CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

PSYCHOANALYSIS – LAW, THEATRE AND VIOLENCE IN SAMSON (1660)

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Thus it is necessary, at any cost, for man to live at the moment when he truly dies, or it is necessary for him to live with the impression of truly dying. This difficulty foreshadows the necessity of *spectacle*, or generally of *representation*, without the repetition of which we could remain foreign and ignorant of death, as animals apparently remain.

George Bataille

But death is precisely what cannot be internalized, and maybe this is what defines the tragic [...]. The 'consciousness' or even [...] the admission that there is nothing to do with death but to dramatize it.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe

Samson as a Disconcerting Tragedy

Samson of Heilige Wraeck (*Samson or Holy Vengeance*, 1660) is usually not ranked among Vondel's masterpieces. Performed only three times during the playwright's lifetime, and rarely since, the critical literature on the play is scant, and if the play is mentioned at all in recent literature, it is often with reference to the play's dramaturgical shortcomings.¹ Based on the well-known story of the Jewish hero in the *Book of Judges* 13–16, Vondel's play dramatizes the last episode of Samson's life when, after being captured by the Philistines, he performs one final glorious deed, an act of 'holy revenge', in which he ultimately dies. A quick glance at Vondel's text reveals the reasons for its present unpopularity: the short play suffers from a lack of action and dramatic conflict, and more crucially, its central character hardly shows any signs of a psychological development. The play may be considered as one that revolves around a 'staetsverandering' ('a mental or emotional

¹ Weevers, for example, suggests in 'Vondel's Influence on German Literature' that the play has lost its popularity because of the lack of action on stage.

change'), as W.A.P. Smit suggests, since its protagonist does indeed transform from a subdued prisoner into a raging figure of revenge, but the psychological process that led to this transformation is barely represented in the play.² The play does not allow us to witness Samson's doubts, hesitations, and resolutions. Instead, *Samson* confronts its audience with the enigma of a heroic decision, taken in solitude – and offstage.

Yet what the play lacks in dramatic conflict, it makes up for in imagery, in particular in the concluding act of the play. Agreeing to play along with a humiliating ritual in a Philistine temple, Samson decides to sacrifice himself in what strikes a contemporary reader as a religiously inspired suicide attack, when he tears down the pillars that uphold the pagan temple, killing himself and a large number of Philistine people. These events are reported in the play by a messenger, who uses powerful and rich language to evoke the scene of this disaster in all its gory detail. A pile of debris is described in which dead and half-living victims, together with torn-off limbs, are bathing in puddles of blood. The speech of the messenger, and its explicit and violent nature, stands out in the play, and has a such a shocking impact that it almost seems to detach itself from the narrative of which it is supposed to be the resolution, leaving Vondel's reader with a visual imprint of a scene of pure violence.

Perhaps even more disconcerting than the gory imagery itself is the manner in which Vondel's preface seeks to relate this eruption of unbridled violence to the question of justice. In its dedication to Cornelis van Outshoren, who as mayor of Amsterdam was entrusted with the task of maintaining law and order, Vondel states that we should understand Samson's divine act of revenge as a foreshadowing of a new epoch of justice, which was to come with the arrival of Christ, humanity's true lawgiver. Christ, Vondel holds, will introduce a new and truly just principle of legality, which will eclipse all previously existing laws.³ Even though neither the play, nor the preface suggest that the blind, raging destructiveness of Samson's act should be understood as an example of justice in itself – indeed the principle of revenge itself is explicitly called

² Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*.

³ 'In de doot van Samson blijktt zijne wraeckzucht, zich wreeckende, door eene heilige aendrift van Godts geest [...]. Hy overwint de vyanden door zijn doot, tot een voorbeeld van den beloofden verlosser, en wetgever der menschen, die [...] alle voorgaende wetgevers en wijsheit der wijzen overtreft [...]. En deze nieuwe en volkomen wet plant.' (4)

pagan and unchristian –, his divinely inspired annihilation of the pagan law should be seen as announcing a new era of justice. Vondel's preface and dedication, then, invite us to understand his play as a reflection on the relation between a religiously inspired act of destruction, and the establishing of a new (Christian) legal order.

Force and Violence in Samson

In his exploration of the relations between violence and the law, Vondel seems to anticipate a distinction Walter Benjamin draws in an essay published in 1921, between 'divine' and 'mythical' violence.⁴ In this essay Benjamin suggests that all law enforcement and lawmaking are inherently violent, since they rely on a use of force (the German *Gewalt* means both force and violence), but he argues that these two forms of legal violence, which he calls 'mythical', should be opposed to a third type of violence, which he labels 'divine violence'. Unlike both mythical forms of violence, divine violence maintains or imposes nothing. It is a purely negative, law-destroying force, which nevertheless in its very negativity serves to usher in a new historical age, with a new legal paradigm, and therefore it can be understood to be the mystical foundation underlying all positively existing laws.

In its preoccupation with both divine violence, and the establishing of a new principle of legality, Vondel's preface seems to situate his work clearly within the corpus of works in which the playwright is mainly concerned with the question of the origin of the law, or rather, with sovereignty. As Frans-Willem Korsten has convincingly demonstrated, questions of law and sovereignty are very much at the heart of Vondel's theatrical oeuvre.⁵ Vondel shares these concerns with legal philosophers of his time, such as Grotius. Furthermore, the issue of sovereignty itself was raised by the particular legal and political situation in which the Dutch Republic found itself in Vondel's time. Having just separated from Spain, the question of the source, and hence of the legitimacy of the law was a question of philosophical, legal as well as political urgency. Vondel's plays, Korsten claims, should be seen as contributing to debates about the law, through the means of theatre.

Yet the precise nature of *Samson's* contribution to these debates is not easy to assess. The preface may testify to the fact that Vondel had

⁴ Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence'.

⁵ Korsten, *Vondel Belicht, and Sovereignty as Inviolability*.

questions of sovereignty on his mind, yet it is unclear what the example of Samson is supposed to dramatize. The typological reading, proposed in the preface, in which Samson's sacrifice is linked to that of Christ, is undermined by the play's emphasis on the violent nature of Samson's act, which is clearly not very Christ-like.⁶ Furthermore, the fact that Samson's sacrifice is an act of revenge seems to be at odds with the Christian preaching of love and forgiveness, praised in Vondel's preface.⁷ If a typological reading itself is not very promising towards an understanding of what precisely Samson's act of violence is supposed to exemplify, it is even more unclear how his example can offer inspiration to a politician such as Outshoren. Indeed, what reading strategy is Vondel's reader supposed to employ to derive lessons of practical wisdom from this play?

Samson, then, poses a riddle to its readers. In this contribution I will not so much try to solve this riddle, but probe the way the play's dramatic and theatrical structure broach the question of the relation of law and violence as precisely a question of reading. Rather than presenting, I propose, positive images of sovereignty – examples, that can help one think through practical and legal-philosophical matters – *Samson* points to something unreadable at the heart of the law itself. It exposes what I propose to call the dark and violent underside of the law. The medium of theatre allows Vondel to expose this legal violence in its very negativity, without translating it into positive images.

In order to highlight this dimension of Vondel's play, I will use psychoanalytic theory, and in particular Freud's writings on the theatre. Psychoanalysis, I claim, is not only a hermeneutics attentive to the repressed underside of cultural phenomena, but it also offers a profound reflection on the theatre as a means of staging a retrieval of what

⁶ The obvious differences between Samson and Christ are often neglected by Vondel scholars who tend to take the correctness of the typological reading for granted. Peter King, for example, writes 'Samson, like so many of the later plays, can be interpreted at two allegorical levels: the typological – Samson foreshadowing the Messiah triumphing over his adversaries, and the anagogic which symbolizes the workings of grace. Samson [...] repents and requites his sin, whereby God's grace returns to him, the symbol of which is Samson's long hair, the token of strength.' 'The Sacramental Thought in Vondel's Drama', p. 208.

⁷ Vondel speaks of Christ as the 'wetgever der menschen, die door het voorschrift van de wet der liefde, in het eenige woort *Bemin* begrepen [...] de wraekgierigheid met wortel met al uit de harten zijner leerlingen ruckende' ('lawgiver of mankind, who, through the prescription of the law of devotion, summed up in the single word *Love* [...] utterly wrenching vindictiveness from the hearts of his disciples', 4).

is repressed. Therefore it can help us to articulate what is at stake in Vondel's enigmatic play.

In what follows I will first discuss the psychoanalytic approach to the theatre, in order to subsequently spell out what I think takes place in Vondel's play, to conclude with some more general reflections on the relations between law, theatre and violence.

Psychoanalysis and Theatre

As many critics have pointed out, the theatre plays a key role in Freud's work. Theatre is not only the type of artwork he refers to most frequently in his writings, but it also provided him with some of his most important concepts, such as, for example, the Oedipus complex. As Ernest Jones and Jean Starobinski have observed, crucial psychoanalytic insights were first articulated in relation to Greek and Elizabethan plays.⁸ Yet the influence of theatre on psychoanalysis reaches even further, as Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued. Lyotard claims that Freud's understanding of the 'psychoanalytic scene' – the drama that takes place in the room of the analyst – is deeply influenced by his understanding of the theatre. Lyotard writes: 'We must go a step further and grasp the fact that Freud's belief in or effective acceptance of the Sophoclean and Shakespearian scenarios is first of all a belief in the theatrical space where these scenarios are acted out, the space of theatrical representation, and in the scenography that constitutes and defines this space.'⁹

In order to make his point, Lyotard turns to a minor, oft-neglected essay that Freud wrote in 1906, and which was first published (in English translation) as 'Psychopathic Characters on Stage'.¹⁰ In the essay Freud attempts to analyze the particular type of enjoyment that watching a theatrical performance can bring. After citing the Aristotelian conception of tragedy as a ritual that serves the purposes of 'getting rid of one's emotions by blowing off steam' (88), Freud points to the

⁸ Starobinski, 'Hamlet et Freud', preface to the French translation of E. Jones, *Hamlet et Oedipe*. See also André Green, *The Tragic Effect: the Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*.

⁹ Lyotard, 'Beyond Representation', p. 156.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Psychopathic Characters on Stage'. References to this text will henceforth appear in parentheses.

remarkable fact that theatre spectators derive pleasure from identifying with characters who go through all sorts of ordeals, something which we would find highly unsettling to observe outside the theatre. We seem to go to the theatre, Freud muses, to watch scenes of pain, suffering, and most crucially of death. 'Suffering of every kind is thus the subject matter of drama,' he concludes, 'and from this suffering it promises to give the audience pleasure'. (89) Watching such scenes of suffering is pleasurable, Freud suggests, not just because it gives us a 'masochistic satisfaction', but also, more specifically, because in traditional drama the suffering itself is the consequence of some heroic act of rebellion.¹¹ We therefore experience the narcissistic pleasure of identifying with a great man, in whose grandiose death we share. We go to the theatre, Freud proposes, to *experience* such deaths. As he writes elsewhere, in the theatre 'we still find people who know how to die [...]. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero'.¹²

After having suggested that there is a profound relationship between death, violence and the theatre, Freud's essay proceeds to outline a brief history of the theatre in which the heroic revolt of the protagonist changes from a revolt against the gods (in Greek tragedy), to human authorities (in social tragedy), against individual men (in tragedies of character) and finally, in modern psychological drama, when a character struggles against himself. He ends his short essay with a description of the type of theatre that fascinates him most, and which he labels dramas about 'psychopathic characters'. The suffering in such dramas is caused by an internal conflict between two impulses in one character, one of which is unconscious. Taking Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as his paradigmatic case, Freud suggests that this type of drama captures an audience that is, like the psychopathic hero, in the grip of similar unconscious conflicts. Freud adds that this last type of drama differs from the aforementioned ones, in that the audience should recognize the conflict at the heart of the psychopathic tragedy, but the nature of it cannot be named explicitly on stage, since this will evoke resistance in the

¹¹ 'Heroes are first and foremost rebels against God or against something divine; and pleasure is derived, as it seems, from the affliction of a weaker being in the face of divine might – a pleasure due to masochistic satisfaction as well as to direct enjoyment of a character whose greatness is insisted upon in spite of everything.' 'Psychopathic Characters', p. 89.

¹² Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', p. 291.

audience.¹³ The psychopathic drama, then, relies on a complex *mise en scène* in which its central dramatic conflict is both made recognizable and remains hidden at the same time. In other words, it revolves around a gap in its textual structure, which leaves the impression that the main dramatic conflicts are played out in a ‘different scene,’ which is not fully present on stage.

Lyotard draws attention to this essay for several reasons. Firstly he points out that Freud’s speculation on the effects of theatre – particularly in its psychopathic form – resemble Freud’s description of what takes place during a psychoanalytic session. According to Freud, the theatre allows us to ‘blow off steam,’ and experience all sorts of fears, desires and impulses that are otherwise repressed, because we know that by entering the auditorium we agree to participate in a *Spiel* – which in Freud’s German can refer to both game and theatrical play (as in *Schauspiel*). The ostensible artificial situation of the theatre, separated as it is from our ‘real lives,’ allows for a certain relaxation of the repressive censorship of the Ego.¹⁴ As Freud explains in his technical papers, psychoanalytic therapy relies on a comparable relaxation of the Ego, since the room of the analyst is also experienced as something that is different from our ‘real lives.’¹⁵ Psychoanalysis, like the theatre, takes place in what Lyotard calls ‘disreal spaces,’ ‘autonomous spaces no longer subject to the laws of so-called reality [...] where what is repressed can be staged, exempted from the censorship imposed by the reality principle.’¹⁶ For this reason, during therapy the *analysand* can act out – and thereby expose – repressed unconscious impulses in front of the gaze of the analyst in a quasi-theatrical setting.

Secondly, Lyotard highlights a casual remark in ‘Psychopathic Characters,’ in which Freud suggests that drama finds its origin in

¹³ ‘It appears as a necessary precondition of this form of art that the impulse that is struggling into consciousness, however clearly it is recognizable, is never given a definite name.’ (92)

¹⁴ ‘Accordingly, his enjoyment is based on an illusion; that is to say, his suffering is mitigated by the certainty that, firstly, it is someone other than himself who is acting and suffering on stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to his personal security. In these circumstances he can allow himself to enjoy being a “great man”, to give way without a qualm to such suppressed impulses as a craving for freedom in religious, political, social and sexual matters, and to “blow off steam” in every direction in the various grand scenes that form part of the life represented on stage.’ (88)

¹⁵ See Sigmund Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through (Further Recommendations on the Teaching of Psycho-Analysis)’.

¹⁶ ‘Beyond Representation,’ p. 157.

religious sacrificial rites. Such rites, as Freud would later write in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), should be understood as re-enactments of a violent event that took place in the past – the killing (and eating) of the leader of the so-called ‘primal horde’. The memory of this event has collectively been repressed, but according to Freud religious rites and theatrical *topoi* unconsciously testify to its former existence. The ritual sacrifice – and by extension the theatre – serve to stage what Freud calls the ‘primal scene’ of a culture, an unknown event that determines the particular shape a culture takes. This implies that the theatre does for the collective what psychoanalytic therapy does for the individual: it allows for the ‘performance’ of an insight that cannot be articulated in the first person, as ‘knowledge’. Lyotard therefore concludes that psychoanalysis, in turn, should be considered as a form of theatre: it is a practice in which we can witness the *mise en scène* of the unconscious.¹⁷

According to Lyotard, the structural resemblances between psychoanalysis and the theatre complicate attempts to ‘apply’ psychoanalytic insights to the theatre. Psychoanalysis and the theatre do not relate to each other as a body of (psychoanalytic) theory, and a set of (theatrical) data, but should be understood as comparable theatrical practices. ‘Theatricality’, writes Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, agreeing with Lyotard, ‘functions as a *model* or even *matrix* in the constitution of psychoanalysis’.¹⁸ The task of a psychoanalytically informed criticism of the theatre is to spell out how both practices rely on a complex *mise en scène*, in which a repressed truth is exposed, staged and negated at the same time.

Samson and Psychoanalysis

I would argue that Vondel’s *Samson* is a remarkably good starting point for an attempt to link the theatre ‘with’ psychoanalysis. Vondel’s play not only revolves around a story about the suffering and heroic death of a great man who sacrifices himself for the greater good, thereby confirming Freud’s intuition that we visit the theatre to experience glorious deaths, but it is also a highly self-conscious investigation of the various ‘disreal’ spaces in which these scenes of suffering and self-sacrifice can be staged. As I will point out, the play consists of a comparison of three

¹⁷ Lyotard elaborates this point in ‘The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*’.

¹⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘*Theatrum Analyticum*’, p. 175.

different theatrical spaces in which a sacrifice takes place: a temple, a theatre and the scene of Samson's death. *Samson* differs, however, from the Freudian paradigm, by virtue of the fact that its protagonist's suffering and death are related to a specific theme, that of the origin of the law. *Samson* examines, in various scenes, the interrelatedness of violence, theatricality and the law.

The intricate links between sacrificial violence, theatre and the law are explored in the opening scene of the play, in which Dagon, God of the Philistines, whom Vondel represents as a satanic creature, delivers a monologue in which he explains that he has come to Gaza to attend a religious ceremony, organized in his honour, which celebrates the capture of Samson. This ceremony will include a parading of the chained, blind and wounded Samson, who will be exposed to the mockery of the crowd. Dagon states that, as a pagan God, he desires such spectacles, since he feeds off the glory they bring him.¹⁹ But, as he muses, staging the spectacle of Samson's humiliation also brings political benefits. Publicly displaying Samson, a hero to the Jews, as a blinded, exhausted, suffering body, would deliver a final blow to the resistance of Jews, persuading them to adopt the pagan religion. Through the medium of theatre, then, and by forcing Samson to play a role, Dagon hopes to enforce a religious and political order upon the region of Gaza, and to impose a new principle of legality to the Jewish people. The fact that this ceremony involves the humiliation of Samson, whose suffering Dagon evokes in flowery lines of poetry, exposes the violence that is inherent in such law-positing rituals.

The importance of theatricalized scenes of violence for the sustaining of a legal-religious order is further highlighted in the second act of the play, in a dialogue between the King of Gaza and the chorus of Jewish women who have come to his court to plead for mercy on behalf of Samson. The King, who presents himself as a representative of the law, strongly resists the women's entreaties to show leniency to Samson. The law of the land dictates, the King reminds the women, that Samson's act of violence against the Philistines be met with equally strong retribution. Furthermore, the King adds, the cruelty of Samson's treatment also has a practical function, as it should deter future rebels from repeating his example.²⁰ His punishment, therefore, should be staged

¹⁹ Dagon speaks of 'gezingen en offerspelen gezingen en offerspelen, daer wy spoocken naar verlangen' (ll. 17–18).

²⁰ See l. 516.

publicly, for all to see. By making a spectacle out of Samson's ordeal, the King's words seem to imply, punishment becomes an instrument of maintaining the law.

However, as the following acts make plain, the reliance of the Philistine law on a *mise en scène* for its force also implies a potential weakness. This becomes clear when the Queen persuades the reluctant King to transform the upcoming ceremony in honour of Dagon into a full-blown theatrical spectacle, during which Samson will be forced to demonstrate his skills in fencing, wrestling and dancing in front of the Philistine audience, and finally will be bribed into re-enacting his downfall in a short play. This should all be done to the delight of the Philistine audience, and to enhance the glory of the royal family and their God. Turning the religious ceremony into a theatrical event (in the strict sense of the term), that will be enacted on a newly erected stage at the centre of the temple, however, has its problems as well. The political, legal and religious success of the ceremony no longer relies on a simple display of Samson's passive, subdued body, but on his active participation. Asking Samson to become an actor – a hypocrite – blurs the distinction between his 'real' submission, and his outward *feigning* of such a submission. It is precisely this blurring that Samson will use to his own advantage. The ostensible theatrical nature of the situation he finds himself in – he is dressed up for the occasion in a theatrical costume – allows him to maintain an inner distance from the role he is playing, and to plot his revenge.

As the chorus implicitly suggests in two different songs ('*reyen*'), Samson is capable of such hypocrisy, precisely by virtue of a crucial difference between the Jewish and Pagan religion. Whereas the Pagan belief depends on rituals and sacrifices – i.e. the externalization and theatricalization of faith – the Jewish religion is depicted as relying on an internal belief. Samson is guided, the *reyen* tell us, by the 'inner light' (215–34) and 'inner vision' (991–1014) of his faith, which bind him to his God without the need for outward rituals.

In its first four acts, then, the play sets up an opposition between on the one hand the pagan religion and the legal-political order it hopes to impose, which is sustained by theatricalized scenes of violence, and on the other hand the Jewish religion that is capable of resisting the pagan force, precisely because its faith does not rely on theatrical rituals. This opposition between a theatrical and a non-theatrical belief, however, is complicated in the play's concluding act, when Samson finally turns into the figure of the 'holy revenge' that gives the play its subtitle.

Samson's awe-inspiring act of violence is not enacted on stage, but is narrated by a messenger, who confusingly compares it to a theatrical spectacle or, to be more precise, as an act that transforms the very nature of the play that the Queen had hoped to stage in the temple. When Samson, after patiently having repeated the story of his own downfall, explodes into a rage and tears down the pillars of the temple, the *comedy* of the scene of his humiliation turns into the *tragedy* of his death, as the messenger reports. (1573) Yet Samson's tragic death does not signify his downfall but his *triumph*, as it enables him, at the moment of his death, to reassume his position as a Judge ('*Richter*'), lawgiver of the Jewish People, announcing, as Vondel's preface states, a new era of justice.

Samson, then, concludes by opposing two 'spectacles': the mocking comedy organized by the Philistines, and the sublime scene of Samson's tragic death. Both scenes can be read as exemplifications of two different modes in which the law is related to theatre and to violence. The spectacle of Samson's humiliation is an instance of what Benjamin calls 'law-preserving violence', whereas Samson's brutal act of destruction evokes the law-annihilating force of the Benjaminian religious violence. But whereas the humiliation of Samson takes place on the traditional theatrical stage that is erected in the temple, the scene of his revenge consists precisely in the destruction of this artifice. By tearing down the pillars of the temple and causing its collapse, Samson destroys not just a physical building, he also erases the symbolic markers that separate the temple from the sphere of everyday life, thereby destroying the very semiotic and institutional framework that makes theatre possible. As a consequence, the play does not so much oppose two types of theatre – the 'bad' pagan versus the 'good' Jewish theatre – but it dramatizes a conflict between theatricalized violence and a violence that negates theatricality. Hence as a play *about* 'holy revenge' it attempts to dramatize something that cannot be properly staged, whose very nature implies the annihilation of the principle of staging.

The difference between the nature of Samson's act of violence, and that of the Philistines is further redoubled by a structural peculiarity of Vondel's play. The rituals in honour of Dagon are not only depicted as spectacles that *can* be performed on stage, they *are* enacted in Vondel's play, most notably in the conclusion to Act IV, when a chorale sings in praise of Dagon. Samson's holy revenge, on the other hand, is present in Vondel's play in absentia, through the words of the messenger, and in the testimony of the chorus of Jewish women who, standing outside

the temple, witness the effects of Samson's acts in the form of a *blinding* cloud of dust, and a *deafening* set of screams – effects, in short, that bar them from witnessing the scene directly.²¹ Hence the first four acts of *Samson* raise the question of the interrelatedness of law, theatre and violence, whereas Act V evokes a scene that remains structurally, thematically and psychologically *offstage*, leaving the audience in the embarrassing situation that paganism is represented on stage whilst the act of holy revenge that the play's title promised to depict remains beyond their grasp.

It is, perhaps, in this structural peculiarity that Vondel's play shows the strongest resonances with Freud's musings on the paradoxical pleasures of the theatre. As mentioned above, according to Freud we go to the theatre to experience a heroic death, to 'die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves', as he puts it. However, as he writes in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', death itself cannot be experienced directly; death remains for us fundamentally unimaginable. 'It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death,' Freud writes, 'and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.'²² In a gloss on this remark, philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that for Freud, the representation of the experience of death itself – which draws us to the theatre – lies beyond the means of the theatre itself. Death itself can never be made present on the stage, since it always takes place on yet another, 'different stage', that lies beyond the actual space of the theatre. Death itself is always endlessly deferred and displaced. 'Death', Lacoue-Labarthe writes, 'cannot present itself as such, Death is submitted to the ineluctable necessity of re-presentation [...]'.

If it is permissible to play on a 'popular' etymology, we might say that death is ob-scene. At the very least, Freud is convinced that death 'cannot be looked in the face' [...]. Death never appears as such, it is in the strict sense unrepresentable, or the unrepresentable itself.²³

Death is only represented on stage, Lacoue-Labarthe suggests, referring to an ancient ritual used to ward off evil deities, in an *apotropaic* way, in a gesture that similarly exposes death, and turns away from it.²⁴

²¹ 'Dit afgrijsselijck geschal verdooft onze ooren. Al dit stof verblint onze oogen.' ('This frightful din deafens our ears. All this dust blinds our eyes', ll. 1483–84).

²² 'Thoughts for the Times', p. 289.

²³ 'Theatrum Analyticum', pp. 187–88.

²⁴ For a clarifying exposition of this figure see Rappaport, 'Staging: *Mont Blanc*': *Between the Sign and the Gaze*, pp. 97–98.

The redoubling of the stage in *Samson*, the split between what is enacted on the ‘proper’ stage of the play, and the events that take place in the temple, leave the impression that the ‘real’ events of *Samson* take place elsewhere, not in a ‘proper’ theatrical scene, but in a scene ‘beyond all scenes’, which stages the impossibility of its own staging.²⁵

What is unique about *Samson* is not so much the very explicitness of the way in which death is made present through its very absence – this could be explained away as Vondel’s bowing to the conventional theatrical laws of propriety of his time – but the way in which its concluding scene of violence is related to the law. By dedicating his play to Outshoren, Vondel offers it as an image to be contemplated by a politician whose very function it is to formulate and codify new laws and to see to the maintenance of existing laws, someone, in short, for whom the law is not an abstraction but a positively existing body of rules. Whereas *Samson* presents the source of the law as violent, destructive, ‘obscene’ and fundamentally unrepresentable, his dedication suggests that his play can be of use to someone for whom the law is something highly present indeed.

I would argue, however, that this tension between preface and play is not just a misunderstanding by the playwright of his own work, but that it points to a structural tension between Benjamin’s distinction between divine (law-destroying) and mythical (law-positing) violence. As Jacques Derrida has pointed out in an essay on Benjamin, despite Benjamin’s insistence that divine violence lies at the origin of law, this origin becomes only readable *as* an origin *retroactively*, after a new legal order has been established.²⁶ Revolutionary violence, Derrida writes, whether of a secular or religious nature, justifies itself by borrowing from a future it has not yet ushered in. Derrida writes that such revolutionary moments are terrifying, not only because of the suffering they cause,

but just as much because they are in themselves, and in their very violence uninterpretable or undecipherable. This is what I am calling the ‘mystical’ [foundation of law] [...] It is in law, what suspends law. It interrupts the established law to found another [...] it never takes place in a presence. A successful revolution, the successful foundation of a state

²⁵ I borrow the phrase ‘a scene beyond all scenes’ from Mikkel Borch-Jacobson, who uses it to describe the scene in which, according to Lacan, *jouissance* appears. See his *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, p. 96.

²⁶ Derrida, ‘Force of Law’.

[...] will produce after the fact what it was destined in advance to produce, namely proper interpretative models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to violence that has produced, among others, the interpretative model in question.²⁷

Divine violence, then, cannot be represented directly; not only because its violent nature has a blinding and deafening impact on those who witness it, but also because it only becomes readable *as* divine violence after the fact, in a second scene, when it is *framed*, interpreted, and understood as divine violence. This means that a depiction of divine violence relies on an interpretative framework, in Vondel's case a preface that serves as a reading guide.

As do many of his other plays, Vondel's *Samson* thus testifies to the fact that the early Dutch 17th century went through a period in which the law was in crisis. As Korsten has shown, his plays should be understood as an examination of the implications of this crisis. *Samson* does not offer solutions, however, and neither does it offer concrete suggestions. Instead it exposes the underlying violence of the law itself, and the way in which the establishing of a new legal order – just as it may be – relies on a moment of violent annihilation. This violence, whose history the law has to repress in order to continue to function smoothly, cannot be represented directly. It can, however, be evoked in its very unrepresentability, in a particular type of theatre, namely that of Vondel.

²⁷ 'Force of Law', pp. 269–70.