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Theatropoiesis and novels of truth

by

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For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and
incommoded the poetic, that is a mere bagatelle
compared to the damage which the poetic would inflict
if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real.
W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror: A commentary on Shakespeare's* The Tempest, p.157

L'irrationel limite le rationel qui lui donne à son tour sa
mesure (The irrational limits the rational that on its
turn gives it its measure)
Camus, *L'homme révolté*, p.365

Introduction: A question of balance

I must start by giving reasons, almost an excuse, for such a strange title word.

Over the past five years or so my research increasingly became focused on masks and theatre, and the long-term in-depth impact of related practices on social life. Such an orientation might seems perplexing, odd, idiosyncratic, as in our world nobody ever wears masks, except children for Halloween, while going to theatre became a fringe activity of an increasingly smaller number of people. It also took for me quite some time to recognise the potential significance of such a path, after it has been suggested to me by Agnes, with her usual graceful force. But by now I came to recognise that it indeed offers a royal road into the most pressing issues of the modern world – and not only. As the reality in which we live, and which we are forced to take for granted as the alpha and omega of our daily existence, as we do not have another one, is an increasingly theatricalised world.

In order to understand the nature of theatricalisation, we need to enter a very basic *anthropological* level; a question, however, that is not concerned with the single human being, but with all of us living in this global world, and is therefore also in this sense *political*. Any moment of human life, in any aspect of our existence, is caught in a tension between two poles: the simple, repetitive ordinariness of everyday existence; and the mystery of being. We can only lead a happy, satisfied, rewarding life if things are ordered, predictable, and meaningful for us; if we have an understanding of and control over the simple, normal events of our everyday existence. There is no meaningful life outside a shared ordinariness. And yet, every moment of our existence is also saturated with mysteries, which can be revealed to us, shining suddenly upon us, in the midst of the most ordinary aspects of life and existence which otherwise we could just pass by of accept without thinking about it. The laughter of a child, the jumping of a dog on a small

meadow, the leaves of the autumn tree in a garden in front of the office window, or the hardly noticeable saluting expression on the face of two strangers who meet each other on a pathway carry a mystery which would take pages to describe – yet, to which no effort of a no matter how comprehensive description could do justice.[1] The value of life is given by the most mundane everyday occurrences that can suddenly become filled with meaning – or, rather, which are *always* full of meaning, except that we don't and cannot recognise, or pay them attention, all the time. The question of balance alluded to in the section title refers to such necessary balance between the everyday and the mysterious – a balance that is captured, in a more 'institutionalised' way, in the alternation of the ordinary and the out-of-ordinary, the Weberian *ausseralltägliche*, or between the sacred and the profane.

If the balance is broken, life – whether suddenly, or eventually – loses its meaning. On one pole, it becomes a wretched everyday drudgery of performing the same old mechanical gestures in order to make ends meet, in desperate search for any entertainment that would make one forget the boredom of everyday 'normality' (notice that the term 'normal' here assumes a purely statistical and legal meaning, in opposition to the meaningful stability it had before – much of the 'postmodern' discussion of the 'normal' is based on a systematic ignorance of this difference); on the other hand, the infinite and inexhaustible mystery of Being is replaced by the supposed 'demystification' of every single human act – a child is only laughing at you because he wants some food or existential security; and love is nothing but the satisfaction of bodily functions, hardly different from other such functions, as the ancient Cynics already discussed and demonstrated this in detail, well before the 'revolutionary' ideas of Freud.

Theatre, understood as a non-participatory and non-sacred quasi-ritual, in which certain human beings, the actors, enact sceneries that in other human beings, the audience, who watch such behaviour as a mere spectacle, generate a certain illusion under which they take what they see *as if it were real*, has a crucial and socially effective role because it explicitly plays on and with the boundary between the everyday and the mysterious, and thus can alter the balance, provoking a lasting disturbance between the two poles of existence whose harmonious balance is fundamental for the possibility of having a meaningful life.

The term *theatropoiesis* was introduced in order to capture such effects produced by theatre, and 'poetry' in general. It is influenced by Heidegger's ideas about technology and poetry, the connections perceived between the two that much puzzled him throughout his works. In Greek *poiesis* simply means the making of any artificial object; and the puzzle concerns the possible connections between the artificial evocation of an imagined world, characteristic of works of poetry, and the similarly artificial subordination of human beings into the 'standing reserve', so that they could become available to perform operations as required by the technological machinery. In other terminology, it implies a critical distance from neo-Kantian constructivism – an approach with which Heidegger was profoundly familiar, given his time spent in Marburg and the exchange of ideas with Natorp. Neo-Kantianism, of which the 'social constructionism' rampant in contemporary sociology is a step-child, through Berger and Luckmann, simply and naively asserts the cognitivist perspective that the world is a 'construct' of our intellect – an approach that ignores and thus in a way destroys the mystery of existence. By introducing the term *theatropoiesis* my intention was to signal that the very condition of possibility of constructivism, whether Kantian, neo-Kantian or social, was a prior 'theatricalisation' of the world, among others through the universalization of the position of spectators into the epistemology of the 'subject' of knowledge possessing a 'transcendental mind' on the one hand, and the moralising perspective of the public sphere on the other.

The question now is to understand how theatrical performances exert such effects on the reality of human existence; and how these can be properly studied. For this, I start by offering a reading of the motto selected from W.H. Auden.

The intrusion of the poetic

In order to understand Auden's text, we must start by its context. Concerning the valorisation of context, Bakhtin is particularly illuminating, in contrast to structuralism and constructivism, but also to semiotics and Derrida. An utterance cannot be studied in isolation: '[i]t always presupposes utterances that precede and follow it […] Each is only a link in the chain, and none can be studied outside this chain' (Bakhtin 1986: 136). But this chain cannot be reduced merely to other utterances, or even the concrete historical setting, but must include a much broader horizon. The late fragments of Bakhtin are as much fragmentary as the sayings of Heraclitus, but contain just as much wisdom: 'The narrow historical horizons of our literary scholarship. Enclosure within the most immediate historical epoch. […] We explain a phenomenon in terms of its own present and the recent past […] We do not study literature's preliterary embryos (in language and ritual). The narrow ("specialists' ") understanding of specifics' (Ibid.: 139). It is only through the sketching of context that a text can become alive – written by a human being, about other human beings, to human beings: 'The responsive nature of contextual meaning. Meaning always responds to particular questions. Anything that does not respond to something seems meaningless to us; it is removed from dialogue. […] The universalism of contextual meaning, its universality and omni-temporality' (Ibid.: 145).

The text is from a long epic poem by Auden; his longest poem, certainly one of the longest poems in world history, running to about 50 pages in his to some extent authoritative 'Selected Poems' (Auden 1979: 127-75). It was also one of the most difficult works he ever wrote: it not only took him about a year and a half to complete (from August 1942 to February 1944), but he was repeatedly stalled in the process, once for as long a six months. Still, he considered this poem, especially its third part, entitled 'Caliban to the audience', from which the quote is taken, as his best work.

It was also written at a very particular moment: during WWII, when Auden was also an émigré, as he moved in 1939 to the United States. He was also particularly preoccupied, since its break-out, with the war: in September 1939 he composed one of his most passionate works, entitled 'September 1, 1939' (Ibid.: 86-9), which contained a number of striking formulations and quasi-prophetic insights, so much so that he eventually forbid reprinting this poem, as he became uncomfortable with some passages.

The poem from which the motto is taken, however, is not directly about the war; it is about Shakespeare – though about Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with evident affinities to Auden's own 'tempestuous' present, the 'permanently liminal' conditions of a particularly destructive war that seemed to last forever; but most importantly, it is about the nature of artistic creation, thus it contains Auden's reflexions on his own work, on his profession – not about himself in a psychoanalytical sense, rather about the general and universal aspect of his activity *as a poet*.

Here it gains a special importance that Auden's choice of writing about *The Tempest* was due not simply to the theme of that play, but also the relationship its author had with that play, and through it with theatre in general. *The Tempest*, as it is well-known, was Shakespeare's last play: due not to accidents, but clearly expressed authorial intentions. The play is closed by an Epilogue, pronounced by its protagonist, Prospero, generally recognised as Shakespeare's alter ego. Its opening line presents Prospero (played by

Shakespeare, but as this was outside the play, so the enunciation was particularly personal) as deprived of all his magic powers: 'Now my charms are all o'erthrown'; while its last sentence, *the* last sentence of Shakespeare, contains a strangely worded request for pardon: 'As you from crimes would pardoned be,/ Let your indulgence set me free.' This could not be read as some kind of standard trick for squeezing out applause, as Shakespeare really and truly left the stage, never writing and presenting another play of his own intention. This is a striking and unique case: Shakespeare, the greatest playwright of all times simply abandoned his profession at the height of his fame and powers, aged 47 – and with his last words asks pardon for his crimes.

This is the context, and the problem, with which Auden is struggling in the middle of WWII, and which gives the full meaning of the passage chosen as motto for this paper; arguably the most important passage of a long and still dense poem. Now we can try to understand what does it mean.

The passage, to begin with, concerns the relationship between the reality of existence (shorthanded as 'the real'), and the nature of art (or 'the poetic'); a relationship in which, evidently, something has gone sour. Instead of a harmonious dialogue between the two, a strange dialectics developed between them.[2] On the one hand, this means that 'the real' somehow interfered with 'the poetic'. The word used for such interference is 'intrusion', quite a strong word, implying forceful entry, thus a penetrating violation; even further, the figure of the 'intruder', as it was analysed in a classic work by F.M. Cornford, was a technical character in the classical comedies of Aristophanes; a kind of trickster figure. Auden was aware of the anthropological character of the trickster, through the figure of the 'flying trickster'.

Yet, this intrusion, for all its violence, is declared a relatively minor issue. It only 'disconcerted' and 'incommoded' the poetic; two terms that play down the harm implied by the previous word 'intrusion'. And Auden explicitly states so: all this was just a 'bagatelle', *as compared to* the *real* problem, which would happen – but the entire poem indicates that this is already happening, and *now*, as this is the central theme of the poem, especially its third part, devoted to the abuse of love, culminating in the most horrendous of all possible crimes, the raping of the Queen of Divine Love, which Caliban, presumed speaker in this third part, was intended to commit before Prospero managed to stop him in the play – thus, which 'would' happen if the poetic managed to intrude upon the real.

Auden's formulation carefully, and poetically, talks about what 'would' happen. But the poem is about Shakespeare, and Shakespeare certainly belongs to the past and not the future. What happens when the balance between 'the real' and 'the poetic' (which is to evoke the mystery of life and Being) is disturbed, when 'the poetic' intrudes into the real, is that reality becomes doubled over into its own copy through images, such images multiplying infinitely and circulated in the social body until our sense of reality, thus reality itself, is thoroughly undermined and destroyed.

The metaphor of undermining is central for the way Goethe, a figure of modern European culture comparable to Shakespeare, came to understand the processes which led to the French Revolution and the rise of the modern world in general.

Towards the French Revolution: The Under-miners

The term appears at a crucial place of *Poetry and Truth*, shortly after Goethe discussed his search for the right measure and judgment, characterising 'critique' and 'satire' as the two sworn enemies of right judgment and serene poetry. The word is used in a stunning way: he claims that shortly after he finished university and started to work in the legal

profession, he came to the realisation that 'civil society' had been 'undermined by a frightful labyrinth', visible in the destruction of entire families around him. But how could a society be 'undermined'? And who are the perpetrators of such an activity? A second use of the word offers some clarification on this point: it was the 'youth' as such that 'undermined' (*untergraben*) itself, with his unhappiness and self-hatred, leading to ever more excessive, unsustainable and unacceptable demands, due to his unsatisfiable passions and imagined sufferings.

The next element concerns Goethe's disappointment with the legal profession and the human beings who made their living out of the workings of the law, in particular the journalists around such tribunals – the kind of people whose presence and voice would dominate, through the French Revolution, the new Parliaments, the modern 'public sphere'. Far from expressing an opinion formulated from the outside, Goethe was one of those legal figures, joining the group, taking part of their everyday activities, the jokes and the drinking, though never a leader of the pack, and so over time gained his distance. The central reason was a vague feeling to which even from the distance of so many decades and at the height of being the greatest master of German language admits of not being able to give a proper name. In lieu of a better term he calls it an excessive desire for independence, which can only develop under periods of long peace, when one's desires and ambitions grow out of all bounds and limits, and become combined with unhealthy sensitivity, in particular an exaggerated sense of justice and a search out for the oppressed, resulting in a chaos of government.[3]

The model for such excesses, observes Goethe, was Voltaire, in particular through his attacks on the family, the institution which should rather be the positive centre of public life, and also through his campaign against respectable figures in high positions, using the press, under the hypocritical mask of searching for the truth, resulting in the gravest error of making the public believe that it is the real judge – a true absurdity. The nefarious influence of Voltaire extends to his continuous mocking and ridiculing of whatever was held sacred – Goethe intimates that while reading Voltaire's *Saul* he even had the desire to strangle him; which became effective when combined with the similar activities of Rousseau and Diderot, confusing everything and everybody. As they failed to present guiding models, or some higher reality, the overall result was a general nausea and repugnance of society itself, demonstrating that even their investigations were of questionable value, as they were not guided by good faith and sincere benevolence, the precondition of genuine research. As a result, in the legal profession a particularly unhealthy, cynical and sophistic mood became dominant, hurting Goethe's sense of beauty and dignity, making 'the worse effect on a young man who is always striving for the good', and also undermining respect for the law.

A crucial aspect of Goethe's self-overcoming concerns his attitudes to Lessing, a central figure of the German Enlightenment. He admitted the enormous impact Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, published in between 1766 and 1769, exerted on him, like on everyone of his generation. In fact, this work was published just when Goethe was 17-20 years old, a liminal moment for everyone, but particularly so for Goethe as he started to attend university at the very early age of 16, was a theatre buff since childhood, and also went through a particularly difficult and long illness at the age of 19-20, in 1768-9. The impact of Lessing, especially through the attention he called on Shakespeare, was resounding; however, and still, while Goethe always preserved his great admiration for the bard, he managed to overcome his early infatuation with Lessing.[4]

The key distancing from Lessing concerns the centre of its previous impact, the propagation of the theatre of Shakespeare. Once Goethe made up his mind about the deleterious impact of the Enlightenment, he was able to perceive where Lessing is coming from and what was wrong with the reading of Shakespeare he offered. He

perceived that his contemporaries attributed a disproportionate attention in Shakespeare's plays to clowns and to the absurd; and that such erroneous perception could only become so widespread as it was given a first signal by Lessing, who at that time enjoyed unlimited respect, in his *Dramaturgy*. Even worse, Lessing is held responsible for the bad state of the German theatre, literally accused by Goethe for corrupting German public morals, and in a very specific way. The German, says Goethe, is by nature benevolent, but comedy only generates gloating (*schadenfreude*) and incites disrespect for the upper classes, where in Germany Lessing played a pioneering role with his *Emilia Galotti* and its presumed 'unmasking' of the higher circles – a play that perfectly rhymed with the 'spirit of the times' (a grave error for Goethe), introducing the new fashion that intriguers must be aristocrats, while the greatest rascals had to be judges, or other members of the judiciary.[5]

The significance of the metaphor is also underlined by its location: it appears at a crucial juncture of his autobiography, where Goethe tries to capture the underlying mood of the period just before the French Revolution. The term implies underground activities, in particular the digging of tunnels under the ground, or with activity of mining. Strikingly, a main character of the first volume of *Wilhelm Meister*, Jarno, who in the second volume would use the name Montan (derivative of 'mountain'), is obsessed with mining. Even further, the quasi-Masonic secret society of which he is a member, the 'Society of the Tower', is working 'underground', while the term 'labyrinth' is emphatically used to characterise their activities and appearance (see Citati 1990: 115).

The evocative power of the metaphor, however, does not stop here. 'Undermining' generates void, or emptiness, thus causing the entity 'undermined' to collapse or fold by its own weight. It is thus a way to destroy, decompose, dismantle and take apart, through the void; something that captures the core of Newton's work, arch-enemy of Goethe, who not only discovered the absolute void, but made it into the 'background' of his 'natural philosophy' as well. Even further, as we'll see, the void is explicitly associated in the *Wilhelm Meister* with theatre.

The metaphor of undermining, however, was not limited to Goethe. It also plays a central role in the chapter devoted to Dostoevsky in the magisterial overview of the novels of the 19th century by Pietro Citati. According to Citati, in the midst of working on *Demons*, a sudden illumination came to Dostoevsky, causing him to mutate the project and introduce a new hero, Stavrogin, figure of 'absolute evil', beyond the previous protagonist, Piotr Verhovensky, modelled on Nechaev; an illumination which made him realise that the presence of evil was much more extensive than he previously imagined: he had to start from a much greater distance, as the entire Russian society was 'undermined' (*minato*, see Citati 2000: 322-5).

Given that destruction is thus achieved by the generation of void – nothingness, nil, *nulla* or *nihil* – it is of considerable interest that the two path-breakers of the idea of nihilism were Jacobi, an old friend of Goethe and Turgenev, a model for Dostoevsky, jointly represent the German and Russia sources of Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism – which, as a kind of performative speech act, eventually culminated in the two greatest nihilistic regimes of the 20th century, Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia. In identifying nihilism as a central problem of European society, novelists evidently took the lead over philosophers – and, more than philosophers or sociologists, they were better aware of the dangers such a diagnosis entails: not only one should not play with demons, but even identifying others playing with demons could have disastrous consequences.

Theatre can be a way of conjuring up demons; it can annihilate reality by copying it infinitely and taking away its liveliness. In order to analyse this effect mechanism, we must turn to novels.

Novels of Truth

The expression 'novels of truth' is taken from the original French title of Girard's 1961 book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* ('Romantic life and novel-like truth'). Girard was born in 1923, lived through WWII, during which he got in close contact with the French avant-garde, becoming familiar, and eventually deeply disillusioned, with the circle of Picasso. Shortly after the war ended he went on a scholarship to the US and stayed there, teaching French language and literature, though his degree was in history. Based on his life experiences he came to see the central dogma of modern thought, like the objective existence of deep-rooted desires and the autonomy of the individual subject as shams, at best Romantic illusions, ideologies that convince and push human beings to give up their life for the pursuit of chimeras that they think as their hidden, inalienable essences, but which only render them as pliant puppets. When studying the novels of the 19th century he discovered the triangular nature of mimetic desire.

This discovery poses the question why mimetic desire became so important for the novelists of the 19th century, or how such desire became *invested*, which leads to the question of the role played by theatre in modern life, and eventually its origins. This is the problem I addresses in a recent book, where I discussed the re-birth of theatre in Europe, and the intimate connections between this process and the rise of the modern world (Szakolczai 2013). It showed that the rebirth of theatre, in the particular form of comedy or *Commedia dell'Arte* that happened at the end of the Renaissance was not simply a rediscovery of a happy form of entertainment, after the 'dark' Middle Ages, but took place at a particularly liminal moment of European history, sparked in particular by the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the escape of mimes and sophists to Europe, mostly through Cyprus and Venice, effecting a profound transformation of European culture that could be called 'commedification' or 'theatricalisation'. This means that while the human world is certainly not a theatre, it can *become* transformed through the regular and routinized performance of mere spectacles. Even further, following cues from Agnew (1986), such a development was closely connected to the birth of modern capitalism whose roots, just as the roots of theatre, can be traced back to the fairground.

The question is how to render evident that a certain society has become theatricalised.

It was clear from the very start that the main tools available for such an analysis, sociology and philosophy, were strikingly unsuited for this task. Philosophy came into being, with the Greeks, in order to analyse reality, in opposition to mythology and religious metaphysics, a purpose that was repeatedly renewed, in an ever more intensive and excessive manner, desperately trying to reject all and any association with metaphysics. Yet, paradoxically, the more philosophy pretended to be concerned only and purely with reality, with facts and logic, nothing else, the more it became constitutionally unable to distinguish between the different layers, levels and modes of reality – in particular, to distinguish between the genuine and the fake *within* the real. Such a failure is particularly striking, as the fountainhead of rational thinking, Plato created philosophy just in order to be able to separate being from non-being, enabling him to treat the strange pseudo-reality of non-being, conjured up into existence by the Sophists, and – towards the end of his life – even identified the central problem of his contemporary Athens, the reason for the collapse of democracy, as a 'base theatrocracy' (Szakolczai 2013). Modern philosophy, desperately trying to liberate itself from all metaphysics, in particular the presumed 'metaphysical idealism' of Plato,[6] is thus thoroughly betraying its own original task – a task that has huge contemporary relevance,

given that the crisis of democracy in our days is much due for the same reasons – the emergence of a modern, but similarly base, 'theatrocracy'.

The problem is strikingly similar with sociology. Sociology is the par excellence modern social science, *the* science of modernity, which came into being for the single purpose of analysing the new kind of reality that came into being after the French Revolution. For similar reasons it also explicitly rejected all previous forms of knowledge, arguing that the analysis of this new reality required radically new methods, for which witnessing events and contemplating their causes and consequences was not sufficient, rather required the systematic, meticulous collecting of facts, making full use of the tools offered by the modern 'natural' sciences and technology. Yet, if the hypothesis concerning theatricalisation is correct, this entire project is thoroughly misdirected, a blind alley, as it is exactly the accumulation of 'mere facts, nothing but facts' that prevents the proper recognition and analysis of the falsification of the real. Such recognition is not even new, as can be traced back at least to Dickens' *Hard Times*.[7] Mainstream sociology, with its fact-mongering and number-crunching, but also interviewing and discourse-analysis, with its desperate collection and accumulation of facts, is a sophisticated enterprise to hide the most important, genuine problems of a theatricalised world, which – with its reification of the apparently real – only offers legitimacy to the fake. No approach is doing it more thoroughly and purposefully than the current fad concerning the 'social construction of reality'; while critical theory, by increasingly committing itself to building up a normative discourse connected to the presumably straightforward utterances pronounced on the 'public sphere', ignores the plain fact that the public primarily is the realm of masked games, therefore it is highly problematic, not to say naïve, to take public utterances at a face value *as a principle*.

The suggestion, therefore, is that the best way to analyse such a theatricalised reality, indeed a 'royal road', is offered through novels. In-depth analyses of a theatricalised world are contained in major classic works by Goethe, Dickens and Dostoevsky, while the theme becomes dominant, though still as if under the surface, in the works of Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka written just around WWI, when the carnival turned apocalyptic, just as Nietzsche and Dostoevsky predicted it would happen. The diagnosis of 'carnivalisation' became explicit in a select group of 20th century novels and stories, in particular 'Carnival' by Karen Blixen, *Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, and *Carnival* by Béla Hamvas; sharing, apart from theme – and even title – the peculiar destiny that none of them was published in the lifetime of its author, though for Blixen this was a matter of choice, while for Bulgakov and Hamvas a part of their fate. Concerning Blixen, who can be considered as a main representative of the most extreme kind of Romanticism that she managed to overcome by herself,[8] the composition of the short story accompanied her literally throughout her entire life. The works of Hamvas and Bulgakov, on the other hand, can be considered, without much of a doubt, as *the* key novels for their respective times and places – Hungary, Russia, indeed of the world of 'existing socialism' and the entire socialist-communist dreamland in general. Yet, and without denying the vast difference between them, taken together they singularly demonstrate something quite fundamental: that the modern world, in its utter and desperate seriousness about itself, the supposed progress and unlimited benefits it is supposed to bring to mankind, through its capitalist market economy (the 'fairground capitalism'), its mass democratic state (the 'public arena'), and its technologised science (the 'infernal megamachine'), cannot possibly face the most fundamental truth about itself: that its core is a fake sacrificial carnival.

Fortunately, there is also a select group of master-thinkers who advance that idea that novels offer a unique way to analyse the modern world: they include René Girard,

Michel Foucault, José Ortega y Gasset, Roberto Calasso, Pietro Citati, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Béla Hamvas.

For their own cultural landscape, these figures are not just representative, rather outright emblematic or symbolic; torchbearers of their times and places, comparable to the way this applies to most of the novelist discussed. This is certainly true of Michel Foucault, Professor of the *Collège de France* and one of the best-known intellectual in a country of famous intellectuals; but also of René Girard, another of the main French master thinkers and member of the French Academy. It also applies to Ortega y Gasset, simply the most famous Spanish philosopher of the 20th century, who furthermore explicitly and repeatedly reflected on the nature of Spanish culture and Spanish identity. Something very similar can be said about the two Italian scholars selected, Pietro Citati and Roberto Calasso, each of them working and publishing since half a century, and recognised as iconic figures in Italian culture. In 2005 selected works of Citati, running to nearly 2000 pages, were published by Mondadori in a series devoted to classics, with no precedent of publishing such a collection by a living author; while Calasso published in 2007 the seventh volume of a book series, a unique undertaking in the contemporary intellectual life. Finally, *mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said about Mikhail Bakhtin and Béla Hamvas. There were important social scientists, psychologists, linguists and philosophers working in the former Soviet Union that came to be known and respected abroad, but arguably the work of none had either the scope or the resonance as that of Bakhtin, whose work furthermore explicitly elucidated and reflected upon Russian identity; and similarly, in Hungary – but with the exception of Jan Patocka in the entire former Communist block – no author's work can be compared, by sheer size, extent and depth to the work produced by Béla Hamvas, who furthermore again and repeatedly reflected upon the nature of Hungarian culture. Thus, while no exclusivity is claimed for these seven figures, they are not just any thinkers selected to fit a preconceived schema.

Yet, at the same time, each and every one of them had to face a quite strong hostility, even animosity due to the manner in which their work went against the dominating political and intellectual ideologies of their time and place, often forcing them to into silence or exile, willed or imposed, internal or external. Michel Foucault spent a large amount of his life outside France, not being able to tolerate the suffocating character of Parisian intellectual life, dominated by Jean-Paul Sartre and in general Communist leftism. René Girard also left France after WWII, while Ortega y Gasset spent decades outside Spain, due to his hostility to both right and left wing ideologies. The marginal status is most visible for the East Europeans, Bakhtin and Hamvas, as their work was not only opposed, but occasionally even their life was in danger. Finally, in spite of their status in Italian intellectual life, Citati and Calasso were both outside of and hostile to the main currents of Italian culture and politics, official Catholicism and Communist Marxism, and mostly also stayed outside Italian academic life; respected and feared, but also intensely disliked, and not having the chance for disciples.

The logic of novels of truth

So how do novels of truth reveal the theatricalisation of the modern world? In this section I will shortly sketch the mechanism, and then illustrate it through the example of Goethe.

The first step of the argument is that theatre not simply represents or illustrates but *invests* and outright *infects* reality with certain modes of conduct and mentality – for e.g., omnipresent mimetic desire, jealousy, envy, occasionally even hatred. Second, this effect mechanism is multiplied by novels which, through the printing press, spread it

beyond the time and space of the theatre, bringing it even to the home; a mechanism of which the first examples were the chivalry romances of the early 16th century. Critical novelists, and critical theorists in general, perceive that something is going wrong, but instead of identifying the entire process, rather consider the form of behaviour invested as the underlying 'truth' of the human condition and champion the free and unrepressed reign of such desires in the name of human autonomy. Novelists of truth, however, make a further step back, even from their own selves, recognising their contribution to the process, and come to analyse the very mechanism by which desires are invested and circulated. Early and particularly important examples include Cervantes, culminating in *Don Quixote*, and Shakespeare, who in *Othello* identified himself with the figure of Iago, the most diabolical trickster figure of his plays, who invested Othello with jealousy – though also with Othello, mask of Harlequin, thus considering the playwright, himself, as both perpetrator and victim (Szakolczai 2013: 224-7).

As another example, let me shortly present Goethe as a novelist of truth.

Goethe as a novelist of truth

Goethe made his name by becoming unrivalled protagonist of German sentimentalism with his first novel, *The Sufferings of the Young Werther*. The novel would not only bring public success to Goethe, but an invitation to Weimar, which – paradoxically – enabled Goethe to escape public limelight, even though much of his subsequent life would be lived under the shadow of this work, especially until his escape to Italy in 1786, shortly after his 37th birthday; and even Napoleon, to Goethe's great consternation, would be interested in 1806 in nothing else but *Werther*. Still, to some extent already in *Werther*, and even more in the first version of *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe's concern was already slightly more than to express this mood: also to signal its problematicity, and the ways of overcoming it. Goethe's aim was not simply the evocation of sentiments, but the overcoming of an experience of suffering (Hadot 2008: 203), something also elaborated in the Prometheus fragment (Saul 2002: 27-8), and discussed in detail in *Poetry and Truth*.

The 'Prometheus' fragment, composed in 1773, just as *Werther*, also expresses Goethe at its most subjective, precocious, and titanic. Goethe fully identifies himself with the hubris of the Titan, and – as Kerényi perceptively analyses – the fragment is saturated with the use of the first person singular (Kerényi 1991). As compared to these two early works, Goethe takes a step back in the first version of the *Wilhelm Meister*, entitled *Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*, draft of the future model book of the 'novel of formation' (*Bildungsroman*), composed in the first decade he spent in Weimar.

The fact that Goethe wrote a first version of *Wilhelm Meister* by that strange title was not known until December 1909, when the manuscript, which in the analogy of the *Ur-Faust* could be called the *Ur-Wilhelm Meister*, was accidentally discovered in Zürich. While the discovery was accidental, the long latency of the manuscript was certainly not. The handwriting was not by Goethe but by Barbara Schulthess, one of his female correspond-dent friends; so it is reasonable to assume that Goethe must have purposefully destroyed all the copies he could lay a hand to. He did not want posteriority to know that he originally considered the theatre as the very 'model' for the formation of the soul of the human being. His ideas certainly changed considerably later, as the two *Wilhelm Meister* novels, especially *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, but to some extent also *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, are stunning documents of the theatricalisation of modern Europe, illustrating the thesis that the best artists are also most perceptive reflexive social theorists.

At the start of the novel matters of education and theatrical 'mission' are tightly articulated upon each other, though in the final version Goethe marks their distance by subtle but evident nuances. This is particularly visible in the consciously exaggerated sentimentalism of the novel, or the manner in which fate punishes those who live according to such theatrical ideals. Another clearly marked problem concerns the manner in which theatre can be, and was then, used to elicit nationalistic feelings. This was a particularly German problem, as – of all countries of Europe – '[i]t was in Germany that the theatre proved to be the strongest focus for national sentiment in the eighteenth century' (Brown 1995: 289). In a scene of Book II, Chapter 10, Goethe shows how the presentation of a play, written in order to elevate feelings of patriotism, succeeds so well that in a completely innocuous situation the normal everyday audience, out of their sheer happiness of being Germans, proceed to break the glasses, damage the furniture, and end in a drunken brawl, leading Wilhelm Meister to reflect upon how 'bad effects can a well-intentioned poetic work produce' (Goethe 1869, XVIII: 79). The analytical power and socio-historical significance of Goethe's work becomes all the clearer if we compare these events to the itinerant circus show and its effects, taking place shortly before (Ch.4). There Goethe analyses in minute details the trick-ful effect mechanism of such shows, starting with the clown and the female soubrette, behaving in a manner that members of the public want to become acquainted with them; continuing with provoking the most different but equally intensive emotions through showing excesses like a deformed child, in order to evoke pity, or acrobats and tight-rope walkers, to evoke admiration and fear; and then ending with the entry of the main stars who enact a love story through tricks of seduction, spinning further the incited desires of the audience, so that the enthusiasm of the public would spread contagiously, with all men lustfully watching the female actor, and all women the male (Ibid.: 60). The stunning, and highly Platonic, conclusion is that the most high-minded presentation of a national theatre uses the same technique, having identical aims, as an ambulant circus show: to incite emotions in the spectators. Thus, considering the importance that the issue of 'national theatre' assumed in Germany, largely due to the works of Lessing, singular fountainhead of the German obsession with 'critique' as well, one can argue that the excessive emotionality and violence of German nationalism has less to do with some presumed German 'historical national character', and more with the particularly sudden and strong theatricalisation of German society in the direction of 'national theatre'; a direction that could exert such an overwhelming effect due to the previous, excessively Puritanical religiosity which – through its inhuman rejection of normal human emotions and pleasures – rendered the populace incapable to resist the sudden and contagious spread of fake emotionality. The parallel is particularly strong with the US of our days, where an originally even more markedly Puritanical society has become, over long decades, thoroughly and haplessly theatricalised through Hollywood, television, video and the internet.[9]

In the same spirit, the novel also contains a series of explicit negative judgments on theatre and a theatricalised society. These start with the initial love-story, of the most trivial kind, as Wilhelm Meister falls in love with an actress, herself torn, as an almost inescapable professional destiny, between her true love and the man who is paying her bills; and continues through the tragic story of Therese who – as a stunning condemnation of her own mother – flares up against those who searched for an escape in books, and thus transform 'their lives into theatre and novel', wondering 'how people could have believed that God talks to them through books and stories' (Ibid., XIX: 120). The most important and direct, truly stunning and resolutely Platonic condemnation of theatre, however, comes from representatives of a supposedly model educational institution. Of all the arts theatre or drama – the two words are used interchangeably – is the only one that the institution does not support, as 'it assumes a idle crowd, even a

mob', set on provoking artificial feelings through 'deceitful fun or fake pain' (Ibid., XX: 168). While all the arts are brothers, theatre is the single exception and prodigal son, which 'would appropriate the goods of the entire family for itself, and would even waste this', given that it is parasitical on them, and is their corruptor (Ibid.); even its origins are ambiguous (*zweideutige Ursprung*) (Ibid.: 169) – an expression that identifies the theatre as having a schismatic origin, or being literally *schismogenic*. These passages are followed by a rare explicit comment by Goethe, as if falling out of his role, presenting himself as the editor of these writings, and admitting that he was deeply disturbed by this strange passage, as he himself spent much more time on theatre than should have been proper, and that it was therefore difficult to convince him that all his related efforts were in vain: 'unpardonable errors'; 'fruitless fatigues' (Ibid.).

These comments can be further supported by a passage from his conversation with Eckermann, of 22 March 1825. His young interlocutor confides him that in his youth he not only could not miss a spectacle, but attended the rehearsals as well, and even visited the empty stage. Goethe offers some reasons why all young people love so much the theatre: '[n]o one asks you any questions; you need not open your mouth unless you choose; on the contrary, you sit quite at your ease like a king, and let everything pass before you, and recreate your mind and senses to your heart's content' (Goethe 1850: 214-5). Goethe shows understanding about the youth, but pitiless concerning the lasting effects of an infatuation with theatre.

Those still not convinced about the metaphorical and real void generated through theatricalisation, a genuine source of nihilism, should read carefully one of the most significant and direct reflections by Goethe, through Wilhelm Meister, on the lasting effect of a preoccupation with the theatre – which is the nothing, or the *nulla* (see Horvath 2010). Reflecting back on his years spent in pursuit of his 'theatrical mission', at the start of Book VII, thus the first chapter added to the book in 1795-6, Wilhelm Meister melancholically states that 'when thinking back on the times that I spent with the theatre, I think I only see an infinite void; nothing remained of the whole thing' (Goethe 1869, XIX: 95).

The indestructible

Are we faced with an irresistible and complete theatricalisation of our everyday existence? Will the dominance of the modern, technical business world be complete?[10] Is there no hope beyond the coming nihilism and its thorough destruction of the very condition of possibility of meaningful existence? The situation is certainly grim, but 'where danger is great, the saving power is always near' (Hölderlin), and a particularly bright ray of hope is offered in the most unlikely of places – the *Nachlass* of Kafka.

It is well known that a significant part of Kafka's work remained unpublished, even dispersed in diaries, notes and letters; however, strikingly nobody paid any attention to a booklet where Kafka carefully copied and numbered 109 aphorisms, written down when he spent some months – presumably the happiest period of his existence – in the mountain village of Zürau, during late 1917 and early 1918; quite an important period in 'world historical' sense as well. These notes, buried in the Critical Edition, were selected for a carefully edited publication by Roberto Calasso, not only in Italian but also English and German, and contain – according to Pietro Citati as well – not simply the philosophy but the theology of Kafka. Their central word, only ever used by Kafka in this work, is the *indestructible*.

The term is contained in four aphorisms (No-s 50, 69, 70/1, and 74), but its study should start by aphorism 64, a crucial aphorism discussing a central theme of the

booklet, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, in a particularly theatrical manner, and concluding in an astonishing claim. Its starting idea, the eternity of the expulsion from the Paradise, is quite depressing; but Kafka, a good student of Nietzsche's genealogy, implies that no historical event can represent a complete break. From a single, once-for-all event expulsion thus becomes a *process*; it is this process that is eternal. If this is so, then it also means that something in us is still preserved from the Paradise; and thus, in so far as this is with us, we are still in the Paradise, whether we take cognisance of this or not. Thus, through a series of cryptic, machinegun-like claims, Kafka's inexorable 'logic' leads us from utter hopelessness into an almost blissful state.

But the nature of whatever is preserved in us is still to be ascertained. This is named as the *indestructible* (*unzerstörbar*), central term of Kafka's philosophico-theology. In aphorism 50 it carries an emphatic meaning: it is simply impossible to live without a trust or belief (*Vertrauen*) that within us there is something indestructible, even if both (meaning the indestructible and belief in its existence) might be hidden from us. One modality of such belief is belief in a personal god.

The term then appears in two subsequent aphorisms, No-s 69 and 70/71, leading up to aphorism 74, which is something of a culmination of the booklet, and thus of Kafka's thought. The first two clarify further the substance of this element of the Golden Age that has been preserved in us. No.69 offers a definition of not simply happiness, but the *perfect possibility* of happiness, or the way to happiness (and we should not forget that the first aphorism started with the question of the 'true way'), as belief in this indestructible in us, not the attempt to reach it. The meaning of 'reaching' is not fully clear here, but the contrast is clearly connected to the possibility of an unconscious presence in us, alluded to in both 50 and 64, and is thus a clear valorisation of faith or belief over knowledge, *exactly* concerning the single most fundamental part of being human.

A potentially important step to understanding Kafka's meaning is offered in a 1920 letter to Brod, in which the aphorism is quoted almost in full, except that the word 'indestructible' is replaced by the expression 'decisively divine' (Calasso 2006: 334). The meaning, however, according to Calasso, even in this way remains inaccessible. It is evidently connected to a sense of immortality associated with certain types of acting, close to the sense of being alive, but we can't go beyond a mere hypothesis; and 'perhaps it is better that it is so' (Ibid.: 335).

The next aphorism, No. 70/1 completes the path towards the bringing together of the two key terms of the aphorisms, defining the heart of Kafka's philosophico-theology, Paradise and the indestructible, by defining, in terms clearly recalling Plato's *Philebus*, thus the very heart of Plato's philosophy, the indestructible as being at the heart of what makes us human and social, thus the heart of the anthropology and sociology of the Golden Age, or whatever of it is remained is us. In this case it is necessary to offer a full citation: 'The indestructible is one; every single human being is so and it is at the same time common to all, thus the connection between human beings is indissoluble like nothing else' (No.70/71).[11]

Aphorism 74 offers the last take on the indestructible, and the first and only joint discussion of 'Paradise' and the 'indestructible'. We should start by noticing that here, and here alone, the term appears as an adjective, and not as a gerund. The aphorism directly, though only hypothetically, connects the Fall and the indestructible: if whatever that was destroyed was destructible, this does not matter. If, however, the 'indestructible' was destroyed, then we have a big problem, as all our convictions are wrong. This, however, again by definition cannot be true – as the 'indestructible', if it was truly indestructible, could not have been destroyed. The Golden Age, not just as a possibility but also as a reality, inside us, is thus still given – it is a gift: our most precious gift.

Notes

[1] Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, so central for the rise of the modern novel, is a classic elaboration of this point.
[2] On the difference between dialogue and dialectic, see again Bakhtin.
[3] There is a remarkable similarity between this attitude and that of Don Quixote, out looking for adventure, but at the same time also desperately in search of widows and orphans who need him to be saved, confirmed by the manner in which the Romantics recognized in a – distorted – image of Don Quixote their own predecessor.
[4] Even according to Dilthey, who much respected Lessing, Goethe managed to overcome Lessing's abstract thinking and the imposition of a 'good taste' that did not take into account the power of life (Dilthey 1986: 236).
[5] Note that for Goethe the real 'villains' were not the judges, rather the lawyers and journalists.
[6] Neo-Kantianism, in particular Natorp, played even here a singularly important role. Natorp was obsessed with demonstrating the identity between Plato and Kant, which influenced Heidegger in attributing an excessive importance to the Presocratics over Plato, failing to recognize the significance of Plato's advancing in thought.
[7] The memorable starting sentences of the book are 'what is want is, Facts. Teaching these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life'.
[8] Significantly, in the otherwise excellent book by Martin Green (1986) this is not realised, as she is considered as mere symptom of the 'commedic'.
[9] About the impact of mass culture, through the 'marriage' of art, technology and commerce, is discussed in the excellent book by Peter Hall (1998: 503-4, 603).
[10] In this regard notw the title of a book that became the Bible of contemporary marketing: 'The experience economy: work is theatre & every business a stage'.
[11] By now it becomes clear that Kafka's 'indestructible' is the same as the 'invincible exigency of human nature' identified by Camus as the 'secret' of the Mediterranean world, which the 'historical absolutism' of 'German ideology', driven by action transformed into 'pure conquest', could not defeat ('une exigence invincible de la nature humaine dont la Méditerrannée […] garde le secret' (Camus, *L'homme révolté*, 1951: 370).)