

The Limit of theatre

An enigmatic link relates the theatre with the modalities of human existence. This can firstly be observed in negative fashion. For example, animals are not in their proper element on stage. It is hard to keep them there : they run off, or do their business (relieve themselves) on the boards. Even when they stay there more or less calm, their presence is so strong, it is said that next to them even the best actor cannot capture the audience's attention. Because their presence is not of a theatrical order but of pure monstration [showing], a being-there stripped of all fable : this is the mode of appearance of the circus, or of certain sports. It does not come under what we call theatre, and constantly transgress its limit.

In the same way, deep down, nature as a whole remains absent from the theatre's existence (the mode of existence in theatre). Rivers and skies are not to be found on stage, except if they have been represented on canvas or cardboard. You won't see mountains there, unless they have been painted. This is true of all the other arts, could we say, of all representations ? Certainly. But the theatrical act itself, we know, is played *in presence, in the presence of*. Now the nature we see on stage is not really there, it only features through a delegation, most often a very meagre one at that. This representation is so clumsy that modern theatre has devoted itself to stripping down the stage, emptying it to leave only direct instances of display. Mountains, flowers, skies, and seas too, only come to the theatre as facts of language, as events of discourse. They don't expose themselves as bodies to real scenic dangers.

This is why people of the theatre who were in large part the builders of cinema as an art – Eisenstein, Griffith, Gance – were so impassioned by the emergence of this discourse of images. The cinema bore above all the promise of calling up nature and its large open spaces, animals and their lives as part of the spectacle. And all of this through movement, the quality for which the movies were the new art form, while in the theatre movement remained constrained and confined. Is there any more actual presence than in the theatre? There certainly is not. What we do find, however, is an effect of renewed presence through its kinetic powers. The movement itself was, at least, real : a genuinely moving image. The appearance of certain genres, such as the western or the historical film, allowed all these new possibilities to be assembled : horses running in vast natural spaces, but also the raging sea, tempests, nature beneficent or dangerous – and so, in a certain sense, the human bounds imposed by the stage were stepped beyond.

At the opposite (end of the scale) to these furies, the theatre, for its part, had only the human for its soil. What you see at the theatre are first and foremost humans, in their everyday doings. But we really do see them, in this resides all the compensation the theatre offers for its relative poverty ; and it is so powerful as to allow it to live alongside any circus, arena or screen, compared to which it does, after all, cut a slight figure. In the theatre, the human is king, because, being almost alone in its kingdom, no beast runs, and no storm rumbles, except in the wings, or thanks to a safe simulation.

This special alliance (between the theatre and human affairs) can also be characterised in positive fashion, rather than centring on what it lacks. Firstly, most theatre finds its centre of gravity in speech. It is established that theatre cannot be reduced to this : not only because there exist forms of theatre in which language is silent, but also because, surrounding language, the whole scenic apparatus surely cannot be reduced to aiding the utterance of discourse. I have personally paid particular attention to the way in which the theatre does not seek, or does not merely seek to allow words to be heard, but, in a very paradoxical way, seeks to allow them to be seen, to give them to be seen ; and so language can only be presented on stage as something shifted, and de-centred from its reputed primary function, and, as it were removed from its shell. The theatre applies itself to the becoming visible of a non-visual meaning, and it is in this way that it tackles words. It is perhaps for this very reason (and not in spite of it) that the theatre, in the way we have known it and named it, works within the field of the linguistic adventure that moves the human. Since the Greeks, but also the Oriental poets, what we call theatre is expressed principally in the conversation, the debate that individuals cultivate between themselves through the means of language. The paradox, which I say once again, is to give this conversation as an event to be seen, and not only to be heard : far from weakening it, this *point of view* reinforces the passionate interest that the theatre directs towards speech. Now spoken language is the affair of humans. Most certainly, at the boundaries of human experience, fringes of language are to be found which go beyond the limits of the human. At the boundaries of theatrical experience, we also venture, in a ruck of bodies (a clinch), beyond the sole centrality of discourse. However, linguistic passion remains the heart of what we call the theatre, and this because of a complicity, a congruence and a very deeply shared belonging between theatre and language – and so

also between theatre and the interpellation of humans. If the theatre, including in the form of its newest experiments, does not simply dissolve into dance, or mime, if it continues to assert itself now as theatre, it is in so far as language continues to perforate it. This affinity, this temper, obviously does not engage in the same way with, for example, painting : this is why painting does not deal in such exclusive fashion with human affairs – but also with landscapes, animals, trees, mountains and skies.

Beyond this acknowledgement, which is (almost) self-evident, we can perceive other terrains and soils, that form part of this coextensiveness between the theatre and human schemes. There is thus a strange polarity between theatrical practice and the upright stance. Most theatre is practiced standing. Exceptions, variations and limit cases can be found. Any claim, whatever it may be, and in whatever domain, can always be demonstrated to be false using a limit case. To he who claims that humans speak or laugh, one can raise the objection of the mute or the sad. To the observation that beasts move and vegetables stay rooted, one can cite static animals and migratory plants. Even to the midday sun, one can raise the objection of eclipses. This casuistry is weak. Concepts should be taken by the middle, stomach-first, considered first of all in their thickness. Limit cases thus show themselves to be very profitable, and I shall return to them : they form my title. So, theatre is mostly performed standing. One can play a role sitting or lying down. It is rare[r] : the sitting position was excluded, at least by the tragedy – Corneille transgressed a steadfast rule when he wrote, ‘Take a chair, Cinna’¹. As for recumbent acting (Desdemona²), it remains exceptional. What is the source of this strange affinity between theatre and the upright position, the actor on his feet, legs straight, possibly raised further by the slope of the stage or the wearing of buskins ? It is a question of vision, at first view, but also of address (the fact of addressing) : standing, one offers the plexus, the pectorals, the entire body up to the gaze and even ear. The seated actor is *diminished*, or ill at ease. Now the standing position is, all exceptions and limits considered, the human position – elevation and straightening up being what stand out in human singularity. These postural features exhibit the body and face differently when face-to-face. The theatre is a human affair. It wants humans, stationed upright, addressing gaze and language, offering themselves to the attentive view of the audience space. All in all, this relation does nothing more than express the, copiously commentated, fact, that theatre finds its

¹ Corneille, *Cinna*, V, 1, v. 1425 and also 1479.

² Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.

substance in men and women present on stage, whereas painting, sculpture or cinema represent them, architecture boxes them round, music springs from their visible bodies, while, inversely, dance may (often) silence their voices. The theatre wants humans in their entire presence, active and living³ – and these requirements neither animals, machines, nor plants can fulfil – except in limit cases.

Must we consider then that the theatre, thus coupled to the human via language, stance, and a few other elements, is confined within human limits, and so lead to be enclosed within this *condition*? Does the theatre consequently find itself condemned to regress in measure with the emergence of a post-human condition, and along this path fall into obsolescence? To this eventuality I see a substantial objection. It is that the idea of a human domain defined by stable properties, fenced in by them, and cantoned within set limits, strikes me as void. Of course this idea has plausible appearances. However, the emergence of the human from within nature is precisely linked to the advent of something exceeding these limits. The human is equivalent to this very excess. Humanity is nothing other than animality in so far as it exceeds itself. That which comes to be in the heart of the natural landscape with the advent of the human condition is a transcendence, which is radical and theoretically infinite, that nature performs upon itself. Here I see the (figurative) meaning of the biblical myth according to which God made man in his own image. If God signifies excess, man resembles him in so far as he introduces boundless excess into that which surrounds him. That being the case, three models suggest themselves.

a) First possibility: this power to exceed defines nature itself, ‘birth’ being the leading characteristic of nature (*natura* in Latin, or the birthing, blooming of *physis* itself). The whole natural, nascent, is invested in this overflowing: from the explosion near a beginning, through ceaseless and unlimited expansion, up to the emergence (in a minute point of infinity or

³ Heiner Müller announces in an interview that the ‘fundamental presupposition of theatre is not as we generally believe, the presence of living actors or dancers, but the presence of actors or dancers who are dying’. This characteristic is immediately defined further, ‘They could die at any moment during the performance.’ This is a word. In the strict sense, they are therefore not dying but capable of dying or threatened with death. They are not dying but have the capacity of dying. It is not the same thing. The ability to die is one of the qualities of life. Only the living can die. So, as capable of dying, there are precisely living beings on stage. H. Müller, ‘Theatre is only born at the point of intersection between anguish and geometry’, interview with Alain Neddard and Johannes Odenthal (1990), trans Jean-Louis Besson and Jean Jourdheuil, in the review *Frictions*, (*Théâtres écritures*), no.24, winter 2014, frictions@revue-frictions.net, p.95.

even several points) of this madness of creation which we call life ; the madness of the created universe, the madness of the creative act, the madness of begetting, of sexual difference, of mortality. According to this model, the appearance of animality, then of the human, is in no way an infringement of creative dynamism. Immanence is here self-transcendent⁴. However, something does nevertheless occur, a considerable phase begins : the human exceeds excess (if only through language), opens excess to itself, and it is in this that the divine metaphor is relevant to the human – it opens infinite change to a kind of undergoing (of experience of) itself.

b) Second model : the break is more radical. Being claims to hold and contain itself within being, as being, according to the finiteness of totality. Here you'll recognise the Levinasian hypothesis. The human expresses, without exhausting it, another version [of excess], which is otherwise than being. In this displacement, the human has no essence. It marks the overflowing of essence, "beyond essence".⁵ The human condition becomes unconditional through its own movement, which is the going beyond the proper and its conditions. The figure, bearing all the limits of metaphor and myth, of the divine recognising in human its own image is none other than the repatriation of this pure excess into the regime of the image.

c) The third model is purely ethical. To think the human according to the scheme of this infinite excess does not make it a loss of control and norms. On the contrary, that which separates the human from the inhuman is the strange condition which opens the human to the beyond being and totality in disinterestedness, in an upsurging of absolute ethics, responsibility and response. This means that the in-finition of the human *responds* of itself in front of the utterance that exceeds it. The infinition of the human is an ethical infinity. It is neither the scuppering nor the

⁴ It seems to me that this is the model put forward by Hans Jonas, re-expressed in the 'myth' created in 'Immortality and the modern spirit' (1962), *Entre le néant et l'éternité*, trad. S. Courtine-Denamy, Belin 1996, pp. 105 et suiv., et repris dans *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz* (1984), trad. Ph. Ivernel, Rivages 1994, pp. 7 et suiv.

⁵ This leads Levinas to his reservation regarding humanism – but also, by the same token regarding anti-humanism, for which he harbours a reserved respect: 'Modern antihumanism [...] is true over and beyond the reasons it gives itself. Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person [...] in which the ego is still a thing [...]. Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human.' Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne, 1981, pp. 127-128.

scrapping of nature but its opening towards a regime of infinite respect, of respect for the infinite, the endless.

If we consider the human as a capacity for transcendence, or at least for moving beyond, the idea of moving beyond the human, of having done with it or of leaving its circumscription, assumes a quite different colour. I know that thought on the a-human or the post-human cannot be reduced to an anti-humanism, or to an in-humanism, and that the 'post', or the 'a' prefixes, can harbour great complexity. Nevertheless, the a-human or the post-human refer the human, through opposition, to an essence, and turn it back into a substance to enclose it within its limits, in order to prescribe the movement beyond. The post-human imprisons human in its characteristics, in its own nature, finitude or property. In this sense, it takes on a reactive value – or even a reactionary one, which I would like to risk characterising as lazy. Because moving beyond the human, is therefore to have done with the scheme of moving beyond / and of / excess itself. Consequently, it leads to a return to a nature contained within limits and to a repatriation within being. The post-human behaves then as a return : this strikes me as deserving careful consideration. A return to the nostalgic odyssean condition, of Ulysses, nostalgia, the manic suffering of return, to emancipate oneself from emancipation, wrench oneself from the wrench of the departure. I can well see that this suspicion is paradoxical, since the post-human seems to loose or break all moorings. But this emancipation does not to me seem certain. Its functioning is): refer the human back to an essence and then free oneself of this essence. But if the human emerges as a breaking with essence, it turns out that deep down it is the break that it is suggested we break with, and the post-human would thus take on the value of a generalised repatriation into the natural order. A pan-naturalism, so to speak, but not in the sense of nature being born (at once naturing and denaturing), of self-transcendence. Nature as a kind of patrimony. A certain idea, (to my view non-Deleuzian), of immanence is the flag flown by such a repatriation. Deleuze complicates immanence by using the plane of the transcendental, or through his link with Bergson or Sartre ; Spinoza, if one wishes, but without forgetting Kierkegaard (and even Dostoevsky). The confined idea of immanence – the model of rigid monism – is not this one. To my mind, this is a lazy idea. Why? I'm coming to this point in relation to the theatre.

Because of the congruence, uneasy but profound, between the theatre and the human, the tendency towards the post-human or a-human leads to the desire for an a-theatre, or a post-theatre. Why not ? All the better, on

the contrary : nothing grabs me in the concept of a theatre well-established in its nature, its identity as an art. But this exit from the theatre, in my experience, often spawns or delivers a backwards repetition, a regressive one. Because of giving up the work of interior tension of the theatre, of the carrying theatre into the vicinity of its limit. In the aim of going out of theatre, theatre is returned to its most conventional forms. Opposition to convention produces here conventional opposition. That is to say a very coded, image-laden, pre-critical transgression. An art can only invent itself when it is carried as near as possible to its boundaries : painting at the extremes of representation, music bordering on the unlistenable. This confrontation with that which exceeds or negates it is necessary, salutary and vital ; it leads to formal work in its most productive developments, questioning the forces within it which yearn for this excess – that long to invest in its self-transcendence. Allow me to repeat : I don't have high expectations for an art settled within an essence, which it claims to develop behind its walls. All I have thought and done is anchored in the active and stubborn critique of this vision of a theatre interior to itself. Nevertheless a great deal of critical work would be needed to refuse at once the positivism of the thing called theatre and any recourse to the inversion of its negative. At least, we need to be more Derridian : not satisfy ourselves (lazily) with the negative, and instead work on movement, and contamination. Not abandon work – as we (I suppose) don't give up philosophy.

Now, in the practical fantasy of a post-theatre – here I am talking about practice, praxeology –, I see at work, at least in a certain field, a so-called setting up beyond the bounds of theatre, which gives up on the idea of working with the agents of its tension. The simplest example is the action of actors. A great deal of post-theatrical researches are paid by a conformism or passeism in forms of acting, which are returned to an eclipse, or by a dialectical symmetry, a hystericization, that desert the worksite of elaborating modes of presence (and absence). The metaphorisation of the body and the voice, the physical and acoustic transport for a poetics (by work) of the body, are quite the opposite of the overheating or undercoldness, shrilling or frigid. The *theatrical point* needs to be displaced, to be moved out of synch or phase, we have to enquire into the point of moulting, to find out the fissure or gestation. It is to be expected that one may beat a retreat, since actors are humans and wishing to see them carried to the limits of their humanity is to want to conceive of this humanity as a capacity to move beyond, and not to be incarcerated within an essence. And so it is in a certain way to love this capacity and to

desire it as a body – not settled within its identity (nothing could be less physical, nor erotic) but engaged in its going beyond itself. This is why I dare characterize this determination as *lazy*. We know of a liberating and inventive laziness, a poetics of idleness. But this isn't the only kind. Somewhere, you can see at work a laziness of conformism, traditionalist by negation. The jump outside of the human, here, remains marked by an in-humanism, which is a humanism in reverse, reassuring itself by the face-to-face of substances. Another adventure of the dialectics. The dialectic has been a questioning power addressing to fixed essences. It retains doubtless this ability – even in encrypted or masked form. But it can also burrow itself into the most hardened essentialism, in a necrosis of negation. This is the heart of what I wanted to say : a negation of the human (as a transformative power), and so a negation of the theatre next to the human, turn to a negativist impetus, an essentialization of negative. There is a name for it, that several masters have taught us to formulate : nihilism.

The transcendence to be sought after would be the dismissal of positivism and of the nihilism that inverts and reinforces it. Transcendence questions the limit. The theatre finds itself carried to the very edge of its frame, where this edge can be worried, and its perforations, ports and pores navigated within. Through actors who let themselves be questioned in their power (and powerlessness) of humanity. In their attentiveness to the transcendences of language, and speech. With consideration for working the empty space and constructions of the stage. In devices (of stages and halls) which reinvent modes of address and dialogue. I would on this point like to call to attention two instances of laziness, which are linked. The first in scenography : a certain theatre of the negative (largely for reasons of financial survival) adapts to the most conventional rules of frontality. But as this frontality must be disrupted, it is hystericized⁶. The stage/hall relation is only questioned in the form of a rape. The rape of the audience is considered to be the only possible transgression – sometimes clearly marked as self-satisfied and tyrannical power. The flag of sadism strengthens the diagnosis : enjoyment in domination. The other laziness plays in address. For thirty years, the question of addressing the theatre (the hall, the audience) has been my fight, almost my flag, a personal combat against a certain fictional closure of the stage in upon itself. Buy address isn't a matter of launching projectiles into the audience, even linguistic ones. Address is a listening. The gaze directed towards the auditorium, if it

⁶ By hysteria, here, I don't mean a feminine feature, or drive, but au very masculine vision of woman.

is directed or *addressed*, is receptive, and passive. Address is this opening towards the auditorium that can only occur as a fissuring of the subject. Address is a kind of lack. When overactive, it turns into a despotic drive. It is deaf. And in this deafness is played out an enclosure of the gaze. This is the equivocality of the eye : to plunge the eye into another's eyes is an act of love – or of guardianship. Love is a transcendental passivity. An act of love that is drenched with passivity, attentiveness and calling.

To hystericize the negative seals a consent to critical laziness, which in its turn strengthens positivistic claims. Reactionary post-humanism. Trans-humanism could be a beautiful word, but is now somewhat spoiled by its mercantile tropism. Some resonances with 'transhumance' could be heard, with 'transcendence' too. It is true that there are no pure words, any of them can be spoiled, and we can still key from these adulterations. It is not easy, work is needed. Without any return to a placid humanism, I don't much like the banner of over-humanism, or the over-(hu)man – except if, as overheating is a heating to a point of excess, the overman is thought as a (ful)filling of the human, to excess. This is the Nietzschean model of the arrow, launched from the human towards the realm of his (or her) overtaking. The arrow comes from the human, and witnesses to the human ability to bend their bows, which, as we know, presupposes not only toned muscles, but a great deal of receptiveness and acceptance. Perhaps Brecht thought of this too, when he called for 'More Good Sport'⁷ in the theatre. This is the sense of my alert on laziness : we must labour, as workers of the stage, for its enlargement. *Elargissement* in French means, for a space, its extension, and for a prisoner, his release.

⁷ B. Brecht, « Davantage de bon sport » (1926), in *L'Uppercut et autres récits sportifs*, L'Arche 2006, pp. 21 et suiv., trad. J. Tailleur.