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*The Theatre and  
Its Double*

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## Contents

The Theatre and Its Double	1
<i>Preface: Theatre and Culture</i>	3
<i>Theatre and the Plague</i>	9
<i>Production and Metaphysics</i>	23
<i>Alchemist Theatre</i>	34
<i>On the Balinese Theatre</i>	38
<i>Oriental and Western Theatre</i>	49
<i>No More Masterpieces</i>	53
<i>Theatre and Cruelty</i>	60
<i>The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)</i>	63
<i>Letters on Cruelty</i>	72
<i>Letters on Language</i>	75
<i>The Theatre of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)</i>	88
<i>An Affective Athleticism</i>	93
<i>Two Notes</i>	100
<i>Notes</i>	104
Appendix	115
<i>Documents Relating to The Theatre and Its Double</i>	117
<i>Notes to the Appendix</i>	149

*The Theatre and  
Its Double\**

## *Preface: Theatre and Culture\**

AT A TIME WHEN LIFE ITSELF is in decline, there has never been so much talk about civilization and culture. And there is a strange correlation between this universal collapse of life at the root of our present-day demoralization and our concern for a culture that has never tallied with life but is made to tyrannize life.

Before saying anything further about culture, I consider the world is hungry and does not care about culture, and people artificially want to turn these thoughts away from hunger and direct them towards culture.

The most pressing thing seems to me not so much to defend a culture whose existence never stopped a man worrying about going hungry or about a better life, but to derive from what we term culture ideas, whose living power is the same as hunger.

Above all, we need to live and believe in what keeps us alive, to believe something keeps us alive, nor should every product of the mysterious recesses of the self be referred back to our grossly creature concerns.

What I mean is this: our immediate need is to eat, but it is even more important not to waste the pure energy of being hungry simply on satisfying that immediate need.

If confusion is a sign of the times, I see a schism between things and words underlying this confusion, between ideas and the signs that represent them.

We are not short of philosophical systems; their number and contradictions are a characteristic of our ancient French and European culture. But where do we see that life, our lives, have been affected by these systems?

I would not go so far as to say philosophical systems ought to be directly or immediately applied, but we ought to choose between the following:

Either these systems are a part of us and we are so steeped in them we live them; therefore, what use are books? Or we are not steeped in

them and they are not worth living. In that case what difference would their disappearance make?

I must insist on this idea of an active culture, a kind of second wind growing within us like a new organ, civilization as applied culture, governing even our subtlest acts, the spirit alive in things. The distinction between civilization and culture is artificial, for these two words apply to one and the same act.

We judge a civilized man by the way he behaves – he thinks as he behaves. But we are already confused about the words “civilized man”. Everyone regards a cultured, civilized man as someone informed about systems, who thinks in systems, forms, signs and representations.

In other words, a monster who has developed to an absurd degree that faculty of ours for deriving thoughts from actions instead of making actions coincide with thoughts.

If our lives lack fire and fervour, that is to say continual magic, this is because we choose to observe our actions, losing ourselves in meditation on their imagined form, instead of being motivated by them.

This faculty is exclusively human. I would even venture to say it was the infection of humanity which marred ideas that ought to have remained sacred. Far from believing man invented the supernatural and the divine, I think it was man’s eternal meddling that ended up in corrupting the divine.

At a time when nothing holds together in life any longer, when we must revise all our ideas about life, this painful separation is the reason why things take revenge on us, and the poetry we no longer have within us and are no longer able to rediscover in things suddenly emerges on the adverse side. Hence the unprecedented number of crimes whose pointless perversity can only be explained by our inability to master life.

Although theatre is made as an outlet for our repressions, a kind of horrible poetry is also expressed in bizarre acts, where changes in the facts of life show its intensity undiminished, needing only to be better directed.

But however we may cry out for magic, at heart we are afraid of pursuing life wholly under the sign of real magic.

Thus our deep-rooted lack of culture is surprised at certain awe-inspiring anomalies; for example, on an island out of contact with present-day civilization, the mere passage of a ship carrying only

healthy passengers can induce the outbreak of diseases unknown on that island but peculiar to our countries: shingles, influenza, grippe, rheumatism, sinusitis and polyneuritis.

Similarly, if we think Negroes smell, we are unaware that everywhere except in Europe, we, the whites, smell. I might even say we smell a white smell, white in the same way as we speak of “the whites”.

Just as iron turns white-hot, so we could say everything extreme is white. For Asians, white has become a mark of final decomposition.

Having said this, we can begin to form an idea of culture, above all a protest.

A protest against the insane constriction imposed on the idea of culture by reducing it to a kind of incredible Pantheon, producing an idolatry of culture and acting in the same way as idolatrous religions, which put their gods in Pantheons.

A protest against our idea of a separate culture, as if there were culture on the one hand and life on the other, as if true culture were not a rarefied way of understanding and exercising life.

Let them burn down the library at Alexandria. There are powers above and beyond papyri. We may be temporarily deprived of the ability to rediscover these powers, but we will never eliminate their energy. It is also a good thing too many facilities should disappear, and forms ought to be forgotten, then timeless, spaceless culture constrained by our nervous capacities will reappear with renewed energy. And it is only right that cataclysms should occur from time to time, prompting us to return to nature, that is to say, to rediscover life. The old totems – animals, rocks, objects charged with lightning, costumes impregnated with bestiality and everything that serves to catch, tap and direct forces – are dead to us, since we only know how to derive artistic or static profit from them, seeking gratification, not action.

Now totemism acts because it moves, it is made to be enacted. All true culture rests on totemism’s primitive, barbarous means, whose wild, that is to say, completely spontaneous life is what I mean to worship.

It was our Western idea of art and the profits we sought to derive from it that made us lose true culture. Art and culture cannot agree, contrary to worldwide usage!

True culture acts through power and exaltation, while the European ideal of art aims to cast us into a frame of mind distinct from the

power present in its exaltation. It is a useless, lazy idea and soon leads to death. The Serpent Quetzalcoatl's multiple coils give us a sense of harmony because they express balance, the twists and turns of sleeping power. The intensity of the form is only there to attract and captivate a power which, in music, produces an agonizing range of sound.

The gods that sleep in the museums: the Fire God with his incense burner resembling an Inquisition tripod, Tlaloc, one of the many Water Gods with his green granite walls, the Mother Goddess of the Waters, the Mother Goddess of the Flowers, the unchanging expression echoing from beneath many layers of water of the Goddess robed in green jade, the blissful, enrapt expression, features crackling with incense, where atoms of sunlight circle around the Mother Goddess of the Flowers. This world of obligatory servitude where stone comes to life because it has been properly carved, a world of organically civilized men – I mean those whose vital organs also awaken – this human world enters into us, we participate in the dance of the gods without turning round or looking back under penalty of becoming, like ourselves, crumbling figures of salt.

In Mexico, so long as we are talking about Mexico, there is no art and things are used. And the people are continually exalted.

Unlike our idea of art, which is inert and disinterested, a genuine culture conceives of art as something magical and violently egoistical, that is, self-interested. For the Mexicans collect the *Manas*, the powers lying dormant in all forms, which cannot be released by meditation on forms for their own sake, but only arise from a magical identity with these forms. And the ancient Totems exist to stimulate the communication.

It is difficult, when everything impels us to fall into a sleep, during which we look about us with fixed, attentive eyes, to wake up and to look about as though in a dream, with eyes that no longer know what use they are and whose gaze is turned inwards.

This is how our strange idea of a disinterested action came into being, tough and active nonetheless, the more violent for having skirted around the temptation to rest.

All true effigies have a double, a shadowed self. And art fails the moment a sculptor believes that as he models he liberates a kind of shadow whose existence will unsettle him.

Like all magic cultures displayed in appropriate hieroglyphics, true theatre has its own shadows. Furthermore, of all languages and all arts,

it is the only one whose shadows have shattered their limitations. From the first, we might say its shadows would not tolerate limitations.

Our fossilized idea of theatre is tied in with our fossilized idea of a shadowless culture where, whatever way we turn, our minds meet nothing but emptiness while space is full.

But true theatre, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, goes on stirring up shadows, while life endlessly stumbles along. An actor does not repeat the same gestures twice, but he gesticulates, moves and, although he brutalizes forms, as he destroys them he is united with what lives on behind and after them, producing their continuation.

Theatre, which is nothing, but uses all languages (gestures, words, sound, fire and screams), is to be found precisely at the point where the mind needs a language to bring about its manifestations.

And confining theatre to one language, speech, written words, music, lighting or sound, heralds its imminent ruin, since choosing one single language proves the inclinations we have for the facilities of that language. But one effect of a single language's limitations is that it dries up.

For theatre, just as for culture, the problem remains to designate and direct shadows. And theatre, not confined to any fixed language or form, destroys false shadows because of this, and prepares the way for another shadowed birth, uniting the true spectacle of life around it.

To shatter language in order to contact life means creating or recreating theatre. The crucial thing is not to believe this action must remain sacred, that is to say, set apart. And the main thing is to believe not that anyone can do it but that one needs to prepare for it.

This leads us to reject man's usual limitations and powers and infinitely extends the frontiers of what we call reality.

We must believe in life's meaning renewed by theatre, where man fearlessly makes himself master of the unborn, gives birth to it. And everything unborn can still be brought to life, provided we are not satisfied with remaining simple recording instruments.

Moreover, when we say the word *life*, we understand this is not life recognized by externals, by facts, but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain. And if there is one truly infernal and damned thing left today, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like those tortured at the stake, signalling through the flames.

## *Theatre and the Plague\**

IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE SMALL TOWN of Cagliari, Sardinia, lies an account of an astonishing historic occurrence.

One night, about the end of April or the beginning of May 1720, some twenty days before the ship *Grand-Saint-Antoine* reached Marseille, where its landing coincided with the most wondrous outbreak of plague to be recorded in that city's history, Saint-Rémy, the Sardinian Viceroy, perhaps rendered more sensitive to that most baleful virus by his restricted monarchical duties, had a particularly agonizing dream. He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state.

Society's barriers became fluid with the effects of the scourge. Order disappeared. He witnessed the subversion of all morality, a total psychological breakdown, heard his lacerated, utterly routed bodily fluids murmur within him in a giddy wasting-away of matter, growing heavy and then gradually being transformed into carbon. Was it too late to ward off the scourge? Although organically destroyed, crushed, extirpated, his very bones consumed, he knew one does not die in dreams, that our will-power even operates *ad absurdum*, even denying what is possible, in a kind of metamorphosis of lies reborn as truth.

He awoke. He would show himself able to drive away these plague rumours and the miasmas of the oriental virus.

The *Grand-Saint-Antoine*, a month out of Beirut, requested permission to enter the harbour and dock there. At this point the Viceroy gave an insane order, an order thought raving mad, absurd, stupid and despotic both by his subjects and his suite. He hastily dispatched a pilot's boat and men to the supposedly infected vessel with orders for the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* to tack about that instant and make full sail away from the town or be sunk by cannon shot. War on the plague. The autocrat did not do things by halves.

In passing, we ought to note the unusually influential power the dream exerted on him, since it allowed him to insist on the savage

fierceness of his orders despite the gibes of the populace and the scepticism of his suite, when to do so meant riding roughshod not only over human rights, but even over the most ordinary respect for life, over all kinds of national and international conventions, which in the face of death no longer apply.

Be that as it may, the ship held her course, made land at Leghorn and sailed into Marseille harbour where she was allowed to dock.

The Marseille authorities have kept no record of what happened to her plague-infected cargo. We roughly know what happened to the members of her crew: they did not all die of the plague, but were scattered over various countries.

The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* did not bring the plague to Marseille, it was already there, at a particular stage of renewed activity, but its centres had been successfully localized.

The plague brought by the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* was the original, oriental virus, hence the unusually horrible aspect, the widespread flaring-up of the epidemic, which dates from its arrival and dispersion throughout the town.

This prompts a few thoughts.

This plague, which apparently revived a virus, was able to wreak a great havoc on its own, the Captain being the only member of the ship's crew who did not catch the plague. Furthermore, it did not seem that the newly arrived infected men had ever been in direct contact with those others confined to their quarantine districts. The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* passed within hailing distance of Cagliari, Sardinia, but did not leave the plague there, yet the Viceroy picked up certain of its emanations in his dreams. For one cannot deny that a substantial though subtle communication was established between the plague and himself. It is too easy to lay the blame for communication of such a disease on infection by contact alone.

But this communication between Saint-Rémy and the plague, though of sufficient intensity to release imagery in his dreams, was after all not powerful enough to infect him with the disease.

Nevertheless, the town of Cagliari, learning some time later that the ship driven from its shores by the miraculously enlightened though despotic Prince's will was the cause of the great Marseille epidemic, recorded the fact in its archives, where anyone may find it.

The 1720 Marseille plague has given us what may pass as the only clinical description we have of the scourge.

But one wonders whether the plague described by Marseille doctors was exactly the same as the 1347 Florence epidemic which produced the *Decameron*. Histories and holy books, the Bible among them, certain old medical treatises, describe the outward symptoms of all kinds of plagues whose malignant features seem to have impressed them far less than the demoralizing and prodigious effect they produced in their minds. No doubt they were right, for medicine would be hard put to establish any basic difference between the virus Pericles died of before Syracuse (if the word virus is anything more than a verbal convenience) and that appearing in the plague described by Hippocrates, which, as recent medical treatises inform us, is a kind of fictitious plague. These same treatises hold that the only genuine plague comes from Egypt, arising from the cemeteries uncovered by the subsiding Nile. The Bible and Herodotus both call attention to the lightning appearance of a plague that decimated 180,000 men of the Assyrian army in one night, thereby saving the Egyptian Empire. If this fact is true, we ought to consider the scourge as the immediate medium or materialization of a thinking power in close contact with what we call fate.

This, with or without the army of rats that hurled itself on the Assyrian troops that night, and gnawed away their accoutrements in a few hours. The above event ought to be compared with the epidemic that broke out in 660 BC in the Holy City of Mekao, Japan, on the occasion of a mere change of government.

The 1502 Provence plague, which gave Nostradamus his first opportunity to practise his powers of healing, also coincided with the most profound political upheavals, the downfall or death of kings, the disappearance and destruction of whole provinces, earthquakes, all kinds of magnetic phenomena, exodus of the Jews, preceding or following on disasters or havoc of a political or cosmic order, those causing them being too idiotic to foresee them, or not really deprived enough to desire their after-effects.

However mistaken historians or doctors may have been about the plague, I think one might agree on the idea of the disease as a kind of psychic entity, not carried by a virus. If we were to analyse closely all the facts on contagious plagues given in history or contained in archives, we would have difficulty in singling out one properly established

occurrence of contagious contact, and the example Boccaccio cites of swine that died because they sniffed at sheets in which the plague-ridden had been wrapped scarcely suggests more than a kind of strange affinity between swine flesh and the nature of the plague, something which would have to be gone into very thoroughly.

Since the concept of a truly morbid entity does not exist, there are forms the mind can provisionally agree on to designate certain phenomena, and it seems our minds might agree on a plague described in the following manner.

Before any pronounced physical or psychological sickness appears, red spots appear all over the body, the sick person only suddenly noticing them when they turn black. He has no time to be alarmed by them before his head feels on fire, grows overwhelmingly heavy and he collapses. Then he is seized with terrible fatigue, a focal, magnetic, exhausting tiredness, his molecules are split in two and drawn towards their annihilation. His fluids, wildly jumbled in disorder, seem to race through his body. His stomach heaves, his insides seem to want to burst out between his teeth. His pulse sometimes slows down until it becomes a shadow, a latent pulse; at other times it races in accordance with his seething inner fever, the streaming wanderings of his mind. His pulse beating as fast as his heart, growing intense, heavy, deafening; those eyes, first inflamed, then glazed. That hugely swollen panting tongue, first white, then red, then black, as if charred and cracked, all heralding unprecedented organic disturbances. Soon the fluids, furrowed like the earth by lightning, like a volcano tormented by subterranean upheavals, seek an outlet. Fiery cones are formed at the centre of each spot and around them the skin rises up in blisters like air bubbles under a skin of lava. These blisters are surrounded by rings, the outer one, just like Saturn's ring at maximum radiance, indicating the outer edge of the bubo.

The body is streaked with them. Just as volcanoes have their own chosen locations on earth, the buboes have their own chosen spots over the expanse of the human body. Buboes appear around the anus, under the armpits, at those precious places where the active glands steadily carry out their functions, and through these buboes the anatomy discharges either its inner putrefaction, or in other cases, life itself. A violent burning sensation localized in one spot more often than not indicates that the life force has lost none of its strength and

that abatement of the sickness or even a cure may be possible. Like silent rage, the most terrible plague is one that does not disclose its symptoms.

Once open, a plague victim's body exhibits no lesions. The gall bladder, which filters heavier, solid organic waste, is full, swollen to bursting point with a sticky black liquid, so dense it suggests new matter. Arterial and venial blood is also black and sticky. The body is as hard as stone. On the walls of the stomach membrane countless blood sources have arisen and everything points to a basic disorder in secretion. But there is neither loss nor destruction as in leprosy or syphilis. The intestines themselves, the site of the bloodiest disorders, where matter reaches an unbelievable degree of decomposition and calcification, are not organically affected. The gall bladder, from which the hardest matter must be virtually torn as in some human sacrifices, with a sharp knife, an obsidian instrument, hard and glazed – the gall bladder is hypertrophied and fragile in places, yet intact, without an iota missing, any visible lesions or loss of matter.

However, in some cases, the lesioned brain and lungs blacken and become gangrenous. The softened, chopped-up lungs fall in chips of an unknown black substance; the brain, fissured, crushed and disintegrated, is reduced to powder, to a kind of coal-black dust.\*

Two notable observations can be made about the above facts. The first is that the plague syndrome is complete without any gangrene in the lungs or brain and the plague victim dies without any putrefaction in his limbs. Without underestimating the disease, the anatomy does not need localized physical gangrene to decide to die.

Secondly one notes that the only two organs really affected and injured by the plague, the brain and lungs, are both dependent on consciousness or the will. We can stop breathing or thinking, speed up our breath, induce any rhythm we choose, make it conscious or unconscious at will, bring about a balance between both kinds of breathing; automatic, under direct control of the sympathetic nerve, and the other, which obeys each new conscious mental reflex.

We can also speed up, slow down or accent our thoughts. We can regulate the subconscious interplay of the mind. We cannot control the filtering of the fluids by the liver, the redistribution of the blood within the anatomy by the heart and arteries, control digestion, stop or speed up the elimination of substances in the intestines. Hence the plague

seems to make its presence known in those places, to have a liking for all those physical localities where human will-power, consciousness and thought are at hand or in a position to occur.

During the 1880s, a French doctor called Yersin, working on the corpses of Indo-Chinese who had died of the plague, isolated one of these round-headed, short-tailed bacilli only visible under a microscope, and called it the plague microbe. In my eyes, this is only a much smaller, infinitely smaller material factor, which appears at any moment during the development of the virus, but does not help to explain the plague at all. And I would rather this doctor had told me why all great plagues last five months, with or without a virus, after which the virulence dies down, and how the Turkish Ambassador, passing through Languedoc towards the end of 1720, could draw an imaginary line from Nice to Bordeaux passing through Avignon and Toulouse, as the outer geographic limit of the scourge's spread, events proving him correct.

From the above it is apparent that the disease has an inner nature whose laws cannot be scientifically specified and it would be useless to try and fix its geographic source, since the Egyptian plague is not the oriental plague, which is not Hippocrates's, which is not the Syracusan, which is not the Florentine (the Black Death) which accounted for fifty million lives in medieval Europe. No one can say why the plague strikes a fleeing coward and spares a rake taking his pleasure with the corpses of the dead. Why isolation, chastity or solitude are ineffectual against the scourge's attacks, or why a group of debauchees who have retired to the countryside – as did Boccaccio, his two well-equipped companions and their seven lustful devotees – could calmly await the hot weather when the plague subsides. Or why in a nearby castle, turned into a warlike fortress ringed with troops barring anyone from entering, the plague turned the garrison and all the occupants into corpses, yet spared the guards, alone exposed to infection. Equally, who could explain why the sanitary cordons set up with great numbers of troops by Mehmet Ali, about the end of the last century at the time of a fresh outbreak of Egyptian plague, effectively protected convents, schools, prisons and palaces. Or why many outbreaks of the plague which had all the characteristics of the oriental plague could suddenly have broken out in medieval Europe in places without any contact with the East.

Out of these peculiarities, mysteries, contradictions and traits, we ought to be able to construct the inner nature of a disease which saps the anatomy and life, until it is torn apart and causes spasms, like pain which, as it intensifies, strikes deeper, increases its resources and means of access in every ramification of our sensibility.

But out of the mental freedom with which the plague evolves, without any rats, germs or contact, we can deduce the dark, ultimate action of a spectacle I am going to try and analyse.

Once the plague is established in a city, normal social order collapses. There is no more refuse collection, no more army, police or municipality. Pyres are lit to burn the dead whenever men are available. Each family wants its own. Then wood, space and fire grow scarce, families fight around the pyres, soon to be followed by general flight since there are too many corpses. The streets are already choked with crumbling pyramids of the dead, the vermin gnawing at the edges. The stench rises in the air like tongues of flame. Whole streets are blocked by mounds of dead. Then the houses are thrown open and raving plague victims disperse through the streets howling, their minds full of horrible visions. The disease gnawing at their vitals, running through their whole anatomy, is discharged in mental outbursts. Other plague victims, lacking buboes or delirium, pain or rashes, examine themselves proudly in the mirror, feeling in splendid health, only to fall dead with their shaving dishes in their hands, full of scorn for other victims.

Over the thick, bloody, noxious streaming gutters, the colour of anguish and opium, spurting from the corpses, strange men clothed in wax, with noses an ell long and glass eyes, mounted on kinds of Japanese sandals made up of a double arrangement of wooden slabs, a horizontal one in the form of a sole, with the uprights isolating them from the infected liquids, pass by chanting absurd litanies, though their sanctity does not prevent them falling into the holocaust in turn. These ignorant doctors only show their fear and childishness.

The scum of the populace, immunized so it seems by their frantic greed, enter the open houses and help themselves to riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. At this point, theatre establishes itself. Theatre, that is to say, the sense of gratuitous urgency with which they are driven to perform useless acts of no present advantage.

The remaining survivors go berserk; the virtuous and obedient son kills his father, the continent sodomize their kin. The lewd become

chaste. The miser chucks handfuls of his gold out of the windows, the soldier hero sets fire to the town he had formerly risked his life to save. Dandies deck themselves out and stroll among the charnel houses. Neither the lack of sanctions nor the imminence of death are enough to explain such pointlessly absurd acts by people who did not believe death could end anything. And how are we to explain that upsurge of erotic fever among the recovered victims who, instead of escaping, stay behind, seeking out and snatching sinful pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half-crushed under the pile of corpses where chance had lodged them?

But if a major scourge is needed to make this frenzied pointlessness appear and if that scourge is called the plague, we might perhaps attempt to determine the value of this pointlessness in relation to our whole personality. The condition of a plague victim who dies without any material destruction, yet with all the stigmata of an absolute, almost abstract disease upon him, is in the same condition as an actor totally penetrated by feelings without any benefit or relation to reality. Everything in the actor's physical aspect, just as in the plague victim, shows life has reacted to a paroxysm, yet nothing has happened.

Between the shrieking plague-ridden who run in pursuit of their imaginings, and actors in pursuit of their sensibility, between a living man who invents characters he would never have thought of dreaming up without the plague, bringing them to life amidst an audience of corpses and raving lunatics, and the poet who inopportunistly invents characters entrusting them to an equally inert or delirious audience, there are other analogies which account for the only important truths, placing theatre action, like that of the plague, on a par with a true epidemic.

Whereas plague imagery related to an advanced state of physical disorganization is like the last outbursts of waning mental strength, the imagery of poetry in the theatre is a mental power which, beginning its trajectory in the tangible, dispenses with reality. Once launched in fury, an actor needs infinitely more virtue to stop himself committing a crime than a murderer needs to perpetrate his crime, and this is where, in their pointlessness, these acts of stage feeling appear as something infinitely more valid than those feelings worked out in life.

Compared with a murderer's fury that exhausts itself, an actor of tragedy remains enclosed within a circle. The murderer's anger has accomplished an act and is released, losing contact with the power

that inspired but will no longer sustain it. It has assumed a form, while the actor's fury, which denies itself by being detached, is rooted in the universal.

If we are now prepared to accept this mental picture of the plague, we can consider the plague victim's disturbed fluids as a solidified, substantial aspect of a disorder which on other levels is equivalent to the clashes, struggles, disasters and devastation brought about by events. Just as it is not impossible that the unconsumed despair of a lunatic screaming in an asylum can cause the plague, so by a kind of reversibility of feelings and imagery, in the same way we can admit that outward events, political conflicts, natural disasters, revolutionary order and wartime chaos, when they occur on a theatre level, are released into the audience's sensitivity with the strength of an epidemic.

In *The City of God*, St Augustine points to the similarity of the plague, which kills without destroying any organs, and theatre, which, without killing, induces the most mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in a whole nation.

"Know then," he writes, "you who are ignorant of this, that these plays, exhibitions of shameless folly and licence, were established at Rome not by the vicious craving of men but by the appointment of your gods. Much more pardonably might you have rendered divine honours to Scipio\* than to gods such as these; indeed, the gods were not so moral as their pontiff!...

"They enjoined that plays be exhibited in their honour to stay a physical pestilence, while their pontiff prohibited the theatre to prevent a moral pestilence. If then there remains in you sufficient mental enlightenment to prefer the soul to the body, choose whom you will worship. But these astute and wicked spirits, foreseeing that in due course the pestilence would shortly cease, took occasion to infect, not the bodies, but the morals of their worshippers, with a far more serious disease. And in this plague these gods found great enjoyment because it benighted the minds of men with so gross a darkness and dishonoured them with so foul a deformity that even quite recently some of those who fled from the sack of Rome and found refuge in Carthage were so infected with the disease that day after day they seemed to contend with one another who should most madly run after the actors in the theatre."

There is no point in trying to give exact reasons for this infectious madness. It would be as much use trying to find reasons why the

nervous system after a certain time is in tune with the vibrations of the subtlest music and is eventually somehow lastingly modified by it. Above all we must agree stage acting is a delirium like the plague, and is communicable.

The mind believes what it sees and does what it believes; that is the secret of fascination. And in his book, St Augustine does not doubt the reality of this fascination for one moment.

Yet conditions must be found to give birth to a spectacle that can fascinate the mind. It is not just a matter of art.

For if theatre is like the plague, this is not just because it acts on large groups and disturbs them in one and the same way. There is both something victorious and vengeful in theatre just as in the plague, for we clearly feel that the spontaneous fire the plague lights as it passes by is nothing but a gigantic liquidation.

Such a complete social disaster, such organic disorder overflowing with vice, this kind of wholesale exorcism constricting the soul, driving it to the limit, indicates the presence of a condition which is an extreme force and where all the powers of nature are newly rediscovered the instant something fundamental is about to be accomplished.

The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. Theatre also takes gestures and develops them to the limit. Just like the plague, it reforges the links between what does and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence. It rediscovers the idea of figures and archetypal symbols which act like sudden silences, fermatas, heart stops, adrenalin calls, incendiary images surging into our abruptly woken minds. It restores all our dormant conflicts and their powers, giving these powers names we acknowledge as signs. Here a bitter clash of symbols takes place before us, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot. For theatre can only happen the moment the inconceivable really begins, where poetry taking place on stage nourishes and superheats created symbols.

These symbols are symbols of full-blown powers held in bondage until that moment and unusable in real life, exploding in the guise of incredible images giving existence and the freedom of the city to acts naturally opposed to social life.

A real stage play disturbs our peace of mind, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion (since it retains

its full value only if it remains potential), calling for a difficult heroic attitude on the part of the assembled groups.

As soon as the curtain goes up on Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, to our great surprise we see before us a man launched on a most arrogant defence of incest, exerting all his youthful, conscious strength both in proclaiming and justifying it.

He does not hesitate or waver for one instant, thereby demonstrating just how little all the barriers mean that might be set up against him. He is heroically guilty, boldly, openly heroic. Everything drives him in this direction, inflames him, there is no heaven and no earth for him, only the strength of his tumultuous passion, which evokes a correspondingly rebellious and heroic passion in Annabella.

"I weep," she says, "not with remorse, but for fear I shall not be able to satisfy my passion." They are both falsifiers, hypocrites and liars for the sake of their superhuman passion, obstructed, persecuted by the law, but which they place above the law.

Revenge for revenge, crime for crime. While we believed them threatened, hunted, lost and we were ready to feel pity for them as victims, they show themselves ready to trade blow for blow with fate and threat for threat.

We follow them from one demand to the other, from one excess to the next. Annabella is caught, convicted of adultery and incest, she is trampled upon, insulted, dragged along by the hair but, to our great astonishment, instead of trying to make excuses she provokes her executioner even more and sings out in a kind of stubborn heroism. This is final rebellion, exemplary love without respite, making the audience gasp with anxiety in case anything should ever end it.

If one is looking for an example of total freedom in rebellion, Ford's *'Tis Pity* offers us this poetic example coupled with a picture of ultimate danger.

And just when we think we have reached a climax of horror and bloodshed, of flaunted laws, in short, poetry consecrating rebellion, we are obliged to continue in a vortex nothing can stop.

At the end we tell ourselves there must be retribution and death for such boldness and for such an irresistible crime.

Yet it is not so. Giovanni, the lover, inspired by a great impassioned poet, places himself above retribution and crime by a kind of indescribably passionate crime, places himself above threats, above horror

by an even greater horror that baffles both law and morals and those who dare to set themselves up as judges.

A clever trap is laid; orders are given for a great banquet where henchmen and hired assassins hide among the guests, ready to pounce on him at the first sign. But this lost, hunted hero inspired by love will not allow anyone to judge that love.

He seems to say, you want my love's flesh and blood, but I mean to hurl it in your face, I intend to splatter you with the blood of a love whose level you could never attain.

So he kills his beloved and rips out her heart as if to eat his fill of it in the midst of that feast where the guests had hoped perhaps to devour him themselves.

He kills his rival before his execution, his sister's husband who had dared to come between himself and his mistress, slaying him in a final duel which then appears to be his own death throes.

Like the plague, theatre is a powerful appeal through illustration to those powers which return the mind to the origins of its inner struggles. And we clearly sense Ford's passionate example is only a symbol for a much greater and absolutely fundamental task.

The terrifying apparition of Evil produced in unalloyed form at the Eleusinian Mysteries being truly revealed corresponded to the darker moments in certain ancient tragedies which all theatre must rediscover.

If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, urging forwards the exteriorization of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, becomes localized.

Just like the plague it is a time for evil, the victory of dark powers, a higher power nourishing them until they have died out.

In theatre, as in the plague, there is a kind of strange sun, an unusually bright light by which the difficult, even the impossible, suddenly appears to be our natural medium. And Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is lit by the brilliance of that strange sun just as is all worthwhile theatre. It resembles the plague's freedom where, step by step, stage by stage, the victim's character swells out, where the survivors gradually become imposing, superhuman beings.

Now one may say all true freedom is dark, infallibly identified with sexual freedom, also dark, without knowing exactly why. For the Platonic Eros, the reproductive impulse, the freedom of life, disappeared long ago beneath the turbid surface of the *Libido* which we associate with everything sullied, despicable and ignominious in the fact of living, the headlong rush with our customary, impure vitality, with constantly renewed strength, in the direction of life.

Thus all great Myths are dark and one cannot imagine all the great Fables aside from a mood of slaughter, torture and bloodshed, telling the masses about the original division of the sexes and the slaughter of essences that came with creation.

Theatre, like the plague, is made in the image of this slaughter, this essential division. It unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potential and if these and the powers are dark, this is not the fault of the plague or theatre, but life.

We do not see that life as it stands and as it has been made offers us much cause for exaltation. It seems as though a colossal abscess, ethical as much as social, is drained by the plague. And like the plague, theatre is collectively made to drain abscesses.

It may be true that the poison of theatre, when injected into the body of society, destroys it, as St Augustine asserted, but it does so as a plague, a revenging scourge, a redeeming epidemic when credulous ages were convinced they saw God's hand in it, while it was nothing more than a natural law applied, where all gestures were offset by another gesture, every action by a reaction.

Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved either by death or cure. The plague is a superior disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification. In the same way, theatre is a disease because it is a final balance that cannot be obtained without destruction. It urges the mind on to delirium which intensifies its energy. And finally from a human viewpoint we can see that the effect of the theatre is as beneficial as the plague, impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness and even two-facedness. It shakes off stifling material dullness which even overcomes the senses' clearest testimony, and collectively reveals their dark powers and hidden strength to men, urging them to take a nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it.

And the question we must now ask ourselves is to know whether in this world that is slipping away, committing suicide without realizing it, a nucleus of men can be found to impress this higher idea of theatre on the world, to bring to all of us a natural, occult equivalent of the dogma we no longer believe.