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CHAPTER 11

The Symbolism of Theatre

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We have just compared the confusion of a being with its outward and profane manifestation[1] to the identification of an actor with the character he is playing; in order to demonstrate to what extent this comparison is exact, a few general considerations about the symbolism of theatre will not be out of order, although they do not pertain exclusively to the initiatic domain. Needless to say, this symbolism may be connected to the original character of the arts and crafts, all of which used to possess an initiatic significance by the fact that they were attached to a superior principle from which they were derived as contingent applications; they only became profane, as we have explained quite often, as a result of the spiritual degeneration of mankind during the descending course of its historical cycle.

One could say, generally speaking, that the theatre is a symbol of manifestation, the illusory character of which it expresses as perfectly as it is possible.[2] This symbolism can be envisaged either from the point of view of the actor or from that of the theatre itself. The actor is a symbol of the Self or the "inner person" manifesting himself in an indefinite series of states and modalities which may be considered as many different roles; and one must note the importance of the ancient use of the mask as an exact expression of this symbolism.[3] For under the mask the actor remains himself throughout all of his roles. Likewise, the "inner person" remains "unaffected" by all of his manifestations; the disappearance of the use of the mask, on the contrary, forces the actor to change his own physiognomy. However, in all cases, the actor remains fundamentally other than what he seems to be, in the same way as the "inner person" is different from the multiplicity of his manifested states. They are but the outward and changing appearances

[1] In the chapter "Noms profanes et noms initiatiques" ("Profane and initiatic names").

[2] We do not say unreal; for it is quite obvious that illusion must only be considered as a lesser reality.

[3] It is relevant to note here that this mask is called in Latin *persona*; the "inner person" is, literally, he who hides himself under the mask of the individual.

which he puts on in order to realize, throughout the various modes which befit their nature, the indefinite possibilities which he contains within himself in the sempiternal moment of non-manifestation.

Moving to another point of view, we can say that the theatre is an image of the world: both the theatre and the world are properly "representations." The world itself, because it exists only as a consequence and an expression of the Principle upon which it is essentially dependent in all its aspects, can be regarded as symbolizing the principial order in its own manner. It is this symbolic character which confers to the world a value superior to that which it possesses in itself, being the way in which it participates in a higher degree of reality.[4] In Arabic, theatre has been designated by the word *tamthīl* which, like all the words which derive from the same root, *mthl*, denotes the meanings of resemblance, comparison, image or figure; and some Muslim theologians use the expression "*ālam tamthīl*," which may be translated as the "figurative world" or the "world of representation," to refer to all that which is described symbolically in the sacred Scriptures and therefore should not be taken literally. It is remarkable that some apply this expression specifically to the realm of angels and demons, which in truth represent the higher and lower levels of being, and which can only be described by symbolic terms borrowed from the sensible world. Moreover, by a coincidence which is at least noteworthy, one must mention the considerable role that these angels and devils played in the religious theatre of the medieval West.

It follows from what has just been said that theatre is not necessarily limited to the function of representing the human world, that is to say a single state of manifestation; it may also represent at the same time the higher and lower worlds. For this reason, in the mystery plays of the Middle Ages, the stage was divided into several levels corresponding to different worlds; these levels were generally assigned following the ternary division: heaven, earth and hell. Furthermore, since the play was performed simultaneously within these various divisions it was an accurate representation of the essential simultaneity of the states of being. For lack of understanding this symbolism, the moderns have come to consider as "naiveté," not to say awkwardness, what is actually of the most profound significance. What is most surprising is how rapidly this incomprehension appeared, as is shown by

[4] This is also the consideration of the world either as attached to the Principle or in its own being only, which distinguishes fundamentally the point of view of the traditional sciences from that of the profane sciences.

its striking manifestation among the writers of the seventeeth century; this radical schism between the mentality of the Middle Ages and the mentality of modern times is not one of the least enigmas of history.

Since we have just spoken of mystery plays, we do not believe it useless to point to the singularity of this denomination which has a double meaning: one should write, in all etymological strictness, "misteries," for this word was derived from the Latin word *ministerium*, meaning "office" or "function," which clearly indicates the extent to which theatrical representations of this kind were originally considered as an integrating part of the celebration of religious holidays.[5] The strange thing is that this name has been contracted and abridged in a way as to become exactly homonymous of the "mysteries," and to be finally confused with this other word, which has a Greek origin and a totally different derivation; it is only through an allusion to the "mysteries" of religion, which were staged in the plays which have been thus designated, that this assimilation produced itself. This may no doubt be a plausible reason; but on the other hand, if one considers that analogous symbolic representations used to take place in the "mysteries" of Antiquity, as in Greece and probably also in Egypt,[6] one may be tempted to see in this something which goes back much further in time and to interpret it as an indication of the continuity of an esoteric and initiatic tradition which affirmed itself outwardly, at more or less distant intervals of time, by similar manifestations, with the adaptation required by the diversity of circumstances of time and place.[7] We have had rather frequent opportunities to point to the importance of phonetic assimilations between words which are philologically distinct, as a modality of symbolic language; there is nothing arbitrary in this, whatever most of our contemporaries may think of it, and this method is actually not without connections with the modes of interpretation pertaining to the Hindu *nirukta;* but the secrets of the intimate constitution of language are so completely lost today that it is hardly possible to allude to them without being suspected of indulging in "false etymologies" or even in mere "play on words."

[5] It is from the same word, *ministerium*, in the sense of "function" that the French word *métier* is derived.

[6] One may furthermore directly connect to these symbolic representations the ritual "staging" of initiatic "legends" which we mentioned earlier.

[7] The "exteriorization" in religious mode which occurred in the Middle Ages may have been the consequence of such an adaptation. It does not therefore constitute an objection against the esoteric character of this tradition in itself.

Plato himself, who occasionally uses this kind of interpretation—as we have incidentally indicated in reference to "myths"—is no more favorably received by the pseudo-scientific "criticism" of minds which are limited by modern prejudices.

In order to conclude these few remarks, we will mention still another point of view on the symbolism of theatre: that of the playwright. From that point of view, the various characters, as mental productions, may be considered as representing secondary modifications and as if extensions of the author, in approximately the same way as the subtle forms which are produced in a state of dream.[8] Furthermore, the same consideration would obviously be relevant with respect to the production of all works of imagination of any genre whatsoever; however, in the particular case of theatre, this production is specifically realized in a sensible mode which renders the very image of life, as it also happens in dreams. The author therefore fulfills a truly "demiurgic" function since he produces a world which is entirely drawn from himself. He may be considered for that reason as the very symbol of Being as producer of the universal manifestation. In this case as in the case of dreams, the essential unity of the producer of "illusory forms" remains unaffected by this multiplicity of accidental manifestations, as the unity of Being remains unaffected by the multiplicity of the manifestation. Therefore, from whatever standpoint one may look at it, one always finds in theatre this profound *raison d'être*—unknown as it may be by those who made of this form of art something purely profane; that of being by its very nature one of the most perfect symbols of the universal manifestation.

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[8] Cf. *The Multiple States of Being*, Chapter 6.