Foreword

The Rebellion of the Masks

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A common image used to understand the human experience consists of observing the world as if it were a theatre, and the people in it as actors in a drama. The idea that life is a stage, and that all individuals in the world acquire a mask to be in it, has been utilized even by the social sciences as a way to understand the integration of a subject with his or her community. “We come to the world,” asserted the sociologist Erving Goffman, “as individuals, achieve characters and become persons.” Persona, let’s remember, is a Latin word that refers to the mask or the character that appears in a theatrical staging. This interpretation of the human being as a subject that constructs herself or himself as a character inside a social drama is valid if we understand the mask not as an object that covers us up, but, on the contrary, as a device that reveals our identity.

Hence, Acting Together, the title of this book, signals to us one of the first aspects that, in a most intimate manner, define the condition of our species. I refer to the symbolic nature of human action, that which properly constitutes us into persons.

In effect, we human beings act together because the meaning of our lives springs from our relationships with others. This is why the question “Who am I?” finds its final answer in the role that I can play within a larger community. This proof does not negate my autonomy. On the contrary, it demands of others the recognition of my own existence and of my own projects. Thus, on the one hand, every person is an end onto herself or himself, and on the other, he or she reaches a level of fulfillment by playing a role in the community. Acting Together allows us to understand that peace constitutes itself in the value and recognition of the roles that each one of us carries out in the daily drama of our existences.
Violence, however, has a thousand faces and all of them relate to the breaking of the bonds that give us both humanity and meaning. In effect, be it under the guise of poverty, serfdom, or carnage, the violent act involves robbing the individual of the possibility of occupying a dignified space in the world of our lives, that is, of depriving her or him of their condition of person. This is why those who suffer any form of violence, experience an attack on their identity. Conversely, the peoples or social groups who have suffered deaths, genocide, slavery, or other forms of oppression carry with them the stigma of having been erased from history.

Thus, we understand that violence is the destruction of meaning, a disorder that contaminates the very symbols with which we build our lives in communion with others. And because it corrupts meaning and reduces our humanity, violence often appears as an inexplicable act, almost impossible to understand at the very time when it occurs. Violent acts that reveal the capacity possessed by human beings to commit abominations against each other and, ultimately, against their own selves, can shake up our conscience and make us lose our sense of reality. It should not be strange then to notice that those who have suffered the most brutal impact of this type of acts feel as if they have lived through something outside of meaning, and although they have felt this experience in their own flesh, they nevertheless find it extremely difficult to define it or make it comprehensible.

Violence appears to be an ineffable experience, but then, how can a conscience crushed by the subtraction of identity be reconstructed? How can the lost meaning be found again?

We can answer these questions in the second meaning that we find in Acting Together, that is, acting as representation, to be understood as the opportunity to be able to present once again the traumatic act on the theatrical stage. The great power of representation lays precisely in its symbolic force, in its ability to restore, through reenactment, the meaning inherent in the traumatic act.

Fiction allows us to reconstitute reality and, therefore, also the individual back into a person. It is because of this that representation can be perceived to be “more real” than the represented act itself, as it is through representation that a vision of the world is recuperated and the fragmented pieces can be composed to create a coherent and meaningful picture.

This restoration or revelation of meaning is in no way an appropriation of the victim’s voice. As we can understand in reading this volume, the actors on stage constitute themselves as mediators in an operation of great symbolic power that allows those who suffered the violent acts to reconnect with the facts and attain a form of catharsis. Acting together, and not separately, mending the torn fabric through community rituals, making understandable the incomprehensible, invoking the very demons that run through history: it is in these acts that the healing qualities of representation shared in this book reside.
We are dealing then with a ritual of exorcism and understanding, of revelation and knowledge. The histrionic fiction is, therefore, a sort of therapy that returns to us, mended and sensible, a broken and stunned reality.

In his *Theater and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud noted that “The theater restores [to] us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols...” and later asserted that “In the true theater a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic.” The many diverse experiences from different parts of the world that are discussed in this volume are comprehended by these images about the theatre offered to us by the great French dramatist. There are two aspects that stand out in them and recur again and again in the chapters of this volume: that theatre operates in a manner that awakens conscience-restoring conflicts, and that the act of representing results in a symbolic rebellion. Conflicts, of course, are not restored to fan the flames of violence, but to integrate them back into our memory. Rebellion is a vindication of that which unsettles us and keeps us awake. As a result, theatre becomes a powerful enemy of the injustice of forgetting.

This book narrates many diverse and particular cases in which theatre is an effective medium to understand the experience of violence. As important as probing each circumstance to understand the ways and effects of theatre on the reconstruction of dignity, peace, and justice is to notice the universal principles present in a wide diversity of expressions. Humanity, in its diverse manifestations, is, in the end, one in its essence, in its capacity to create symbols and through them its own existence is understood. Unfortunately, it is also one in its capacity to inflict great suffering and unfathomable misfortune.

Yet art and, as we see in this volume, theatre in particular, can show us that there is a greater force in creativity and a greater power in solidarity. It is in instances like these that art is not just contemplation and transcendence, but also a form of justice that cleanses and vindicates our species in a universal way.

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