PREFACE: The Theater and Culture

Never before, when it is life itself that is in question, has there been so much talk of civilization and culture. And there is a curious parallel between this generalized collapse of life at the root of our present demoralization and our concern for a culture which has never been coincident with life, which in fact has been devised to tyrannize over life.

Before speaking further about culture, I must remark that the world is hungry and not concerned with culture, and that the attempt to orient toward culture thoughts turned only toward hunger is a purely artificial expedient.

What is most important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger.

We need to live first of all; to believe in what makes us live and that something makes us live—to believe that whatever is produced from the mysterious depths of ourselves need not forever haunt us as an exclusively digestive concern.

I mean that if it is important for us to eat first of all, it is even more important for us not to waste in the sole concern for eating our simple power of being hungry.

If confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation.

Not, of course, for lack of philosophical systems; their number and contradictions characterize our old French and
European culture: but where can it be shown that life, our life, has ever been affected by these systems? I will not say that philosophical systems must be applied directly and immediately: but of the following alternatives, one must be true:

Either these systems are within us and permeate our being to the point of supporting life itself (and if this is the case, what use are books?), or they do not permeate us and therefore do not have the capacity to support life (and in this case what does their disappearance matter?).

We must insist upon the idea of culture-in-action, of culture growing within us like a new organ, a sort of second breath; and on civilization as an applied culture controlling even our subtlest actions, a presence of mind; the distinction between culture and civilization is an artificial one, providing two words to signify an identical function.

A civilized man judges and is judged according to his behavior, but even the term "civilized" leads to confusion: a cultivated "civilized" man is regarded as a person instructed in systems, a person who thinks in forms, signs, representations—a monster whose faculty of deriving thoughts from acts, instead of identifying acts with thoughts, is developed to an absurdity.

If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force.

And this faculty is an exclusively human one. I would even say that it is this infection of the human which contaminates ideas that should have remained divine; for far from believing that man invented the supernatural and the divine, I think it is man's age-old intervention which has ultimately corrupted the divine within him.

All our ideas about life must be revised in a period when nothing any longer adheres to life; it is this painful cleavage
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which is responsible for the revenge of things; the poetry which is no longer within us and which we no longer succeed in finding in things suddenly appears on their wrong side: consider the unprecedented number of crimes whose perverse gratuitousness is explained only by our powerlessness to take complete possession of life.

If the theater has been created as an outlet for our repressions, the agonized poetry expressed in its bizarre corruptions of the facts of life demonstrates that life’s intensity is still intact and asks only to be better directed.

But no matter how loudly we clamor for magic in our lives, we are really afraid of pursuing an existence entirely under its influence and sign.

Hence our confirmed lack of culture is astonished by certain grandiose anomalies; for example, on an island without any contact with modern civilization, the mere passage of a ship carrying only healthy passengers may provoke the sudden outbreak of diseases unknown on that island but a specialty of nations like our own: shingles, influenza, gripe, rheumatism, sinusitis, polynucleosis, etc.

Similarly, if we think Negroes smell bad, we are ignorant of the fact that anywhere but in Europe it is we whites who “smell bad.” And I would even say that we give off an odor as white as the gathering of pus in an infected wound.

As iron can be heated until it turns white, so it can be said that everything excessive is white; for Asiaties white has become the mark of extreme decomposition.

This said, we can begin to form an idea of culture, an idea which is first of all a protest.

A protest against the senseless constraint imposed upon the idea of culture by reducing it to a sort of inconceivable Pantheon, producing an idolatry no different from the image-worship of those religions which relegate their gods to Pantheons.
A protest against the idea of culture as distinct from life—as if there were culture on one side and life on the other, as if true culture were not a refined means of understanding and exercising life.

The library at Alexandria can be burnt down. There are forces above and beyond papyrus: we may temporarily be deprived of our ability to discover these forces, but their energy will not be suppressed. It is good that our excessive facilities are no longer available, that forms fall into oblivion: a culture without space or time, restrained only by the capacity of our own nerves, will reappear with all the more energy. It is right that from time to time cataclysms occur which compel us to return to nature, i.e., to rediscover life. The old totemism of animals, stones, objects capable of discharging thunderbolts, costumes impregnated with bestial essences—everything, in short, that might determine, disclose, and direct the secret forces of the universe—is for us a dead thing, from which we derive nothing but static and aesthetic profit, the profit of an audience, not of an actor.

Yet totemism is an actor, for it moves, and has been created in behalf of actors; all true culture relies upon the barbaric and primitive means of totemism whose savage, i.e., entirely spontaneous, life I wish to worship.

What has lost us culture is our Occidental idea of art and the profits we seek to derive from it. Art and culture cannot be considered together, contrary to the treatment universally accorded them!

True culture operates by exaltation and force, while the European ideal of art attempts to cast the mind into an attitude distinct from force but addicted to exaltation. It is a lazy, unserviceable notion which engenders an imminent death. If the Serpent Quetzalcoatl's multiple twists and turns are harmonious, it is because they express the equilibrium and fluctuations of a sleeping force; the intensity of the forms is there
only to seduce and direct a force which, in music, would produce an insupportable range of sound.

The gods that sleep in museums: the god of fire with his incense burner that resembles an Inquisition tripod; Tlaloc, one of the manifold Gods of the Waters, on his wall of green granite; the Mother Goddess of Waters, the Mother Goddess of Flowers; the immutable expression, echoing from beneath many layers of water, of the Goddess robed in green jade; the enraptured, blissful expression, features crackling with incense, where atoms of sunlight circle—the countenance of the Mother Goddess of Flowers; this world of obligatory servitude in which a stone comes alive when it has been properly carved, the world of organically civilized men whose vital organs too awaken from their slumber, this human world enters into us, participating in the dance of the gods without turning round or looking back, on pain of becoming, like ourselves, crumpled pillars of salt.

In Mexico, since we are talking about Mexico, there is no art: things are made for use. And the world is in perpetual exaltation.

To our disinterested and inert idea of art an authentic culture opposes a violently egoistic and magical, i.e., interested idea. For the Mexicans seek contact with the Manas, forces latent in every form, unreleased by contemplation of the forms for themselves, but springing to life by magic identification with these forms. And the old Totems are there to hasten the communication.

How hard it is, when everything encourages us to sleep, though we may look about us with conscious, clinging eyes, to wake and yet look about us as in a dream, with eyes that no longer know their function and whose gaze is turned inward.

This is how our strange idea of disinterested action originated, though it is action nonetheless, and all the more violent for skirting the temptation of repose.
Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double; and art must falter and fail from the moment the sculptor believes he has liberated the kind of shadow whose very existence will destroy his repose.

Like all magic cultures expressed by appropriate hieroglyphs, the true theater has its shadows too, and, of all languages and all arts, the theater is the only one left whose shadows have shattered their limitations. From the beginning, one might say its shadows did not tolerate limitations.

Our petrified idea of the theater is connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind (esprit) encounters only emptiness, though space is full.

But the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way. The actor does not make the same gestures twice, but he makes gestures, he moves; and although he brutalizes forms, nevertheless behind them and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation.

The theater, which is in no thing, but makes use of everything—gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness—redisCOVERS itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations.

And the fixation of the theater in one language—written words, music, lights, noises—betokens its imminent ruin, the choice of any one language betraying a taste for the special effects of that language; and the dessication of the language accompanies its limitation.

For the theater as for culture, it remains a question of naming and directing shadows: and the theater, not confined to a fixed language and form, not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life.
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To break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theater; the essential thing is not to believe that this act must remain sacred, i.e., set apart—the essential thing is to believe that not just anyone can create it, and that there must be a preparation.

This leads to the rejection of the usual limitations of man and man’s powers, and infinitely extends the frontiers of what is called reality.

We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theater, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And everything that has not been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms.

Furthermore, when we speak the word “life,” it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.
I. The Theater and the Plague

The archives of the little town of Cagliari, in Sardinia, contain the account of an astonishing historical fact.

One night at the end of April or the beginning of May, 1720, about twenty days before the arrival at Marseille of the Grand-Saint-Antoine, a vessel whose landing coincided with the most amazing outbreak of the plague in that city's memory, Saint-Rémys, the viceroy of Sardinia, whose reduced monarchical responsibilities had perhaps sensitized him to the most pernicious of viruses, had a particularly afflictive dream: he saw himself infected by the plague he dreamed was ravaging the whole of his tiny state.

Beneath such a scourge, all social forms disintegrate. Order collapses. He observes every infringement of morality, every psychological disaster; he hears his body fluids murmuring within him; torn, failing in a dizzying collapse of tissue, his organs grow heavy and gradually turn to carbon. But is it too late to avert the scourge? Even destroyed, even annihilated, organically pulverized and consumed to his very marrow, he knows we do not die in our dreams, that our will operates even in absurdity, even in the negation of possibility, even in the transmutation of the lies from which truth can be remade.

He wakes up. All these rumors about the plague, these
miasmas of a virus from the Orient:—he will know how to keep them away now.

The Grand-Saint-Antoine, a month out of Beirut, asks for permission to dock at Cagliari. The viceroy replies with an insane order, an order considered irresponsible, absurd, idiotic, and despotic by the public and by his own staff. He hastily dispatches the pilot's boat and some men to the ship which he presumes contaminated, with orders that the Grand-Saint-Antoine tack about immediately and make full sail away from the town, under threat of being sunk by cannon shot. War against the plague. The autocrat was not going to waste any time.

The particular strength of the influence which this dream exerted upon him should be remarked in passing, since it permitted him, in spite of the sarcasms of the crowd and the skepticism of his followers, to persevere in the ferocity of his orders, trespassing because of it not only upon the rights of man, but upon the simplest respect for human life and upon all sorts of national or international conventions which, in the face of death, are no longer relevant.

In any case, the ship continued on its course, landed at Leghorn, and entered the Marseille roadstead where it was permitted to unload its cargo.

The harbor authorities of Marseille have not kept a record of what happened to its plague-ridden cargo. What became of its crew is more or less known; those who did not die of the plague dispersed to different countries.

The Grand-Saint-Antoine did not bring the plague to Marseille. It was already there. And at a point of particular recrudescence. But its centers had been successfully localized.

The plague brought by the Grand-Saint-Antoine was the Oriental plague, the original virus, and it is from its approach and diffusion in the city that the particularly dreadful and widespread flaring up of the epidemic dates.

This inspires certain thoughts.
ANTONIN ARTAUD

This plague, which seems to reactivate a virus, was of itself capable of inflicting equally virulent damage: of all the crew, the captain alone did not catch the plague; furthermore, it does not appear that the newly arrived victims had ever been in direct contact with the others, confined as they were to close quarters. The Grand-Saint-Antoine, which passes within shouting range of Cagliari, in Sardinia, does not deposit the plague there, but the viceroy gathers certain emanations from it in a dream; for it cannot be denied that between the viceroy and the plague a palpable communication, however subtle, was established: and it is too easy and explains nothing to limit the communication of such a disease to contagion by simple contact.

But these relations between Saint-Rémy and the plague, strong enough to liberate themselves as images in his dream, are all the same not strong enough to infect him with the disease.

In any case the town of Cagliari, learning some time later that the ship turned from its shores by the despotic will of its viceroy, its miraculously enlightened viceroy, was at the source of the great epidemic of Marseille, recorded the fact into its archives, where it can be found today.

The plague of 1720 in Marseille has yielded us the only so-called clinical descriptions of the scourge that we possess.

Yet one wonders if the plague described by the Marseille doctors was indeed the same as that of 1347 in Florence which produced the Decameron. History, sacred books, among them the Bible, certain old medical treatises describe externally all sorts of plagues concerning which they seem to have paid much less attention to morbid symptoms than to the demoralizing and prodigious effect produced on the victims’ minds. They were probably right in doing so. For medicine would have considerable trouble establishing a basic difference between the virus of which Pericles died before Syracuse, sup-
posing the word "virus" to be something other than a mere verbal convenience, and that which manifests its presence in the plague described by Hippocrates, which recent medical treatises regard as a kind of pseudoplague. According to these same treatises, the only authentic plague is the plague from Egypt which rises from the cemeteries uncovered when the Nile recedes. The Bible and Herodotus both call attention to the lightning-like appearance of the plague which in one night decimated the 180,000 men of the Assyrian army, thereby saving the Egyptian empire. If the fact is true, we should have to consider the scourge as the direct instrument or materialization of an intelligent force in close contact with what we call fatality.

And this with or without the army of rats which that same night threw itself upon the Assyrian troops, whose leather armor and harness they gnawed to pieces in a few hours. The fact is comparable to the epidemic which broke out in 660 B.C. in the holy city of Mékao, Japan, on the occasion of a mere change of government.

The plague of 1502 in Provence, which furnished Nostradamus his first opportunities to exercise his powers as a healer, coincided with the most profound political upheavals, downfalls or deaths of kings, disappearance and destruction of provinces, earthquakes, magnetic phenomena of all kinds, exoduses of Jews, which precede or follow, in the political or cosmic order, cataclysms and devastations whose effects those who provoke them are too stupid to foresee and not perverse enough actually to desire.

Whatever may be the errors of historians or physicians concerning the plague, I believe we can agree upon the idea of a malady that would be a kind of psychic entity and would not be carried by a virus. If one wished to analyze closely all the facts of plague contagion that history or even memoirs provide us with, it would be difficult to isolate one actually verified instance of contagion by contact, and Boccaccio's
example of swine that died from having sniffed the sheets in which plague victims had been wrapped scarcely suggests more than a kind of mysterious affinity between pig and the nature of the plague, which again would have to be very closely analyzed.

Although there exists no concept of an actual morbid entity, there are some forms upon which the mind can provisionally agree as characterizing certain phenomena, and it seems that the mind can agree to a plague described in the following manner.

Before the onset of any very marked physical or psychological discomfort, the body is covered with red spots, which the victim suddenly notices only when they turn blackish. The victim scarcely hesitates to become alarmed before his head begins to boil and to grow overpoweringly heavy, and he collapses. Then he is seized by a terrible fatigue, the fatigue of a centralized magnetic suction, of his molecules divided and drawn toward their annihilation. His crazed body fluids, unsettled and commingled, seem to be flooding through his flesh. His gorge rises, the inside of his stomach seems as if it were trying to gush out between his teeth. His pulse, which at times slows down to a shadow of itself, a mere virtuality of a pulse, at others races after the boiling of the fever within, consonant with the streaming aberration of his mind, beating in hurried strokes like his heart, which grows intense, heavy, loud; his eyes, first inflamed, then glazed; his swollen gasping tongue, first white, then red, then black, as if charred and split—everything proclaims an unprecedented organic upheaval. Soon the body fluids, furrowed like the earth struck by lightning, like lava kneaded by subterranean forces, search for an outlet. The fieriest point is formed at the center of each spot; around these points the skin rises in blisters like air bubbles under the surface of lava, and these blisters are surrounded by circles, of which the outermost, like Saturn’s ring around the incandescent planet, indicates the extreme limit of a bubo.
The body is furrowed with them. But just as volcanoes have their elected spots upon the earth, so bubos make their preferred appearances on the surface of the human body. Around the anus, in the armpits, in the precious places where the active glands faithfully perform their functions, the bubos appear, wherever the organism discharges either its internal rottenness or, according to the case, its life. In most cases a violent burning sensation, localized in one spot, indicates that the organism’s life has lost nothing of its force and that a remission of the disease or even its cure is possible. Like silent rage, the most terrible plague is the one that does not reveal its symptoms.

The corpse of a plague victim shows no lesions when opened. The gall bladder, which must filter the heavy and inert wastes of the organism, is full, swollen to bursting with a black, viscous fluid so dense as to suggest a new form of matter altogether. The blood in the arteries and the veins is also black and viscous. The flesh is hard as stone. On the inner surfaces of the stomach membrane, innumerable spurts of blood seem to have appeared. Everything indicates a fundamental disorder in the secretions. But there is neither loss nor destruction of matter, as in leprosy or syphilis. The intestines themselves, which are the site of the bloodiest disorders of all, and in which substances attain an unheard-of degree of putrefaction and petrifaction, are not organically affected. The gall bladder, from which the hardened pus must be virtually torn, as in certain human sacrifices, with a sharp knife, a hard, vitreous instrument of obsidian—the gall bladder is hypertrophied and cracking in places but intact, without any parts missing, without visible lesion, without loss of substance.

In certain cases, however, the injured lungs and brain blacken and grow gangrenous. The softened and pitted lungs fall into chips of some unknown black substance—the brain melts, shrinks, granulates to a sort of coal-black dust.

Two important observations can be made about this fact.
The first is that the plague syndrome is complete without gangrene of the lungs and brain, the victim dying without the putrefaction of any member at all. Without underestimating the nature of the disease, we can say that the organism does not require the presence of a localized physical gangrene to determine its own death.

The second observation is that the only two organs really affected and injured by the plague, the brain and the lungs, are both directly dependent upon the consciousness and the will. We can keep ourselves from breathing or from thinking, can speed up our respiration, give it any rhythm we choose, make it conscious or unconscious at will, introduce a balance between two kinds of breathing: the automatic, which is under the direct control of the sympathetic nervous system, and the other, which is subject to those reflexes of the brain which have once again become conscious.

We can similarly accelerate, retard, and give an arbitrary rhythm to our thinking—can regulate the unconscious play of the mind. We cannot control the filtering of body fluids by the liver or the redistribution of blood by the heart and arteries, cannot restrain the digestion, arrest or accelerate the elimination of matter from the intestine. Thus the plague seems to manifest its presence in and have a preference for the very organs of the body, the particular physical sites, where human will, consciousness, and thought are imminent and apt to occur.

In 1880 or so, a French doctor by the name of Yersin, working on some cadavers of Indo-Chinese natives who had died of the plague, isolated one of those round-headed, short-tailed tadpoles which only the microscope can reveal and called it the plague微be. Personally, I regard this microbe only as a smaller—ininitely smaller—material element which appears at some moment in the development of the virus, but which in no way accounts for the plague. And I should like
this doctor to tell me why all the great plagues, with or without virus, have a duration of five months, after which their virulence abates, and how the Turkish ambassador who was passing through Languedoc towards the end of 1720 was able to draw an imaginary line from Nice through Avignon and Toulouse to Bordeaux, marking the limit of the scourge’s geographical extent—a line which events proved to be accurate.

From all this emerges the spiritual physiognomy of a disease whose laws cannot be precisely defined and whose geographical origin it would be idiotic to attempt to determine, for the Egyptian plague is not the Oriental plague, which is not that described by Hippocrates, which is not that of Syracuse, nor of Florence, nor the Black Death which accounted for fifty million lives in medieval Europe. No one can say why the plague strikes the coward who flees it and spares the degenerate who gratifies himself on the corpses. Why distance, chastity, solitude are helpless against the attacks of the scourge; and why a group of debauchees isolating themselves in the country, like Boccaccio with his two well-stocked companions and seven women as lustful as they were religious, can calmly wait for the warm days when the plague withdraws; and why in a nearby castle transformed into a citadel with a cordon of armed men to forbid all entree, the plague turns the garrison and all the occupants into corpses and spares only the armed men exposed to contagion. Who can also explain why the military cordons sanitaires which Mehmet Ali established toward the end of the last century, on the occasion of an outbreak of the Egyptian plague, effectively protected convents, schools, prisons, and palaces; and why numerous epidemics of a plague with all the characteristic symptoms of Oriental plague could suddenly break out in medieval Europe in places having no contact whatever with the Orient.

From these peculiarities, these mysteries, these contradic-
tions and these symptoms we must construct the spiritual physiognomy of a disease which progressively destroys the organism like a pain which, as it intensifies and deepens, multiplies its resources and means of access at every level of the sensibility.

But from this spiritual freedom with which the plague develops, without rats, without microbes, and without contact, can be deduced the somber and absolute action of a spectacle which I shall attempt to analyze.

Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse. There is no maintenance of roads and sewers, no army, no police, no municipal administration. Pyres are lit at random to burn the dead, with whatever means are available. Each family wants to have its own. Then wood, space, and flame itself growing rare, there are family feuds around the pyres, soon followed by a general flight, for the corpses are too numerous. The dead already clog the streets in ragged pyramids gnawed at by animals around the edges. The stench rises in the air like a flame. Entire streets are blocked by the piles of dead. Then the houses open and the delirious victims, their minds crowded with hideous visions, spread howling through the streets. The disease that ferments in their viscera and circulates throughout their entire organism discharges itself in tremendous cerebral explosions. Other victims, without bubos, delirium, pain, or rash, examine themselves proudly in the mirror, in splendid health, as they think, and then fall dead with their shaving mugs in their hands, full of scorn for other victims.

Over the poisonous, thick, bloody streams (color of agony and opium) which gush out of the corpses, strange personages pass, dressed in wax, with noses long as sausages and eyes of glass, mounted on a kind of Japanese sandal made of double wooden tablets, one horizontal, in the form of a sole, the other vertical, to keep them from the contaminated fluids, chanting
absurd litanies that cannot prevent them from sinking into the furnace in their turn. These ignorant doctors betray only their fear and their childishness.

The dregs of the population, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed, enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. And at that moment the theater is born. The theater, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit.

The last of the living are in a frenzy: the obedient and virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbors. The lecher becomes pure. The miser throws his gold in handfuls out the window. The warrior hero sets fire to the city he once risked his life to save. The dandy decks himself out in his finest clothes and promenades before the charnel houses. Neither the idea of an absence of sanctions nor that of imminent death suffices to motivate acts so gratuitously absurd on the part of men who did not believe death could end anything. And how explain the surge of erotic fever among the recovered victims who, instead of fleeing the city, remain where they are, trying to wrench a criminal pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half crushed under the pile of corpses where chance has lodged them.

But if a mighty scourge is required to make this frenetic gratuitousness show itself, and if this scourge is called the plague, then perhaps we can determine the value of this gratuitousness in relation to our total personality. The state of the victim who dies without material destruction, with all the stigmata of an absolute and almost abstract disease upon him, is identical with the state of an actor entirely penetrated by feelings that do not benefit or even relate to his real condition. Everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim of the plague, shows that life has reacted to the paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened.

Between the victim of the plague who runs in shrieking pursuit of his visions and the actor in pursuit of his feelings;
between the man who invents for himself personages he could never have imagined without the plague, creating them in the midst of an audience of corpses and delirious lunatics and the poet who inopportune invents characters, entrusting them to a public equally inert or delirious, there are other analogies which confirm the only truths that count and locate the action of the theater like that of the plague on the level of a veritable epidemic.

But whereas the images of the plague, occurring in relation to a powerful state of physical disorganization, are like the last volleys of a spiritual force that is exhausting itself, the images of poetry in the theater are a spiritual force that begins its trajectory in the senses and does without reality altogether. Once launched upon the fury of his task, an actor requires infinitely more power to keep from committing a crime than a murderer needs courage to complete his act, and it is here, in its very gratuitousness, that the action and effect of a feeling in the theater appears infinitely more valid than that of a feeling fulfilled in life.

Compared with the murderer's fury which exhausts itself, that of the tragic actor remains enclosed within a perfect circle. The murderer's fury has accomplished an act, discharges itself, and loses contact with the force that inspired it but can no longer sustain it. That of the actor has taken a form that negates itself to just the degree it frees itself and dissolves into universality.

Extending this spiritual image of the plague, we can comprehend the troubled body fluids of the victim as the material aspect of a disorder which, in other contexts, is equivalent to the conflicts, struggles, cataclysms and debacles our lives afford us. And just as it is not impossible that the unavailing despair of the lunatic screaming in an asylum can cause the plague by a sort of reversibility of feelings and images, one can similarly admit that the external events, political conflicts, natural cataclysms, the order of revolution and the disorder of
war, by occurring in the context of the theater, discharge themselves into the sensibility of an audience with all the force of an epidemic.

In *The City of God* St. Augustine complains of this similarity between the action of the plague that kills without destroying the organs and the theater which, without killing, provokes the most mysterious alterations in the mind of not only an individual but an entire populace.

"Know," he says, "you who are ignorant, that these plays, sinful spectacles, were not established in Rome by the vices of men but by the order of your gods. It would be more reasonable to render divine honors unto Scipio¹ than to such gods; surely, they are not worthy of their pontiff! . . .

"In order to appease the plague that killed bodies, your gods commanded in their honor these plays, and your pontiff, wishing to avoid this plague that corrupts souls, opposes the construction of the stage itself. If there still remains among you sufficient trace of intelligence to prefer the soul to the body, choose what deserves your reverence; for the strategy of the evil Spirits, foreseeing that the contagion would end with the body, seized joyfully upon this occasion to introduce a much more dangerous scourge among you, one that attacks not bodies but customs. In fact, such is the blindness, such the corruption produced in the soul by plays that even in these late times those whom this fatal passion possessed, who had escaped from the sack of Rome and taken refuge in Carthage, passed each day at the theater priding themselves on their delirious enthusiasm for the actors."

It is useless to give precise reasons for this contagious delirium. It would be like trying to find reasons why our nervous system after a certain period responds to the vibrations of the subtlest music and is eventually somehow modified by them

¹ Scipio Nasica, grand pontiff, who ordered the theaters of Rome to be leveled and their cellars filled with earth.
in a lasting way. First of all we must recognize that the
theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative.

The mind believes what it sees and does what it believes:
that is the secret of the fascination. Nor does Saint Augustine's
text question for one moment the reality of this fascination.

However, there are conditions to be rediscovered in order
to engender in the mind a spectacle capable of fascinating it:
and this is not a simple matter of art.

For if the theater is like the plague, it is not only because
it affects important collectivities and upsets them in an iden-
tical way. In the theater as in the plague there is something
both victorious and vengeful: we are aware that the spontane-
ous conflagration which the plague lights wherever it passes
is nothing else than an immense liquidation.

A social disaster so far-reaching, an organic disorder so
mysterious—this overflow of vices, this total exorcism which
presses and impels the soul to its utmost—all indicate the
presence of a state which is nevertheless characterized by
extreme strength and in which all the powers of nature are
freshly discovered at the moment when something essential is
going to be accomplished.

The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder,
and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures;
the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they
will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is
and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and
what already exists in materialized nature. It recovers the
notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows,
rests, leaps of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory
images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads. The theater
restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and
gives these powers names we hail as symbols: and behold!
before our eyes is fought a battle of symbols, one charging
against another in an impossible mêlée; for there can be
theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols.

These symbols, the sign of ripe powers previously held in servitude and unavailable to reality, burst forth in the guise of incredible images which give freedom of the city and of existence to acts that are by nature hostile to the life of societies.

In the true theater a play disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic.

Thus in Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, from the moment the curtain rises, we see to our utter stupefaction a creature flung into an insolent vindication of incest, exerting all the vigor of his youthful consciousness to proclaim and justify it.

He does not waver an instant, does not hesitate a minute, and thereby shows of how little account are all the barriers that could be opposed to him. He is heroically criminal and audaciously, ostentatiously heroic. Everything drives him in this direction and inflames his enthusiasm; he recognizes neither earth nor heaven, only the force of his convulsive passion, to which the rebellious and equally heroic passion of Annabella does not fail to respond.

"I weep," she says, "not with remorse but for fear I shall not be able to satisfy my passion." They are both forgers, hypocrites, and liars for the sake of their superhuman passion which laws obstruct and condemn but which they will put beyond the law.

Vengeance for vengeance, and crime for crime. When we believe them threatened, hunted down, lost, when we are ready to pity them as victims, then they reveal themselves ready to render destiny threat for threat and blow for blow.

With them we proceed from excess to excess and vindication to vindication. Annabella is captured, convicted of adul-
tery and incest, trampled upon, insulted, dragged by the hair, and we are astonished to discover that far from seeking a means of escape, she provokes her executioner still further and sings out in a kind of obstinate heroism. It is the absolute condition of revolt, it is an exemplary case of love without respite which makes us, the spectators, gasp with anguish at the idea that nothing will ever be able to stop it.

If we desire an example of absolute freedom in revolt, Ford's Annabella provides this poetic example bound up with the image of absolute danger.

And when we tell ourselves we have reached the paroxysm of horror, blood, and flouted laws, of poetry which consecrates revolt, we are obliged to advance still further into an endless vertigo.

But ultimately, we tell ourselves, there is vengeance, there is death for such audacity and such irresistible crime.

But there is no such thing. Giovanni, the lover, inspired by the passion of a great poet, puts himself beyond vengeance, beyond crime, by still another crime, one that is indescribably passionate; beyond threats, beyond horror by an even greater horror, one which overthrows at one and the same time law, morality, and all those who dare set themselves up as administrators of justice.

A trap is cleverly set, a great banquet is given where, among the guests, hired ruffians and spies are to be hidden, ready at the first signal to throw themselves upon him. But this hero, cornered, lost, and inspired by love, will let no one pass sentence on this love.

You want, he seems to say, my love's flesh and blood. Very well, I will throw this love in your face and shower you with its blood—for you are incapable of rising to its height!

And he kills his beloved and tears out her heart as if to feast upon it in the middle of a banquet where he himself is the one whom the guests had hoped to devour.

And before being executed, he manages to kill his rival,
his sister’s husband, who has dared to come between him and his love, and despatches him in a final combat which then appears as his own spasm of agony.

Like the plague, the theater is a formidable call to the forces that impel the mind by example to the source of its conflicts. And it is evident that Ford’s passion has merely symbolizes a still greater and absolutely essential task.

The terrorizing apparition of Evil which in the Mysteries of Eleusis was produced in its pure, truly revealed form corresponds to the dark hour of certain ancient tragedies which all true theater must recover.

If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized.

Like the plague the theater is the time of evil, the triumph of dark powers that are nourished by a power even more profound until extinction.

In the theater as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element. And Ford’s play, like all true theater, is within the radiance of this strange sun. His Annabella resembles the plague’s freedom by means of which, from degree to degree, stage to stage, the victim swells his individuality and the survivor gradually becomes a grandiose and overwhelming being.

We can now say that all true freedom is dark, and infallibly identified with sexual freedom which is also dark, although we do not know precisely why. For it has been a long time since the Platonic Eros, the procreative sense, the freedom of life vanished beneath the somber veneer of the Libido which is identified with all that is dirty, abject, infamous in the process of living and of throwing oneself headlong with a
natural and impure vigor, with a perpetually renewed strength, upon life.

And that is why all the great Myths are dark, so that one cannot imagine, save in an atmosphere of carnage, torture, and bloodshed, all the magnificent Fables which recount to the multitudes the first sexual division and the first carnage of essences that appeared in creation.

The theater, like the plague, is in the image of this carnage and this essential separation. It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life.

We do not see that life as it is and as it has been fashioned for us provides many reasons for exaltation. It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively.

Perhaps the theater's poison, injected into the social body, disintegrates it, as Saint Augustine says, but at least it does so as a plague, as an avenging scourge, a redeeming epidemic in which credulous ages have chosen to see the finger of God and which is nothing but the application of a law of nature whereby every gesture is counterbalanced by a gesture and every action by its reaction.

The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. Similarly the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off
the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it.

And the question we must now ask is whether, in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe.