Theatricality as Medium
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IN MEMORY OF
AXEL MANTHEY (1945–1995)
AND
JACQUES DERRIDA (1930–2004)
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Preface

This book has had a long period of gestation and a hybrid history. It goes back, first, to a fascination with texts, “fictional” or not, in which the reader is called upon to play an active part. This summons is surely coextensive with all reading in the strong sense. But certain texts render the awareness of this possibility more accessible than others. From Sterne to Kafka, Kierkegaard to Derrida, Freud to Lacan, a transformative involvement of the reader is required in order for the text “itself” to function—just as an “audience” is required for a representation to be “theatrical.” The second source was less academic and developed from the experience of working as a dramaturge in German productions of theater and opera during the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the director, stage designer, or actors, the dramaturge, like the academic, is primarily concerned with texts. Whereas the academic tends to be guided by a notion of a long-lasting, if not eternal truth, however, the goal of a theatrical production is far more ephemeral, more localized, and more singular. If, as the O.E.D. speculates, the word truth derives from the Old English word for truce, this etymological filiation remains palpable today in the process of theatrical staging: its result resembles a temporary truce between warring factions rather than a peace treaty of long duration. It can therefore differ from performance to performance and in any case rarely outlives them.

This experience contrasts with certain aspects of “scholarly” life, where belief in a durable truth often functions as the tenet of a secular faith. In providing an alternative perspective to this faith, “theatricality” offers another perspective from which to approach the relation of institutions, interpretation, and media investigated in my previous work. For theatricality—which is not the same as theater, although also not separable from it—spans the gap dividing “old” and “new” media
in ways whose investigation and reflection can illuminate the cultural, social, and political transformations currently underway.

Although this book thus results from a history involving both academic and theatrical experiences, the texts it brings together were written almost exclusively for academic occasions. Although initially conceived as independent studies, a common set of concerns that gradually emerged links the different texts in various ways. At the center of their concerns stands the tension between the effort to reduce the theatrical medium to a means of meaningful representation by enclosing its space within an ostensibly self-contained narrative, and the resistance of this medium to such reduction. Theatricality resists the reduction to a meaningful narrative by virtue of its ability to signify. This ability associates it with what is called “language.” As the most ubiquitous of signifying media—a pleonasm insofar as all media are such through signifying—language demonstrates the priority of the signifying function over that of representation. In so doing, far from reducing the materiality and corporeality of theater, it marks their irreducibility. This is what Walter Benjamin interprets as baroque “allegory,” and it is why he links it to theater in the form of the German “mourning play.” In its allegorical dimension, the process of signifying always leaves something out and something over: an excess that is also a deficit, or, as Derrida has formulated it, a “remainder”—un reste. It is the irreducibility of this remainder that, ultimately, renders language theatrical, and theatricality significant.

The essays collected in this volume repeat and rehearse certain chapters in the emergence of this significance, while exploring some of its ramifications. They make no claim to completeness and remain as aleatory as their subject matter. Whether or not they leave anything in their wake will have to depend on the readings to which they give rise.

As work on this book has been in progress for well over a decade, it is impossible to acknowledge adequately or completely the many helpful suggestions I have received. Memory retains the most recent of these, whereas older ones tend to be assimilated over the years so that one forgets that they initially came from elsewhere. My apologies therefore in advance to those whose names deserve to be mentioned here but are not.
This book would almost certainly never have been published without the insight and involvement of Helen Tartar, whose dedication and support have been a constant source of encouragement. Largely due to her interventions, as well as those of Ela Kotkowska, the original manuscript has become far more readable. My friend and former colleague Haun Saussy also gave generously of his time in suggesting revisions and corrections. Jennifer Bajorek and Nicholas Müller-Schöll were discerning readers; Rodolphe Gasché gave valuable suggestions at various points. A word of thanks is also due the Wooster Group, who kindly made available a taped recording of their unforgettable production of O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones*. Although I was unable to include a discussion of this staging here, their approach to theater and media certainly informs my notion of “theatricality” throughout.

A debt of a different kind is due Klaus Zehelein, currently Director of the Stuttgart Opera; his invitation to work with the Frankfurt Opera in the 1980s allowed me to experience the theatrical process from behind the scenes. A determining aspect of that experience was the opportunity to work on several theater and opera productions, as *dramaturg*, with the director and stage designer Axel Manthey. I gratefully dedicate this volume to his memory.

Finally, a unique word of thanks is due my wife, Arlette. Her experience in television production provided me with an invaluable perspective on the relation of “theatricality” to media. Beyond that, her patience and understanding made this book possible.

Although I have tended to modify existing translations or retranslate, I have often used and learned from the published English versions, to which I remain greatly indebted.
Prior Publication

Portions of the chapters in this book have been published in the following books and journals.


Chapter 13: “La Théâtralité dans le cinema: Considérations prélimi-
Prior Publications


Theatricality as Medium
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Introduction:
Theatricality as Medium

The essays that compose this book seek to respond to two sets of questions.

First, how does it come about, and what does it signify, that, in an age increasingly dominated by electronic media, notions and practices that could be called “theatrical,” far from appearing merely obsolete, seem to gain in importance? In other words, given that the medium of theater and the effect of theatricality presuppose, as one of their indispensable preconditions, some sort of real, immediate, physical presence, and given that the status and significance of such presence has been rendered increasingly problematic by the advent of the “new media,” with their powerful “virtualizing” effects, one might expect to find that practices relating to theater and theatricality would tend to diminish progressively in scope and significance. Yet the contrary appears to be the case. Theatrical practices, attitudes, even organizations seem to proliferate, in conjunction with if not in response to the new media. Why is this happening, and what are its possible consequences?

The notions of “theater” and “theatricality” are anything but self-evident or unambiguous. They have a vexed and complex history, and only by articulating some of the major traits and tendencies of this history can we begin to investigate the renewed significance these terms are acquiring today. This brings me to the second set of questions to which I seek to respond.

Second, how has theater been conceptualized in the West? I limit myself here to the Western European tradition and its sequels, not because non-Western theater and theatrical practices lack importance, on the contrary. Non-Western theatrical practices have played a decisive and determining role throughout the long history of Western
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In the twentieth century, they have inspired a critical reevaluation of this history, most conspicuously in playwrights and theatrical thinkers such as Brecht, Artaud, Deleuze, Barthes, and Derrida. This rethinking has a much longer history, however. It emerges perhaps most significantly in the early part of the nineteenth century, in what might be called the “aftermath” of the Hegelian philosophical system and the culmination of thought it entails—in a writer-thinker such as Kierkegaard, for example—and it continues to mark the work of many of the most radical writer-thinkers of that century, such as Marx and Nietzsche, to name just the most obvious and influential. In the wake of the exhaustion of a conceptual tradition based on a certain notion of identity, reflexivity, and subjectivity, theater and theatricality emerge as names for an alternative that begins to articulate itself in the writings of these thinkers, although it certainly has far more complex a progeny than this limited list would seem to suggest. To understand just how a certain questioning of theater and theatricality could assume this function in the nineteenth century, we must first examine that against which such thinkers and dramaturges were reacting. In this emergence of theatrical language, figures, and concerns, it becomes clear that a battle is being fought to redefine the meaning and value of words such as theater and theatricality, and that this battle has a very long history. It reaches back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle, in whose work the question of theater as medium is posed, but only to be rapidly disposed of in a way that was to determine much of the history—the thought and practice—of theater in the West. This tendency continues, even and perhaps especially today, to extend its influence in the world dominated by electronic media that have developed out of these same traditions. It is thus crucial to elaborate, as precisely as possible, just what the determining characteristics of this systematic conception of theater are, in order to discern alternatives to it, alternatives that have their own “history,” which is quite distinct from that associated with “mainstream” versions. We will discover that an alternative approach to the dominant Western concept of theater is already at work within the elaboration of the mainstream concept. It is not something simply imposed upon it from without, but accompanies it from the start—which is to say, from the initial efforts of Western metaphysics to appropriate theater for its purposes.

To understand what is at stake in this effort of appropriation, one need only return to a well-known and often-discussed fact: The term
theater has the same etymology as the term theory, from the Greek word thea, designating a place from which to observe or to see. The fact that theater, like television today, has always involved much more than simply seeing only makes this privileging of sight all the more significant, and questionable. The valorization of sight over the other senses, especially hearing, which is implied in the currency of words such as theory and theater, but also television, often results from the desire to secure a position, from a distance that ostensibly permits one to view the object in its entirety while remaining at a safe remove from it. This desire for exteriority and control has always felt both threatened by and attracted to a certain conception of theater. I will briefly discuss several instances of this ambivalent tendency, one quite old and the others relatively recent.

The Cave

The first is the famous scene of the cave in Plato’s Republic. This scene, designed to illustrate the limitations of ordinary human existence insofar as it is not enlightened by a philosophical perspective, involves the staging of a scenario with strong, if negative, theatrical connotations:

“Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets.”

“All that I see,” he said.

“See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.”

“A strange image you speak of,” he said, “and strange prisoners.”
“Like to us,” I said. “For, to begin with, tell me, do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?”

“How could they,” he said, “if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved throughout life?”

“And again, would not the same be true of the objects carried past them?”

“Surely.”

“If then they were able to talk to one another, do you not think that they would suppose that in naming the things that they saw they were naming the passing objects?”

“Necessarily.”

“And if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow to be the speaker?”

“By Zeus, I do not,” said he.

“Then in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects”

“Quite inevitably,” he said. (514b–515c)2

The cave here is a particular kind of theater, it is true, or a particular interpretation of theater, but it is unmistakably a theater nonetheless. Two traits mark the setting as being also a theater. First, the reader is invited to “picture” a defined, limited place. This placement—the arrangement of the place, the positioning of the people and things in it—is constitutive of what is taking place there. This is the first characteristic of a theater: the events it depicts are not indifferent to their placement. The second trait is the no less constitutive role of spectators. A theatrical scene is one that plays to others, called variously “spectators” or, in this case, more properly “audience,” since in the cave “vision” and “visibility” are by no means the only media of perception involved. They are not the only media, but they are placed in a dominant, if problematic, position.

What is characteristic of Plato’s parable of the cave, however, is that the protagonists are above all spectators. And spectators of a very distinct kind: they are not merely fixed in place, but riveted to their posts. They are “prisoners,” although—and this is what makes the
scene so modern in many ways—they are prisoners unaware of their imprisonment. They do not know where they are, and hence they do not know how and who they are.

But where, precisely, are they? They are in a particular kind of “home theater”: dwelling in a subterranean cavern (katageiōi oikēsei spēlaio̱dei): at home in a place defined by a certain vacuity, a hollow place under the earth. A place that is profound, interior, and yet precisely not self-contained. Indeed, the cave may be said to be a prison to the very extent that it is not self-contained. Just this lack of self-containment distinguishes the spatial character of the setting. The cave or cavern is described as having “a long entrance” that is “open to the light on its entire width.” What is distinctive about this “prison” enclosure is that it is not entirely closed. Rather, it appears to be open to the outside. Indeed, its cavernous hollowness suggests that it itself is an of outside that has been enclosed by a kind of container. Like every “place,” however, it remains in contact with an outside that it excludes.

So much for the curious place, or setting, of the cave. What of its inhabitants? What is most pertinent for our concerns is that the much-celebrated blindness of the cave dwellers is bound up with their being bound into place. The cave dwellers do not understand what they see, not because they are blind or in any other way intrinsically deficient, but because they are bound—unable to get up and move about, and thereby to experience the relativity of their point of view. Their positions are fixed and stable, but the very stability of their point of view prevents them from seeing it as situationally conditioned. They have never known any other position, or situation, and therefore are not aware of the relations that frame the situation from which they see. Lack of alternative experience and force of habit make what they see and hear seem entirely natural, in the sense of being self-evident and self-contained.

Yet this cavern is by no means simply a natural setting: It conflates nature and culture. Deep in the earth, it is chthonic; but in its organization it is fabricated, technical, cultivated. The cavern is a theater in which the spectators observe a highly organized, “staged” spectacle, which, however, they take to be utterly self-contained. “Shadows” are apprehended as “reality.” The lighting in this home theater is both natural and artificial. The space is illuminated by the glare of a fire, a “natural” phenomenon, but one that has been carefully set up and
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thus is also the result of artifice. This natural-technical source of light is placed so that, given the immobility of the spectators, it remains invisible. As in a theater when the lights have been dimmed, the stage is lit by lights that themselves remain out of sight.

This carefully staged scene is explicitly compared to a “puppet” show. The comparison is significant, since—as we will see later on in this book—today puppets exemplify the aspect of theatricality which has caused it to be regarded with suspicion by a certain humanistic tradition: its heterogeneity. On one side, an audience of spectators is locked in place, indeed, chained to their positions (they cannot move their heads . . . ) vis-à-vis “implements of all kinds . . . and human images and shapes of animals” being carried past the wall, upon which they cast shadows or silhouettes. This shadow play suggests certain Javanese puppets, which cast shadows on a screen, to the accompaniment of gamelan music. But in Javanese puppet shows the audience is free to move about, free to pass to the other side of the “screen,” to experience the “reality” of theater as relativity and as surface, an experience that seems hardly compatible with the reductive dichotomy of “appearance” versus “reality.”

Even in Plato’s scenario, that dichotomy is not unequivocal. In the commentary that articulates and accompanies the scene, a third instance can be distinguished, though it remains in the shadows. Not all the inhabitants of the cave are passively fixed in their seats: there are also “men carrying past the wall” those “implements” and figures. Those “men,” who are responsible for the movement of the silhouettes, exercise a function situated somewhere between artists and stagehands. What is their ontological or, for that matter, political status? How do they relate to that spellbound, enthralled audience of spectator-prisoners? How do they relate to the organization and significance of the “spectacle” itself?

Plato does not respond to these questions, though his own scenario stages, and thus implicitly raises, them. The question of theater and theatricality thereby remains unaddressed by the ontological condemnation Plato reserves for emphatically mimetic practices. But that condemnation sets the scene, as it were, for all successive attempts to determine the precise place—ontologically, epistemologically, ethically, politically—of theater and its “special” effects, including spectators and actors, stages and their “props,” lighting, sound, and perhaps effectiveness in general. Insofar as one proceeds from a presumption of
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self-identity and self-presence, all departures from their putative self-enclosure—and theater entails just such a departure—are to be vigilantly controlled, if not condemned. Theater marks the spot where the spot reveals itself to be an ineradicable macula, a stigma or stain that cannot be cleansed or otherwise rendered transparent, diaphanous.

This irreducible opacity defines the quality of theater as medium. When an event or series of events takes place without reducing the place it “taken” to a purely neutral site, then that place reveals itself to be a “stage,” and those events become theatrical happenings. As the gerund here suggests—and this will be a recurrent topic of discussion throughout this book—such happenings never take place once and for all but are ongoing. This in turn suggests that they can neither be contained within the place where they unfold nor entirely separated from it. They can be said, then, in a quite literal sense, to come to pass. They take place, which means in a particular place, and yet simultaneously also pass away—not simply to disappear but to happen somewhere else. Out of the dislocations of its repetitions emerges nothing more or less than the singularity of the theatrical event. Such theatrical singularity haunts and taunts the Western dream of self-identity.

In the Western tradition, here exemplified not so much by the scenario of the cavern as by its explicit interpretation, the desire for self-identity informs the condemnation of theater. It is the desire to occupy a place from which one can take everything in, first and foremost visually, but also orally and audibly, that renders the theater and theatricality so terribly suspect. For theatrical space, like the cavern, allows no simple extraterritoriality. Yet, to reside “in” it is to be most distant from it—from its “truth,” its “reality.” Which perhaps is why, following Plato’s scenario at least, those who seek to address theater as theater, to explore its theatricality, must be prepared to suffer the most severe consequences. As the text of the Republic makes clear, the basis of most existing political communities, as distinct from those that would be desirable, involves confounding theater with nature or, more precisely, with things themselves. In the modern period, such “naturalness” is often attributed to or absorbed into “history.” The shifting attribution changes little, so long as the attribute—that of self-contained meaningfulness, that is, of self-identity—remains essentially unchanged.

The alternative to theater and its shadows is portrayed by Plato as
the liberating if painful ascent into the open and natural light of the sun. In the world above, the world of ideas and of truth, space need no longer be localized, for what counts is never a particular place but rather the ubiquity of daylight itself. No shadows or obscurities, no echoes, projections, or simulacra: only light as it is and things as they are, in and of themselves: such is the dream of a liberation that would leave behind the cavernous nightmare of theater in which enslavement appears as freedom.

Plato thus dreams of exchanging the cave, its fire and shadows, for the bright sunlight and its direct, if dazzling illumination. But the example of Socrates remains as a stern reminder of what it can cost to defy, not just habit and custom, but the desire for stability from which they draw much of their force. The scenario of the cave dwellers displays the desire of those who have either never known or cannot admit the possibility of change. The formation and maintenance of communities, of polities, Socrates seems to suggest, may depend above all on the power of this desire: the desire to remain, to remain the same, to survive in the same place, if necessary until the end of time. It is this desire that makes the cave dwellers such willing spectators— and prisoners. To stay the same, the story seems to say, is to see the same, even while seeing others: that is, to see shadows as though they were real persons, stage props as though they were things in themselves, a stage as though it were a world. And thus to confound “reality” with self-identity and thereby to misconstrue the relationality of one’s own place and position in a world that cannot simply be surveyed by those who inhabit it.

Theater is thus, from the very beginnings of what, for convenience, we continue to call “Western” thought, considered to be a place not just of dissimulation and delusion but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion. It is a place of fixity and unfreedom, but also of fascination and desire. A prison, to be sure, but one that confines through assent and consensus rather than through constraint and oppression. Theater, in short, is that which challenges the “self” of self-presence and self-identity by reduplicating it in a seductive movement that never seems to come full circle.

The Stage

Millennia after Plato, a resolutely modern philosopher introduces his most influential and perhaps most innovative thought by resorting to a familiar comparison:
A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in many ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiologies of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.6

Examples are never chosen fortuitously, and the one that J. L. Austin invokes in order to illustrate the constitutive negative precondition of his notion of a “performative” speech act is exemplary in more ways than one. It also stands in a significant relationship to Plato’s cave scenario. In both texts, a certain theatricality serves as the quintessence of what is both most normal and most anomalous. In Austin’s language, theater is the epitome of the extra-ordinary “circumstances” that must be excluded if language is to be analyzed as a “performative” speech act. Such an argumentative strategy presupposes that language outside of theater is being or can be used seriously, whereas theatrical acting on a stage imposes itself as the most striking instance of nonserious, “parasitic” language use. The seriousness or integrity of an “act” or “action” is thus to be clearly demarcated from its “parasitical” cognate: from theatrical acting. Why?

For reasons and in terms that recall those of the Platonic cave. True, there is no “cave” here, but when it is recited on a stage, language creates a kind of “cave” or, more precisely, a “hollow or void.” The intentional meaning, which in “ordinary circumstances” is directed at a more or less self-contained object, is undercut on the stage, hollowed out by the ambivalent dynamics of repetition, which Derrida has analyzed, precisely in respect to this passage, as “iterability.”7 An actor on a stage simply repeats, recites, reproduces his “lines,” his “part,” which therefore must be seen in the context of a different network of relations from that which one would expect in “ordinary” language use. For Austin, the nonserious theatrical use of language is dependent—“parasitical”—upon what is considered to be its serious, nontheatrical use, just as for Plato the repetition (or mimesis) of an object is dependent upon the object in and of itself, prior to all such
repetition or mimesis. “Play-acting” is the quintessence of nonserious behavior and, once again, seems defined by a relationality that cannot be reduced to the dichotomous structure and self-enclosed trajectory usually associated with unambiguous “intention” and its undivided “goal.” By contrast, the reciting of lines on stage involves a process of repetition that can never be entirely self-contained, insofar as its horizon is determined by an audience of spectators and not simply by the communication of a message. In short, the horizon of specifically theatrical performance can never be enclosed or comprehended by the kind of “act”—speech or other—to which Austin appeals. “Ordinary” English makes this distinction when it discriminates between acting and act or action. It should be noted, however, that even the word act is equivocal, often connoting—or infected by—the very lack of “seriousness” that Austin attributes to “parasitic” theatricality. (“It’s all an act.”)

But the fact that Austin, in his theatrical reference, resorts to the particular spatial figure “hollow or void” points to what is perhaps the most significant aspect of the theatrical with which we will be concerned. It entails the intrusion of spatiality within the process of localization: the fact that the process of being situated has to include (spatial) relationships that it cannot enclose or integrate. From the ontological and axiological position first systematized by Plato, such a situation can only be considered negative, as a lack or deficiency, as “parasitical.” Can it be avoided? Austin has little doubt that it can, at least in principle. But when the parasitical and theatrical become the guiding principle of society as a whole, the critique takes on a very different tone. We turn now to another, very different but not unrelated formulation of this traditional, Platonic condemnation.

The Show

It is difficult to imagine a figure further removed—culturally, institutionally, linguistically—from Austin than his contemporary Guy Debord, whose major work, The Society of the Spectacle, was published in 1967. Debord, co-founder of the Situationist International, places his notion of “spectacle” (or “show”) at the center of a comprehensive post-Marxist critique of bourgeois capitalist society. The spectacle, he argued, “asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance,” whereas an authentic critique should “expose it
Debord thus seeks to “expose” the “spectacle” or “show” as the consequence of a capitalist social system directed toward the production of “commodities.” What distinguishes his critique from previous Marxist theory is its emphasis on seduction rather than on constraint. As we have seen, this is also a trait of the Platonic critique of theatricality: theater is dangerous because it induces assent. (This aspect also resonates in Austin’s notion of the “parasitical.”)

The major traits of Debord’s critique can be stated in four assertions. (1) The spectacle is both social and global in scope. It does not merely “express” the capitalist system: it “justifies” it (§6). (2) The spectacle implies a spectator whose role is essentially passive and alienated (§30). (3) The medium of the spectacle is “the autonomous image” (§2). (4) Despite its “global” reach, the spectacle is based on the “separation” and “isolation” of the individual spectator (§13, §§25–28). “The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but . . . only in its separateness” (p. 22).

All of these features are inscribed in the conception of theatricality already encountered in Plato’s description of the cavern. Above all, the spectacle “turns reality on its head” (§14, p. 14) by causing “a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen” (§18, p. 17), by transforming “mere images . . . into real beings” (ibid.). Images and representations usurp the role of “reality” and threaten “life.” As a correlative, the role of the spectator is one of alienated passivity. Like Plato’s cave dweller, the spectator is locked into place by a system that produces a high degree of acquiescence. Constraint imposes itself through consensus. Debord, in a formulation that is both resolutely contemporary and at the same time profoundly Platonic, asserts that “the spectacle is a permanent opium war,” whose seductive power depends on the way it links the desire to survive with “deprivation”:

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing beyond augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it. (§44, pp. 30–31)
Debord, in his critique of the spectacle, is thus condemning the-ater—but it is a certain kind of theater, one that, as already for Plato, presents itself as a nontheatrical “reality.” At the same time, this conception of theater leaves room for another kind of spectacle or, perhaps, another reading of spectacle, which would not regard it as a mere surrogate (for) reality. For Debord, this involves another kind of “game” (jeu), one that would build upon certain traits of the society of spectacle in a way Debord seems not to want to acknowledge. One of those traits has to do with the change in the sense of “place” brought about by commodity production and consecrated by the spectacle:10 “Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market inevitably shattered all regional and legal barriers . . . so too it was bound to dissipate the independence and quality of places. The power to homogenize is the heavy artillery that has battered down all Chinese walls” (§165, p. 120).

Commodity production undermines the integrity of place by submitting it to the universalizing, “homogenizing” law of value. But another development of this destabilizing of place is also conceivable:

The same history that threatens this twilight world is capable of subjecting space to a directly experienced time. The proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic journey will be restored to us, although with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself. (§178, p. 126)

Debord’s formulation here once again underscores his affinity with the Platonic critique of theatricality already discussed. “Subjecting space to a directly experienced time” raises the question of “place” as the dialectical result of the intrusion of time into space. But however “mobile” Debord wishes those places to be, their motion is still to be oriented by a goal: that of a “total history.” The “rules of the game” that preside over the “mobility of places” are informed by the ideal of a certain self-containment, as a “journey containing its whole mean-
ing within itself.” This ideal of containment, however, is ultimately incompatible with the theatrical dimension of the spectacle as Debord describes it: “The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere” (§37, p. 26). This “at once” constitutes the challenge of theatricality to every system of thought based on the priority of identity and self-presence.

Presenting

One of the most powerful articulations of that challenge is to be found in the writings of Jacques Derrida. In “The Double Session,” a reading of Mallarmé elaborates an alternative to the more traditional—Platonic—subordination of mimesis to truth construed in terms of self-presence. This alternative is described as a peculiar type of “closure of Metaphysics,” peculiar because it does not simply “close” but also, in a repetitive re-marking, opens a different sort of space and place, a sort of “dis-location.”11 This dislocated space “takes place” simultaneously as the written text of Mallarmé and as the theatricality of the performance it describes, comments upon, interprets, and quotes (the libretto). In his reading of the network of texts involved—not just the published text of Mallarmé, but its precursors, including the libretto of the Mime—Derrida provides an account of theatrical performance that in certain ways recalls that of Debord, but without succumbing to the nostalgia for a self-present “life” or “reality” that would both antedate and ground theatrical mimesis as its “authentic” origin and foundation. Drawing his key terms from the texts he reads, Derrida singles out Mallarmé’s use of “hymen” in the following passage:

in a hymen (from which the Dream proceeds), vice-ridden yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment, perpetration and its memory: here anticipating, there remembering, in the future, in the past, under a false appearance of the present. (p. 209)

Dans un hymen (d’où procède le Rêve), vicieux mais sacré, entre le désir et l’accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvénir: ici devançant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé, sous une apparence fausse de présent. (p. 237)
Whereas Mallarmé’s formulation at the end of this passage, “under a false appearance of the present,” would seem to inscribe itself in the “illusionist” conception of theater we have found at work from Plato to Debord, Derrida argues that it is both possible and compelling to read Mallarmé’s text as deconstructing the duality of appearance and reality to which this formulation seems to appeal: “The hymen, consummation of differences [des différents], . . . confounds itself with that from which it seems to be derived” (pp. 212/241), producing in Mallarmé what Derrida describes as “a simulacrum of Platonism or of Hegelianism . . . separated from what it simulates only by a barely perceptible veil, of which one could just as well say that it passes already-unnoticed—between Platonism and itself, between Hegelianism and itself. In between enter[s] [Entrée] the text of Mallarmé and itself” (pp. 207/235).

The awkward expedient to which I have resorted to translate the single French word *entre* in this passage—“in between enter[s]”—has the virtue of calling attention to what is decisive in Derrida’s reading, here and elsewhere. In Austinian terms, one might have said that his discourse moves from a constative to a performative mode, were not the notion of “performative” subject to the very logic here being put into question by being put into play. It is therefore more precise to say that, in repeating and remarking the ambiguity of the word *entre* in Mallarmé’s text, a word that can be read as both adverb (“between”) and verb (“enter”), Derrida moves from a purely “theoretical” discourse, describing an object independent of it, to a “theatrical” mode of (re)writing that stages (dislocates) what it also recites: the theatrical movement of Mallarmé’s writing. It should also be noted that if *entre* is read as a verb here, its syntactical placement at the start of the phrase makes it into an injunction rather than a simple indicative: “Let Mallarmé’s text enter.” This indeed is what happens more and more explicitly from this moment on, both in this particular text of Derrida and in his writing in general. In the almost four decades since this essay was published, Derrida’s writing has not ceased to demonstrate and explore, with increasing explicitness and variety, its own theatrical quality as a “staging” or *mise en scène*, rather than as an essentially constative reading of something held to exist independently of it.12

A text that does not merely “reproduce” and yet also does not simply “create” or “produce.” Its object is situated in an unusual and
complicated relationship to its “pretext.” It is involved in an operation that, like the “hymen,” exposes the interval “between” texts and in so doing allows something else to “enter” the stage or scene: a certain theatricality, which has as its grammatical hallmark the present participle.

Why the present participle? For two interrelated reasons, at least. First, because its “presence” is suspended, as it were, in and as the interval linking and separating that which is presented from the presentation “itself.” The “presence” of the present participle is thus bounded, or defined, by the convergence of its articulation with that which it articulates. But in thus being defined by its own redoubling—and this is the second reason—it is also constituted by and as a series of repetitions, each of which is separated from the others and yet is also bound to them in the sequence. Already in *Mimique* Mallarmé resorts to this tense where he must articulate that “false appearance of the present” as “ici devançant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé.” In short, something is going on that is more than just a false appearance. The appearing of the present participle is the grammatical index of those disjunctive “goings-on” that make the “present” into a “tense” in the most intense sense: “coming before” (devançant) or anticipating (the future) by “remembering” (the past).

If theatrical performance does not simply reproduce or accomplish something that exists in and of itself or that is at least intrinsically self-contained, the reiterative openness of the present participle is always both ahead of and behind itself, an ambiguity that in English is condensed in the preposition “after.” As present participle the present is “after” itself, in hopeless self-pursuit. From this point of view, it can be designated as “false” with respect to a notion of truth as self-preservation. But at the same time it can be understood as being more truly “pre-sent,” in the etymological sense of being placed before itself as well as before “spectators,” who, from this standpoint, are anything but merely “passive,” although they occupy a position that calls for impassiveness rather than for expressiveness.

What is curious about the present participle is the way it is both very close and yet irreducibly remote. Since it never adds up to a whole and always remains a part, the participation it entails follows a trajectory like that of the ballerina in another text of Mallarmé. Her pirouette, as Derrida shows, revolves incessantly around a center that is displaced with each turn, never coming full circle, never adding up
to a whole nor even to a simple step forward. If the ballerina’s pirouette is eminently theatrical, it is because its complex movement winds up going nowhere, if going somewhere is understood in the sense of that “authentic journey” described by Debord.

Derrida is, of course, aware of the curious status of the present participle, to which he refers explicitly at various times in this text. Yet these references do not explicitly discuss or dwell on either its incidence in the texts of Mallarmé that he cites or his own use of it. In most cases, the present participle is assimilated to an oppositional pair that appears as part and parcel of the logic that has to be deconstructed:

As soon as a mirror is interposed in some way, the simple opposition of activity and passivity, like that of producing \( \text{produire} \) and product, or also all the present and past participles (imitating/imitated, signifying/signified, structuring/structured, etc.) become ineffective and formally too weak to dominate the graphics of the hymen, its spider web and the play of its eyelids. (pp. 224/253)

But can the significance of the present participle be contained or comprehended within a “simple opposition,” which would place it in a certain symmetry with other participles? Or does something happen to “presence” when it is articulated as a participle, that exceeds the bounds of such an opposition?

There is an earlier allusion to the present participle in this text, which could have been the occasion for a more prolonged reflection on its status, especially since it links this “tense” to one of the major figures of Derrida’s reading of Mallarmé: the fold (\( \text{pli} \)). Derrida is arguing that the traditional notion of truth as self-presence undoes itself in the phenomenological insistence on truth as an appearing, “in the ambiguity or the duplicity of the presence of the present, of its \( \text{apparaître} \)—that which appears and its appearing \( \text{ce qui apparaît et son apparaître} \)—in the fold of the present participle (pp. 192/219).

How this “fold” of the present participle might relate to all the other folds that Derrida remarks in his reading of Mallarmé is a question that remains in abeyance throughout this particular text, although it goes on to engender increasingly powerful and conspicuous effects in virtually all his subsequent writings. Heidegger himself, of course, has little patience with or interest in theater, a point to which I shall
return later. Nevertheless, in the essay to which Derrida here alludes, what he does elaborate about the fold or, rather, about the “two-fold” quality of the present participle bears significant implications for its relation to theatricality.

Parting With

In his essay “Moïra,” Heidegger discusses a text by Parmenides, Fragment VIII, lines 34–41, which he reads as an elaboration of the more celebrated dictum, Fragment III, usually translated as “Thinking and Being are the same.” Heidegger introduces his commentary on Fragment VIII by noting that, although it seems simply to repeat and amplify the more famous assertion in Fragment III, there is a significant shift in the manner in which Parmenides articulates the relation between thinking and being:

Above all else, we should observe that [Fragment VIII, lines 34ff], which thinks this relationship more profoundly, speaks of ἐόν and not of εἶναί as does Fragment III. As a result the impression results, understandably, that what Fragment VIII addresses is not the to-be [Sein] but being [Seienden]. But in the noun ἐόν Parmenides in no way thinks being in itself [das Seiende an sich] wherein everything [das Ganze], including thinking, belongs, insofar as it is a being. Just as little does ἐόν mean εἶναί in the sense of the to-be for itself, as though the thinker sought to demarcate the non-sensuous way of the to-be from the being as sensuous [entity]. The ἐόν, the being [das Seiend], is rather thought in the twofold split [Zwiefalt] of the to-be and being, and spoken participially, without the grammatical concept on its own being able to attain to the knowledge of language.17

Heidegger thus dismisses the ability of the “grammatical concept” of the “participle” “on its own” to “attain to the knowledge of language.” Nevertheless, although mere grammar may not be enough, it seems hardly accidental that the problem that will occupy Heidegger throughout this essay and much of his philosophical work—the ontological difference and relationship between “the to-be” and “beings”—is linked here to the present participle, in the form of a gerund, das Seiend, which is both singular and general at once. This “at once,” however, distinguishes the “two-fold” structure of the to-be and
being, Sein and Seiendes, from that of a mere duality or opposition, since what is decisive is the emergence of a third term, das Seiend, to designate the way-of-being as a singular event. The key distinction here is that between Seiendes, the entity in general, and das Seiend, the singularization of being as an event or happening.

In English, by contrast, the three terms employed by Heidegger—Sein, Seiendes, Seiend—tend to be rendered by the “same” word, being. There would thus seem to be a loss of differentiation in the inability of English to distinguish Sein, verbal infinitive noun, from Seiendes, participial noun, as well as from their singularization as das Seiend. But perhaps this linguistic impoverishment of English with respect to German can become a resource, a “chance,” insofar as it offers no other choice than to articulate this singularization of being through what appears to be a repetition of the same word, in which the ostensibly tautology both dissimulates and deploys the difference at the heart of sameness—the tautos. If, however, the singularization of being were to turn out to be inseparable from just such a process of repetition, then the inability of English to “get its act together” by proffering the series of ostensibly self-contained nouns that German has at its disposal, far from being (!) merely a deficiency, could open a perspective that Heidegger’s native language, by dint of its very lexical and morphological richness, tends to obscure. Were this the case, the comparison between the respective linguistic resources of German and English would remain a helpful, if not indispensable condition of any such interpretation. The lexical paucity of English, in its limited ability to name “being” and its modes, would assume significance only through the comparison with (Heidegger’s) German.

To sum up: das Seiend, Heidegger’s decisive “third” term in the discussion of Parmenides, names “being” as a singular event or happening. The contribution of English, lacking equivalent nouns, would be to foreground a certain repetition as that which splits or transfixes the twofold—the to-be and brings—into the always singular way of being, das Seiend, that is its effect. The two German turns of phrase usually used to describe this split—“Sein des Seienden” (the to-be of beings) and “Seiendes im Sein” (being in the to-be)—are, Heidegger notes, unsatisfactory makeshifts, since both the genitive “des” and the inclusive “in” tend to “hide” rather than disclose the way in which the two-fold unfolds. What thereby unfolds is a singularity that has the
attributes of a process (being) and at the same time is localized (das Seiend) without being identifiable as a substance or entity (a Seiendes).

Thus, despite the tendency of Heidegger to downplay the significance of the grammatical form “on its own” to accede to the meaning of to-be, his effort to articulate the “twofold” of being leads him to resort to the present participle and in particular to its nominal, gerundive forms. The fact that, perhaps even more insistently than Derrida, Heidegger again and again recurs to the present participle and the gerund when he has to formulate the event of being places his disclaimer in a singular light. To be sure, a purely grammatical category is “on its own”—eigens—insufficient to explain anything, much less the complex and ambivalent event of being with which Heidegger is concerned. Nevertheless, the present participle and gerund recur too regularly at decisive junctures in his texts not to be indicative of a problem that deserves further attention.

The fact that it is a form of the gerund, das “Seiend,” that, as Heidegger writes, “in its ambiguity names the twofold,” (38) tells us something, in return, about the significance of the gerund and the present participle. The notion of “participle,” etymologically, comes from participium, which in Latin signifies “a sharing, partaking.” The Latin word in turn is a translation of the Greek metokhē, derived from the verb methexis, used by Plato to describe the manner in which entities “partake” or “participate” in the absolutes, the “ideas” that determine their qualities. But already these discussions of methexis indicate the close and for Plato problematical link between participation and partitioning, which is why Parmenides criticizes the notion in the dialogue of that name (Parmenides, 130c–131a). The same problem will crop up with respect to mimēsis, of which Aristotle, in the Metaphysics (987b), declares methexis to be nothing more than a verbal variant.

In order to share and partake, there must, however, be a concomitant dividing or divesting, a parting or, perhaps more precisely, a departing, a taking leave, a partitioning in order to im-part. All of this is uncannily condensed in the English phrase parting with. The “with” suggests that parting entails a departure, not simply as the dissolving of a relationship, but rather as a singular way of (re)constituting one. To remain in relation with precisely by parting is, however, one of the distinctive traits of the “spectacle,” as Debord recognized, albeit
primarily from a critical-nostalgic point of view: “The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*” (§29). Heidegger would of course reject any such assimilation, positive or negative, of the twofold to theater or the theatrical, however strongly his conception of truth as *aIētheia*, as self-dissimulation—concealing through revealing—seems to move in such a direction. As we shall see in Chapter 2, he will explicitly reject the related possibility of assimilating what he calls the clearing, *Lichtung*, to a theatrical stage, with “constantly raised curtain.” And yet his image itself suggests there is more to the matter than a simple rejection (or acceptance) could account for. Why should a “curtain” in front of a stage be “constantly raised”—or constantly lowered, for that matter? Heidegger’s effort to dismiss the stage by invoking a constant curtain suggests, by its very incommensurability with even the most rudimentary “ontic” experience of theater, that the simple *opposition* of raising and lowering will be no more appropriate to theater than to truth as *aIētheia*. What if it were not the presence or absence of the curtain, no more than that of the to-be of beings, that was at stake in this negative figure, but rather its *folds*? Might not the ambivalent ambiguity of the present participle turn out to be a singularly powerful linguistic and *theatrical* medium for articulating such a self-dissimulating parting-with?

The split with which Heidegger is concerned here, in his reading of Parmenides, is that between “thinking” and “being”—in Greek, between *nOEein* and *eIOn*, which he renders as “the twofold of oncoming and the ongoing [*Anwesen und Anwesendem*]” (p. 41). Like Derrida’s *arrivant*, Heidegger’s twofold has as its destiny never fully to arrive at its destination. Its *Geschick* is to suffer *Miβgeschick*. As the *Anwesen des Anwesenden*, the “ongoing of the oncoming,” it is neither one nor the other but their singular duplicity. It is not *two* folds, but rather the crease of a *singularly single fold*, enfolding and exposing its constitutive difference from itself.

Such singular duplicity, however, requires a no less singular process of being received, “collected,” discerned. It must, as Heidegger puts it, be *brought forward*. The medium of such bringing forth Heidegger conceives to be the *muthos*, *Sage*: which is not just myth or legend, but at the same time also and perhaps above all a saying (*Sagen*), which in “calling” “brings-to-appearing.” Such “calling” calls *forth* only by also calling for a receiving, perceiving, discerning instance. Yet any
such instantiation arrests the complex and conflicting movement of the twofold, which only discloses itself through self-concealment:

The destiny [Geschick] of the disclosing of the twofold hands over the oncoming (ta ēonta) to the everyday apprehension of the mortal.

How does this destined handing-over happen? Only through the way the twofold as such, together with its unfolding, remains concealed. Hence, self-concealment prevails in disclosure. (p. 51)

This kind of self-concealment affects not so much what appears as the way it appears. More precisely, what is concealed is precisely the way, in the double sense of trajectory and of manner. The “way” or trajectory is dissimulated by appearing as an event that seems simply to take place, in a single, self-identical place or, better, in a series of such places. Such a semblance, however, would reduce what Heidegger calls saying to a series of discrete statements, as in a narrative, for instance. It would construe mythos, not as a kind of saying, but rather as plot, in the sense of the word found in Aristotle’s Poetics, namely, a sequence of events with beginning, middle, and end, adding up to an integrated, meaningful whole. Heidegger does not speak of this explicitly, to be sure, but it seems consonant with his description of the self-dissimulation of the twofold, which he identifies, on the one hand, with the reduction of language to naming, and on the other, with the locating of the named in an unequivocal place. Heidegger formulates this as follows:

The usual saying of mortals, insofar as they do not attend to the oncoming [Anwesen], becomes the saying of names in which the pronouncement [Verlautbarung] and the immediately graspable figure of the word . . . predominate.

And where the usual . . . mode of discerning [Vernehmen], speaking out of the words, comes upon rising and falling, it recurs to the “this as well as that” of emerging and passing-away. The place, topos, is never attended to as placement [Ortschaft], as which the twofold offers a home to the oncoming of the ongoing [dem Anwesen des Anwesenden]. The meaning of mortals, in preferring the this-as-well-as-that, follows only the each-and-always-distinctness of places [Plätze]. (pp. 50–51)

Heidegger’s language suggests why he would be so little at home—or perhaps, so uncannily at home—with theater or theatrical-
ity. However riven he construes the twofold of being and beings to be, he still envisages the possibility of being "at home" in it or with it, of giving it a Heimat. But what becomes of such an "offer" in a world where, as Debord observes, "the spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere" (§30)? In being everywhere, the spectacle transforms each everywhere into somewhere else, into another scene. Heidegger attempts to dismiss this other scene by reducing it to the neutral simultaneity of the "this-as-well-as-that," which is to say, to a constant stream of places that are "always different" from one another—and yet, in their in-difference, always the same. Debord's position is not so very removed from that of Heidegger, since he too suggests that the capitalist commodity-spectacle always amounts to, returns to, the same. But he insists that in so doing it remains split, never simply taking place here and now.

The divided character of such taking place constitutes the quintessence of the theatrical scene, which is never just a place or series of places, making room for the orderly sequence of a narrative plot leading to a meaningful conclusion. Since no narrative sequence succeeds in framing or enclosing such places it traverses, it winds up being partitioned by them; in concluding, it gestures toward other scenes, which remain inconclusive, even and especially where the sequence ends or stops. With respect to such a sequence, it is not always easy to get one's bearings or to take a stand.

**Linking Pearls**

Taking a stand, having or finding firm ground under one's feet, has surely constituted one of the oldest concerns of Western modernity. It is not surprising, therefore, that at its very beginnings Western theater should have staged precisely this concern and explored its vicissitudes in the fate of a king whose very name, far from concealing the complex and conflictual folding discussed by Heidegger, flaunts it. Oedipus, "swollen foot," made his name a public word by finding the word or noun that "solved" the riddle of the Sphinx and liberated Thebes from its scourge, only to reveal that the greatest dangers do not always come from without. Having supplied the name of a species that seemed to subsume the paradoxes of the Sphinx—paradoxes that describe a creature who has "two, three, and four legs," who speaks with a "single voice" and yet moves most rapidly on two feet and...
most slowly on four—Oedipus suffered a fate that demonstrates what can happen when the Heideggerian twofold deploys itself under feet that are trying to move.

We will have occasion to explore certain effects of this deployment later in this book. For now, however, it is time to bring this introduction to a provisional conclusion by taking a very brief look at another sort of theatrical performance, one that sheds light on the ambivalent attitude that has dominated the Western approach to theater almost from its very beginnings, although never without being contested and challenged. In contrast to what I will have occasion to designate a “mythological” approach to theater, epitomized in the *Poetics* of Aristotle—a theater that is understood to be essentially a vehicle for the presentation of a coherent, meaningful story—the theatrical performance I wish to discuss, although it includes a narrative element, is not essentially dependent on a story to produce its effects. To quote Heidegger’s “Moïra” one last time, such theater is concerned with “the manner in which the Word speaks, rather than the words’ individual pronouncements” (p. 51).

I refer to a performance of Peking Opera, given in Beijing in August 1999, a few weeks before the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the successful culmination of the Communist Revolution in China. Some sixty years earlier, Bertolt Brecht, in an article entitled “On Chinese Drama and the Alienation Effect,” provided the following account of a similar scene performed by a Peking Opera company in Moscow:

A young woman, the daughter of a fisherman, is shown standing and rowing in an imaginary boat. To steer it, she uses an oar that barely reaches to her knees. The current becomes faster; she finds it more difficult to keep her balance. . . . Each of the girl’s movements is as familiar as a picture; each bend of the river is known before the boat comes to it. This feeling is produced in the audience by the manner in which the actress plays the scene; it is she who makes the occasion seem so memorable.

The contrast described here by Brecht, between “standing and rowing” and hence between land and water, is one of the recurring situations of Peking Opera, part of its scenic repertoire. Since the movements performed by the actress are “as familiar as a picture,” Brecht emphasizes that it is “the manner in which the actress plays
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The scene” that “makes the occasion seem so memorable.” Elsewhere, he discusses how Chinese theater (and this could be extended to other Asiatic theaters as well) operates with a defined repertoire of gestures and situations, which are presented in infinitely varied and singular ways. What therefore “happens” on the stage is not the communication of something new, in the sense of content, but the variation of something familiar through its repetition. Repetition thus emerges as a visible, audible, and constitutive element of the theatrical medium. To vary Heidegger’s observation, it is not so much what is said or shown as the way that showing takes place. Or rather, since the stage of the Peking Opera is largely empty, the way that place is constituted as a scene.

The scene is set, as it were, through the contrast of water and land that recurs so often in Peking Opera. Where there is land, one can hope to take a stand, to acquire and maintain a certain stability. The joy and relief of sighting land is inseparable from the conception of the “voyage of life” that we find in Debord, who invokes it as a contrast to the spectacle. As a “journey,” rather than a spectacle, life can be seen as “containing its whole meaning within itself,” he writes. By contrast, the theatricality of the scene described by Brecht does not derive from the desire for such a journey, but rather from the ability to cope with the water’s current. The oar “that barely reaches to her knees” forces the body of the woman to bend as she rows. Bending to channel one’s movements while rowing is very different from trying to take a stand, or trying to conduct the journey to its successful conclusion, where it can display its “whole meaning within itself.” If such meaning is truly “within itself,” that is, within the narrative sequence that makes it “whole,” then the movements of the body on (or off) the stage can at best be means toward attaining that end or, as Aristotle insists, to presenting the whole story, the muthos, and through it the meaningful action upon which all tragedy is based, its praxis.

Western audiences have been encouraged to expect the display of such meaning and to demand it from theater and from art in general. This is why theatrical writers from Brecht to Artaud to Genet have all recognized the need to change, not just the habits of stagecraft, but those of spectatorship as well. As Brecht put it, once again with respect to Chinese theater: “What appears particularly important for us in Chinese theater is its efforts to produce a true art of beholding [eine
This “art” presupposes an awareness of the rules and repertoire, since this alone permits each performance to be evaluated in its singularity.27

Although such knowledge is, as Brecht writes, required for a “full appreciation” of the “art” of Chinese theater, a more general kind of comparison can be no less illuminating for those whose theatrical experience is primarily “Western.” One obvious point of departure for such a cross-cultural comparison would be the respective function of “plot” in mainstream Western theater and Peking Opera. In the latter, and presumably in Chinese and Asian theater generally, the importance of plot is closer to that assumed by “myth” in the practice of the Attic tragedians than to that first systematized by Aristotle’s theoretical reflections on that practice in his Poetics, even though the latter has continued to dominate, not just theater in the West, but also the newer media of film and television. The primary interest of Peking Opera is not to present a meaningful action through a coherent plot, but rather to use both action and plot to foreground the significance of the performance. This alters the function of both narrative and its staging. In the program of a contemporary Peking Opera company, the Liyuan Theater,28 this is described as follows: “The plot structure of Beijing Opera is often characterized as ‘linking pearls with a thread.’ Here the ‘thread’ refers to the general plot of the play, while the ‘pearls’ are the specific scenes of the play. Each scene is an integral part of the play. On the other hand, it has its own sub-plot and can be staged separately” (p. 21).

This suggests that the scenic “pearls” can be separated from, and are therefore not entirely dependent upon, the “thread.” Judging from the performance I saw, such independence could well be described as “situational”—with the proviso that “situation” here includes not merely the actions represented on stage but their presentation as well. The latter deploys its own significance, one that is neither separable from nor reducible to an extra-theatrical, referential “plot.”

The scene I want to discuss is taken from a sequence entitled “Autumn River.” The story thread tells of a student, Pan Bizheng, who has failed his examination, falls in love with a beautiful young nun, Chen Miaochang, who lives in a convent directed by Pan’s aunt. When the aunt learns about their relationship, she forces Pan to leave without saying goodbye to Chen. Chen finds the courage to forsake

**wahre Zuschaukunst**].”
the convent in pursuit of Pan. Reaching the banks of the Autumn River, she desperately searches for a means of crossing it. Here is how the program of the Liyuan Theater sums up this scene: “She happens to meet an elderly boatman, who turns out to be a jocular person. Having understood thoroughly why the girl is in such a hurry, the old boatman takes it easy and enjoys teasing the girl. Having had enough fun [with] her, the kind-hearted old man helps the girl catch up with the big ship Pan Bizheng has boarded” (pp. 47–48).

So much for the “story.” In its deliberately stereotypical manner, it is hardly the kind of muthos that Aristotle recommended as suitable for tragedy. But of course this is no tragedy, and that is part of the point: the Peking Opera and Asian theater generally are neither tragic nor even “dramatic” in the sense these terms have acquired in Western theater. The decision to privilege “tragedy” as exemplary of theater in general is a distinctively Western one, even if, as we shall see, the actual tragedies to which Aristotle refers in the Poetics, above all those of Sophocles, do not necessarily conform to his interpretation of them. One of the ways in which “Autumn River” is not “tragic” is in its refusal to focus upon the fate of one or two noble individuals. Not that its “characters” are not “noble”: they belong to the aristocracy, even if not necessarily to its ruling class. But already at the level of the plot they do not function primarily as “individuals,” even though the story is a love story. These lovers make no claim to be interesting or autonomous “individuals,” for the same reason that the “plot” does not provide the performance with its necessary coherence or meaning. Meaning is not separable from the way in which it is staged; indeed, it can be said to inhere in the staging of a certain type of performance, even if the latter is not unrelated to the story that frames it. But this story is no more equivalent to the scenic “situation” that is staged than a paraphrase is equivalent to the poem it paraphrases. To demonstrate the difference between the two, it is first necessary to describe the situation more closely.

It is that of a journey undertaken by Chen in the hopes of finding Pan. But the fascination of the scene—in which Chen finds the boatman, boards the ferry, and makes her way across the river to its distant shore—derives, not from the notion of a journey that might be completed, for instance, with the reuniting of the lovers, but rather from the deployment of a different kind of desire, involving separation rather than than fulfillment. “Autumn River” stages one of the ways