 28.

Semar, therefore, is the 'grammatical index of those disjunctive goings-on', an allegory of the gerund or present participle, of a present constantly overshadowed by the past and foreshadowing the future. But as a shadow image, he is also the present that never stays still. He is what 'take[s] place', what exists in a particular place, and what 'simultaneously also *pass[es] away* — not simply to disappear but to happen somewhere *else*'.⁵⁴

I would like to go back to Plato's cave, and return to Heidegger's reflections on how the allegory is essentially a series of transitions and movements, a story of overcoming. I am struck by the violence required to wrench oneself from the cavernous pit of 'false' beliefs, and the decisive action that one must take to suffer a turning towards the light. This, according to Heidegger, is the task one must undertake to arrive at the place of the unhidden. But while he criticizes the notion of *eidōs*, of being as presence, and tries to return to the idea of unhiddenness in *aletheia*, giving priority not to sight but to attunement, his thought is still very much centred on truth and on a profound concern for its veiling and unveiling.

But what, then, of those 'cave dwellers' who refuse to abandon the cave, fire, and shadows for the blinding light and decide to stay the same and in the same place? Say, for example, the clowns and everyone else who continue to subscribe 'Javanism' to a feudal relation of master and slave? Are we to think of them, in light of the heroic gesture of those who stepped out of the cave into the light as weak for as long as they dwell in their non-truth?

Maurice Blanchot tries to get beyond the notion of truth as revelation, 'seeking a way, without getting there', seeking 'a speech such that to speak would no longer be to unveil with light'. Further, he says:

We would want to arrive at a mode of 'manifestation', but a manifestation that would not be one of unveiling-veiling. Here what reveals itself does not give itself up to sight, just as it does not take refuge in simple invisibility.⁵⁵

54 Weber, *Theatricality*, p. 7.

55 Maurice Blanchot, 'Speaking Is Not Seeing', in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 25–32 (p. 29).

‘To reveal, to remove the veil, to expose directly to view’ — Blanchot finds these movements unsuitable. And because revelation is implicated in the notion of *aletheia*, what seems to be closest to what he is seeking is non-truth.

In trying to arrive at a mode of manifestation that forces neither an unveiling nor veiling, I reflect on the notion of mimesis. While constant doubling enacts the present participle and allows for the ambiguity of presence as what appears and what is appearing in the production of variants, I would argue that mimesis is not a function of truth, a moment in the life of its ongoing revelation. Rather, mimesis is the staging of non-truth; it does not aim to reveal and make us wiser or understand reality better. Rather, it is the macabre ritual of endless repetition, a rehearsal that prepares one for the hearse.

The reason perhaps why we might think of mimesis and the movement of deferral as a function of life is that we regard such operations as the overproduction or the result of an abundance. The grotesque, as I have said earlier, in its playful distortions and absurd manifestations, is for Bakhtin the result of (quoting him and myself) ‘the ongoing, transmogrifying, “grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” growth of the material form’. But the grotesque, again from the word *grottesca*, are fanciful projections of images in the cave, and is therefore also related to a certain mania, which Derrida argues is the result of the abuse of drugs, of the *pharmakon*.⁵⁶

Furthermore, when Derrida speaks of writing as *pharmakon*, he describes it as half-living. The *pharmakon* is a

weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath. The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum [...] of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing. This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn’t amount too much, is like all ghosts: errant. It rolls (*kulindeitai*) this way and that like someone who has lost his way, who doesn’t know where he is going, having strayed from the correct path, the right direction, the rule of rectitude, the norm; but also like someone who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer,

56 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 72.

a bum. Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is, what his identity — if he has one — might be, what his name is, what his father's name is. He repeats the same thing every time he is questioned on the street corner, but he can no longer repeat his origin.⁵⁷

Writing is therefore the shadow of living speech, a mere duplication, one that is itself in the habit, in the business of self-duplication, of repetition *ad infinitum*. But the *pharmakon* is also associated with the ceremonial rite. In this sense, Thamus may have had reason to reject Theuth's invention as a device for remembering insofar as one takes the written *logos* not so much as a function of *anamnesis* but as a reminder of what one already knows. It is therefore not knowledge, 'a repetition of truth (*alētheia*) which presents and exposes the *eidos*' but 'nonknowledge as rememoration', where one 're-presents a presentation, repeats a repetition.'⁵⁸

Deep in the forest, Semar and his sons accompany their master who is deep in meditation. Semar had just woken up, and Gareng complains that their father had been asleep for two hours. Semar tries to defend himself: 'Aku wong tuwa ora kuwat (I'm an old man, I'm not strong enough). And later you might need to take me to the hospital.' Petruk laughs and says that their father is asking for donations again. Semar ignores him and instructs his sons to stay awake and watch the pendapa (the pavilion), and soon after, announces that he will go rest. Bagong makes fun of Semar: 'Look at this old man, he cannot even stay awake. And he drools.' He goes closer to the sleeping Semar and hears a sound coming out of his father's lips: 'Poh, poh.' Bagong turns to Petruk, 'Truk, what is poh?' Petruk laughs, and mocks Bagong: 'This person really does not understand anything.' He then explains: 'Gong, old people, when they sleep, are like that. Because they no longer have teeth. So when they breathe, and air comes out of their mouth, and passes through their lips, it sounds like "poh".' Bagong is more curious than ever, and decides to examine Semar more closely. But as soon as he approaches, Semar lets out a huge fart into Bagong's face. Bagong is in momentary shock: 'Tak tilik, kebos! (I check him out, he blows!) Semar awakens momentarily, again to defend himself: "It's masuk

57 Ibid., pp. 143–44.

58 Ibid., p. 135 (emphasis is mine).

angin”⁵⁹ Bagong retorts, ‘Ora masuk angin, ngebrak!’ (That’s not masuk angin. Ngebrak!)

Bagong is particularly interesting because he is known to be born out of the shadow of Semar. With his impenetrable stupidity, his consistent mishearing and misunderstanding of what his fellow *punakawan* tell him, he is the grotesque distortion of the wise philosopher, a simulacrum turned bad. But is it not the fate of the mimetic double to be so? In the internal division that happens within *mimesis* as the *ad infinitum* ‘self-duplication of repetition itself’, Derrida notes that the copy is what interrupts or *supervenies*, ‘the strange mirror that reflects but also displaces and distorts one *mimēsis* into the other, as though it were itself destined to mime or mask *itself*’.⁶⁰

In *wayang*, Semar is usually the didactic element, the endless repetition and over-production of wise adages. Bagong, in his stupidity, will never grasp sense or understand the meaning of words. Rather, he is the interruption that supervenes upon *logos*, upon living speech, which for as long as it hinges on truth, will always be an unveiling of the unhidden; an interruption because, for Bagong, words are no longer about sense but about their physicality, their materiality. Onomatopoeia is his playing field, the place where language no longer is about veiling or unveiling, but what hinges on the non-truth: it is the death mask of the word. It does not explain to make us understand better, but it is the stage that allows language to perform itself, to rehearse and repeat itself in its own death ritual. *Kebos*, it is the sound of an explosion; *Ngebrak*, the sound of ‘ripping action’, of ‘splitting wood’, or ‘slapping sound’, the sound of a fart, of hot air tearing out.



59 *Masuk angin* is an illness the Javanese believe is caused by cold wind entering one’s belly.

60 Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 191.

And the Dreamer, ready for the sacrifice, replies: 'Here I am! Envelop me in rivers of burning lava, clasp me in your arms of fire as a lover clasps his bride.'

Gaston Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*

Between wakefulness and sleep, between remembering and forgetting, there exists the realm of the in-between. In his analysis of fire, Bachelard speaks of how we are drawn to the comfort and warmth of the flame, and how it invites us to repose, lulling us to contemplation, to a state of reverie. In its contemplation, reverie, Bachelard explains, 'works in a star pattern', return[ing] 'to its center to shoot out new beams'.⁶¹ And in this movement of an errant mind, I hear the echo of Blanchot who also spoke of a going astray that 'moves steadily ahead and stays at the same point'.⁶²

*When I reflect on the shadow image of Semar, and on Bagong who in turn reflects (on) Semar, do I really stay at the same point? Do I not know better, and move, even a tiny bit, towards overcoming ignorance and unveiling the unhidden? Because of his impenetrable stupidity, Bagong will always misunderstand, mishear, and will always stay in the same place, having no option of an overcoming. Perhaps he will never be able to explain the sense or meaning of things; or wrench the unhidden from its hiding; or peel off the outer covering. But it is he, the copy as a grotesque distortion, who comes closest and hears the breath of the god.*⁶³

I keep thinking of Descartes meditating by the fireplace. In his reveries, he conjured the image of an evil genius, but only in the end taking it as a device to get to the most unhidden, to the cogito that shines forth as clear and distinct, as what can never ever be doubted. Watching wayang, I feel myself detached from the world, and in suspended animation, I remain the same, and in the same place. From night till dawn, there exists no destination, no urge/urgency to get to the place where the unhidden may

61 Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. by Alan Ross (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 14.

62 Blanchot, 'Speaking Is Not Seeing', p. 26.

63 I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Hans Jürgen Scheuer for this wonderful insight.

reveal itself; just this lull where time is interrupted, briefly stopping in its tracks. The wayang had ended, and everyone was slowly going home to prepare for the new day. I hitched a ride with the sleepy pesindhen (female singers) and took a bus back to town from the dhalang's house. On the way, I saw the roads covered in white, as though it had snowed. I realized later that it was ash; people had told me that the sacred mountain, Merapi, had begun to 'cough up' (Merapi batuk lagi, the Javanese would say) and that scientists were predicting an eruption in a matter of days. Anxious, I begged Pak Ego, who agreed to be my translator, to take me to the mountain the next day. I had plans to speak to the juru kunci, the guardian of the mountain, Mbah Maridjan, who I heard was a powerful mystic and was known for notoriously refusing to speak Indonesian, adamantly insisting on the use of Javanese — a curious conviction at a time when the educated ones are trying so hard to disassociate themselves from their feudal culture. The next morning, however, it was too late. The town of Mbah Maridjan, Kinahrejo, was closed and pronounced a disaster zone.

While the fire gives us comfort and warmth, and invites us to a state of reverie, it is also what 'speeds up the passage of time, brings all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter.'⁶⁴ The fire that projects shadows is also the hearth that reminds us of the volcano, and the desire for 'death on the funeral pyre' — 'to disappear, to be swallowed up, to leave no trace!'⁶⁵

On 20 May 2012, an article was published in the newspaper, *Merdeka*, reporting the sighting of a cloud in the shape of Semar, hanging over the summit of Mount Sumbing in Temanggung, Central Java. Residents were alarmed because it reminded them of a previous incident, of a hot cloud, appearing in the shape of Petruk, a day before Merapi erupted in 2010.⁶⁶

Days before the eruption in 2010, I remember how Mbah Maridjan had caused a controversy by refusing to leave the mountain despite warnings of an imminent eruption and Sultan Hamengkubuwana X's appeal for a mandatory evacuation. The *juru kunci* had pulled the same

64 Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 16.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

66 Anwar Khumaini, 'Dulu Mbah Petruk, sekarang Mbah Emar', *Merdeka.com*, 20 May 2012 <<http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/dulu-mbah-petruk-sekarang-mbah-semar.html>> [accessed 4 July 2021].

stunt in 2006, and this was in fact the reason for his fame as he urged hundreds of families to remain in their homes, convincing them that the mountain meant them no harm. Aside from a few burns, Mbah Maridjan and his followers survived the volcanic blasts and pyroclastic flow. The *juru kunci* was then hailed as a hero and was believed to possess great spiritual power, which afforded him a real connection with the spirit of the sacred mountain. Later, he would reveal in an interview that it was through a dream that the mountain spoke, assuring him that while an eruption was bound to take place, no one would get hurt.

In *Merapi omahku* (Merapi my home), a book published by the French journalist Elizabeth Inandiak, we find Mbah Maridjan's own account of a dream he had in 1994, predicting the eruption that would take place that year. In that dream, he recounts how he was visited by tall people (orang-orang tinggi), who were good (orang bagus), clean (bersih), and of yellow skin (berkulit kuning).

And the people spoke in this way: '*kami punya uang, silakan dibagi*' [we have money, please share it]. In Javanese language [Bahasa Jawa], this means: '*aku duwe dhuwit dum na*.' But its [real] meaning is not this. What is meant by *dhuwit* is '*arta*' [money], the word used in Bahasa Jawa *halus*. I take '*arta*' to mean '*warta*', '*kabar*' [news]. And thus I was told to spread the news that Merapi would become dangerous. Next morning, at 10 am, indeed came a continuous eruption.⁶⁷

Here, we see that Kromo or Bahasa Jawa *halus* does not only offer the Javanese protection from a feeling of embarrassment and inferiority; it is also the key to understanding esoteric signs. And curiously, mishearing, the blunder for which Bagong's impenetrable stupidity is known, is here intentionally employed as the device that deciphers the message of the spirits.

In humbling himself, Mbah Maridjan would often say, *Saya ini orang bodoh* (I'm a stupid person). For the Javanese, the statement itself is a philosophical dictum, one that I've often heard uttered not just by the *juru kunci* himself but also by others, including Pak Ego. But here, stupidity is not at all what we think it is. In speaking further

67 Elizabeth D. Inandiak, *Merapi Omahku* (Yogyakarta: Babad Alas Elizabeth D. Inandiak/Heri Dono, 2010), p. 69 (my translation, P.d.J.).

about this, Mbah Maridjan does not try to explain or shed light on its meaning but gestures towards stupidity's mode of manifesting: '*Kalau orang pintar, diberi satu akan minta dua. Tapi kalau orang bodoh, diberi satu akan disyukuri.*' (For a smart person, given one he will ask for two. But for a stupid person, given one he will be thankful.)⁶⁸ For Inandiak, however, such stupidity and gratitude can only be possible for one who leads a life of simplicity. Thus, what immediately follows Mbah Maridjan's statement is Inandiak's description of his humble home, which consists of only a few basic things: a grounded mat, a cabinet, a Javanese-Islamic calendar and several photos, including one of Sultan Hamengkubuwona X, of Merapi erupting, and of the Javanese ancestor, Semar.⁶⁹

On 26 October 2010, Mbah Maridjan and a few others who refused to leave Merapi, perished in a cloud of gas and ash with a temperature of a thousand degree Celsius. A few days later, the *juru kunci's* incinerated body was found in a prostrated position. Some people speak of this tragedy as Mbah Maridjan's own failure, a gross error in calculation — he miscalculated the danger, believing that the mountain would spare them all. But did he? Was it not more the certainty of death, rather than survival, which urged him to stay?

Mbah Maridjan often said that 'he would guard Merapi until his death.'⁷⁰ On several occasions, he also explained that his refusal to follow Sultan Hamengkubuwana X's order was not due to stubbornness or arrogance, but because the mandate that declared him the guardian of Merapi was authorized not by the current sultan but by the previous one, Sultan Hamengkubuwana IX.⁷¹ It would therefore be only

68 Ibid., pp. 42–43.

69 Ibid., p. 43.

70 This phrase, 'dia akan menunggu Merapi hingga ajal menjemputnya' (he will guard Merapi until his death), was taken from 'Duka Bencana Merapi. Mbah Maridjan meninggal sujud', news clip video, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVGKtatChK8>> [accessed 1 November 2015; the video can no longer be accessed]. See also Rimawan Prasetyo, 'Pesan Terakhir Mbah Maridjan dan Kisahnya Tepat Ramalkan Letusan Merapi Gara-gara Burung', *Tribunwong*, 28 July 2017, <<https://www.tribunnews.com/2017/07/28/pesan-terakhir-mbah-maridjan-dan-kisahnyatepat-ramalkan-letusan-merapi-gara-gara-burung>> [accessed 4 July 2021]. Here, again, Mbah Maridjan is quoted: 'Saya akan tinggal di sini akan menunggu Merapi sesuai amanat Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono ke IX ...' (I will stay here [and] will guard Merapi according to the mandate of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX ...).

71 Ghaffar, Ibrahim, 'Embah Setia Menunggu Merapi', *Dewan Masyarakat*, July 2006, pp. 54–55.

in abiding by the latter's orders that the *juru kunci* would abandon his post. This of course could only mean that Sultan Hamengkubuwana IX, who passed away in 1988, would have to give his injunction from the grave.

This blind loyalty, not even to a living authority, but to the ghost of a king, may seem far more feudal than one can imagine. And the desire to move steadily towards one's doom, to remain at the place of danger despite all the technology that today makes possible a temporary escape from death, may strike us as a mere case of madness or irrational behaviour. But for Mbah Maridjan and his followers, the life of the villagers is inextricable from the fertile soil. And one can only begin to sense the severity of this bond when villagers refuse to leave their homes, and are more willing to face Merapi's threat to die at the place that has given them life, the source of their clothing and food (*sandang-pangan*).⁷² Their loyalty therefore is wrought not by blindness but gratitude, and it is precisely in acknowledging the mountain's goodwill that Mbah Maridjan urges people not to speak badly of Merapi or resent it for its eruptions. As a friend, Merapi is good (*apik*), and does not destroy but seeks to build (*Merapi kuwi mbangun*).⁷³

As I see Semar dancing happily on stage, I realize that the philosopher, on this rare occasion, ceases to be the loud and profuse proclamation of ideas and wise adages. Instead, he speaks to me with the silence of an image, a gentle reminder, through the evocations of hot air in the form of 'pohs' and farts and of the mountain that hides from sight and sleeps inside his belly. Semar, as the shadow of the image, is what passes across and beyond the wayang screen between performance and life and the image of passing, the flickering shadow that commemorates the fire.

Listening to the phrase manunggaling kawula gusti being uttered for the umptieth time, I begin to hear, arising from the tiresome repetition of the mantra, the shadow of sound: what resounds is not a new revelation but the echo that rehearses what the Javanese have always known all along: to remain the same and at the same place, and in exchange for the truth of the blinding sun, they seek the fire that consumes and consummates, that brings all of life to conclusion.

72 Ibid.

73 'Duka Bencana Merapi'.

Preciosa de Joya, 'The Punakawans Make an Untimely Appearance: In Praise of Caves, Shadows, and Fire (or A Response to Plato's Doctrine of Truth)', in *Errans: Going Astray, Being Adrift, Coming to Nothing*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 24 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 19–47 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24_1>

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