

The Tooth, the Palm

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Jean-Francois Lyotard

1. Theater places us right at the heart of what is religious-political: in the heart of absence, in negativity, in nihilism as Nietzsche would say, therefore in the question of power. A theory of theatrical signs, a practice of theatrical signs (dramatic text, mise en scene, interpretation, architecture) are based on accepting the nihilism inherent in re-presentation. Not only accepting it: reinforcing it. For the sign, Peirce used to say, is something which stands to somebody for something. To Hide, to Show: that is theatricality. The modernity of our fin-de-siecle is due to this: there is nothing to be replaced, no lieutenantcy¹ is legitimate, or else all are; the replacing—therefore the meaning—is itself only a substitute for displacement. Take two places A and B; a move from A to B means two positions and a displacement; now declare that B comes from A; you are no longer taking B's position positively, affirmatively, but in relation to A, subordinated to A, itself absent (gone by, hidden). B is turned into nothingness; as an illusion of presence, its being is in A; and A is affirmed as truth, that is to say absence. Such is the apparatus of nihilism. Is theatricality thus condemned? By repeating this apparatus in its specific reading, semiology continues theology, the theology of the death of God, of structure, of critical dialectics, etc.

2. Displacement (Freud's *Verschiebung* or *Entstellung*) is an energy transfer, Freud said an economic process; the libido invests this or that region of the body's surface (which turns inward to its "internal organs" also); it establishes itself there, in position A; it moves; it settles elsewhere; in position B. Shall we say B represents A? In his *Petite anatomie de l'image*, Hans Bellmer takes this example: I have a toothache, I clench my fist, my nails dig into the palm of my hand. Two investments of the libido. Shall we say that the action of the palm represents the passion of the tooth? That it is a sign of it? Is there no possibility to reverse one and the other, a hierarchy of one position over the other, power of one over the other? For anatomical and physiological sciences, for re-flexology, and for any reflexion, the answer is yes, of course. In the move of the libido, no irreversibility is possible; the erotic-morbid body can function in all directions, can go from the clenching of the palm to that of the jaw, from the fear (imagined?) or a father or mother to obesity (real?) or ulcer (real?) of the stomach. This reversibility from A to B introduces us to the destruction of the sign, and of theology, and perhaps of theatricality.

3. Reversibility is part of our social, economic, ideological experience of modern capitalism, which is ruled by a simple law: value. In precapitalistic economy, the product, production, consumption (which are not even separated as distinct spheres) are related as signs or as sign-making activities to positions deemed original or pre-existing: the object, work, the destruction or circulation of objects are thought of within a Mystique or within a Physics, being there by and for another thing. Part of Marx's work perpetuates this semiotic theory of precapitalist economy, notably by

using the category of use-value (of commodities, but especially of labor power). But the present experience of growth economy teaches us that so-called economic activity has no anchoring in an origin, in any position A. Everything is exchangeable, reciprocally, only under the conditions inherent in the law of value: work is no less a sign than money, money no more than a house or car, there is only a flux metamorphosing into billions of objects and currents—such a teaching from political economy must be compared to what libidinal economy teaches us: both political economy and libidinal economy in so much as they shape our modern life, support criticism and the crisis of the theater. A semiology would inhibit the crisis and gag the criticism.

4. Reading Zeami's treatises in R. Sieffert's translation, and at the same time Artaud and Brecht, whose analyses and concurrent failures still dominate today's theater, I am learning how theater, put at the place where dis-placement becomes re-placement, where libidinal flux becomes representation, wavers between a semiotics and an economic science. In the first books of the Fushi-kaden, the earliest (c. 1400) Zeami multiplied discontinuities; he divided up, the life of the actor into periods, the year into seasons, the day into moments; mimicry into types, the repertory into genres of *nô* (of *waki*, of *ashura*, of women, of the real world ...), the diachrony of the theatrical show in units (*kyôgen*, *nô*), assembled according to an unchangeable sequence *jo-ha-kyû*, the stage space into places ascribed to such and such a role and to such and such a moment in the action, the sound space into regions, the mimicry into poses, the very public itself into categories, etc. This material is every semiologist's dream; everything is discrete and coded, each unit of one order referred to a unit of another and of all other orders; the whole game seems governed by the two principles of the primary of signification (*iwâre*) and of the search for the greatest agreement (*sôô*). To fully realize the sign system, the actor himself had to disappear as presence; wearing a mask, his hands hidden, when playing women's roles; the flower (*fleur*) of the performance was conceived as absolute interpretation, that is to say, non-interpretation; and when playing the role of madmen without a mask, he would underline the difficulty of performing madness by allusions to possession, therefore imitating the possessor-demon, without however falling into the expressionism of facial features "whereas there is no necessity to imitate the facial expression; it happens however that in changing one's usual expression, one composes his countenance. That is the intolerable sight." Intolerable in that it makes visible the invisible, it confuses bones with skin, substance with secondary effects, it violates the hierarchy of social and corporal spaces distanced into front and back, into illusion and reality. The extreme nihilism lurking in Buddhism is what pushes this semiotics to its limit, transforming the signs into signs of nothing, of the nothing that is between the signs, between A and B; said Zeami, it is in the intervals between the actions he performs, be they spoken, sung, danced or mimed, thus in moments when he is doing nothing, that the actor is truly a sign, signifying the very power of signifying which is a deviation and a void: a puppet. Zeami cited in this connection a zen formula about puppets which referred the Westerner to Book VII of the *République*.

5. However the semiotics of Zeami seems traversed, sometimes thwarted by a very different drive, a libidinal drive, a search for intensiveness, a desire for potency (isn't it necessary to express *nô* as potency, *Macht*, might, in the Nietzschean sense, in the same sense that Artaud takes *cruauté*?). The name of flower (*fleur*) is given to the search for the energetic intensification of the theatrical apparatus. The elements of a total "language" are divided and linked together in order to permit the production of effects of intensity through slight transgressions and the infringement of overlapping units. The signs are no longer looked at in their representative dimension, they don't even represent the Nothing any more, they do not represent, they permit "actions," they operate as the transformers, fueled by natural and social energies in order to produce affects of a very high intensity. In this way, we can understand the appearance (a little later) in Zeami's work of the themes of the unusual, of the fluidity and the unpredictable effectiveness of acting, of the uncalculable significance of seizing the right moment; above all the fact that the flower (*fleur*) of interpretation is nothing, is only effervescent (*shoiretaru*). The well-trying procedures (*kojitsu*), which correspond to the unity of a culture which is also a cult, thus make room for a flux in motion, for a displaceability, and for a kind of effectiveness by means of affects, which belong to libidinal economy.

6. The hesitation of Artaud was the same as that of Zeami. But it leaned the other way. Artaud sought to destroy not so much the Italian, i.e. European Renaissance, theatrical apparatus, but at least the predominance of articulated language and the suppression of the body. In this way he expected to rediscover a libidinal efficiency of the performance: "power," "underlying energy," the power to displace the affects which work by the displacement of well-ordered units; "the secret of the theater in space is dissonance, the discrepancy of voice timbers and the dialectical deconcatenation of discourse." Here is evidence of something very closely approaching libidinal economy; "in the ardour of life, in the lust of life, in the unreasoned impulse of life, there is a sort of initial meanness, the desire of Eros is a cruelty because it burns contingencies, death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty, because in all directions and in a circular and closed world, there is no room for true death, because ascension is a tearing away, because the closed space is teeming with life, and because every stronger life passes through other lives, thus devouring them in a massacre which is transfiguration and a positive good." But on the way to this generalized dissemiotization, Artaud stopped and what stopped him was nihilism, religion, (perceptible even in this *Lettre sur la cruauté*). For intensities to function, he had to manufacture a "tool" which would again be language, a system of signs, a grammar of gestures, of hieroglyphics." That is what he thought he found in Eastern theater, particularly in Japanese and Balinese. Thus he remained a European, he repeated the "invention" of an agreement between the body and the senses, he repeated the great discovery of the uniting of the Eros-libido with the libido as death-wish, he repeated his "ethnographic" *mise en scene* here on the Eastern stage. But the Eastern schoolmaster, no less nihilistic than his Western pupil, had to also "invent" the paradise, whether Buddhist or any other, of non-duality. In this way the mutilation that Artaud is fleeing comes back to him by way of Balinese hieroglyphics.

To hush the body with the writer's theater, dear to bourgeois Europe of the 19th century, is nihilistic; but to make it speak the lexicon and syntax of mime, song, dance, as the *nô* does, is again a way of annihilating it; a body completely transparent, skin and flesh of the bone which is spirit, untouched by all displacement, events, libidinal denseness. Not to mention that modern Europe does not have at its disposal any *kojitsu*, any certified means of conveying the affects; it wants signs and speaks of them at the very moment that it lacks them. This is why Artaud put more emphasis on the sacred than did Zeami.

7. Will the theater have to limit itself to a critical function? the only one allowed by the crisis of modernism? That was Brecht's solution. To him, it is not enough for the movement of the hand to make a silent allusion to the toothache, effectiveness is defined as a process of understanding or of realization, that is to say a process of appropriation, of espousing the cause (position A). The theater aims at making us recognize that there exists a structure connecting the tooth and the fist, connecting such and such a behavior of Mother Courage to such and such an infrastructure, and such and such another behavior to such and such an ideology. The theatrical effectiveness, defined as knowledge, is mediated by "conscience." "Conscience" is, in fact, a precise language apparatus, Marxist materialism: this apparatus of language, in its turn, introduces into Brechtian playwriting and scenography, a complex apparatus, no less precise, that Brecht defines as distanciation. Distanciation appears to be an extreme case of nihilism, the actor performs such and such an action in such and such a situation, but his text, his acting and the whole *mise en scene* take hold of this action in order to show that it could be another: "to act out all the scenes in terms of other possible scenes." This is a process that reduces its object to nothing, much as the recounting of a witness on the street corner, far from actualizing the accident, distanciates it through discourse. Here Brecht can also call upon Eastern theater (especially Chinese): "it is evidently a matter of repetition by a third party of a process, of a description admittedly artful. The artist shows (representing someone in a rage) that this man is beside himself, and he points to completely external signs that prove it (for example, taking a lock of his hair between his teeth and biting it off). But no nihilism can realize itself, all nihilism must remain religious; where there is a gap between A and B (the *nihil*), there must also always be the link between A and B (to connect it, the *religio*). What performs as religion in Brecht is the language apparatus of Marxism: the whole theatrical effectiveness which he anticipates, relies upon a system of beliefs, not only the belief that there exist sociological determinations that correspond to economic structures, but the belief that these determinations form the deep lexicon and grammar of historical passions, that they produce and govern the displacement of affects and the investments of the theatrical audience. That is why this theater is called epic theater. But ours is no longer a time of the epic any more than of tragedy or of savage cruelty. Capitalism destroys all the codes, including the one that gives industrial workers the role of the historical hero. The Marxism of Brecht = an epic grafted onto a critique. After a century of International Congresses and half a century of Socialist States, we must say: the graft has not taken, neither as

dramaturgy, scenography, nor as world politics. Marxist semiotics is as arbitrary in the theater as is any other semiotics for correlating the performer and the performed and to allow the communication of the audience with itself through the mediary of the stage.

8. Alienation itself, a nihilistic, religious and again Marxist category, must be thought through affirmatively. The importance of alienation is not that it points out the distance from an origin, from a lost nature, its importance is in the way Marx analyzed it in the introduction to the *Contribution critique de l'économie politique* in the *Grundrisse* in (the unpublished) Chapter VI of *Kapital I*: as indifference of man towards his work and of work towards its man, of money towards that which it can buy and of the commodity towards its monetary counterpart (and its possessor). This indifference is the experience of the predominance of exchange value. We must stop thinking of it as the loss of something, the loss of the difference, that is to say of qualification, craft, quality, usage, meaning, agreement, possession. Rather let's think of it positively, this indifference leads to libidinal economy, to a direct linking without representation of the political economy with libidinal economy. The theory of value puts us potentially into a non-hierarchical circulation, where the tooth and the palm no longer have a relationship of illusion and truth, cause and effect, signifier and signified (or vice versa), but they coexist, independently, as transitory investments, accidentally composing a constellation halted for an instant, an actual multiplicity of stops in the circulation of energy. The tooth and the palm no longer mean anything, they are forces, intensities, present affects.

9. An energetic theater would produce events that are effectively discontinuous, such as the acts noted randomly on slips of paper themselves being lots, drawn by John Cage and proposed to the interpreters of *Theater Piece*. Likewise what this theater needs, instead of *sôô*, of agreement between dance, music, mimicry, words, seasons, time, the public and nothing, is rather the independence and the simultaneity of noises-sounds, of words, body arrangements, images that characterize the co-productions of Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg. By eliminating the sign relation and its hollowness, one makes the power relation (hierarchy) impossible, and consequently, what becomes also impossible is the so-called domination of the playwright + *metteur en scene* + choreographer + stage-designer over the so-called signs and also over the so-called spectators.

10. So-called spectators, because the notion of such a person or such a function is itself contemporary with the predominance of the re-presentation in social life; and specifically of what the modern West calls politics. The subject is a product of the performance apparatus, it disappears when the apparatus disappears.

11. As for the theater as place, this affirmative thinking of alienation implies not only the bankruptcy of the hierarchized relation stage/house, but that of the hierarchized relation of inside/outside. For all theater is an apparatus duplicated at least once (sometimes more than once; *Hamlet*, *Marat-Sade*, *La prochaine fois je vous le*

chanterai: it could be reversed, it could be displaced; actors playing in the wings, the audience seated on stage) thus made up of two limits, of two barriers filtering the coming and going energies; one limit (1) which determines what is "exterior" to the theater ("reality") and what is "interior," a second limit (2) which, on the inside, disassociates what is to be perceived and what is not to be perceived (underneath, stage lights, wings, chairs, people ...). Criticism, involved in the new theater, addressed itself essentially to the problem of the second limit (2), as staging and architectural experiments prove. But the crisis is now that of the first limit (1); stage + house/"outside." It is a selective limit, par excellence; sounds, lights, words, eyes, ears, postures, (and therefore also in capitalism, the wallets) get sorted out so that what is a libidinal displacement may yield to the re-presentative re-placement of performance. On the "outside," the tooth ache, on the "inside," its representation by the clenching of the fist. But the business of an energetic theater is not to make allusion to the aching tooth when a clenched fist is the point, nor the reverse. Its business is neither to suggest that such and such means such and such, nor to say it, as Brecht wanted. Its business is to produce the highest intensity (by excess or by lack of energy) of what there is, without intention. That is my question: is it possible, how?

Translated by Anne Knap
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NOTES

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1. A pun is here intended; lieu-tenant = place holder