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Welles in Power

by Serge Daney

1. Of *Falstaff,* Welles said that "He wages a struggle lost in advance." And, too, "I don't believe he is seeking something. He represents a value; he is goodness." That strength and genius—unanimously recognized—celebrate only hopeless causes or majestic downfalls, that a man like Welles, exerting an undeniable influence on those around him, incarnates only the defeated (disappearing, certainly, at the heart of an impressive machinery, but still worn by life, betrayed by their own)—that is a very surprising thing. Strange malediction—that a man too strong can only end badly. And yet, from Kane to Falstaff, from proud display to bareness, from a corpse that one does not see to a coffin that is carried, it is really the same story, that of a man who makes ill use of his power.

Cinema tends to recount how this or that character (and behind him, often, the cinéaste) has obtained some power, that of speaking, or acting, of making a choice, and so on. Those are perhaps the noblest films (like *Le Hêros sacrilège, Le Caporal épinglé,* or *Le Coeur d'une mère),* the strange roads on which the cinéastes lead their characters, because the simplest road is not always the most natural, because there are detours more rich than straight lines, defeats more noble than victories, and so on. The winning of one's power—aiming at it, meriting it, snatching it—is precisely what Welles speaks of least. It is the witches who shape Macbeth, ad his intuition that pushes Quinlan forward. The films of Welles begin where the others end; when everything is won, nothing more remains but to unlearn everything, unto death, once Quinlan, today Falstaff.

2. The work of Welles, in that way faithful to Shakespeare, is a reflection on the very idea of Power, that excessive freedom that no one can follow without seeing in it, in the end, degradation and derision. Power is an evil that brings life only to those who do not yet have it. Theirs the bold enterprises, the efficacious and astonishing actions, the well contrived plots — men of the future, born to trample on kings, to whom it is given, at least once in their lives, to rock the world. Kings have other cares; their victory is automatically without prestige, like a repression, a useless recall of the past. Defeat is the only adventure which remains for them.

Absolute power destroys real power, condemns it to futility. "If there is a sense of the real," Musil said, "there must be also a sense of the possible." And a little further, "No doubt God Himself prefers to speak of His creation as potential." In too extensive a power, the possible gnaws away the real, condemns it in advance; one action is never more necessary than another; good and evil, interchangeable, are equally indifferent. He who is master of the possible at twenty, like Citizen Kane, ends as slave to his caprices, surrendered gradually to a power without object or echo to an arbitrary and mad activity, useless and expensive, which never involves him completely, but which separates him always more and more from others (like the career of a singer without a voice, or the collections heaped up in Xanadu). Who can do the most, does the least, or acts at the margin of his power. Comedy demands then that from a prodigious expenditure of power there results a rigorously useless life.

From film to film, to the extent that his work proceeds, that Welles ages, the sense of the derisory grows stronger, to the point of becoming the very subject of the film *(The Trial)* that Welles considers his best. Always, everywhere, power is in bad hands. Those who possess it do not know enough about it (Othello who believes Iago, Macbeth victim of a play or words)—or know much too much (Arkadin, Quinlan, Hastler the lawyer), each committed to purely destructive actions by an excess of naivete, as of intelligence.

3. The life of John Falstaff is a commercial failure. Shortly before dying, he observes that his friend—the feeble but prudent Robert Shallow—has been more successful, and he promises himself to cultivate his friendship. No doubt only his sudden death, which no one had foreseen, spares him the last disillusion. Falstaff was born, not to receive, but to give—without discrimination or hope of return—or, if he has nothing, to give himself as an entertainment. Welles calls this waste the goodness of Falstaff (and the latter himself remarks, "Not only do I have wit, but I give it to others." Which is a good definition of genius.) That Falstaff—whom Shakespeare had intended mostly ridiculous—has become, imagined, then incarnated, by Welles, a moving character is not very surprising. His death is not the disappearance—mysterious and legendary—of a Kane, but the drab naked event in which one must read, although nothing is underlined, the end of a world. "If one amused oneself all the year," says the young prince, "amusing oneself would be forced labor." Of what is Falstaff guilty? Not so much of having ill used his power, for he has scarcely any, being a character of comedy, moreover without real courage or authority. Perhaps of having used without restraint speech, that power of parody, of having made from it an interminable histrionics, useless and tedious, in which talent, if there is any, asserts itself for nothing. More certainly still of having so long survived so scandalous a waste of his energy (his puns on "waste" and "waist"). And what is still more serious, victim more than culprit, if he makes ill use of his affections too, when he chooses as his friend the very person who will betray him.

4. The work of Welles is singularly rich in abuses of trust *(The Lady from Shanghai)* or in friendships betrayed *(Othello).* The strange and scandalous complicity that for some time links Falstaff and the young prince makes more and more evident what it passes over in silence, the difference in their natures. But there would be no fascination between them if each did not precisely feel that they are radically different, symbols of two complementary and inimical worlds, like face and reverse of the same coin. On one side, Falstaff who lives on his past, on what he is already, in the entropy of a freedom deliberately ruined. On the other, the future Henry V, who is nothing still, who will perhaps be a great king, if he discovers that exact relation between the effort to supply and the end to attain, the austerity and the rigor that makes power utilizable.

The almost monstrous egocentricity of the characters whom Welles has incarnated in his past films fascinated only because it was accompanied by a more or less perceptible proportion of vulnerability. Beyond self-assertion, a few scattered but explicit signs betrayed uneasiness and weakness; a certain irritation in the movement of his eyebrows, the sometimes extreme tension of his gaze, or some hesitation in the character's behavior, gave him a pathetic dimension and aroused that sense of fragility that the most instinctive strength gives. The flaw, the sensitive part, once perceived, the fascination was as irresistible as the first repulsion had been strong.

Of this moral image that Welles has bent his mind to retouch from film to film, *Falstaff* offers us the inverted reflection. Not that the film witnesses a change in the proceedings of Welles or a new orientation of his art, but rather because, through the same mode of investigation, he makes a kind of moral discovery. The primitive strength that stirred him has lost its cutting edge; that is enough to change the components of his portrait, not so much in their respective natures as in their apportionment. In the past, strength by its obtuse presence crushed the underlying virtues of the character; today devalorized, made ridiculous, by age it lets appear more clearly what was latent and scarcely perceptible—vulnerability and a certain goodness, the ultimate form that strength or weakness assumes, and which decides the emotional tonality of the film.

From that, to salute in *Falstaff* the most accomplished Shakespearean work of Welles, is not to envisage it in its specific character, in this special position that the film occupies in relation to his entire work—a kind of corrigendum, or rather, of complement, in the sense in which one says that two colors are complementary, a marginal film in which values are reversed as if to make more explicit the rest of his work by shedding a new light on it.

For there is a great distance between that sombre shot in *Othello* where the convulsed face of Welles emerges and the pure milky whiteness of Falstaff, between the wilful impetuous forehead of Kane or of Arkadin and the full features and the unreserve tinged with melancholy of Jack Falstaff. In the exchange Welles has lost his visual aggressiveness, and if a violent low-angle shot reappears from time to time, it is rather as a nostalgic recollection of the past. But he broods with a disquiet like Rembrandt's over his own face, and it is not inconsequential that he finds there other attunements, accents less brilliant but more human, which he substitutes for the dazzling flashes of the past, so that the icy image of the old Kane, infinitely reflected in the mirrors of Xanadu, recedes before that of a king's Fool, nearer to life.