

Drama

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"The Theater and Its Double is far and away the most important thing that has been written about the theater in the twentieth century. . . . It should be read again and again. . . . Artaud oozed magical desires. He was the metaphysician of the theater."—Jean-Louis Barrault

A collection of manifestos originally published in 1938, *The Theater and Its Double* is the fullest statement of the ideas of Antonin Artaud. "We cannot go on prostituting the idea of the theater, the only value of which is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger," he wrote. He fought vigorously against an encroaching conventionalism he found anathema to theater's very concept. He sought to use theater to transcend writing, "to break through the language in order to touch life."

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—*The Nation*

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THE THEATER AND ITS DOUBLE — ANTONIN ARTAUD



GROVE PRESS

THE THEATER
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BY
ANTONIN ARTAUD



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The Theater and Its Double

By Antonin Artaud

Translated from the French by
Mary Caroline Richards

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

This translation faithfully follows the text of the *Le Theatre et son Double*, published by Gallimard in *Collection Metamorphoses* as No. IV, copyright 1938.

"*Esprit*," for which we have no English equivalent, combining as it does both *mind* and *spirit*, has in most cases been translated as "mind." And the expression "*mise en scene*" has been retained throughout, for Artaud's use of it implies all that we call direction, production, and staging.

VIII. The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)

We cannot go on prostituting the idea of theater whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger.

Put in this way, the question of the theater ought to arouse general attention, the implication being that theater, through its physical aspect, since it requires *expression in space* (the only real expression, in fact), allows the magical means of art and speech to be exercised organically and altogether, like renewed exorcisms. The upshot of all this is that theater will not be given its specific powers of action until it is given its language.

That is to say: instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.

This language cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue. And what the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility. This is the hour of

intonations, of a word's particular pronunciation. Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels.

The question, then, for the theater, is [0 create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and "human interest." But all this can be of no use unless behind such an effort there is some kind of real metaphysical inclination, an appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted. These ideas which touch on Creation, Becoming, and Chaos, are all of a cosmic order and furnish a primary notion of a domain from which the theater is now entirely alien. They are able to create a kind of passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature, and Objects.

It is not, moreover, a question of bringing metaphysical ideas directly onto the stage, but of creating what you might call temptations, indraughts of air around these ideas. And humor with its anarchy, poetry with its symbolism and its images, furnish a basic notion of ways to channel the temptation of these ideas.

We must speak now about the uniquely material side of this language--that is, about all the ways and means it has of acting upon the sensibility.

It would be meaningless to say that it includes music, dance, pantomime, or mimicry. Obviously it uses movement,

harmonies, rhythms, but only to the point that they can concur in a sort of central expression without advantage for any one particular art. This does not at all mean that it does not use ordinary actions, ordinary passions, but like a springboard uses them in the same way that HUMOR AS DESTRUCTION can serve to reconcile the corrosive nature of laughter to the habits of reason.

But by an altogether Oriental means of expression, this objective and concrete language of the theater can fascinate and ensnare the organs. It flows into the sensibility. Abandoning Occidental usages of speech, it turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by convey

ing the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms.

For all this magnetism, all this poetry, and all these direct means of spellbinding would be nothing if they were not used to put the spirit physically on the track of something else, if the true theater could not give us the sense of a creation of which we possess only one face, but which is completed on other levels.

And it is of little importance whether these other levels are really conquered by the mind or not, i.e., by the intelligence; it would diminish them, and that has neither interest nor sense. What is important is that, by positive means, the sensitivity is put in a state of deepened and keener perception. and this is the very object of the magic and the rites of which the theater is only a reflection.

TECHNIQUE

It is a question then of making the theater, in the proper sense of the word, a function; something as localized and as precise as the circulation of the blood in the arteries or the apparently chaotic development of dream images in the brain, and this is to be accomplished by a thorough involvement, a genuine enslavement of the attention.

The theater will never find itself again--i.e., constitute a means of true illusion--except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.

In other terms, the theater must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all the aspects of the objective and descriptive external world, but of the internal world, that is, of man considered metaphysically. It is only thus, we believe, that we shall be able to speak again in the theater about the rights of the imagination. Neither humor, nor poetry, nor imagination means anything unless, by an anarchistic destruction generating a prodigious flight of forms which will constitute the whole spectacle, they succeed in organically reinvolving man, his ideas about reality, and his poetic place in reality.

To consider the theater as a second-hand psychological or moral function, and to believe that dreams themselves have only a substitute function, is to diminish the profound poetic bearing of dreams as well as of the theater. If the theater, like dreams, is bloody and inhuman, it is, more than just that, to manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of a perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself against our appointed rank; it is in order to perpetuate in a concrete and immediate way the metaphysical ideas of certain

Fables whose very atrocity and energy suffice to show their origin and continuity in essential principles.

This being so, one sees that, by its proximity to principles which transfer their energy to it poetically, this naked language of the theater (not a virtual but a real language) must permit, by its use of man's nervous magnetism, the transgression of the ordinary limits of art and speech, in order to realize actively, that is to say magically, *in real terms*, a kind of total creation in which man must reassume his place between dream and events.

THE THEMES

It is not a matter of boring the public to death with transcendent cosmic preoccupations. That there may be profound keys to thought and action with which to interpret the whole spectacle, does not in general concern the spectator, who is simply not interested. But still they must be there; and that concerns us.

•

THE SPECTACLE: *Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models; resplendent lighting, incantational beauty of voices, the charms of harmony, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements whose crescendo and decrescendo will accord exactly with the pulsation of movements familiar to everyone, concrete appearances of new and surprising objects, masks, effigies yards high, sudden changes of light, the physical action of light which arouses sensations of heat and cold, etc.*

THE MISE EN SCENE: *The typical language of the theater will be constituted around the mise en scene considered not*

simply as the degree of refraction of a text upon the stage, but as the point of departure for all theatrical creation. And it is in the use and handling of this language that the old duality between author and director will be dissolved, replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE STAGE: *It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams.*

Meanwhile new means of recording this language must be found, whether these means belong to musical transcription or to some kind of code.

As for ordinary objects, or even the human body, raised to the dignity of signs, it is evident that one can draw one's inspiration from hieroglyphic characters, not only in order to record these signs in a readable fashion which permits them to be reproduced at will, but in order to compose on the stage precise and immediately readable symbols.

On the other hand, this code language and musical transcription will be valuable as a means of transcribing voices.

Since it is fundamental to this language to make a particular use of intonations, these intonations will constitute a kind of harmonic balance, a secondary deformation of speech which must be reproducible at will.

Similarly the ten thousand and one expressions of the face caught in the form of masks can be labeled and catalogued, so they may eventually participate directly and symbolically in this concrete language of the stage, independently of their particular psychological use.

Moreover, these symbolical gestures, masks, and attitudes, these individual or group movements whose innumerable meanings constitute an important part of the concrete language of the theater, evocative gestures, emotive or arbitrary attitudes, excited pounding out of rhythms and sounds, will be doubled, will be multiplied by reflections, as it were, of

the gestures and attitudes consisting of the mass of all the impulsive gestures, all the abortive attitudes, all the lapses of mind and tongue, by which are revealed what might be called the impotences of speech, and in which is a prodigious wealth of expressions, to which we shall not fail to have recourse on occasion.

There is, besides, a concrete idea of music in which the sounds make their entrance like characters, where harmonies are coupled together and lose themselves in the precise entrances of words.

From one means of expression to another, correspondences and levels of development are created---even light can have a precise intellectual meaning.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS: *They will be treated as objects and as part of the set.*

Also, the need to act directly and profoundly upon the sensibility through the organs invites research, from the point of view of sound, into qualities and vibrations of absolutely new sounds, qualities which present-day musical instruments do not possess and which require the revival of ancient and forgotten instruments or the invention of new ones. Research is also required, apart from music, into instruments and appliances which, based upon special combinations or new alloys of metal, can attain a new range and compass, producing sounds or noises that are unbearably piercing.

LIGHTS, LIGHTING: *The lighting equipment now in use in theaters is no longer adequate. The particular action of light upon the mind, the effects of all kinds of luminous vibration must be investigated, along with new ways of spreading the light in waves, in sheets, in fusillades of fiery arrows. The color gamut of the equipment now in use is to be revised from beginning to end. In order to produce the qualities of particular musical tones, light must recover an element of thinness, density, and opaqueness, with a view to producing the sensations of heat, cold, anger, fear, etc.*

COSTUMES: Where costumes are concerned, modern dress will be avoided as much as possible without at the same time assuming a uniform theatrical costuming that would be the same for every play--not from a fetishist and superstitious reverence for the past, but because it seems absolutely evident that certain age-old costumes, of ritual intent, though they existed at a given moment of time, preserve a beauty and a revelational appearance from their closeness to the traditions that gave them birth.

THE STAGE--THE AUDITORIUM: We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. This envelopment results, in part, from the very configuration of the room itself.

Thus, abandoning the architecture of present-day theaters, we shall take some hangar or barn, which we shall have reconstructed according to processes which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places, and of certain temples in Tibet.

In the interior of this construction special proportions of height and depth will prevail. The hall will be enclosed by four walls, without any kind of ornament, and the public will be seated in the middle of the room, on the ground floor, on mobile chairs which will allow them to follow the spectacle which will take place all around them. In effect, the absence of a stage in the usual sense of the word will provide for the deployment of the action in the four corners of the room. Particular positions will be reserved for actors and action at the four cardinal points of the room. The scenes will be played in front of whitewashed wall-backgrounds designed to absorb the light. In addition, galleries overhead will run

around the periphery of the hall as in certain primitive paintings. These galleries will permit the actors, whenever the action makes it necessary, to be pursued from one point in the room to another, and the action to be deployed on all levels and in all perspectives of height and depth. A cry uttered at one end of the room can be transmitted from mouth to mouth with amplifications and successive modulations all the way to the other. The action will unfold, will extend its trajectory from level to level, point to point; paroxysms will suddenly burst forth, will flare up like fires in different spots. And to speak of the spectacle's character as true illusion or of the direct and immediate influence of the action on the

spectator will not be hollow words. For this diffusion of action over an immense space will oblige the lighting of a scene and the varied lighting of a performance to fall upon

the public as much as upon the actors--and to the several simultaneous actions or several phases of an identical action in which the characters, swarming over each other like bees, will endure all the onslaughts of the situations and the external assaults of the tempestuous elements, will correspond the physical means of lighting, of producing thunder or wind, whose repercussions the spectator will undergo.

However, a central position will be reserved which, without serving, properly speaking, as a stage, will permit the bulk of the action to be concentrated and brought to a climax whenever necessary.

OBJECTS-MASKS-ACCESSORIES: *Manikins, enormous masks, objects of strange proportions will appear with the same sanction as verbal images, will enforce the concrete aspect of every image and every expression--with the corollary that all objects requiring a stereotyped physical representation will be discarded or disguised.*

THE SET: *There will not be any set. This function will be sufficiently undertaken by hieroglyphic characters, ritual costumes, manikins ten feet high representing the beard of King*

Lear in the storm, musical instruments tall as men, objects of unknown shape and purpose.

IMMEDIACY: *But, people will say, a theater so divorced from life, from facts, from immediate interests. . . . From the present and its events, yes! From whatever preoccupations have any of that profundity which is the prerogative of some men, no! In the Zohar, the story of Rabbi Simeon who burns like fire is as immediate as fire itself.*

WORKS: *We shall not act a written play, but we shall make attempts at direct staging, around themes, facts, or known works. The very nature and disposition of the room suggest this treatment, and there is no theme, however vast, that can be denied us.*

SPECTACLE: *There is an idea of integral spectacles which must be regenerated. The problem is to make space speak, to feed and furnish it; like mines laid in a wall of rock which all of a sudden turns into geysers and bouquets of stone.*

THE ACTOR: *The actor is both an element of first importance, since it is upon the effectiveness of his work that the success of the spectacle depends, and a kind of passive and neutral element, since he is rigorously denied all personal initiative. It is a domain in which there is no precise rule,' and between the actor of whom is required the mere quality of a sob and the actor who must deliver an oration with all his personal qualities of persuasiveness, there is the whole margin which separates a man from an instrument.*

THE INTERPRETATION: *The spectacle will be calculated from one end to the other, like a code (un langage). Thus there will be no lost movements, all movements will obey a rhythm; and each character being merely a type, his gesticulation, physiognomy, and costume will appear like so many rays of light.*

THE CINEMA: *To the crude visualization of what is, the theater through poetry opposes images of what is not. However, from the point of view of action, one cannot compare*

a cinematic image which, however poetic it may be, is limited by the film, to a theatrical image which obeys all the exigencies of life.

CRUELTY: Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.

THE PUBLIC: First of all this theater must exist.

THE PROGRAM: We shall stage, without regard for text:

- 1. An adaptation of a work from the time of Shakespeare, a work entirely consistent with our present troubled state of mind, whether one of the apocryphal plays of Shakespeare, such as Arden of Feversham, or an entirely different play from the same period.*
- 2. A play of extreme poetic freedom by Leon-Paul Fargue.*
- 3. An extract from the Zohar: The Story of Rabbi Simeon, which has the ever present violence and force of a conflagration.*
- 4. The story of Bluebeard reconstructed according to the historical records and with a new idea of eroticism and cruelty.*
- 5. The Fall of Jerusalem, according to the Bible and history, with the blood-red color that trickles from it and the people's feeling of abandon and panic visible even in the light; and on the other hand the metaphysical disputes of the prophets, the frightful intellectual agitation they create and the repercussions of which physically affect the King, the Temple, the People, and Events themselves.*
- 6. A Tale by the Marquis de Sade, in which the eroticism will be transposed, allegorically mounted and figured, to create a violent exteriorization of cruelty, and a dissimulation of the remainder.*
- 7. One or more romantic melodramas in which the improbability will become an active and concrete element of poetry.*
- 8. Buchner's Wozzek, in a spirit of reaction against our*

principles and as an example of what can be drawn from a formal text in terms of the stage.

9. Works from the Elizabethan theater stripped of their text and retaining only the accouterments of period, situations, characters, and action.

IX. Letters on Cruelty

FIRST LETTER

To J. P.

Paris, September 13, 1932

Dear friend,

I cannot give you particulars about my Manifesto that would risk emasculating its point. All I can do is to comment, for the time being, upon my title "Theater of Cruelty" and try to justify its choice.

This Cruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed, at least not in any exclusive way.

I do not systematically cultivate horror. The word "cruelty" must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense that it is customarily given. And I claim, in doing this, the right to break with the usual sense of language, to crack the armature once and for all, to get the iron collar off its neck, in short to return to the etymological origins of speech which, in the midst of abstract concepts, always evoke a concrete element.

One can very well imagine a pure cruelty, without bodily laceration. And philosophically speaking what indeed is cruelty? From the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.

The most current philosophical determinism is, from the point of view of our existence, an image of cruelty.

It is a mistake to give the word 'cruelty' a meaning of merciless bloodshed and disinterested, gratuitous pursuit of physical suffering. The Ethiopian Ras who carts off vanquished princes and makes them his slaves does not do so out of a desperate love of blood. Cruelty is not synonymous with bloodshed, martyred flesh, crucified enemies. This identification of cruelty with tortured victims is a very minor aspect of the question. In the practice of cruelty there is a kind of higher determinism, to which the executioner-tormenter himself is subjected and which he must be *determined* to endure when the time comes. Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death.

SECOND
LETTER

To J. P.

Paris, November 14, 1932

Dear friend,

Cruelty was not tacked onto my thinking; it has always been at home there: but I had to become conscious of it. I employ the word 'cruelty' in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue; good is desired, it is the consequence of an act; evil is permanent. When the hidden god creates, he obeys the cruel necessity of creation which has been imposed on himself by himself, and he cannot *not* create, hence not admit into

the center of the self-willed whirlwind a kernel of evil ever more condensed, and ever more consumed. And theater in the sense of continuous creation, a wholly magical action, obeys this necessity. A play in which there would not be this will, this blind appetite for life capable of overriding everything, visible in each gesture and each act and in the transcendent aspect of the story, would be a useless and unfulfilled play.

THIRD LETTER

*To M. R. de R**Paris, November 16, 1932*

Dear friend,

I confess to you I neither understand nor admit the objections that have been made against my title. For it seems to me that creation and life itself are defined only by a kind of rigor, hence a fundamental cruelty, which leads things to their ineluctable end at whatever cost.

Effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty. Rising from his repose and extending himself into being, Brahma suffers, with a suffering that yields joyous harmonics perhaps, but which at the ultimate extremity of the curve can only be expressed by a terrible crushing and grinding.

There is in life's flame, life's appetite, life's irrational impulsion, a kind of initial perversity: the desire characteristic of Eros is cruelty since it feeds upon contingencies; death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty, since nowhere in a circular and closed world is there room for true death, since ascension is a rending, since closed space is fed with lives, and each stronger life tramples down the others, consuming them in a massacre which is a transfiguration and a bliss. In the manifested world, metaphysically speaking, evil is the permanent law, and what is good is an effort and already one more cruelty added to the other.

Not to understand this is not to understand metaphysical ideas. And after this let no one come to tell me my title is too limited. It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world. Good is always upon the outer face, but the face within is evil. Evil which will eventually be reduced, but at the supreme instant when everything that was form will be on the point of returning to chaos.

X. Letters on Language

FIRST LETTER

To M. B. C.

Paris, September 15, 1931

Sir,

You state in an article on the theater and the *mise en scene* that "in considering the *mise en scene* as an autonomous art one risks committing still worse errors" and that "the presentation, the spectacular aspect of a dramatic work should not be determined in total and cavalier independence."

And you say in addition that these are elementary truths.

You are perfectly right in considering the *mise en scene* as only a subservient and minor art to which even those who employ it with the maximum of independence deny all fundamental originality. So long as the *mise en scene* remains, even in the minds of the boldest directors, a simple means of presentation, an accessory mode of expressing the work, a sort of spectacular intermediary with no significance of its own, it will be valuable only to the degree it succeeds in hiding itself behind the works it is pretending to serve. And this will continue as long as the major interest in a performed work is in its text, as long as literature takes precedence over the kind of performance improperly called spectacle, with

everything pejorative, accessory, ephemeral, and external that that term carries with it.

Here is what seems to me an elementary truth that must precede any other: namely, that the theater, an independent and autonomous art, must, in order to revive or simply to live, realize what differentiates it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means.

We can perfectly well continue to conceive of a theater based upon the authority of the text, and on a text more and more wordy, diffuse, and boring, to which the esthetics of the stage would be subject.

But this conception of theater, which consists of having people sit on a certain number of straight-backed or overstuffed chairs placed in a row and tell each other stories, however marvelous, is, if not the absolute negation of theater --which does not absolutely require movement in order to be what it should-- certainly its perversion.

For the theater to become an essentially psychological matter, the intellectual alchemy of feelings, and for the pinnacle of art in the dramatic medium to consist finally in a certain ideal of silence and immobility, is nothing but the perversion on the stage of the idea of concentration.

This concentration in playing, employed among so many modes of expression by the Japanese for example, is valuable as only one means among many others. And to make a goal out of it on the stage is to abstain from making use of the stage, like someone who, with the pyramids for burying the corpse of a pharaoh, used the pretext that the pharaoh's corpse occupied only a niche, and had the pyramids blown up.

He would have blown up at the same time the whole magical and philosophical system for which the niche was only the point of departure and the corpse the condition.

On the other hand, the director who takes pains with his set to the detriment of the text is wrong, though perhaps less

wrong than the critic who condemns his single-minded concern for the *mise en scene*.

For by taking pains with the *mise en scene*, which in a play is the truly and specifically theatrical part of the spectacle, the director hews to theater's true line, which is a matter of production. But both parties are playing with words; for if the term *mise en scene* has taken on, through usage, this deprecatory sense, it is a result of our European conception of the theater which gives precedence to spoken language over all other means of expression.

It has not been definitively proved that the language of words is the best possible language. And it seems that on the stage, which is above all a space to fill and a place where something happens, the language of words may have to give way before a language of *signs* whose objective aspect is the one that has the most immediate impact upon us.

Considered in this light, the objective work of the *mise en scene* assumes a kind of intellectual dignity from the effacement of words behind gestures and from the fact that the esthetic, plastic part of theater drops its role of decorative intermediary in order to become, in the proper sense of the word, a directly communicative *language*.

In other terms, if it is true that in a play made to be spoken, the director is wrong to wander off into stage effects more or less cleverly lit, interplay of groups, muted movements, all of which could be called epidermal effects which merely inflate the text, he is, in doing this, still closer to the concrete reality of theater than the author who might have confined himself to his text without recourse to the stage, whose spatial necessities seem to escape him.

Someone may point out here the high dramatic value of all the great tragedians, among whom it is certainly the literary or at any rate the spoken aspect that seems to dominate.

I shall answer that if we are clearly so incapable today of giving an idea of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare that is worthy of them, it is probably because we have lost the sense of their theater's physics. It is because the directly human and active aspect of their way of speaking and moving, their whole scenic rhythm, escapes us. An aspect that ought to have as much if not more importance than the admirable spoken dissection of their heroes' psychology.

By this aspect, by means of this precise gesticulation which modifies itself through history we can rediscover the deep humanity of their theater.

But even if this physics really existed, I would still assert that none of these great tragedians is the theater itself, which is a matter of scenic materialization and which lives only by materialization. Let it be said, if one wishes, that theater is an inferior art--take a look around!--but theater resides in a certain way of furnishing and animating the air of the stage, by a conflagration of feelings and human sensations at a given point, creating situations that are expressed in concrete gestures.

Furthermore these concrete gestures must have an efficacy strong enough to make us forget the very necessity of speech. Then if spoken language still exists it must be only as a response, a relay stage of racing space; and the cement of gestures must by its human efficacy achieve the value of a true abstraction.

In a word, the theater must become a sort of experimental demonstration of the profound unity of the concrete and the abstract.

For beside the culture of words there is the culture of gestures. There are other languages in the world besides our Occidental language which has decided in favor of the despoiling and dessication of ideas, presenting them inert and unable to stir up in their course a whole system of natural analogies, as in Oriental languages.

The theater still remains the most active and efficient *site of passage* for those immense analogical disturbances in which ideas are arrested in flight at some point in their transmutation into the abstract.

There can be no complete theater which does not take account of these cartilaginous transformations of ideas; which does not add to our fully known feelings the expression of states of mind belonging to the half-conscious realm, which the suggestions of gestures will always express more adequately than the precise localized meanings of words.

It seems, in brief, that the highest possible idea of the theater is one that reconciles us philosophically with Becoming, suggesting to us through all sorts of objective situations the furtive idea of the passage and transmutation of ideas into things, much more than the transformation and stumbling of feelings into words.

It seems also that it was with just such an intention that the theater was created, to include man and his appetites only to the degree that he is magnetically confronted with his destiny. Not to submit to it, but to measure himself against it.

SECOND LETTER

Ta J. P.

Paris, September 28, 1932

Dear friend,

I do not believe that if you had once read my Manifesto you could persevere in your objections, so either you have not read it or you have read it badly. My plays have nothing to do with Copeau's improvisations. However thoroughly they are immersed in the concrete and external, however rooted in free nature and not in the narrow chambers of the brain, they are not, for all that, left to the caprice of the wild and thoughtless inspiration of the actor, especially the modern

actor who, once cut off from the text, plunges in without any idea of what he is doing. I would not care to leave the fate of my plays and of the theater to that kind of chance. No.

Here is what is really going to happen. It is simply a matter of changing the point of departure of artistic creation and of overturning the customary laws of the theater. It is a matter of substituting for the spoken language a different language of nature, whose expressive possibilities will be equal to verbal language, but whose source will be tapped at a point still deeper, more remote from thought.

The grammar of this new language is still to be found. Gesture is its material and its wits; and, if you will, its alpha and omega. It springs from the NECESSITY of speech more than from speech already formed. But finding an impasse in speech, it returns spontaneously to gesture. In passing, it touches upon some of the physical laws of human expression. It is immersed in necessity. It retraces poetically the path that has culminated in the creation of language. But with a manifold awareness of the worlds set in motion by the language of speech, which it revives in all their aspects. It brings again into the light all the relations fixed and enclosed in the strata of the human syllable, which has killed them by confining them. All the operations through which the word has passed in order to come to stand for that fiery Light-Bringer, whose Father Fire guards us like a shield in the form of Jupiter, the Latin contraction of Zeus-Pater--all these operations by means of cries, onomatopoeia, signs, attitudes, and by slow, copious, impassioned modulations of tension, level by level, term by term--these it recreates. For I make it my principle that words do not mean everything and that by their nature and defining character, fixed once and for all, they arrest and paralyze thought instead of permitting it and fostering its development. And by development I mean actual extended concrete qualities, so long as we are in an extended concrete world. The language of the theater aims then at encompassing and utilizing

extension, that is to say space, and by utilizing it, to make it speak: I deal with objects--the data of extension --like images, like words, bringing them together and making them respond to each other according to laws of symbolism and living analogies: eternal laws, those of all poetry and all viable language, and, among other things, of Chinese ideograms and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Hence, far from restricting the possibilities of theater and language, on the pretext that I will not perform written plays, I extend the language of the stage and multiply its possibilities.

I am adding another language to the spoken language, and I am trying to restore to the language of speech its old magic, its essential spellbinding power, for its mysterious possibilities have been forgotten. When I say I will perform no written play, I mean that I will perform no play based on writing and speech, that in the spectacles I produce there will be a preponderant physical share which could not be captured and written down in the customary language of words, and that even the spoken and written portions will be spoken and written in a new sense.

Theater which is the reverse of what is practiced here, i.e., in Europe, or better, in the Occident, will no longer be based on dialogue; and dialogue itself, the little that will remain, will not be written out and fixed a priori, but will be put on the stage, created on the stage, in correlation with the requirements of attitudes, signs, movements and objects. But this whole method of feeling one's way objectively among one's materials, in which Speech will appear as a necessity, as the result of a series of compressions, collisions, scenic frictions, evolutions of all kinds (thus the theater will become once more an authentic living operation, it will maintain that sort of emotional pulsation without which art is gratuitous)--all these gropings, researches, and shocks will culminate nevertheless in a work *written down*, fixed in its least details, and recorded by new means of notation. The composition, the

creation, instead of being made in the brain of an author, will be made in nature itself, in real space, and the final result will be as strict and as calculated as that of any written work whatsoever, with an immense objective richness as well.

P.S.--The author must discover and assume what belongs to the *mise en scene* as well as what belongs to the author, and become a director himself in a way that will put a stop to the absurd duality existing between director and author.

An author who does not handle the scenic material directly and who does not move about the stage in orienting himself and making the power of his orientation serve the spectacle, has in reality betrayed his mission. And it is right for the actor to replace him. But so much the worse for the theater which is forced to suffer this usurpation.

Theatrical time, which is based upon breath, sometimes rushes by in great, consciously willed exhalations, sometimes contracts and attenuates to a prolonged feminine inhalation. An arrested gesture sets off a frantic complex seething, and this gesture bears within itself the magic of its evocation.

But though it may please us to offer suggestions concerning the energetic and animated life of the theater, we would not care to lay down laws.

Most certainly the human breath has principles which are all based upon innumerable combinations of the cabalistic ternaries. There are six principal ternaries but innumerable combinations, since it is from them that all life issues. And the theater is precisely the place where this magic respiration is reproduced at will. If the fixation of a major gesture requires around it a sharp and rapid breathing, this same exaggerated breathing can come to make its waves break slowly around a fixed gesture. There are abstract principles but no concrete plastic law; the only law is the poetic energy that proceeds from the stifled silence to the headlong representation of a

spasm, and from individual speech *mezzo voce* to the weighty and resonant storm of a chorus slowly swelling its volume.

But the important thing is to create stages and perspectives from one language to the other. The secret of theater in space is dissonance, dispersion of timbres, and the dialectic discontinuity of expression.

The person who has an idea of what this language is will be able to understand us. We write only for him. We give elsewhere some supplementary particulars which complete the first Manifesto of the Theater of Cruelty.

Everything essential having been said in the first Manifesto, the second aims only at specifying certain points. It gives a workable definition of Cruelty and offers a description of scenic space. It remains to be seen what we make of it.

THIRD LETTER

To J. Po

Paris, November 9, 1932

Dear friend,

Objections have been made to you and to me against the Manifesto of the Theater of Cruelty, some having to do with cruelty, whose function in my theater seems unclear, at least as an essential, determining element; others having to do with the theater as I conceive it.

As for the first objection, those who make it are right, not in relation to cruelty, nor in relation to the theater, but in relation to the place this cruelty occupies in my theater. I should have specified the very particular use I make of this word, and said that I employ it not in an episodic, accessory sense, out of a taste for sadism and perversion of mind, out of love of sensationalism and unhealthy attitudes, hence not at all in a circumstantial sense; it is not at all a matter of vicious cruelty, cruelty bursting with perverse appetites and expressing

itself in bloody gestures, sickly excrescences upon an already contaminated flesh, but on the contrary, a pure and detached feeling, a veritable movement of the mind based on the gestures of life itself; the idea being that life, metaphysically speaking, because it admits extension, thickness, heaviness, and matter, admits, as a direct consequence, evil and all that is inherent in evil, space, extension and matter. All this culminates in consciousness and torment, and in consciousness *in* torment. Life cannot help exercising some blind rigor that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it would not be life; but this rigor, this life that exceeds all bounds and is exercised in the torture and trampling down of everything, this pure implacable feeling is what cruelty is.

I have therefore said "cruelty" as I might have said "life" or "necessity," because I want to indicate especially that for me the theater is act and perpetual emanation, that there is nothing congealed about it, that I turn it into a true act, hence living, hence magical.

And I am searching for every technical and practical means of bringing the theater close to the high, perhaps excessive, at any rate vital and violent idea that I conceive of it for myself.

As for the drawing up of the Manifesto, I realize that it is abrupt and in large measure inadequate.

I propose unexpected, rigorous principles, of grim and terrible aspect, and just when everyone is waiting for me to justify them, I pass on to the next principle.

The dialectic of this Manifesto is admittedly weak. I leap without transition from one idea to another. No internal necessity justifies the arrangement.

As for the last objection, I claim that the director, having become a kind of demiurge, at the back of whose head is this idea of implacable purity and of its consummation whatever the cost, if he truly wants to be a director, i.e., a man versed in the nature of matter and objects, must conduct in the physical

domain an exploration of intense movement and precise emotional gesture which is equivalent on the psychological level to the most absolute and complete moral discipline and on the cosmic level to the unchaining of certain blind forces which activate what they must activate and crush and burn on their way what they must crush and burn.

And here is the general conclusion.

Theater is no longer an art; or it is a useless art. It conforms at every point to the Occidental idea of art. We are surfeited with ineffectual decorative feelings and activities without aim, uniquely devoted to the pleasurable and the picturesque; we want a theater that functions actively, but on a level still to be defined.

We need true action, but without practical consequence. It is not on the social level that the action of theater unfolds. Still less on the moral and psychological levels.

Clearly the problem is not simple; but however chaotic, impenetrable, and forbidding our Manifesto may be, at least it does not evade the real question but on the contrary attacks it head on, which no one in the theater has dared to do for a long time. Nobody up to now has tackled the very principle of the theater, which is metaphysical; and if there are so few worthy plays, it is not for lack of talent or authors.

Putting the question of talent aside, there is a fundamental error of principle in the European theater; and this error is contingent upon a whole order of things in which the absence of talent appears as a consequence and not merely an accident.

If the age turns away from the theater, in which it is no longer interested, it is because the theater has ceased to represent it. It no longer hopes to be provided by the theater with Myths on which it can sustain itself.

We are living through a period probably unique in the history of the world, when the world, passed through a sieve, sees its old values crumble. Our calcined life is dissolving at its base, and on the moral or social level this is expressed by

a monstrous unleashing of appetites, a liberation of the basest instincts, a crackling of burnt lives prematurely exposed to the flame.

What is interesting in the events of our time is not the events themselves, but this state of moral ferment into which they make our spirits fall; this extreme tension. It is the state of conscious chaos into which they ceaselessly plunge us.

And everything that disturbs the mind without causing it to lose its equilibrium is a moving means of expressing the innate pulsations of life.

It is from this mythical and moving immediacy that the theater has turned away; no wonder the public turns away from a theater that ignores actuality to this extent.

The theater as we practice it can therefore be reproached with a terrible lack of imagination. The theater must make itself the equal of life—not an individual life, that individual aspect of life in which CHARACTERS triumph, but the sort of liberated life which sweeps away human individuality and in which man is only a reflection. The true purpose of the theater is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspect, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves.

And by so doing to arrive at a kind of general resemblance, so powerful that it produces its effect instantaneously.

May it free *us*, in a Myth in which we have sacrificed our little human individuality, like Personages out of the Past, with powers rediscovered in the Past.

FOURTH
LETTER

To J. P.

Paris, May 28, 1933

Dear friend,

I did not say that I wanted to act directly upon our times;
I said that the theater I wanted to create assumed, in order to

be possible, in order to be permitted by the times to exist, another form of civilization.

But without representing its times, the theater can impel the ideas, customs, beliefs, and principles from which the spirit of the time derives to a profound transformation. In any case it does not prevent me from doing what I want to do and doing it rigorously. I will do what I have dreamed or I will do nothing.

In the matter of the spectacle it is not possible for me to give supplementary particulars. And for two reasons:

1. the first is that for once what I want to do is easier to do than to say.

2. the second is that I do not want to risk being plagiarized, which has happened to me several times.

In my view no one has the right to call himself author, that is to say creator, except the person who controls the direct handling of the stage. And exactly here is the vulnerable point of the theater as it is thought of not only in France but in Europe and even in the Occident as a whole: Occidental theater recognizes as language, assigns the faculties and powers of a language, permits to be called language (with that particular intellectual dignity generally ascribed to this word) only articulated language, grammatically articulated language, Le., the language of speech, and of written speech, speech which, pronounced or unpronounced, has no greater value than if it is merely written.

In the theater as we conceive it, the text is everything. It is understood and definitely admitted, and has passed into our habits and thinking, it is an established spiritual value that the language of words is *the* major language. But it must be admitted even from the Occidental point of view that speech becomes ossified and that words, all words, are frozen and cramped in their meanings, in a restricted schematic terminology. For the theater as it is practiced here, a written word has as much value as the same word spoken. To certain theatrical

amateurs this means that a play read affords just as definite and as great a satisfaction as the same play performed. Everything concerning the particular enunciation of a word and the vibration it can set up in space escapes them, and consequently, everything that it is capable of adding to the thought. A word thus understood has little more than a discursive, i.e., elucidative, value. And it is not an exaggeration to say that in view of its very definite and limited terminology the word is used only to sidestep thought; it encircles it, but terminates it; it is only a conclusion.

Obviously it is not without cause that poetry has abandoned the theater. It is not merely an accident that for a very long time now every dramatic poet has ceased to produce. The language of speech has its laws. We have become too well accustomed, for more than four hundred years, especially in France, to employing words in the theater in a single defined sense. We have made the action turn too exclusively on psychological themes whose essential combinations are not in finite, far from it. We have overaccustomed the theater to a lack of curiosity and above all of imagination.

Theater, like speech, needs to be set free.

This obstinacy in making characters talk about feelings, passions, desires, and impulses of a strictly psychological order, in which a single word is to compensate for innumerable gestures, is the reason, since we are in the domain of precision, the theater has lost its true *raison d'etre* and why we have come to long for a silence in it in which we could listen more closely to life. Occidental psychology is expressed in dialogue; and the obsession with the defined word which says everything ends in the withering of words.

Oriental theater has been able to preserve a certain expansive value in words, since the defined sense of a word is not everything, for there is its music, which speaks directly to the unconscious. That is why in the Oriental theater there is no spoken language, but a language of gestures, attitudes, and

signs which from the point of view of thought in action have as much expansive and revelational value as the other. And since in the Orient this sign language is valued more than the other, immediate magic powers are attributed to it. It is called upon to address not only the mind but the senses, and through the senses to attain still richer and more fecund regions of the sensibility at full tide.

If, then, the author is the man who arranges the language of speech and the director is his slave, there is merely a question of words. There is here a confusion over terms, stemming from the fact that, for us, and according to the sense generally attributed to the word *director*, this man is merely an artisan, an adapter, a kind of translator eternally devoted to making a dramatic work pass from one language into another; this confusion will be possible and the director will be forced to play second fiddle to the author only so long as there is a tacit agreement that the language of words is superior to others and that the theater admits none other than this one language.

But let there be the least return to the active, plastic, respiratory sources of language, let words be joined again to the physical motions that gave them birth, and let the discursive, logical aspect of speech disappear beneath its affective, physical side, Le., let words be heard in their sonority rather than be exclusively taken for what they mean grammatically, let them be perceived as movements, and let these movements themselves turn into other simple, direct movements as occurs in all the circumstances of life but not sufficiently with actors on the stage, and behold! the language of literature is reconstituted, revived, and furthermore--as in the canvasses of certain painters of the past--objects themselves begin to speak.

Light, instead of decorating, assumes the qualities of an actual language, and the stage effects, all humming with significations, take on an order, reveal patterns. And this immediate and physical language is entirely at the director's disposal. This is the occasion for him to create in complete autonomy.

It would be quite singular if the person who rules a domain closer to life than the author's, i.e., the director, had on every occasion to yield precedence to the author, who by definition works in the abstract, i.e., on paper. Even if the *mise en scene* did not have to its credit the language of gestures which equals and surpasses that of words, any mute *mise en scene*, with its movement, its many characters, lighting, and set, should rival all that is most profound in paintings such as van den Leyden's "Daughters of Lot," certain "Sabbaths" of Goya, certain "Resurrections" and "Transfigurations" of Greco, the "Temptation of Saint Anthony" by Hieronymus Bosch, and the disquieting and mysterious "Dulle Griet" by the elder Breughel, in which a torrential red light, though localized in certain parts of the canvas, seems to surge up from all sides and, through some unknown technical process, glue the spectator's staring eyes while still yards away from the canvas: the theater swarms in all directions. The turmoil of life, confined by a ring of white light, runs suddenly aground on nameless shallows. A screeching, livid noise rises from this bacchanal of grubs of which even the bruises on human skin can never approach the color. Real life is moving and white; the hidden life is livid and fixed, possessing every possible attitude of incalculable immobility.

This is mute theater, but one that tells more than if it had received a language in which to express itself. Each of these paintings has a double sense, and beyond its purely pictorial qualities discloses a message and reveals mysterious or terrible aspects of nature and mind alike.

But happily for the theater, the *mise en scene* is much more than that. For besides creating a performance with palpable material means, the pure *mise en scene* contains, in gestures, facial expressions and mobile attitudes, through a concrete use of music, everything that speech contains and has speech at its disposal as well. Rhythmic repetitions of syllables and particular modulations of the voice, swathing the precise sense of words, arouse swarms of images in the brain, producing a

more or less hallucinatory state and impelling the sensibility and mind alike to a kind of organic alteration which helps to strip from the written poetry the gratuitousness that commonly characterizes it. And it is around this gratuitousness that the whole problem of theater is centered.