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Shakespeare and the City:
The Negotiation of Urban Spaces
in Shakespeare's Plays

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TIMON'S ATHENS AND THE WILDERNESS OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

GALENA HASHHOZHEVA

Within the Shakespeare corpus, *Timon of Athens* is one among a handful of plays that blazon names of cities in their titles. Athens merits this mention since it functions as both a dramatic setting and a metonym for the local society and its mores. Yet the city's titular prominence does not betoken a compliment, for Athens is a whore that breeds thieves, traitors, gluttons, and parasites. Timon's Athens possesses few redeeming features, in contradistinction to other, more complex cities in Shakespearean drama, such as a Venice that balances contractual obligation, legalism, and mercy with the help of Christian wit (*The Merchant of Venice*), or an impassioned Verona where love and a blood feud embrace (*Romeo and Juliet*). The imperfect city in *Timon of Athens* is confronted by philosophy, a rigorous judge and an all-permeating presence in this cold, cerebral play.¹ *Timon of Athens* features a professional philosopher, Apemantus of the Cynic school, among its dramatis personae, while the protagonist Timon professes misanthropy, a near kin of Cynicism. With these two philosopher figures dominating the play, the city is destined to suffer a radical critique and transvaluation. This corresponds to historical realities in antique Athens, whose wise men – men prone to critical interrogation and a Socratic defiance of received beliefs and customs – considered the polis to be one of their most intriguing philosophical subjects.

Put in a broader perspective, *Timon of Athens* reminds us of the origins of European philosophy as a pointedly urban phenomenon. From Diogenes' feat of urinating in the agora before the eyes of Athens to Benjamin's fascination with Parisian flânerie, Western thinking has learnt to thrive on the fruitful soil of the city. Even city-refugees such as Heidegger could not resist the intellectual challenges that the urban environment unceasingly generates. And so the sylvan philosopher of the Black Forest sometimes wrote with a view specifically to the city, giving us a fine philosophical critique of modern technology and a pioneering profession of ecological *Sorge* (care, concern).

¹ For a philosophical critique of the city and urban society in the play, see Robert Miola's "Timon in Shakespeare's Athens." Miola argues (as have others before him, although in a less systematic manner) that the play demonstrates Shakespeare's "response to Greek political philosophy and the idea of the polis," especially the idea of historical Athens as an example of a democratically – that is to say, "chaotic[ally,] vicious[ly]" – governed polis (22). Miola uses facts from Athenian history and concepts from treatises of Greek political philosophy as scalpels with which to anatomize the corrupt mores in Shakespeare's Athens. Yet, he does not pay sufficient attention to the dramatization of philosophy itself in this city play on the levels of plot, character, and rhetoric. In my analysis, philosophy critiques the city not from a meta-plane but from the middle of the dramatic action. This position makes philosophy vulnerable, and soon it must itself undergo trials and criticisms pitched against it by the city and its other, the wilderness.

The forest, a locus where a human being's over-determined relationship to the city can be reconsidered, dominates the second half of *Timon of Athens*. Following his financial ruin, Timon voluntarily flees Athens and chooses the wilderness as cradle for his new misanthropic worldview, which germinated in the moral miasma of the city just before he left it. Up to this moment, philosophy in *Timon of Athens* has been represented solely by Apemantus' Cynicism, a creed unmatched in its censorious verdicts of its urban milieu. Timon's misanthropy, however, complicates the depiction of philosophy in the play by venturing out beyond the limits of the city. In the wilderness, philosophy, until now judge, will itself undergo an ordeal: the city and the wilderness, nature and culture will unite to try philosophy, its sense of place, and its situatedness in the world.

The first condemnation of Athens in the play accompanies the entrance of Apemantus, the "churlish philosopher," at a rich feast in Timon's house. The setting of the opening scene is representative of the whole first half of the play, which takes place mostly in urban interiors teeming with domestic comforts and echoing with the whispers of busybodies and parasites. As the guests at Timon's banquet are gathered gossiping, Apemantus swoops down on them and instead of greeting them, insinuates that they are dishonest knaves simply because they live in Athens:

TIMON.	Why dost thou call them knaves? Thou know'st them not.	
APEMANTUS.	Are they not Athenians?	
TIMON.	Yes.	
APEMANTUS.	Then I repent not.	(1.1.186-189)

Apemantus' snarling speeches and offensive behaviour throughout the play echo well-known legends about Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of classical Cynicism. The railing against Athens in particular is a signal philosophical reflex that Apemantus has inherited from antiquity, as have a number of other Cynic characters in Renaissance literature. In the comedy *Alexander and Campaspe*, for instance, Lyly's Diogenes makes accusations no less collective or categorical than those of Apemantus: "Indeed I think the Athenians have their children ready for any vice, because they be Athenians" (Lyly 4.1.78-79). The Cynicism of the historical Diogenes was, among other things, a philosophy of anti-urbanism, anti-patriotism, and apoliticism – a reaction against a civilization that was reaching the apex of its refinement and beginning to turn in upon itself. Yet precisely because he purposed to criticise the city vigorously and effectively, a Cynic had to circulate within its bounds: he could not but become an eminently urban figure.² Although Diogenes scorned civil housing and found an ascetic shelter in his infamous tub – the "zero-point of architecture" (Sloterdijk 312) –, his tub, we must note, neighboured the Athenian mansions. Similarly, while Socrates prided himself on his poverty and modesty of needs, which he shared with the Cynics, he frequented the homes of wealthy symposiarchs, as does Apemantus. Apemantus, Diogenes, and Socrates all live actively in the very heart of urban society, from which strategic point they also dispatch their criticism of its vices and their aggressive counsel towards its moral improvement. They practise an equilibristic art of

² On the cultural psychology of the Cynic as an urban figure, see Sloterdijk 34-35 and 309-310.

involvement and non-involvement that allows them to belong to Athens without being entirely assimilated.

Apemantus' reluctance to participate as others do in social occasions and, indeed, to move as others move in social space is especially visible in Shakespeare's dramatic medium.³ In 1.1 the vocational philosopher makes a point of arriving late at Timon's feast, after the representatives of most other guilds (Poet, Painter, Jeweller, Merchant) have already gathered. In 1.2, when the food is served and everyone proceeds with much pomp to the tables, a colourful stage direction reads, "Then comes, dropping after all, Apemantus, discontentedly, like himself." According to Robert Weimann, this defiant action produces a "meaningful gap in space and time [...]. Apemantus, 'dropping after all,' breaks up unity both in the timing of the entrance and in the representation of social status and manners" (205). Even as the others have taken their seats, Apemantus continues to toy with his undecided role, which lies halfway between a proper guest and a disruptive *persona non grata*:

TIMON.	O, Apemantus! You are welcome.
APEMANTUS.	No, You shall not make me welcome.
TIMON.	I come to have thee thrust me out of doors. Fie, thou'rt a churl. Ye've got a humour there Does not become a man; 'tis much to blame [...] Go, let him have a table by himself, For he does neither affect company Nor is he fit for't, indeed.
APEMANTUS.	Let me stay at thine apperil, Timon. I come to observe, I give thee warning on't.
TIMON.	I take no heed of thee; thou'rt an Athenian, Therefore welcome. (1.2.22-35)

The philosopher shows himself resistant to mollycoddling with kind phrases. For him, to be welcome could only be a matter of being *made* welcome, but this his independent spirit would not stomach: "You shall not make me welcome." While he cannot be forced into anything, Apemantus apparently can induce in others such reactions as may suit his whim. With his retort "I come to have thee thrust me out of doors," for instance, Apemantus presumes to control the passions and actions of Timon, his host and superior. Apemantus augments his positional ambivalence in every way he can,

³ Northrop Frye describes socially alienated characters in *Timon of Athens* (98-100) and other relevant plays (93-97) under the heading of the *idiōtēs*. The term *idiōtēs* is particularly appropriate to *Timon of Athens* since it had a historically specific use during Athens' classical democratic era: an *idiōtēs* was a withdrawn self-centred person (from *idios*, "private"), who refused to participate in public affairs and was for this reason reviled by the rest of society. A masterful use of this anti-social type for the purposes of drama we may find in many works by Lucian of Samosata, including his comic dialogue *Timon, or the Misanthrope*, which is among the possible sources of Shakespeare's play. According to Frye, in Shakespearean comedy, the *idiōtēs* is a structural position that may be occupied by a variety of character types (such as the villain, the scapegoat, the gull, the *senex iratus*, etc.) theorized by Frye and others. In tragedy, "the hero is always something of an *idiōtēs*, isolated from the society in which he has his being" (Frye 98).

shilly-shallying between wanting to “observe” and wanting to be expelled, between the house and the street, and between the whole party and a separate table. Timon, however, tries to collapse Apemantus’ ambivalence: “thou’rt an Athenian, / Therefore welcome.” This dignified laconic statement inverts Apemantus’ earlier insinuation that all guests at the feast are knaves because they are Athenians (1.1.187-189). Apemantus’ due revenge for Timon’s attempt to number him among the citizens is a most anti-social and unappetising speech on cannibalism. According to Apemantus, the too-welcoming Timon has gathered banqueters who lust to dine not with him but rather on him (1.2.37-50).

In the dense fabric of urban households, Apemantus appears to be an undomesticated isolate. He does, however, possess if not a home, then at least a space of his own, which is none the less real for being entirely verbal, built of the Cynic’s rocky and jagged rhetoric. Even in the middle of the foolish city, Apemantus can create and maintain this alternative space of wisdom from which he can access and attack society while remaining inaccessible himself. Apemantus calls his philosophical bastion a “heaven” (1.2.245) and will share it with others whom he deems worthy of, or in need of, its benefits. Timon, a good man but devoid of practical reason, qualifies to be inducted into the Cynic “heaven.” Timon’s love of society, however, gets in the way of his inclusion, for Apemantus’ “heaven” is full of dire railings against society. Timon won’t listen to such anti-social opprobrium and is consequently locked out of the “heaven” of sound counsel:

- APEMANTUS. Thou giv’st so long, Timon, I fear me thou wilt give away thyself
in paper shortly. What needs these feasts, poms, and vainglories?
- TIMON. Nay, an you begin to rail on society once, I am sworn not to give
regard to you.
Farewell, and come with better music.
- APEMANTUS. So. Thou wilt not hear me now, thou shalt not then. I’ll lock thy
heaven from thee.
O, that men’s ears should be
To counsel deaf, but not to flattery! (1.2.238-246)

This heaven is not the only place from which Timon will be banished during the headlong course of his fall. As soon as the rumour about his bankruptcy spreads, it becomes impossible for him to move freely or to occupy securely any given space, interior or exterior, within Athens. Timon’s folly locks him out even from the peace and comfort of his home, over which he no longer holds mastery. Previously, the house had been a temple dedicated to godlike bounty, and he its host and high priest. The house embraced numerous guests and orchestrated them, under Timon’s lead, into the consummate form of an Athenian symposium with its select society of artists, generals, merchants, senators, philosophers, and hetaeras (the masque’s Amazons at 1.2.109-149). Now, by contrast, rude servants of these same guests throng the halls and passages of the house to demand, on behalf of their masters, that Timon repay his loans. The servants’ scramble renders the house untraversable and disorganized, whereas previously the ceremonious movements and the dance of their masters at the feast had made it seem orderly and elegant, animated with an insincere cosmic harmony. In their desire to gain access to Timon and his private chambers, the zealous

servants block the very doors through which Timon, rushing to the sudden din, is trying to enter. Significantly, Timon's first wrathful outburst in the play is an expression of his painful sense of reduced existential space:

TIMON. What, are my doors opposed against my passage?
 Have I been ever free, and must my house
 Be my retentive enemy, my jail?
 The place which I have feasted, does it now,
 Like all mankind, show me an iron heart? (3.4.79-83)

Besieged and set astir by the intruders, the house turns against its master and becomes, along with all Athenians, an "enemy." The reproach that Timon levels against his house adds a singular accent to Samuel Johnson's designation of the play as a "domestick tragedy" (455). While in *Othello* and other plays that may be said to exemplify this putative genre, the characters suffer from what happens in their households, Timon blames as it were the house itself. Like the swooning Othello, Timon grows weak and physically nauseated and suffocated in the middle of his home filled with oppressors: "They have e'en put my breath from me, the slaves. Creditors? Devils!" (3.5.1-2).

Inflamed by hate, Timon conceives a plan to humiliate the creditors: he will treat them to the same inhospitable disorder that their servants unleashed in his house. Timon invites his regular guests for one last feast, which begins with solemn music and urbane curtseys but degenerates to a bedlam of grotesque curses, flying stones, and lukewarm water thrown in the guests' faces. In their ensuing flight, amid Timon's sardonic shouts "What, all in motion?" (3.7.94), the creditors hurry so much that they leave behind a litter of caps and gowns. They have thereby literally enacted the cavalier comment that their servants made after Timon's earlier fit of rage: "our masters may throw their caps at their money. These debts may well be called desperate ones, for a madman owes 'em" (3.4.97-99).

Having used his house as an accomplice in this vengeance, Timon has done with it and curses it too, for the house is a hateful reminder of a past that deserves obliteration: "Burn house!" (3.7.96). This execration is succeeded by "Sink Athens!" (3.7.96) as Timon moves from interior to exterior space and makes the entire city a stage for his discontent. He rages in particular against architecture, one of the renowned embodiments of Athenian civilisation. Timon attempts to "unbuild[...] the city in a rhetoric of destruction" (Paster 102):

TIMON. Let me look back upon thee. O thou wall
 That girdles in those wolves, dive in the earth,
 And fence not Athens! [...]
He tears off his clothing.
 Nothing I'll bear from thee
 But nakedness, thou detestable town;
 Take thou that too, with multiplying bans.
 Timon will to the woods, where he shall find
 Th'unkindest beast more kinder than mankind.
 The gods confound – hear me you good gods all –

Th'Athenians, both within and out that wall;
 And grant, as Timon grows, his hate may grow
 To the whole race of mankind, high and low.
 Amen. (4.1.1-41)

Timon's naked departure from the city inverts the Athenians' fussiness about their clothing and similar attributes, which from signs of culture have devolved into signs of cultural decadence. While hurrying to escape from Timon's travestied feast of stones, the creditors had abandoned cloaks, hats, and various bejewelled raiments and afterwards harped on about them in pathetic regret, wishing that they could retrieve them (3.7.99-105). Set against the creditors' ridiculous attachment to such trivia, Timon's gesture of tearing his clothes acquires an unexpected air of dignity. Stripped of the protective layers of clothing and housing and divested of his citizenship, Timon betakes himself to the wilderness in a condition of absolute existential exposure.⁴ This man without a city is no longer "Timon," and no longer "of Athens." He finds a new identity in misanthropy, and he inaugurates it by renaming himself. Henceforth he answers those who ask who he is with the snarl "I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind" (4.3.53). All his speech is now curse and denial, his sole food the roots he digs in the forest, his only attire his own skin, and his abode a bare cave.

The fallen, railing Timon is, like Apemantus, a philosopher, contrary to what Rolf Soellner states in his monograph *Timon of Athens, Shakespeare's Pessimistic Tragedy*: "Timon is no philosopher and no clear line in his thought is discernible" (137).⁵ Thinking does not need to follow a clear discursive line to be philosophical. Among the various movements in ancient philosophy, Cynicism for instance focused exclusively on ethical practice at the expense of speculative thinking. Cynicism, which Apemantus faithfully represents in the play, was for the most part a sententious worldview combined with a minimalist lifestyle, and it never worked out a systematic logic, physics, or metaphysics. The classical Cynic was "an anti-theorist, anti-dogmatist, and anti-scholastic" (Sloterdijk 303). Moreover, even some speculative philosophers, e.g. some Presocratics, did not regard systematicity and logical rigour as indispensable features of their thought. Like Timon's passionate speeches in the wilderness, their writings were emotional, dramatic, and loaded with imagery,

⁴ For the raging Timon, architecture and clothes become as it were two proximate, associated emblems of civilisation. This association between building and clothing has in fact some anthropological validity; compare for instance Gottfried Semper's theory of the origins and fundamental elements of architecture. Primitive architecture relied for one of its basic functions – that of *Umfriedigung* (enclosing, fencing in, vertical delimiting) – on weaving, braiding, and textiles; hence the etymological link between *Wand* (wall) and *Gewand* (raiment) (Semper 57; see also 56-68). Clothing separates and protects the body from the outside, as do the walls of the house at another relay, and beyond them, the walls of the city as well.

⁵ This assertion is all the odder since in his overview of classical and Renaissance sources for *Timon of Athens*, Soellner has collected a number of authors who unequivocally call Timon a philosopher. For instance, according to Pierre Boaistuau (*Theatrum Mundi*, English translation 1586), of all the ancient philosophers who hated man "Timon, a philosopher of Athens, was the most affectioned patriarch of this sect" (qtd. in Soellner 213). Consider in this connection Sloterdijk's warning, "Great is the danger of underestimating the philosophical import of Cynicism on the grounds that it enjoys a 'merely' anecdotal transmission" (303).

metaphor, and allusion. The emotionality of Presocratic philosophy may account for Montaigne's mention of Timon and his equally emotional misanthropy in the essay "On Heraclitus and Democritus" (418). Montaigne discusses Timon's hate in comparison with the two other primal philosophical passions, Heraclitean sadness and Democritean cheer. In addition, the Presocratics – especially their most poetically minded representative, Empedocles – remind us of Timon in their bold use of performative language. Presocratic and Timonist curses, blessings and invocations seek to bring about states of affairs rather than just to reflect on the pre-existing ones (reflection being the limit of discursive constative philosophy).

Extraordinarily impassioned speeches are likewise taken as proof of Timon's philosophical status in Lucian's second-century dialogue *Timon, or the Misanthrope*, to which Shakespeare's play is indebted either directly or via intermediary Renaissance sources. In Lucian, Zeus' attention is caught by Timon raging on earth, and Zeus comments: "Who is that who is shouting from Attica? [...] A mouthy fellow and an impudent one. Very likely he is a philosopher" (vii, 333). Even Athens, as soon as Timon begins to rail against it, perceives enough of the philosophical in his speech and behaviour to start a rumour that he now imitates Apemantus in his Cynic antics. The rumour promptly brings Apemantus to the woods, in the intention to strip Timon of Cynic credibility and to unmask him as a dilettante who passes himself for some newfangled thing called "Misanthropos" (4.3.53). Timon's misanthropy certainly shares many ideas, philosophical attributes, and colourful details with Apemantus' Cynicism. Both Apemantus and Timon favour roots as their sustenance; both despise Athens and riches; and both love to use the appellation "dog" (in allusion to one popular etymology of the word *Cynic*: *dog-like*, from *kuon*, dog).

Notwithstanding this resemblance to Apemantus' Cynicism, Timon's misanthropy is *sui generis*. Philosophers like Apemantus, Diogenes, or Socrates are the moral gadflies of the city, and they practice their calling on the assumption that a fit of pique may have a salubrious effect on the irritated. Despite appearances to the contrary, the harsh Socratic elenchus and the rude Cynic rants are intended to benefit their victims. Indeed, Cynicism possesses some philanthropic and even utopian dimensions, recognizable in Apemantus' "heaven" of good counsel (1.2.245).⁶ Timon's misanthropy, by contrast, appears to cast a dystopian shadow over the entire world. Uniformly bleak, the misanthropic insight into man's nature cannot bear to encounter any exceptions that undermine its validity. When he witnesses one honest, sympathetic man – his former steward Flavius – Timon is pained by this deviation from the general pattern of human wickedness and treachery: "It almost turns my dangerous nature wild. [...] I do proclaim / One honest man – mistake me not, but one, / No more, I pray [...] How fain would I have hated all mankind" (4.3.484-491). At misanthropy's most perverse extreme, Timon prays for the non-existence of honest men, so that his worldview is universally justified. Unwilling to dwell on the marvel of Flavius' goodness for too long, Timon drives him away with the advice that Flavius should

⁶ According to Sloterdijk, in his practical influence on human affairs, a Cynic philosopher may turn out to be philanthropic rather than misanthropic (309), "biophilic" (309), and capable of a "humanizing and balancing effect" (308).

“build from men” (4.3.518), that is, keep far from where men live when he sets up a new home for himself. Such an anti-social home would situate Flavius outside the city, yet he would still enjoy the comforts of civilized life. In Lucian's *Timon, or the Misanthrope*, this scenario reflects the fate of Timon himself after he accidentally digs out a treasure in the forest (Lucian xli, 371; cf. the discovery of the treasure at 4.3.25 in *Timon of Athens*). Lucian's Timon erects a well-fortified tower on the spot where he found the treasure, and lives there in blissful isolation for the rest of his days, chasing away any unwanted visitors from Athens who dare come too close (xliv-xlv, 373-377). Shakespeare's Timon, however, does not consider this or any similar arrangements, since they would recreate the physical features of the city in the middle of the wilderness. As his furious speech against the wall of Athens shows (4.1.1-41; see above), Timon resents not only the citizens but also the very texture of the city moulded by them to suit their fancies and excesses. Resolved to subtract the city, in all its facets, from his life, Timon chooses nature. Henceforth he will sleep no more in spaces that are human artefacts: neither in Lucian's tower, nor in anything like Diogenes' tub. Nor will he move from one urban mansion to another, as the restlessly roaming and observing Apemantus seems to do. Instead, Timon lies at night, as he puts it, “under what's above me” (4.3.294).

Although Timon hates Athens, this hate does not turn him into a worshipper of nature, a Jacques of sorts. Jacques, the melancholic malcontent in *As You Like It*, chooses nature because the city is not as perfect as nature, Timon because nature is not as bad as the city. The forest, the cave, and the windy beach attract Shakespeare's most extreme misanthrope only inasmuch as they are devoid of civilisation. Rather than appreciating nature in and of itself, he values it as a negation of the city, that is, in relative rather than absolute terms: he finds “th'unkindest beast,” for instance, “more kinder” in comparison to unkind man (4.1.36). Yet these are precarious grounds for preferring nature to culture. Although the beast is better than man, its essence is not kindness but still unkindness, even if of a different or lesser sort. The same, Timon will find, applies to nature as a whole. Originally recruited in Timon's curses as a nemesis of culture, nature soon begins to mock him with grievances similar to those for which he renounced culture. Dramatic irony thus undermines the logic of revenge as Timon's avenging ally proves to be more closely connected with Timon's enemy than was to be expected.⁷ While he digs for roots, the fare of hermits and outcasts, the earth perversely yields him a treasure of gold (4.3.25), as though nature purposed his restoration to his former wealth and status in Athens. Another facet of the sympathy between nature and the city that Timon will eventually abhor lies in nature's dependence on the redistribution and conversion of substance. When Timon first comes to the forest, he entreats nature to be on his side and to turn the human world upside down as part of the elemental cycle of water and vapours:

TIMON. O blessed breeding sun, draw from the earth
 Rotten humidity; below thy sister's [the moon's] orb
 Infect the air [...]

⁷ On the mutual influences between nature and the city in light of the Christian *contemptus mundi*, and on the paradoxes of choosing nature as a fellow-avenger, see Soellner 138-139.

Raise me this beggar and demit that lord,
 The senator shall bear contempt hereditary,
 The beggar native honour (4.3.1-14).

Later on, however, Timon proclaims his loathing for the same process of circulation between the heavenly bodies and the earth, since this process amounts to stealing. How could nature judge or punish men for their lawlessness if it permits such promiscuous robbery within its own domain? Timon delivers a chilling condemnation of criminal nature in a speech to three banditti (deserting soldiers from Alcibiades' army), who have come to steal his newfound gold:

TIMON. I'll example you with thievery.
 The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
 Robs the vast sea. The moon's an arrant thief,
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.
 The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
 The moon into salt tears. The earth's a thief,
 That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
 From gen'ral excrement. Each thing's a thief.
 [...] To Athens go,
 Break open shops; nothing can you steal
 But thieves do lose it. (4.3.428-441)

Timon depicts a finite universe with a finite availability of substance in it, which is perpetually re-transmitted but never newly generated. In this barren world, we gain not only our alienable possessions but also our very life force and elemental being from incursions upon others.

Nature's harshest, but also most predictable, betrayal of Timon is her inability to keep men out of the wilderness. Just while Timon pledges nature to breed the human kind no more, numerous citizens from all social strata – prostitutes, soldiers, artists, and politicians – are approaching, seeking, finding, and bothering him in his forest retreat. The harried Timon exclaims in disbelieving revulsion: "More man? Plague, plague!" (4.3.197). Note that "man" is in the singular, as though human beings were a mass of which one can measure greater or smaller, yet consistently unbearable, quantities. In its en-masse momentum, the crowd shatters the philosopher's utopian prerogative of emigrating from civilization and society to nature and solitude. Athens is now a nightmare out of which Timon cannot awake: even though he tried to leave the city, the city won't leave him.⁸ The city has mobilized itself, migrated along with

⁸ Paster makes a very different claim about the psychological intricacy of Timon's inclinations and desires once he is in the wilderness. She argues that Timon perversely desires the citizens to come so that he can vent his rage upon them: "Timon's earlier need to draw men to him has become a complementary need to draw out hostility that will confirm his new social mythology [of misrule], his anti-civic identity. Indeed, the succession of characters whom Timon meets here is so perfectly suited to his new imaginative needs that their encounters come to resemble a dream in which the subject can reshape intractable reality. Timon gets a chance to reenact in a new and aggressive key earlier exchanges" (105). But if this were so, if Timon really preferred to have company against

the philosopher, and now bustles about the wilderness as though the wilderness were yet another city in the making. Before the end of Timon's days, we will even witness a choice delegacy of the Athenian senate conducting negotiations with Timon in front of a cave, a farce of an agora (5.2). The city has thus brought over to the forest not only its people, in all their burgeoning variety, but also its institutions, including the senate, the army, and the brothel, as well as its peculiar civil problems – in this case an imminent military coup planned by Alcibiades, against whom the senators want to enlist Timon's prowess and newfound gold.

Together with Apemantus, Timon had fantasised that a plague of bloodthirsty animals should come upon Athens (4.3.317-343), “[so] that beasts / May have the world in empire” (4.3.384-5), but savage nature neglects to show the city crowds this cruel face of hers. Instead of sending beasts to men, nature allows the men to inundate her. Yet, the non-occurrence of the beast apocalypse does not disappoint Apemantus all that much. Although earlier Apemantus proclaimed his grandiose wish to “give [the world to] the beasts, to be rid of the men” and even agreed to “fall [himself] in the confusion of men, and remain a beast with the beasts” (4.3.321-2), later he incongruously corrects himself: “Would ‘twere so, / But not till I am dead” (4.3.385-6). Apemantus may revile the city for its depraved ways but, being a city philosopher, he is not keen on witnessing its total demise. Nor does he consider a beastly life, a life without the city, to be possible for a city man like Timon. Apemantus mocks Timon for his illusion that he can erase the habits and memories with which Athens has imprinted him, and live with a fresh mind, and with content, in a pleasing, innocent natural environment:

APEMANTUS.

What, think'st

That the bleak air, thy boisterous chamberlain,
Will put thy shirt on warm? Will these mossed trees
That have outlived the eagle page thy heels
And skip when thou point'st out? Will the cold brook,
Candied with ice, caudle thy morning taste
To cure thy o'ernight's surfeit? (4.3.221-227)

In Apemantus' judgment, spoiled Timon cannot help projecting old domestic habits on his dour new habitation. Instead of experiencing nature in its own right, Timon expects it to offer equivalents to the comforts of his prosperous city mansion. The parodic daintiness of Apemantus' speech underscores the pathetic misapprehensions – seeing sugar frosting in the brook's ice, etc. – that Apemantus attributes to Timon. The mention of candy and an “overnight surfeit” must be particularly gruelling for Timon since, as we may infer, by now he is pained by hunger. The discovery of the treasure and the endless succession of visitors from Athens have delayed first his laborious search for roots, then the consumption thereof. Guessing the inadequacy of forest nourishment, Apemantus has brought food from the city for this ex-citizen who plays

which to rail rather than to be alone, he would be indistinguishable from Apemantus, and thus a Cynic, not a misanthrope. Moreover, if he perversely enjoyed the succession of visitors in the forest, the total effect of the play would degenerate to that of a farce, and Timon of Athens would be pure satire rather than a (admittedly problematic) tragedy.

at life-in-accordance-with-nature. Just as Timon is finally about to bite into a root, Apemantus intervenes and offers a better fare: “Here, I will mend thy feast” (4.3.284). Rather than a gesture of charity, the meal may be bait designed to provoke Timon’s confession of his neediness and distress, and the folly of his isolation. The food is pushed under his nose to prove to him that, notwithstanding his vociferous repudiations of the city, he does crave sugar frosting when he sees the ice on the brook. Apemantus is confident that Timon can exorcise neither the banqueter nor the citizen in himself and that, as he tells Timon, “Thou’dst courtier be again / Wert thou not beggar” (4.3.241-2). According to Apemantus, Timon eats roots “enforcedly” (4.3.241) despite his inclination, since in the wilderness he cannot obtain better food – in contrast to Apemantus, who eats roots in the middle of a city feast supposedly out of an authentic philosophical commitment (1.2.70).

Dietary standards and references to food as a civilizing factor become a charged subject in the second half of the play. The opposition between nature and culture is reflected in the difference between the raw and the cooked, between the earth’s roots and steaming “covered dishes” that promise “royal cheer” at feasts (3.7.45-6), as they did at the banquets that Timon once gave. Civilisation is sweet, social graces are saccharine, and Timon admits that in his prosperous days he enjoyed the world of Athens as his own “confectionery” (4.3.260). From his present vantage point however, Timon realizes that urban man lusts for cornucopias, gastronomic and otherwise, that surpass both the natural human need and what nature should in fairness allot to man. The feasts of the city stultified and ruined Timon. More generally, its society of gastronomic delectation can corrupt any human being’s intelligence and ethical sense: “man with liquorish draughts / And morsels unctuous greases his pure mind, / That from it all consideration slips!” (4.3.194-6). The engorged city is not a place for higher thoughts and virtues, not a place for philosophy. The close association between city culture, food, and the neglect of thinking and moral accountability sickens Timon and spoils him every single bite he takes even now in the forest. As he ingests his roots, Timon cannot avoid thinking compulsively about the city: “That the whole life of Athens were in this! / Thus would I eat it. / *He bites the root*” (4.3.283-4).

Timon’s eating disorder is perhaps more serious, and more sinister, than it appeared to be in Apemantus’ sardonic judgment; still, it is not so radical as to blunt completely Timon’s simplest biological need – hunger. Based on his life in Athens, Timon seems to have assumed that eating has everything to do with civic culture and expected that his desire to eat would subside, or even disappear, when he ceases to inhabit the domain of culture. But of course, eating has at least as much to do with nature, in particular with human nature, and at one point Timon’s demanding stomach quite bewilders him: “That nature [his own essence], being sick of man’s unkindness, / Should yet be hungry! Common mother [i.e. the earth, ...] Yield him who all thy human sons doth hate, / From forth thy plenteous bosom, one poor root” (4.3.177-186). In the heart of nature, Timon is surprised by hunger, an element of that nature which is peculiar to him as a human being. An alimentary agony threatens him, as he is digging for food all the time yet remains perpetually underfed. Timon is human, all too human both in his misanthropic revulsion from food and in his tormented search for the last food that his stubborn misanthropy would permit him to have.

Timon's experiences in the wilderness demonstrate that it is impossible for him to find an innocent space, a spot completely free of civilisation. All city things from which Timon tried to escape – appetite and greed, gold and throngs of gold lovers, flattery and hypocrisy, thievery and betrayal – he encounters again in the wilderness. He was wrong in thinking nature impervious to the incursions of the city, but equally, he had been wrong in the first place to perceive the city with its moral and economic pitfalls as unnatural, as the one ulcer in the tissue of an otherwise orderly and healthy universe. To speak with classical political thinkers such as Aristotle, a city “consisteth by nature” (*Aristotles politiques* sig. D4r.) in the same manner that a beehive does, because men, like bees, are sociable animals. For Aristotle, the city is “compounded of men naturally Ciuill and Politicke”, men naturally predetermined to join in a community (sig. D5r). Men must live together if they are to realize their *telos* of “self-sufficiency” defined as the state in which one has all things and therefore neither lacks nor desires anything (see sig. D5r). The term “self-sufficiency” (the early modern translation of Aristotle's *autárkeia*), we must note, is paradoxical because it posits that man can satisfy the needs and wants of his self only by being in the company of others and by drawing on their aid. In isolation, the human being remains needy, debilitated, and imperfect. If man is to avoid this vulnerability and achieve his state of sufficiency and perfection, he must share his life with other men.

In light of Aristotle's ideas, the question why Timon cannot escape from civilisation in the wilderness is simply answered: because he has brought himself – a man – to the wilderness and with himself, inevitably, also the great tug of humanity: “More man” (4.3.197) and again, “More things like men” (4.3.390). Whither one man goes, even one who proclaims that he hates mankind, thither other men shall follow. One man in one place is already society *in potentia*, and there is no misanthrope who can counteract the human force of attraction, an impulse so definitive of our nature according to Aristotle. The processional rhythm of the scenes in the wilderness, with so many characters coming by and passing on, has inspired classic readings of the play as a pageant.⁹ In light of Aristotle's ideas, we may see in the pageantry of *Timon of Athens* not only a form of dramatic presentation but also a lesson in political anthropology.

As a man willy-nilly bound to men due to the unrelenting gregariousness of the species, Timon is to some extent his own problem, the catalyst of his own misery. Self-hate accordingly accompanies his misanthropy and becomes a paradox that others cannot understand (as Alcibiades asks, “Is man so hateful to thee / That are thyself a man?” 4.3.51-2). Yet, Timon cannot undo himself as man and exist in some new form less attractive to men. A metamorphosis from human into animal remains only a philosophical phantasm that the misanthrope Timon and the Cynic Apemantus bandy about in their forest debate (4.3.321-344). Timon's only possible release now is death, as Apemantus exhorts him: “Thou shouldst desire to die, being miserable” (4.3.248). Before long, Timon entertains the same thought: “I am sick of this false world [...] Then, Timon [he addresses himself], presently prepare thy grave” (4.3.368-370). The grave, a vacuum in which “all things” are mercifully reduced to “nothing” (5.2.73),

⁹ See for instance M. C. Bradbrook's chapter “Blackfriars: The Pageant of Timon of Athens” in *Shakespeare the Craftsman*, where she describes the structure of the play as “a structure by means of apposition, rather than development of a plot” (163).

appears to be the innocent space that Timon could not find in nature. Innocence, if at all possible, must amount to such emptiness, of which neither the city nor nature are capable. This is yet another feature that the city and nature share, to the displeasure of Timon, who has tried to keep apart two realms that actually interpenetrate each other. Since there is no culture outside nature and no nature in complete isolation from culture, and since both are far from innocent, Timon is left without an environment. But to sustain themselves, human beings must form meaningful relationships to some animating milieu, be it the city or the wilderness. Without an environment, Timon possesses no life-world either. Given the choice between an existential void and the grave, he opts for the latter.

An immediate and simple death would best epitomize the nihilism that Timon has reached. But as it stands, Timon's death abounds in mystery, ambiguity, and polysemy, and he embarks upon it with some delay, and with repeated leave-taking. By and by, the announcement of Timon's demise comes from one of Alcibiades' soldiers (5.5.66). The evidence consists of a tomb by the sea, while the body – wherever it may be – remains dramatically occluded. Whether the misanthropic hermit has died a natural death or committed suicide Athens will never learn. Since no one is known to have attended upon him in his last hours, the play breeds the uncanny suspicion that he has somehow managed to bury himself. Living or dead, the misanthrope does not permit other men to interfere in his affairs. In its proud loneliness, Timon's death can take an honorary place next to the legendary suicide of another philosopher, Empedocles. While the latter committed himself to the flames of Etna, Timon lies low under the "light foam" of the sea (4.3.371).

Is Timon's burial ground by the seashore a sign of his final preference for nature over culture? Does the dying Timon dedicate himself exclusively to nature? This may be true of Empedocles and other Presocratic philosophers, whom Aristotle collectively called "the naturalists." Empedocles chose to dissolve his particular existence in the elemental crucible of nature and thus into pure immanence. Timon's death, by contrast, is not a form of dissolution; it leaves an irreducible human trace – a grave with an inscribed tombstone – which permanently changes the coastal landscape. This artefact is not the kind of nondescript tomb into which a fatigued life has thrown itself carelessly, as though in consonance with the slogan "I care not" (5.2.62) overused by Timon during his last stage appearance when he rejects the pleas of the delegated Athenian senators (5.2). Some thought and care on Timon's part must have been necessary to furnish the tombstone with not just one but several epitaphs, whose conjoined effect underlines the charismatic character of Timon's death. The epitaphs are composed in such a way as to contradict each other, to baffle readers, and simultaneously to insult and exhort them. These messages perpetuate the complexities and dead ends of Timon's misanthropic life also into his grave:

Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span.
Some beast read this; there does not live a man. (16.3-4)¹⁰

¹⁰ *The Norton Shakespeare* from which I have been quoting deletes this distich, which is read by a soldier (the soldier who discovers the tomb) rather than by Alcibiades (who reads the rest) and thus

'Here lies a wretched corpse,
 Of wretched soul bereft.
 Seek not my name. A plague consume
 You wicked caitiffs left!
 Here lie I, Timon, who alive
 All living men did hate.
 Pass by and curse thy fill – but pass,
 And stay not here thy gait.' (5.5.71-78)

Despite their mutual contradictions, all the inscriptions strive to inform, to communicate with passers-by, and beyond this, even to shape their responses to the tomb – hence the imperatives “some beast read this,” “seek not my name,” and “pass by and curse thy fill – but pass and stay not here thy gait.” Beside the inscribed epitaphs, Timon, while still alive, has prospectively composed yet another epitaph, to be disseminated by word-of-mouth:

Come not to me again, but say to Athens,
 Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
 Upon the beached verge of the salt flood,
 Who once a day with his embossed froth
 The turbulent surge shall cover. Thither come,
 And let my gravestone be your oracle. (5.2.99-104)

Timon hereby invites all Athenians to visit his grave and contemplate the inscriptions as they would an oracle. He does not entirely leave out the tone of misanthropic hostility: as he suggests elsewhere, he writes his epitaph so that “death in me at others’ lives may laugh” (4.3.373). Yet, there is a change in his attitude. While previously he tried to keep men away, or, when this was impossible, he sought to harm those who pestered him, now he proclaims in his anticipatory epitaph that everyone should come and heed his posthumous admonitions.

Apart from reconsidering his relationship with men, Timon's valediction betrays a desire for an intimate communion with the natural forces. He imagines how day by day the “turbulent surge shall cover” him, his tombstone, and the beach under a frothy blanket. Enduring the ebb and tide of “the salt flood” – an allegory of the *fort-da* dynamic underlying human existence – Timon's body in the end accepts the need for contact with his natural as well as with his social environment. Ideally for the human being, both kinds of contact should not grow burdensome; rather, they should alternate between approach and avoidance in consonance with the ebbing and flowing of the sea. Yet, however uneven or cyclic, the connection with one's life-sustaining milieu must be maintained. Centuries after Timon, Nietzsche's Zarathustra will unceasingly

appears separately from the two other epitaphs. The latter seem to be the central inscriptions, whereas the “Timon is dead...” distich may be a kind of introductory superscription. John Jowett's excellent Oxford edition of *Timon* includes the distich at 16.3-4 (Jowett uses scene numbers only); see also his explanatory note on the same passage, which is included in the text of the play by most editors, one exception being the Norton editors.

alternate between the solitude of his mountain cave and various cities where he comes to unleash his philosophy upon the citizens.¹¹

The impossibility of separating nature from culture drove Timon, while living, to despair. His imminent death, however, endows him with “rich conceit” (5.5.82) and a rightly reasoned philosophical attitude towards nature and culture, whose synthesis is embodied in Timon’s thoughtfully composed grave. Sunk fast in the sandy beach, the “low grave” (5.5.84) pays homage to nature, whose timelessness, graciously transferred to the grave, makes it “everlasting” (5.2.100). But the charismatic inscriptions on the tombstone proclaim it a piece of man-made art and an unmistakable mark of reason and culture.¹² Man is the only beast that possesses language with which to write epitaphs, and with which also to form, according to Aristotle, concepts of justice, fairness, and duty – concepts that facilitate social bonds and the formation of cities and states.¹³ An inevitably mocking echo of this same Aristotelian postulate appears in one of the epitaphs’ commands, “Some beast read this; there does not live a man” (see footnote 10, above). Man, moreover, is the only beast that enters the body to honour it. The location of a tomb (like Timon’s) in the middle of a wilderness poignantly enhances its humanity and its aura as an artefact. Thus Adolf Loos: “If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a sombre mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say, ‘There is someone buried here’. *That is architectural art*” (84).¹⁴

Despite the moral debris accumulated by the play, the last scene attempts to restore confidence in architecture as a symbol of the human impulse to build, shape, create, and consolidate, be it works of fine art or forms of social organization. The senators supplicate Alcibiades not to lay waste to Athens because its significance and beauty transcend the sins of its present generation, which in any event will soon be superseded, in accordance with the natural course of things. The architectonic majesty of the city is an especially palpable argument for its pardon. Thus civilisation and its art sue for peace:

¹¹ For a more extensive comparative reading of Timon and Zarathustra, see Knight 224-229. According to Harold Bloom (18-19), *Timon of Athens* may actually have been a source of inspiration for Nietzsche in shaping the figure of Zarathustra as a recluse, his speeches, and his interactions with other characters, notably with the fool called “Zarathustra’s ape” (an Apemantus-type) in “On Passing By,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Bk. 3 (Nietzsche 195).

¹² On the inscribed tombstone in its symbolic setting as a work of art, and on Timon’s triumph as an artist (poet, painter, architect), see de Alvarez 195-8, and Soellner 142.

¹³ Another famous thesis from Aristotle: “Man herefore is more sociable then any Bee, or other creature whatsoever that desires societie: which is manifest by this, that Nature who hath bestowed the power of Speech vpon man, maketh nothing in vaine [...] Speech is giuen vnto vs to signifie what is profitable and what vnprofitable, and consequently what is iust and what uniuert. For this is a proprietie belonging vnto man aboue all other liuing creatures, that he onely hath a sense and feeling of good and euill, and of iust and uniuert. The communion of which things begetteth and establisheth a house and a Citie” (*Aristotles politiques* sig. D5r).

¹⁴ Translation negligibly emended to convey more clearly Loos’ sense here. According to Loos, architecture is not an art, but there is a single exception to this: the architecture of monuments, which fall under the heading of genuinely artistic production (see 83).

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Zusammenfassung

Timon of Athens problematisiert das Verhältnis zwischen der Stadt und philosophischen Einstellungen wie Timons Misanthropie und Apemantus' Kynismus. Nach der altertümlichen Tradition ist Athens die Polis, die mehrere Philosophen inspirierte, die aber wegen ihrer imperfekten politischen, sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Ordnung auch als das beliebteste Objekt von philosophischen Kritiken fungierte. Die Stadt ist zugleich ein Ort des Bedenkens und eine breite Bühne für Leichtsinn, Verschwendung, Gier, Gefräßigkeit, Promiskuität, Heuchelei und Schmarotzertum. In Apemantus und Timon erkennen wir zwei entgegengesetzte Reaktionen auf die ethischen Miasmen Athens: der Kyniker bekämpft sie vor Ort und hofft, dass er durch Schock und Beschimpfen das Gewissen der Bürger erregen kann, während der Misanthrop der Stadt den Rücken zeigt und in die Wildnis zieht. Timons ambivalenter Versuch, ein isolierter Asket zu werden, bezeugt, dass Philosophie das Recht zur Reflexion über Stadt und Natur gerade in dem Grade hat, in dem sie sich durch Stadt und Natur auch selbst prüfen lässt.