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Speech and Self in Othello

JAMES L. CALDERWOOD

I
The Narrative Subject

If Othello’s name sums him up better than those of other men, it is perhaps because his way with words is so singular. He is his name, but he is also by extension his speech, and his speech has caught everyone’s ear. He descants the Othello music, those arias of splendid sonority that rise and fall like the stormy waters off Cyprus and sometimes flow as inexorably as the Pontic Sea. In his mouth, casual greetings take on the character of sacred vows, and even when he confesses himself rough with words he sounds like Demosthenes:

Rude am I in my speech,
And little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace;
For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us’d
Their dearest action in the tented field;
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself.

(I.iii.81–89)

By Act IV, however, we will find ourselves saying “That’s he that was Othello. Here he is’’:

Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her. Lie with her! [’Zounds,] that’s fulsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief! To confess, and be hang’d for his labor—first to be hang’d, and then to confess. I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some in-

2 “The Othello Music” is the title of G. Wilson Knight’s chapter on the play in his The Wheel of Fire (New York: Meridian Books, 1957; originally published by Oxford Univ. Press, 1930). Of course lago puts a different light on Othello’s rhetoric when he speaks of it on one occasion as “bumbast circumstance / Horribly stuff’d with epithites of war” (I.i.13–14). All quotations are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), with square brackets indicating emendations or variants from the F1 copy-text.
3 Of course all of Shakespeare’s presumably crude speakers speak well in the cause of inarticulacy. Still, Othello contrasts with, say, Coriolanus, who not merely proclaims his indifference to fine words but also truculently avoids occasions where they are to be used either about him or, worse, by him.
These are the first lines of prose Othello has spoken, a significant moment. To see just how significant, however, requires a context. Let us return to his verse self and better times.

In the opening act, Othello is in command of speech, and at first his speeches are mostly commands: “Holla, stand there! . . . Keep up your bright swords . . . Hold your hands” (I.i.56, 59, 81). He is so sure of himself that he is willing to obey Brabantio and proceed to the Senate, where amid the scurrilities of rumor his speech stands out in its calm confidence, most notably when he assumes the role of narrator in response to the Duke’s invitation, “Say it, Othello” (I.iii.127). Since Othello’s self-exonerating speeches here are central to his concept of self, let us consider them and him in terms of narrative and monologue.

In effect Othello says “She willingly came with me.” But in his mouth nothing is ever that simple. “She willingly came” is transformed into an extended account of his courtship of Desdemona. As courtly lovers do, he says, “Here I am, Othello. Let me tell you the meaning of that name, and you will love me.” Of all Shakespeare’s characters, Othello testifies most thoroughly to the fact that everyone is a biography, a life-story constantly being written and revised, told and retold. As the neurologist Oliver Sacks observes, “Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique.”

So it is with the Moor. Not only is he telling himself at the moment before the Senate, but the subject of his telling is telling: his story about his courtship of Desdemona is recursively suspended as it merges with the stories of which that courtship consisted. For a moment we seem on the edge of an Arabian Nights infinite regression of stories: Shakespeare’s dramatic story yields to Othello’s senatorial story, which disappears into stories of cannibals and Anthropophagi, which might perhaps disappear into . . . But fortunately they do not.

This narrative in which the narrator is in several senses the “subject” gives us a divided perspective on Othello. In the first place, as story-telling subject or seemingly autonomous self, he is present and in command of the scene, exercising such dominion over shifters as to transform I into his own proper name, while everyone else is distanced as a he or she. All words and meanings come under his monopoly; the capitalist of self is also the capitalist of speech: he puts words to work to win him Desdemona’s love and the Senate’s approval. He imposes his image of himself on others through sheer force of continuity, his meanings rolling on in sounding diction and sentences of sustained syntactic complexity. His speech verges on writing, in the sense that he walls himself up in words, fashioning unalterable verbal structures that make him no more subject to interruption than the author of a treatise.

In these respects, as storyteller in the Senate, Othello aggrandizes himself as subject. Moreover, because of the recursiveness of his story, because he is a voice telling about himself telling about himself, his possession of the I is

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reaffirmed within his own story. Normally, that is, the I who says I and the I that is said are distinctly different, the former being the ontological subject, the latter the grammatical subject. The grammatical subject thus has an element of the accusative about it, inasmuch as it is not merely the doer of its own verbal deeds but the done-unto, the object of the ontological subject’s speech. Othello, however, fends off this accusative element, keeping it at one further remove by mirroring and embedding the ontological subject in the grammatical one. It is not until we get to the I who stands for the adventurous hero, not for the speaking voice, that Othello takes on an accusative aspect—appropriately, for instance, in his brief mention of having been “taken by the insolent foe” and sold into slavery, an embarrassing occasion in which his being physically enslaved is analogous to his enthrallment to the words of his own speech.

Thus the act of telling about himself subtly subverts Othello’s domination of speech and, through speech, his domination of the Senate and of Desdemona and Brabantio earlier. After all, his life is being recast in verbal forms. He says, for instance, that he ran through his biography for Brabantio “even from my boyish days / To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it” (I.iii.132–33) and that at Desdemona’s request he later dilated on “all [his] pilgrimage” (I. 153). But the story of his life does not stop there; even now before the Senate a further episode is being added, Othello’s Courtship of Desdemona. Thus in addition to saying, Othello is being said. His being and doing are embedded in speech, as though the events of his life were being lived just one Shandy-like step ahead of the words that seize and digest them into story.

This division of Othello into a narrating and a narrated I is perhaps the first suggestion we have of the fission of his identity later on that causes Desdemona to say “My lord is not my lord” (III.iv.124).

II

Signs and De-signs

In light of the fact that Brabantio, Desdemona, and now the Senate have succumbed to his eloquence, it is little wonder that Othello puts his faith in words. Like Harry Hotspur, another romantic warrior, he is a Platonic idealist who believes in the reality of abstractions. Hotspur’s favorite abstraction is honor, Othello’s is honest.⁵ For him honest is a transcendental signifier that stabilizes discourse; he believes not only in the word honest but in the honesty of words. Although he speaks the language of high romance,⁶ he naively assumes that even the most ethereal of words are bonded to their meanings and that their meanings are bonded to the things they represent. If Iago is called honest, Iago is honest—honest enough, at least, to say “‘The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so’” (I.iii.400). Thus honest Iago has only to pin the word dishonest on Desdemona to guarantee her death.

This faith in words stems from Othello’s logocentrism. He has a Saussurian belief that every signifier is an arrow aimed, however arbitrarily, at a signified.

⁵ For the full range of the meanings of honest in Othello, see William Empson’s chapter in his The Structure of Complex Words (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951).

⁶ For an excellent discussion of Othello as a recapitulation and subversion of Shakespeare’s earlier representations of chivalry in the history plays (and of Elizabethan England’s efforts to “turn reality into a romance”), see Mark Rose, “Othello’s Occupation: Shakespeare and the Romance of Chivalry,” English Literary Renaissance, 15, 3 (1985), 293–311.
Thus when Iago’s vaguenesses begin to stir in his imagination, his first reaction—"If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought" (III.iii.115–16)—is to brush aside words and get to the thing itself, an unmediated "thought." Still, not all mediation is gone; Iago’s thought must be somehow "shown," even in words:

I prithee speak to me as to thy readings,
As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words.

(III.iii.131–33)

The following fifty or so lines play increasingly passionate variations on this theme, ending with Othello’s angry “[By heaven,] I’ll know thy thoughts!” (III.iii.162). By this time mediation disappears; he would understand Iago’s mind not as mortal men are obliged to do, by reason and discourse, but as angels do, simply by knowing.

Unfortunately Iago refuses to speak, and Othello lacks clairvoyance. Honesty grows suspect; like Iago, it is not what it is. If Iago is honest, then Cassio and Desdemona will, it seems certain, prove dishonest; whereas as long as he is dishonestly secretive, they remain honest in name, whatever they may be in fact. No wonder Othello says “What dost thou mean?” (I. 154). What Iago means, he says, is that he is something of an idealist himself, claiming in Cassio-like terms that “Who steals my purse steals trash” but “he that filches from me my good name” steals true value (III.iii.157–59). Therefore he will not speak his thoughts.

What is Othello to make of this? Honest Iago is unforthcomingly dishonest, yet for noble reasons that make him seem more deeply honest than if he had spoken straight out. With Iago’s honesty apparently growing in proportion to his dishonesty, no wonder Othello is puzzled and frustrated.

By this time Iago’s insinuations have set Othello adrift on a sea of deconstructive signifiers in accordance with the sign theory he proclaimed earlier to Roderigo: “I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign” (I.i.156–57). As this reminds us, Iago is Othello’s Ancient, and ancient is a variant of ensign, which means flag or sign. Iago’s style is to run up flags and signs that can be switched at a moment’s notice. In fact his signs are really “designs” in a double sense: they “de-sign” or divest signs of meaning in order to fulfill his villainous designs. The sign for him is a one-sided coin, signifier up, inasmuch as its signified, the pure (or in this case impure) thought that could stop the whirligig of signification he has set spinning, is nowhere to be found. Iago’s worst words can express no worst thoughts, for the simple reason that he has no worst thoughts; he knows perfectly well that Desdemona is above suspicion. Unanchored either to referents or to significeds, his insinuations float free, deferring meaning indefinitely and obliging Othello to trace an endless loop of suggestion.

III

Ocular Proof and Body Language

If Othello cannot gain access to Iago’s conclusive thoughts by way of words, how then? The answer is simple and familiar; the epistemology of the West rests on it: merely look. “To be once in doubt,” Othello says, “Is [once] to
be resolv’d” (ll. 179–80), and the way to be resolved is to follow the optic nerve:

I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this—
Away at once with love or jealousy!
(III.iii.190–92)

This is more famously expressed later when he collars Iago and demands “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore; / Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof” (III.iii.359–60), after which, just to be sure there is no mistake, he adds,

Make me to see’; or (at the least) so prove it
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on; or woe upon thy life!
(ll. 364–66)

To break free of slippery signifiers like honesty and gain access to the unmediated truth, he will dismiss words altogether and take the incomparably honest eye to friend.

Iago seizes on the idea with enthusiasm. First he ocularizes his language, painting lascivious images of Cassio and Desdemona in the fiction of dreaming Cassio (ll. 410–26). When Othello begins to rage, Iago taunts him by complaining (as though the game were too easily won): “yet we see nothing done; / She may be honest yet” (ll. 432–33). Then he leads Othello, still with no more than a noose of words, to the terrible speech quoted earlier in which he falls from verse into prose:

Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her. Lie with her! ['Zounds,] that’s folsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief! To confess, and be hang’d for his labor—first to be hang’d, and then to confess. I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Fish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is’t possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!
(IV.i.35–43)

If Othello simply fell from verse to prose here it would be startling enough, but in fact he plunges right on through prose to a series of incoherent cries and babblings at the edges of the sublinguistic. In view of his earlier sublimations of language, his logocentric concern for signifieds, it is ironic that his discourse should be reduced to a random play of signifiers alone. Now he is caught up in the low material stuff of speech, the carnal body of sounds devoid of sense.

Here Shakespeare draws a painful parallel between Othello’s (non)language and his (non)love. In the Senate scene earlier, recoiling almost in disgust from the notion that he might want to take Desdemona to Cyprus for sexual reasons, Othello purified his wife Lady Macbeth-like, by unsexing her there, and then. If we say as so many critics have, either in praise or complaint, that Othello’s love is idealistic and lacks body, then in this scene that metaphor unmetaphors itself. Desdemona becomes not a body to bed but a soul to enfranchise (“to be free and bounteous to her mind” [I.iii.265]), a Petrarchan divinity inviting allegorization as the antithesis to Iago’s Devil. As such, she is the disembodied
feminine equivalent to the operatic Othello music. Now, however, Desdemona’s
divinity and Othello’s style collapse together. In this disjointed speech, he is
assaulted by images of her as a body to be lain with or on, and then, finally,
as no more than a repellent concatenation of bodily parts—“Noses, ears, and
lips.” Everything descends not merely to body here but rather, as in a spar-
agmos, to a dismembered and disarticulated body. Noses, ears, and lips are to
the intact body as Othello’s fragmented utterance is to authentic syntax—in-
deed, as Othello’s own trembling and shaking limbs are to his fine physical
presence in earlier scenes. What issues from Othello is not romantic verse or
even plain prose but something not quite speech, a verbal epilepsy—a regres-
sion from language in its abstract and symbolic role as the instrument of godlike
reason to language as the almost pre-verbal Artaud-like noises expelled by a
creature in pain.7

When Othello falls into his epilepsy one further parallel ensues, for his sei-
zure consists of an obliteration of consciousness and a consequent deterioration
of reflective man to that state which Hamlet called bestial oblivion. The ideal-
istic Othello to whom the bodily and material are a source of corruption—to
whom love must be ethereally chaste or else (the only imaginable alternative)
“a cestern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!” (IV.ii.61–62)—is now
reduced to nothing but body, a lump of quivering matter. And if the body is
the Devil’s empire, as Luther maintained, and Iago is a devil, then Othello is
now most fully within His Satanic Majesty’s dominion.8

IV

The Storied Self

Othello clearly can go no further in this verbal direction. Despite his sinking
cry “It is not words that shakes me thus,” it is still precisely words that shakes
him thus. It is past time to shift to ocular proofs, for the eye is incorruptibly
honest. Iago obliges by staging the play-within, at last bringing forth for in-
spection his secret thoughts, not in slippery phrases and vague insinuations but
open and palpable as a pageant. Now at last Othello is satisfied. There in full
and damning sight are the smiling Cassio, the beckoning Iago, the embraces,
then Cassio’s whore, and finally the handkerchief itself (IV.i.100–168). In keeping
with his own prescription for revenge, he has seen, doubted, proved, and there
is no more but this: “How shall I murder him, Iago?” (IV.i.169).

However, what Iago knows and Othello does not is that ocular proofs are
no more transcendent and unmediated than verbal ones:

As [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad;
And his unbookish jealousy must [conster]
Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviors
Quite in the wrong.

(IV.i.100–103)

7 In all of Shakespeare’s other plays the nearest analogue to this moment in Othello is Lear’s
howling entrance with Cordelia’s dead body, which can be regarded as part of a pattern of linguistic
uncreation (as it is in my “Creative Uncreation in King Lear,” Shakespeare Quarterly, 37, 1 [1986],
5–19).

8 For a study of Luther’s scatological notions of the Devil, see Norman O. Brown, Life Against
Here Iago rather brilliantly translates the visual into the verbal to demonstrate that the observing eye is not all that different from the reading eye (or the hearing ear). Iago employs space as a blank sheet on which he writes his lubricous meanings with the stylus of Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviors. And Othello, convinced that he is simply registering the naked phenomenological truth, instead reads what Iago has written, and thus misconstruits all. Othello is, after all, an unbookish barbarian; the subtleties of meditation undo him quite. Thus he stands apart, entering his crude glosses in the margins of Iago’s elusive text—“Now he denies it faintly, and laughs it out . . . Do [you] triumph, Roman? . . . By heaven, that should be my handkerchief!” Even afterwards when Iago remarks upon the handkerchief, and he is obliged to ask “Was that mine?” (I. 174), he still believes he has been recording the unmediated truth. And because he does, he chooses to regard Desdemona herself as a fair paper and goodly book in which Cassio has written the word whore (IV.ii.71–72).

As Iago predicted, Othello goes “mad.” Not mad like Lear: it is a measure of his delusion that we must put his “madness” within quotation marks, as we do Desdemona’s “dishonesty.” Whereas Lear, casting aside his protective cultural clothing, is battered into honest madness by the true immediacy of the storm, Othello is driven “mad” by the pseudo-storms of Iago’s mediated stagings. Still, the storm within Othello is real enough to overwhelm the sense he struggles to retain. Out of the whirlwind of his passion Desdemona hears words that are both demeaning and demeaned, signifiers that no longer signify:

Upon my knee, what doth your speech import?
I understand a fury in your words,
[But not the words].

(IV.ii.31–34)

After this he curses her in the presence of Lodovico, strikes her, and banishes her from his presence.

Following his epileptic speech, Othello’s syntax improves, but his meanings still twitch and jerk with fury until IV.iii and Emilia’s ominous comment to Desdemona, “How goes it now? He looks gentler than he did” (I. 11). The calm, if not gentleness, of his manner reoccurs in the murder scene, which recapitulates in small the larger fall of Othello’s speech throughout the play. Diapasons of his former style and stately rhythms reappear as he enters now intoning “It is the cause” (V.ii.1). As self-assured as he was at his first entrance, he addresses himself to a respiritualized Desdemona whose soul, heaven forfend, he would not kill. But when she remains simply a loving woman instead of a contrite fallen nun, Othello’s style falters and then fails him altogether. “Alas,” Desdemona cries, “why gnaw you so your nether lip? / Some bloody passion shakes your very frame” (ll. 43–44)—just as it did during his seizure. His words grow increasingly abusive as his frustration mounts, until at last he seizes on murder as a kind of manual correlative to ocular proof—a transcendental signified meant to terminate the play of speech: “But while I say one prayer!” “It is too late” (l. 83).

9 In this respect Othello more resembles Gloucester than Lear—the blind Gloucester deceived by Edgar at Dover “Cliffs,” although he is cast into furious despair, not rescued from it.
The last phase of Othello's story is another story, beginning “Soft you; a word or two before you go” (I. 338). In his early stories about himself, he was subsumed by narrative, simultaneously telling and being told. So it is again at the end. He hushes other speakers to convert them into an audience of his own speech. He is once again the speaking subject. Yet he is also the subject to be spoken of, not only by himself but by his audience. He must speak to them because it is they who will speak of him: “Speak of me as I am” (I. 342). And then, typically, he tells their story for them—“Then must you speak / Of one that loved” (II. 343 ff.). Just as he told his stories of adventure up to the moment Brabantio asked him to tell them, and continued them up to the moment the Duke said “Say it, Othello,” so now he resumes his tale, bringing his account of his life up-to-date and providing us with a brief chronicle of the play itself. If his life has always been lived just a breath ahead of his stories about himself, now life and story terminally coincide at the moment of death: “O bloody period!” Lodovico exclaims as the dagger makes its point. When Gratiano adds “All that is spoke is marr’d” (I. 357), his words suggest not merely that Othello’s suicide casts a foul light on his fine words but that his bloody period has blotted the fair written page of his self. Inasmuch as he is both the speaker and “all that is spoke,” his assimilation to story is complete.

V

Monologue/Dialogue

Othello’s narrative monopoly on language in the first Act and his subsequent loss of that monopoly during his verbal exchanges with Iago suggest that Mikhail Bakhtin’s views about monologue and dialogue may provide a means of making helpful distinctions between the two.10 Taking that perspective, at any rate, let us see how the play looks.

As noted earlier, Othello’s speech bears some similarities to writing. For instance, when he speaks in monologue he commands language as a writer does when he writes. The high, almost fawning formality of his opening lines—“Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, / My very noble and approv’d good masters” (I.iii.76–77)—reserves a solemn and sizeable space for his holding forth. The assurance that he will proceed without interruption allows him amplitude of utterance. He can afford the long phrase and sustained period, the rhythms of repetition, the crafting of parallels, subordinations, parentheses, and antitheses, and the lingering evocations of detail that help unfold his rhetorical plot from that opening apostrophe to the formal closure of “This only is the witchcraft I have us’d” (I. 169).

All of this unhurried stylizing of speech has a greater affinity to writing than to utterance. This affinity appears also in Othello’s near total investment of meaning in words alone. When he tells his story, nothing is assumed, everything is said. Once under way, his words roll on autonomously, indifferent to their immediate nonverbal context, each sentence responding to the thrust of the one before it and preparing the way for the one following it. Like most forms of public address, Othello’s speech is designed not to further dialogue but to sus-

10 See Mikhail Bakhtin, especially Speech Genres and Other Essays, trans. Vern McGee (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), and Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). Actually in Bakhtin’s view there is no such thing as monologue, since all utterance answers and is answerable; but I use the term for convenience.
pend it. As a performance, the proper response to it is applause, which is just what it gets: “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (l. 171).

In Act III, however, Othello finds himself in Iago’s dialogistic territory, a place of disjunctive utterances and echoings, of eyebrows raised and fingers laid along the nose, of musings meant to be overheard and silences loud with implication. Meaning resides now in the unspoken aspects of the scene or immediate context even more than it does in words. With Iago, the unsaid always says more than the said. The thrust of speech comes not syntactically from within as in monologue, where phrases and sentences build on their predecessors, but responsively from without, each utterance answering one before it and preparing for one to follow, a reply that invites a reply, as when Iago repeats Othello’s words in the form of a question—“Honest, my lord?” “Think, my lord?” (III.iii.103, 106). The extent to which meaning arises from the scene—this speaker, this audience, this shared subject, this known past and anticipated future—is suggested by Iago’s sly employment of deictics and demonstratives. “Hah? I like not that,” he begins (l. 35); or “scan this thing no farther; leave it to time” (l. 245) and “I see, [sir], that you are eaten up with passion; / I do repent me that I put it to you” (ll. 391–92) (emphases mine). Such terms, meaningless in themselves, imply a shared understanding and a community of interest: we two, here and now, faced with this difficulty, knowing what we know.

The irony lies in the fact that Iago is inviting Othello out of his fortress of monologue into a social scene where he must share his I, honor the verbal rights of others, and assume alien points of view. It is precisely what his love for Desdemona should have accomplished but has not, largely because Iago has wedged his “love” for Othello into the space where Desdemona’s should be, but also because Othello’s famous style is constitutionally opposed to dialogue. Monologue makes its own meaning, and Othello’s verbal idealism, his logocentrism, lodges all meaning in words.\(^\text{11}\) Obliged to attend to meanings situated, or in Iago’s slick practice seemingly situated, outside language, in silence, in undivulged thought, in pitch and accent and smiles and nods and handkerchiefs, and perhaps most of all in such “common knowledge” as the sly sexual maneuvers of Venetian ladies (III.iii.201–4), Othello breaks down. But, after all, what should we have expected? The Moor is a stranger. He is not privy to the world shared by Venetians: the social order, habits, standards, expectations, all that stands behind the simplest remark one person makes to another, guaranteeing that what is meant by the one is at least roughly what is understood by the other. He always speaks from a place outside or at the borders of this cultural scene. Perfectly natural, then, that he should situate as

\(^{11}\) As Bakhtin says, arguing against Saussure’s langue: “Can the expressive aspect of speech be regarded as a phenomenon of language as a system? Can one speak of the expressive aspect of language units, i.e., words and sentences? The answer to these questions must be a categorical ‘no.’ . . . The word ‘darling’—which is affectionate both in the meaning of its root and its suffix—is in itself, as a language unit, just as neutral as the word ‘distance’” (Speech Genres and Other Essays, p. 60; excerpted in Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work, ed. Gary Saul Morson, p. 96). More succinctly: “If an individual word is pronounced with expressive intonation it is no longer a word, but a complete utterance expressed by one word” (Speech Genres, p. 62). In other words, I take it, you can define a word in a dictionary and indicate its grammatical functions, but you cannot assign it a suprasegmental phoneme that represents its prosodic meaning—you cannot say how it is to be uttered. Only on a given occasion, spoken with a certain duration, pitch, and intensity, will darling escape its lexical abstractness and express affection, contempt, surprise, passion, or the emptiness of the formulaic Hollywood greeting.
much meaning as possible in words, and especially in his own words. To grasp meanings lying outside and around and behind words, he is dependent on those in the know. And of course Iago is always in the know. Othello’s cry “[By heaven,] I’ll know thy thoughts” (I. 162) stands beside his bemused comment “Dost thou say so?” (I. 205) as testimony to a desire that can never be wholly satisfied in the stranger: the knowledge that is simply known, the understanding that is “understood,” all that is given to Venetians because of experiences shared while Othello was engineering hairbreadth escapes off in antres vast and deserts idle.

In light of these considerations, the murder scene is a mockery of dialogue. Othello enters in the old vein, intoning his music, fashioning a lyric poem about the finalities of death; and although what follows has the appearance of dialogue, especially in the stichomythic exchanges, everything Othello says is designed to impose his own exclusive interpretation on the occasion and to prevent further speech. Cassio’s “mouth is stopp’d” (V.ii.71), and so should Desdemona’s be: “Peace, and be still!” (I. 46). Desdemona is cast in the role of questioner, inviting response, and Othello as answerer, having the final word. Even when she prays, it is he who utters “Amen,” setting the conventional verbal seal on her words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{Then heaven} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{Have mercy on me!} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{Amen, with all my heart!}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{[Then Lord] have mercy on me!} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{I say, amen.}
\end{align*}
\]

(V.ii.33–34)

(V.ii.57)

_Amen_ puts a period to prayer as a period puts an end to a sentence; and inasmuch as we hear Desdemona repeatedly beginning lines that Othello concludes—as in the examples just cited—he is literally the periodic end-stop of dialogistic verse. This is increasingly the case as the scene moves on—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{Let [Cassio] confess a truth.} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{He hath confess’d.} \\
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{What, my lord?} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{That he hath us’d thee.} \\
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{How? unlawfully?} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{Ay.}
\end{align*}
\]

(I. 68–69)

—until it reaches its unhappy climax when Othello puts a terminal end-stop to her speech:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{But half an hour!} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{Being done, there is no pause.} \\
\text{Des.} & \quad \text{But while I say one prayer!} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{It is too late.} \\
\text{Oth.} & \quad \text{Smothers her.}
\end{align*}
\]

(II. 82–83)

Othello may stop Cassio’s mouth and then Desdemona’s, but human affairs are incorrigibly dialogistic; there is always an Emilia at the door crying “My
lord, my lord! What ho! my lord, my lord!" (ll. 84–85) and demanding that the world outside be allowed to speak its disruptive piece. What the world says is that Othello is a murdering fool. And Othello—what does he say?

That is, after all this playing off of monologue against dialogue, how should we understand Othello’s last speech? Has he profited stylistically from his experience? Perhaps. The speech is a monologue of sorts, an attempt to redefine himself and bring to a final close, a bloody period, both his words and his life. Yet it is also open-ended, not merely acknowledging but relying on the subsequent speech of others (“Then must you speak” [l. 343]), and, as it were, open-beginninged in that it issues from prior speech (“Soft you” [l. 338]) and comments on what has gone before (“these unlucky deeds” [l. 341]). Moreover, as that definite description suggests—perhaps with a gesture in the direction of Desdemona—it takes its source in the immediate context and is grounded in common knowledge (“I have done the state some service, and they know’t—/ No more of that” [ll. 339–40]). Finally, its most significant meaning derives not from words alone, as in the Senate scene, but from an act that can be known for certain only if you are there to see it, since it is represented verbally by nothing more enlightening than “thus.” (To be sure, the deed emerges from the words “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him—thus” [ll. 355–56], but without the stage direction “He stabs himself” we might momentarily assume that Othello had seized and stabbed Iago, or even Lodovico or Gratiano.)

Perhaps the merger of monologue and dialogue in the speech does justice to Othello’s insistence on asserting his distinctive status as tragic hero, which allows him to say the last word himself (“O bloody period!” [l. 351]), while at the same time registering his chastened awareness that he is about to become merely words in the mouths of other men, a phrasal link in an endless chain of utterance.