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Part Four. The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht

Notes on a Materialist Theatre

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I should like to make amends to the Piccolo Teatro of Milan and their extraordinary production at the Théâtre des Nations in July, 1962. Amends for the condemnation and disappointment that Bertolazzi's *El Nost* Milan drew so copiously from Parisian criticism,ⁱ depriving it of the audiences it deserved. Amends, because, far from diverting our attention from the problems of modern dramaturgy with tired, anachronistic entertainment, Strehler's choice and his production take us to the heart of these problems.

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Readers will forgive me if I give a brief summary of the plot of Bertolazzi's play, so that what follows can be understood.ⁱⁱ

The first of its three acts is set in the Milan Tivoli in the 1890s: a cheap, poverty-stricken fun-fair in the thick fog of an autumn evening. With this fog we already find ourselves in an Italy unlike the Italy of our myths. And the people strolling at day's end from booth to booth, between the fortune-tellers, the circus and all the attractions of the fairground: unemployed, artisans, semi-beggars, girls on the look-out, old men and women on the watch for the odd halfpenny, soldiers on a spree, pickpockets chased by the cops ... neither are these people the people of our myths, they are a sub-proletariat passing the time as best they can before supper (not for all of them) and rest. A good thirty characters who come and go in this empty space, waiting for who knows what, for something to happen, the show perhaps? – no, for they stop at the doorway, waiting for something of some sort to happen in their lives, in which nothing happens. They wait. However, at the end of the act, in a flash a 'story' is sketched out, the image of a destiny. A girl, Nina, stands transfixed by the lights of the circus, staring with all her heart through a rent in the canvas at the clown performing his perilous act. Night has fallen. For one moment, time is in suspense. But she is already being watched by the Togasso, the good-for-nothing who hopes to seduce her. A quick defiance, retreat, departure. Now an old man appears, the 'fire-eater', her father, and he has seen everything. Something has taken shape, which might turn into a tragedy.

A tragedy? It is completely forgotten in the second act. It is broad day in the spacious premises of a cheap eating-house. Here again we find a whole crowd of poor people,

the same people but different characters: the same poverty and unemployment, the flotsam of the past, the tragedies and comedies of the present: small craftsmen, beggars, a cabman, a Garibaldian veteran, some women, etc. Also a few workers who are building a factory, in sharp contrast with their lumpen-proletarian surroundings: they are already discussing industry, politics, and, almost, the future, but only just and with difficulty. This is Milan from below, twenty years after the conquest of Rome and the deeds of the Risorgimento: King and Pope are on their thrones, the masses are in poverty. Yes, the day of the second act is indeed the truth of the night of the first: these people have no more history in their lives than they had in their dreams. They survive, that is all: they eat (only the workers depart, called by the factory hooter), they eat and wait. A life in which nothing happens. Then, just at the end of the act, Nina reappears on the stage, for no apparent reason, and with her the tragedy. We learn that the clown is dead. The men and women leave the stage little by little. The Togasso appears, he forces the girl to kiss him and give him what little money she has. Hardly more than a few gestures. Her father arrives. (Nina is weeping at the end of the long table.) He does not eat: he drinks. After a terrible struggle he succeeds in killing the Togasso with a knife and then flees, haggard, overwhelmed by what he has done. Once again a lightning flash after a long grind.

In the third act it is dawn in the women's night shelter. Old women, blending into the walls, sitting down, talk or stay silent.

One stout peasant woman, bursting with health, will certainly return to the country. Some women pass; as always, we do not know them. The lady warden leads her whole company to Mass when the bells ring. When the stage has emptied, the tragedy begins again. Nina was sleeping in the shelter. Her father comes to see her for the last time before prison: she must realize at least that he killed for her sake, for her honour ... but suddenly everything is reversed: Nina turns on her father, on the illusions and lies he has fed her, on the myths which will kill him. But not her; for she is going to rescue herself, all alone, for that is the only way. She will leave this world of night and poverty and enter the other one, where pleasure and money reign. The Togasso was right. She will pay the price, she will sell herself, but she will be on the other side, on the side of freedom and truth. The hooters sound. Her father has embraced her and departed, a broken man. The hooters still sound. Erect, Nina goes out into the day light.

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There are the themes of this play and the order in which they appear, pressed into a few words. Altogether not much. Enough, however, to foster misunderstandings, but also enough to clear them up, and discover beneath them an astonishing depth.

The first of these misunderstandings is, of course, the accusation that the play is a 'mélodrame misérabiliste'. But anyone who has 'lived' the performance or studied its economy can demolish this charge. For if it does contain melodramatic elements, as a whole, the drama is simply a criticism of them. Nina's father does indeed live his daughter's story in the melodramatic mode, and not just his daughter's adventure, but above all his own life in his relations with his daughter. He has invented for her the fiction of an imaginary condition, and encouraged her in her romantic illusions; he tries desperately to give flesh and blood to the illusions he has fostered in his daughter: as he wishes to keep her free from all contact with the world he has hidden from her, and as, desperate that she will not listen to him, he kills the source of Evil, the Togasso. So he lives intensively and really the myths he has constructed to spare his daughter from the law of this world. So the father is the very image of melodrama, of the 'law of the heart'

deluding itself as to the 'law of the world'. It is precisely this deliberate unconsciousness that Nina rejects. She makes her own real trial of the world. With the clown's death her adolescent dreams have died too. The Togasso has opened her eyes and dispatched her childhood myths along with her father's. His violence itself has freed her from words and duties. She has at last seen this naked, cruel world where morality is nothing but a lie; she has realized that her safety lies in her own hands and that she can only reach the other world by selling the only goods at her disposal: her young body. The great confrontation at the end of the third act is more than a confrontation between Nina and her father, it is the confrontation of a world without illusions with the wretched illusions of the 'heart', it is the confrontation of the real world with the melodramatic world, the dramatic access to consciousness that destroys the myths of melodrama, the very myths that Bertolazzi and Strehler are charged with. Those who make this charge could quite easily have found in the play the criticism they tried to address to it from the stalls.

But there is another, deeper reason that should clear up this misunderstanding. I was trying to hint at it in my summary of the play's 'sequence', when I pointed out its strange 'temporal' rhythm.

For this is, indeed, a play remarkable for its internal dissociation. The reader will have noted that its three acts have the same structure, and almost the same content: the coexistence of a long, slowly-passing, empty time and a lightning-short, full time; the coexistence of a space populated by a crowd of characters whose mutual relations are accidental or episodic – and a short space, gripped in mortal combat, inhabited by three characters: the father, the daughter and the Togasso. In other words, this is a play in which about forty characters appear, but the tragedy concerns only three of

them. Moreover, there is no explicit relationship between these two times or between these two spaces. The characters of the time seem strangers to the characters of the lightning: they regularly give place to them (as if the thunder of the storm had chased them from the stage), only to return in the next act, in other guises, once the instant foreign to their rhythm has passed. If we deepen the latent meaning of this dissociation it will lead us to the heart of the play. For the spectator actually lives this deepening as he moves from disconcerted reserve to astonishment and then passionate involvement between the first and the third acts. My aim here is merely to reflect this lived deepening, to make explicit this latent meaning which affects the spectator despite himself. But the decisive question is this: why is it that this dissociation is so expressive, and what does it express? What is this absence of relations to suggest a latent relation as its basis and justification? How can there coexist two forms of temporality, apparently foreign to one another and yet united by a lived relationship?

The answer lies in a paradox: the true relationship is constituted precisely by the absence of relations. The play's success in illustrating this absence of relations and bringing it to life gives it its originality. In short, I do not think we are dealing with a melodramatic veneer on a chronicle of Milanese popular life in 1890. We are dealing with a melodramatic consciousness criticized by an existence: the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat in 1890. Without this existence it would be impossible to tell what the melodramatic consciousness was; without this critique of the melodramatic consciousness it would be impossible to grasp the tragedy latent in the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat: its powerlessness. What is the significance of the chronicle of wretched existence that makes up the essential part of the three acts? Why is this chronicle's time a march-past of purely typed, anonymous and interchangeable beings? Why is this time of vague meetings, brief exchanges and broached disputes precisely an empty time? In its progress from the first act through the second to the third, why does this time tend towards silence and immobility? (In the first act there is still a semblance of life and movement on the stage; in the second, everyone is sitting down and some are already lapsing into silence; in the third, the old women blend into the walls.) Why – if not to suggest the actual content of this wretched time: it is a time in which nothing happens, a time without hope or future, a time in which even the past is fixed in repetition (the Garibaldian veteran) and the future is hardly groped for in the political stammerings of the labourers building the factory, a time in which gestures have no continuation or effect, in which everything is summed up in a few exchanges close to life, to 'everyday life', in discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility.ⁱⁱⁱ[3] In a word, a stationary time in which nothing resembling History can yet happen, an empty time, accepted as empty: the time of their situation itself.

I know of nothing so masterly in this respect as the setting for the second act, because it gives us precisely a direct perception of this time. In the first act it was still possible to wonder whether the waste land of the Tivoli only harmonized with the nonchalance of the unemployed and idlers who saunter between the few illusions and few fascinating lights at the end of the day. In the second act it is overwhelmingly obvious that the empty, closed cube of this cheap restaurant is an image of time in these men's situation. At the bottom of the worn surface of an immense wall, and almost at the limit of an inaccessible ceiling covered with notices of regulations half effaced by the years but still legible, we see two enormously long tables, parallel to the footlights, one downstage, the other mid-stage; behind them, up against the wall, a horizontal iron bar dividing off the entrance to the restaurant. This is the way the men and women will come in. Far right, a high partition perpendicular to the line of the tables separates the hall from the kitchens. Two hatches, one for alcohol, the other for food. Behind the screen, the kitchens, steaming pots, and the imperturbable cook. The bareness of this immense field created by the parallel tables against the interminable background of the wall, constitutes an unbearably austere and yawning location. A few men are seated at the tables. Here and there. Facing the audience, or with their backs to them. They will talk face on or backwards, just as they are sitting. In a space which is too large for them, a space they will never be able to fill. Here they will make their derisory exchanges, but however often they leave their places in an attempt to join some chance neighbour, who has tossed them a proposal across tables and benches, they will never abolish tables or benches, which will always cut them off from each other, under the inalterable, silent regulation that dominates them. This space is really the time they live in. One man here, another there. Strehler has scattered them around. They will stay where they are. Eating, pausing in their meal, eating again. At these times, the gestures themselves reveal all their meaning. The character seen face-on at the beginning of the scene, his head hardly higher than the plate he would prefer to carry between his two hands. The time it takes him to fill his spoon, to lift it up to his mouth and over it, in an interminable movement designed to ensure that not one scrap is lost, and when at last he has filled his mouth, he lingers over his portion weighing it up before swallowing it. Then we see that the others with their backs to us are making the same movements: their raised elbows compensating for their unstable backs – we see them eating, absently, like all the other absent people, making the same holy movements in Milan and in all the world's great cities, because that is the whole of their lives, and there is nothing which would make it possible for them to live out their time otherwise. (The only ones with an air of haste are the labourers, their life and work punctuated by the hooters.) I can think of no comparable representation in spatial structure, in the distribution of men and places, of the deep relations between men and the time they live.

Now for the essential point: this temporal structure – that of the ‘chronicle’ – is opposed to another temporal structure: that of the ‘tragedy’. For the tragedy’s time (Nina) is full: a few lightning-flashes, an articulated time, a ‘dramatic’ time. A time in which some history must take place. A time moved from within by an irresistible force, producing its own content. It is a dialectical time par excellence. A time that abolishes the other time and the structure of its spatial representation. When the men have left the restaurant, and only Nina, her father and the Togasso are left, something has suddenly disappeared: as if the diners had taken the whole décor with them (Strehler’s stroke of genius: to have made two acts one, and played two different acts in the same décor), the very space of walls and tables, the logic and meaning of these locations; as if conflict alone substituted for this visible and empty space another dense, invisible, irreversible space, with one dimension, the dimension that propels it towards tragedy, ultimately, the dimension that had to propel it into tragedy if there was really to be any tragedy.

It is precisely this opposition that gives Bertolazzi’s play its depth. On the one hand, a non-dialectical time in which nothing happens, a time with no internal necessity forcing it into action; on the other, a dialectical time (that of conflict) induced by its internal contradiction to produce its development and result. The paradox of *El Nost Milan* is that the dialectic in it is acted marginally, so to speak, in the wings, somewhere in one corner of the stage and at the ends of the acts: this dialectic (although it does seem to be indispensable to any theatrical work) is a long time coming: the characters could not care less about it. It takes its time, and never arrives until the end, initially at night, when the air is heavy with the renowned night-owls, then as midday strikes, with the sun already on its descent, finally as dawn rises. This dialectic always appears after everyone has departed.

How is the ‘delay’ of this dialectic to be understood? Is it delayed in the way consciousness is for Marx and Hegel? But can a dialectic be delayed? Only on condition that it is another name for consciousness.

If the dialectic of *El Nost Milan* is acted in the wings, in one corner of the stage, it is because it is nothing but the dialectic of a consciousness: the dialectic of Nina’s father and his consciousness. And that is why its destruction is the precondition for any real dialectic. Here we should recall Marx’s analyses in *The Holy Family* of Eugene Sue’s personages.^{iv}[4] The motor of their dramatic conduct is their identification with the myths of bourgeois morality: these unfortunates live their misery within the arguments of a religious and moral conscience; in borrowed finery. In it they disguise their problems and even their condition. In this sense, melodrama is a foreign consciousness as a veneer on a real condition. The dialectic of the melodramatic consciousness is only possible at this price: this consciousness must be borrowed from

outside (from the world of alibis, sublimations and lies of bourgeois morality), and it must still be lived as the consciousness of a condition (that of the poor) even though this condition is radically foreign to the consciousness. It follows that between the melodramatic consciousness on the one hand, and the existence of the characters of the melodrama on the other, there can exist no contradiction strictly speaking. The melodramatic consciousness is not contradictory to these conditions: it is a quite different consciousness, imposed from without on a determinate condition but without any dialectical relation to it. That is why the melodramatic consciousness can only be dialectical if it ignores its real conditions and barricades itself inside its myth. Sheltered from the world, it unleashes all the fantastic form of a breathless conflict which can only ever find peace in the catastrophe of someone else's fall: it takes this hullabaloo for destiny and its breathlessness for the dialectic. In it, the dialectic turns in a void, since it is only the dialectic of the void, cut off from the real world for ever. This foreign consciousness, without contradicting its conditions, can not emerge from itself by itself, by its own 'dialectic'. It has to make a rupture – and recognize this nothingness, discover the non-dialecticity of this dialectic.

This never happens with Sue: but it does in *El Nost Milan*. In the end the last scene does give an answer to the paradox of the play and of its structure. When Nina turns on her father, when she sends him back into the night with his dreams, she is breaking both with her father's melodramatic consciousness and with his 'dialectic'. She has finished with these myths and the conflicts they unleash. Father, consciousness, dialectic, she throws them all overboard and crosses the threshold of the other world, as if to show that it is in this poor world that things are happening, that everything has already begun, not only its poverty, but also the derisory illusions of its consciousness. This dialectic which only comes into its own at the extremities of the stage, in the aisles of a story it never succeeds in invading or dominating, is a very exact image for the quasi-null relation of a false consciousness to a real situation. The sanction of the necessary rupture imposed by real experience, foreign to the content of consciousness, is to chase this dialectic from the stage. When Nina goes through the door separating her from the daylight she does not yet know what her life will be; she might even lose it. At least we know that she goes out into the real world, which is undoubtedly the world of money, but also the world that produces poverty and imposes on poverty even its consciousness of 'tragedy'. And this is what Marx said when he rejected the false dialectic of consciousness, even of popular consciousness, in favour of experience and study of the other world, the world of Capital.

At this point someone will want to stop me, arguing that what I am drawing from the play goes beyond the intentions of the author – and that I am, in fact, attributing to Bertolazzi what really belongs to Strehler. But I regard this statement as meaningless, for at issue here is the play's latent structure and nothing else, Bertolazzi's explicit

intentions are unimportant: what counts beyond the words, the characters and the action of the play, is the internal relation of the basic elements of its structure. I would go further. It does not matter whether Bertolazzi consciously wished for this structure, or unconsciously produced it: it constitutes the essence of his work; it alone makes both Strehler's interpretation and the audience's reaction comprehensible.

Strehler was acutely aware of the implications of this remarkable structure,^v[5] and his production and direction of the actors were determined by it; that is why the audience was bowled over by it. The spectators' emotion cannot be explained merely by the 'presence' of this teeming popular life – nor by the poverty of these people, who still manage to keep up a hand-to-mouth existence, accepting their fate, taking their revenge, on occasion with a laugh, at moments by solidarity, most often by silence – nor by the lightning tragedy of Nina, her father and the Togasso; but basically by their unconscious perception of this structure and its profound meaning. The structure is nowhere exposed, nowhere does it constitute the object of a speech or a dialogue. Nowhere can it be perceived directly in the play as can the visible characters or the course of the action. But it is there, in the tacit relation between the people's time and the time of the tragedy, in their mutual imbalance, in their incessant 'interference' and finally in their true and delusive criticism. It is this revealing latent relation, this apparently insignificant and yet decisive tension that Strehler's production enables the audience to perceive without their being able to translate this presence directly into clearly conscious terms. Yes, the audience applauded in the play something that was beyond them, which may even have been beyond its author, but which Strehler provided him: a meaning buried deeper than words and gestures, deeper than the immediate fate of the characters who live this fate without ever being able to reflect on it. Even Nina, who is for us the rupture and the beginning, and the promise of another world and another consciousness, does not know what she is doing. Here we can truly say that consciousness is delayed – for even if it is still blind, it is a consciousness aiming at last at a real world.

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If this reflection on an 'experience' is acceptable, we might use it to illuminate other experiences by an investigation into their meaning. I am thinking of the problems posed by Brecht's great plays, problems which recourse to such concepts as the alienation effect or the epic theatre has perhaps not in principle perfectly solved. I am very struck by the fact that a latent asymmetrical critical structure, the dialectic-in-the-wings structure found in Bertolazzi's play, is in essentials also the structure of plays such as *Mother Courage* and (above all) *Galileo*. Here again we also find forms of temporality that do not achieve any mutual integration, which have no relation to one another, which coexist and interconnect, but never meet each other, so to speak; with lived elements which interlace in a dialectic which is localized, separate and

apparently ungrounded; works marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity.

The dynamic of this specific latent structure, and in particular, the coexistence without any explicit relation of a dialectical temporality and a non-dialectical temporality, is the basis for a true critique of the illusions of consciousness (which always believes itself to be dialectical and treats itself as dialectical), the basis for a true critique of the false dialectic (conflict, tragedy, etc.) by the disconcerting reality which is its basis and which is waiting for recognition. Thus, the war in *Mother Courage*, as opposed to the personal tragedies of her blindness, to the false urgency of her greed; thus, in *Galileo* the history that is slower than consciousness impatient for truth, the history which is also disconcerting for a consciousness which is never able to 'take' durably on to it within the period of its short life. This silent confrontation of a consciousness (living its own situation in the dialectical-tragic mode, and believing the whole world to be moved by its impulse) with a reality which is indifferent and strange to this so-called dialectic an apparently undialectical reality, makes possible an immanent critique of the illusions of consciousness. It hardly matters whether these things are said or not (they are in Brecht, in the form of fables or songs): in the last resort it is not the words that produce this critique, but the internal balances and imbalances of forces between the elements of the play's structure. For there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious. I wonder whether this asymmetrical, decentred structure should not be regarded as essential to any theatrical effort of a materialist character. If we carry our analysis of this condition a little further we can easily find in it Marx's fundamental principle that it is impossible for any form of ideological consciousness to contain in itself, through its own internal dialectic, an escape from itself, that, strictly speaking, there is no dialectic of consciousness: no dialectic of consciousness which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions; in short, there can be no 'phenomenology' in the Hegelian sense: for consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is other than itself.

It was in precisely this sense that Brecht overthrew the problematic of the classical theatre – when he renounced the thematization of the meaning and implications of a play in the form of a consciousness of self. By this I mean that, to produce a new, true and active consciousness in his spectators, Brecht's world must necessarily exclude any pretensions to exhaustive self-recovery and self-representation in the form of a consciousness of self. The classical theatre (though Shakespeare and Molière must be excepted, and this exception explained) gave us tragedy, its conditions and its 'dialectic', completely reflected in the speculative consciousness of a central character – in short, reflected its total meaning in a consciousness, in a talking, acting, thinking, developing human being: what tragedy is for us. And it is probably no accident that

this formal condition of 'classical' aesthetics (the central unity of a dramatic consciousness, controlling the other, more famous 'unities') is closely related to its material content. I mean that the material, or the themes, of the classical theatre (politics, morality, religion, honour, 'glory', 'passion', etc.) are precisely ideological themes, and they remain so, without their ideological nature ever being questioned, that is, criticized ('passion' itself, opposed to 'duty' or 'glory' is no more than an ideological counterpoint never the effective dissolution of the ideology). But what, concretely, is this uncriticized ideology if not simply the 'familiar', 'well known', transparent myths in which a society or an age can recognize itself (but not know itself), the mirror it looks into for self-recognition, precisely the mirror it must break if it is to know itself? What is the ideology of a society or a period if it is not that society's or period's consciousness of itself, that is, an immediate material which spontaneously implies, looks for and naturally finds its forms in the image of a consciousness of self living the totality of its world in the transparency of its own myths? I am not asking why these myths (the ideology as such) were not generally questioned in the classical period. I am content to be able to infer that a time without real self-criticism (with neither the means nor the need for a real theory of politics, morality and religion) should be inclined to represent itself and recognize itself in an uncritical theatre, that is, a theatre whose (ideological) material presupposed the formal conditions for an aesthetic of the consciousness of self. Now Brecht can only break with these formal conditions because he has already broken with their material conditions. His principal aim is to produce a critique of the spontaneous ideology in which men live. That is why he is inevitably forced to exclude from his plays this formal condition of the ideology's aesthetics, the consciousness of self (and its classical derivations: the rules of unity). For him (I am still discussing the 'great plays'), no character consciously contains in himself the totality of the tragedy's conditions. For him, the total, transparent consciousness of self, the mirror of the whole drama is never anything but an image of the ideological consciousness, which does include the whole world in its own tragedy, save only that this world is merely the world of morals, politics and religion, in short, of myths and drugs. In this sense these plays are decentred precisely because they can have no centre, because, although the illusion-wrapped, naïve consciousness is his starting-point, Brecht refuses to make it that centre of the world it would like to be. That is why in these plays the centre is always to one side, if I may put it that way, and in so far as we are considering a demystification of the consciousness of self, the centre is always deferred, always in the beyond, in the movement going beyond illusion towards the real. For this basic reason the critical relation, which is a real production, cannot be thematized for itself: that is why no character is in himself 'the morality of history' – except when one of them comes down to the footlights, takes off his mask and, the play over, 'draws the lessons' (but then he is only a spectator reflecting on it from the outside, or rather prolonging its movement: 'we have done our best, now it is up to you').

It should now be clear why we have to speak of the dynamic of the play's latent structure. It is the structure that we must discuss in so far as the play cannot be reduced to its actors, nor to their explicit relations – only to the dynamic relation existing between consciousnesses of self alienated in spontaneous ideology (Mother Courage, her sons, the cook, the priest, etc.) and the real conditions of their existence (war, society). This relation, abstract in itself (abstract with respect to the consciousness of self – for this abstract is the true concrete) can only be acted and represented as characters, their gestures and their acts, and their 'history' only as a relation which goes beyond them while implying them; that is, as a relation setting to work abstract structural elements (e.g. the different forms of temporality in *El Nost Milan* – the exteriority of dramatic crowds, etc.), their imbalance and hence their dynamic. This relation is necessarily latent in so far as it cannot be exhaustively thematized by any 'character' without ruining the whole critical project: that is why, even if it is implied by the action as a whole, by the existence and movements of all the characters, it is their deep meaning, beyond their consciousness – and thus hidden from them; visible to the spectator in so far as it is invisible to the actors – and therefore visible to the spectator in the mode of a perception which is not given, but has to be discerned, conquered and drawn from the shadow which initially envelops it, and yet produced it.

Perhaps these remarks give us a more precise idea of the problem posed by the Brechtian theory of the alienation-effect. By means of this effect Brecht hoped to create a new relation between the audience and the play performed: a critical and active relation. He wanted to break with the classical forms of identification, where the audience hangs on the destiny of the 'hero' and all its emotional energy is concentrated on theatrical catharsis. He wanted to set the spectator at a distance from the performance, but in such a situation that he would be incapable of flight or simple enjoyment. In short, he wanted to make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play, but in real life. This profound thesis of Brecht's has perhaps been too often interpreted solely as a function of the technical elements of alienation: the abolition of all 'impressiveness' in the acting, of all lyricism and all 'pathos': *al fresco* acting; the austerity of the set, as if to eliminate any eye-catching relief (cf. the dark ochre and ash colours in *Mother Courage*); the 'flat' lighting; the commentary-placards to direct the readers' attention to the external context of the conjuncture (reality), etc. The thesis has also given rise to psychological interpretations centred around the phenomenon of identification and its classical prop: the hero. The disappearance of the hero (whether positive or negative), the object of identification, has been seen as the very precondition of the alienation-effect (no more hero, no more identification – the suppression of the hero being also linked to Brecht's 'materialist' conception – it is the masses who make history, not 'heroes'). Now, I feel that these

interpretations are limited to notions which may well be important, but which are not determinant, and that it is essential to go beyond the technical and psychological conditions to an understanding that this very special critique must be constituted in the spectator's consciousness. In other words, if a distance can be established between the spectator and the play, it is essential that in some way this distance should be produced within the play itself, and not only in its (technical) treatment, or in the psychological modality of the characters (are they really heroes or non-heroes? Take the dumb daughter on the roof in *Mother Courage*, shot because she beat her infernal drum to warn the unknowing city that an enemy was about to fall on it, is she not, in fact, a 'positive hero'? Surely we do temporarily 'identify' with this secondary character?). It is within the play itself, in the dynamic of its internal structure, that this distance is produced and represented, at once criticizing the illusions of consciousness and unravelling its real conditions.

This – that the dynamic of the latent structure produces this distance within the play itself – must be the starting-point from which to pose the problem of the relation between the spectator and the performance. Here again Brecht reverses the established order. In the classical theatre it was apparently quite simple: the hero's temporality was the sole temporality, all the rest was subordinate to it, even his opponents were made to his measure, they had to be if they were to be his opponents; they lived his time, his rhythm, they were dependent on him, they were merely his dependants. The opponent was really his opponent: in the struggle the hero belonged to the opponent as much as the opponent did to the hero, the opponent was the hero's double, his reflection, his opposite, his night, his temptation, his own unconscious turned against him. Hegel was right, his destiny was consciousness of himself as of an enemy. Thereby the content of the struggle was identified with the hero's consciousness of himself. And quite naturally, the spectator seemed to 'live' the play by 'identifying' himself with the hero, that is, with his time, with his consciousness, the only time and the only consciousness offered him. In Bertolazzi's play and in Brecht's great plays this confusion becomes impossible, precisely because of their dissociated structure. I should say, not that the heroes have disappeared because Brecht has banished them from his plays, but that even as the heroes they are, and in the play itself, the play makes them impossible, abolishes them, their consciousness and its false dialectic. This reduction is not the effect of the action alone, nor of the demonstration which certain popular figures are fated to make of it (on the theme: neither God nor Caesar); it is not even merely the result of the play appreciated as an unresolved story, it is not produced at the level of detail or of continuity, but at the deeper level of the play's structural dynamic.

At this point close attention is essential: up till now only the play has been discussed – now we must deal with the spectator's consciousness. I should like to show in a few

words that this is not, as might have been thought, a new problem, but really the same one. However, if this is to be accepted, two classical models of the spectatorial consciousness which cloud our reflection must first of all be relinquished. The first of these misleading models is once again a consciousness of self, this time the spectator's. It accepts that the spectator should not identify with the 'hero'; he is to be kept at a distance. But is he not then outside the play judging, adding up the score and drawing the conclusions? Mother Courage is presented to you. It is for her to act. It is for you to judge. On the stage the image of blindness – in the stalls the image of lucidity, led to consciousness by two hours of unconsciousness. But this division of roles amounts to conceding to the house what has been rigorously excluded from the stage. Really, the spectator has no claim to this absolute consciousness of self which the play cannot tolerate. The play can no more contain the 'Last Judgment' on its own 'story' than can the spectator be the supreme Judge of the play. He also sees and lives the play in the mode of a questioned false consciousness. For what else is he if not the brother of the characters, caught in the spontaneous myths of ideology, in its illusions and privileged forms, as much as they are? If he is kept at a distance from the play by the play itself, it is not to spare him or to set him up as a Judge – on the contrary, it is to take him and enlist him in this apparent distance, in this 'estrangement' – to make him into this distance itself, the distance which is simply an active and living critique.

But then, no doubt, we must also reject the second model of the spectatorial consciousness – a model that will haunt us until it has been rejected: the identification model. I am unable to answer this question fully here, but I shall try to pose it clearly: surely the invocation of a conception of identification (with the hero) to deal with the status of the spectatorial consciousness is to hazard a dubious correlation? Rigorously speaking, the concept of identification is a psychological, or, more precisely, a psychoanalytic concept. Far be it from me to contest the effectivity of psychological processes in the spectator seated in front of the stage. But it must be said that the phenomena of projection, sublimation, etc., that can be observed, described and defined in controlled psychological situations cannot by themselves account for complex behaviour as specific as that of the spectator-attending-a-performance. This behaviour is primarily social and cultural aesthetic, and as such it is also ideological. Certainly, it is an important task to elucidate the insertion of concrete psychological processes (such as identification, sublimation, repression, etc., in their strict psychological senses) in behaviour which goes beyond them. But this first task cannot abolish the second – the definition of the specificity of the spectatorial consciousness itself – without lapsing into psychologism. If the consciousness cannot be reduced to a purely psychological consciousness, if it is a social, cultural and ideological consciousness, we cannot think its relation to the performance solely in the form of a psychological identification. Indeed, before (psychologically) identifying itself with the hero, the spectatorial consciousness recognizes itself in the ideological content of the

play, and in the forms characteristic of this content. Before becoming the occasion for an identification (an identification with self in the species of another), the performance is, fundamentally, the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition.^{vi}[6]

This self-recognition presupposes as its principle an essential identity (which makes the processes of psychological identification themselves possible, in so far as they are psychological): the identity uniting the spectators and actors assembled in the same place on the same evening. Yes, we are first united by an institution – the performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our consent, by the same spontaneously lived ideology. Yes, even if it is the ideology of the poor par excellence, as in *El Nost Milan*, we still eat of the same bread, we have the same rages, the same rebellions, the same madness (at least in the memory where stalks this ever-imminent possibility), if not the same prostration before a time unmoved by any History. Yes, like *Mother Courage*, we have the same war at our gates, and a handsbreadth from us, if not in us, the same horrible blindness, the same dust in our eyes, the same earth in our mouths. We have the same dawn and night, we skirt the same abysses: our unconsciousness. We even share the same history – and that is how it all started. That is why we were already ourselves in the play itself, from the beginning – and then what does it matter whether we know the result, since it will never happen to anyone but ourselves, that is, still in our world. That is why the false problem of identification was solved from the beginning, even before it was posed, by the reality of recognition. The only question, then, is what is the fate of this tacit identity, this immediate self-recognition, what has the author already done with it? What will the actors set to work by the Dramaturg, by Brecht or Strehler, do with it? What will become of this ideological self-recognition? Will it exhaust itself in the dialectic of the consciousness of self, deepening its myths without ever escaping from them? Will it put this infinite mirror at the centre of the action? Or will it rather displace it, put it to one side, find it and lose it, leave it, return to it, expose it from afar to forces which are external – and so drawn out – that like those wine-glasses broken at a distance by a physical resonance, it comes to a sudden end as a heap of splinters on the floor.

To return finally to my attempt at definition, with the simple aim of posing the question anew and in a better form, we can see that the play itself is the spectator's consciousness – for the essential reason that the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself: the new result which the play produces from the self-recognition whose image and presence it is. Brecht was right: if the theatre's sole object were to be even a 'dialectical' commentary on this eternal self-recognition and non-recognition – then the spectator would already know the tune, it is his own. If, on the contrary, the theatre's object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion

the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator – incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.

I look back, and I am suddenly and irresistibly assailed by the question: are not these few pages, in their maladroit and groping way, simply that unfamiliar play *El Nost Milan*, performed on a June evening, pursuing in me its incomplete meaning, searching in me, despite myself, now that all the actors and sets have been cleared away, for the advent of its silent discourse?

August, 1962

ⁱ 'Epic melodrama' ... 'Poor popular theatre' ... 'Noxious Central European Miserabilism' ... 'Tear jerker' ... 'detestable sentimentalism' ... 'Worn out old shoe' ... 'A Piaf croon' ... 'Miserabilist melodrama, realist excess' (comments drawn from *Parisien-libéré*, *Combat*, *Figaro*, *Libération*, *Paris-Presses*, *Le Monde*).

ⁱⁱ Bertolazzi was a late-nineteenth-century Milanese playwright who achieved no more than moderate success – no doubt because of his obstinate persistence in 'verismo' of a style odd enough to displease the public which then set 'theatrical taste': the bourgeois public.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a whole tacit conspiracy among these poor folk to separate quarrellers, to circumvent unbearable pains, such as those of the unemployed young couple, to reduce all the troubles and disturbances of this life to its truth: to silence, immobility and nothingness.

^{iv} Marx's book (*The Holy Family*, English translation, Moscow, 1956) contains no explicit definition of melodrama. But it does tell us its genesis, with Sue as its eloquent witness.

(a) The *Mystères de Paris* present morality and religion as a veneer on 'natural' beings ('natural' despite their poverty or disgrace). What efforts have gone into this veneer! It needed Rodolphe's cynicism, the priest's moral blackmail, the paraphernalia of police, prison, internment, etc. Finally 'nature' gives in: a foreign consciousness will henceforth govern it (and catastrophes multiply to guarantee its salvation).

(b) The origin of this 'veneer' is obvious: it is Rodolphe who imposes this borrowed consciousness on these 'innocents'. Rodolphe neither comes from the 'people', nor is he 'innocent'. But (naturally) he wants to 'save' the people, to teach them that they have souls, that God exists, etc. – in other words, whether they will or no he gives them bourgeois morality to parrot so as to keep them quiet.

(c) It can be inferred (cf. *The Holy Family*, p. 242; 'Eugène Sue's personages ... must express as the result of their own thoughts the conscious motive of their acts, the reason why the writer makes them behave in a certain way and no other') that Sue's novel is the admission of his own project: to give the 'people' a literary myth which will be both the propaedeutic for the consciousness they must have, and the consciousness they must have to be the people (i.e.

‘saved’, i.e. subordinate, paralysed and drugged, in a word moral and religious). It could not be more bluntly put that it was the bourgeoisie itself that invented for the people the popular myth of the melodrama, that proposed or imposed it (serials in the popular Press, cheap ‘novels’) just as it was the bourgeoisie that ‘gave’ them night-shelters, soup kitchens, etc.: in short, a fairly deliberate system of preventive charities.

(d) All the same, it is entertaining to witness the majority of established critics pretending to be disgusted by melodrama! As if in them the bourgeoisie had forgotten that melodrama was its own invention! But, in all honesty, we must admit that the invention dated quickly: the myths and charities handed out to the ‘people’ are otherwise organized today, and more ingeniously. We must also accept that at heart it was an invention for others, and it is certainly very disconcerting to see your own works sitting squarely at your right hand for all to see – or parading unashamedly on your own stages! Is it conceivable, for example, that the romantic Press (the popular ‘myth’ of recent times) should be invited to the spiritual concert of ruling ideas? We must not mix ranks.

(e) It is also true that one can allow oneself what one would forbid others (it used to be what marked out the ‘great’ in their own consciousness): an exchange of roles. A Person of Quality can use the back stairs for fun (borrow from the people what he has given it, or left over for it). Everything depends on the double-meaning of this surreptitious exchange, on the short terms of the loan, and on its conditions: in other words, on the irony of the game in which one proves to oneself (so this proof is necessary?) that one is not to be fooled by anything, not even by the means that one is using to fool others. In other words one is quite prepared to borrow from the ‘people’ the myths, the trash that one has fabricated and handed out (or sold) to them, on condition that they are suitably accommodated and ‘treated’. Good or mediocre ‘treaters’ (such as Bruant and Piaf, and the Frères Jacques, respectively) may arise from their ranks. One makes oneself ‘one of the people’ through a delight in being above one’s own methods; that is why it is essential to play at being (not being) the people that one forces the people to be, the people of popular ‘myth’, people with a flavour of melodrama. This melodrama is not worthy of the stage (the real, theatrical stage) It is savoured in small sips in the cabaret.

(f) My conclusion is that neither amnesia, nor disgust, nor irony produce even the shadow of a critique.

^v ‘The principal feature of the work is precisely the sudden appearances in it of a truth as yet hardly defined ... *El Nost Milan* is a drama sotto voce, a drama continually referred back, reconsidered, a drama which is focused from time to time only to be deferred once again, a drama which is made up of a long grey line broken by the cracks of a whip. This is no doubt the reason why Nina and her Father’s few decisive cries stand out in particularly tragic relief... We have decided to make some rearrangements in the construction of the play so as to stress this secret structure. Bertolazzi’s four acts have been reduced to three by the fusion of the second and third acts... .’ (Programme Notes)

^{vi} We should not imagine that this self-recognition escapes the exigencies which, in the last instance, command the destiny of the ideology. Indeed, art is as much the desire for self-recognition as self-recognition itself. So, from the beginning, the unity I have assumed to be (in essentials) achieved so as to restrict the analysis, the stock of common myths, themes and aspirations which makes representation possible as a cultural and ideological phenomenon – this unity is as much a desired or rejected unity as an achieved unity. In other words, in the theatrical world, as in the aesthetic world more generally ideology is always in essence the site of a competition and a struggle in which the sound and fury of humanity’s political and social struggles is faintly or sharply echoed. I must say that it is very odd to put forward purely psychological processes (such as identification) as explanations of spectatorial behaviour, when

we know that the effects of these processes are sometimes radically absent – when we know that there are professional and other spectators who do not want to understand anything, even before the curtain rises or who, once the curtain has been raised, refuse to recognize themselves in the work presented to them, or in its interpretation. We need not look far for a wealth of examples. Was not Bertolazzi rejected by the late nineteenth century Italian bourgeoisie and forced into failure and poverty? And here in Paris, June 1962, was he not condemned – along with Strehler – without a hearing, a real hearing, by the leaders of ‘Parisian’ public consciousness? Whereas a large popular audience now accepts and recognizes him in Italy?