

Playing at the Circumference: Towards a Theory of the Theatrical Symbolic

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... to tell a story you must first of all construct a world . . .
—Umberto Eco¹

*Nature is a temple where living pillars
At times allow confused words to come forth;
There man passes through forests of symbols
Which observe him with familiar eyes.*
—Charles Baudelaire²

Historically, the concept of the symbol has played an important role in religious and mystic ritual, including those rituals from which, so it is supposed, theatre as we know it emerged. The dramatists and artists of the symbolist movement, inspired by their Romantic and mystic precursors, appropriated this concept and developed it into a style of literature and performance that was to give birth to the modernist avant-garde. For the symbolists, with their roots in religious mysticism and occultism, the symbol was the foundation of a cosmological—even cosmogonic—philosophy, and a means of accessing the life of the spirit. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the symbol as a function within literature and ritual came to be widely characterized not as a connection to the divine, but as mere allegory and signification. Theatre, under the gaze of semiotic theory, has likewise been placed within this deracinated frame of signification. Such placement removes the possibility for the theatrical symbolic and makes problematic if not impossible the notion of a sacred theatre sought by the symbolists and their avant-garde progeny.

In this paper, I examine a certain conceptualization of the symbolic, one that emerged into symbolism from currents within Western esotericism, and illustrate ways in which it is different from allegory and the structuralist sign. Relying significantly on the literary theory of Hazard Adams, I will develop the idea of the symbol as a contrariety (in the Blakean sense) that will lead to a formulation of dramatic literature and theatrical performance as symbolic activity differentiated from significatory activity. The aim of this investigation is to take an initial and

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humble step towards a theory³ of theatre as symbolic activity that will suggest meaningful and non-alienating connections to the mystic aspects of ritual.

Most contemporary theory posits drama and theatre as signification. The difficulty with this model, as useful as it is, is that it situates theatre, drama, and other forms of communication as radically cut off from meaning and the world by the unbridgeable gulf that divides reference from referent. The dilemma constructs a seemingly unassailable obstacle for the various forms of holy or sacred theatre attempted by numerous figures of the twentieth-century avant-garde. In these performances, under the model of signification, every utterance, every gesture, even the performed actions themselves, serves only as indeterminate pointers to the spiritually transcendent. The Divine is banished from the stage, flung down the infinite staircase of the Saussurean signifying “chain.” Such pointing, such signification, far from bringing the activity closer to the holiness it seeks, serves only to reify, indeed, to *construct*, the unbridgeable distance between humankind and the Divine.

If, as I suggest below, the symbol is a function that operates quite differently from signification or representation, then, for the symbol to exist as a function within theatre or drama at all, both must be conceived of as activities that are something other than “mere” signification. I do not offer an argument against the model of signification, much less a refutation. My goal here is to sketch the outlines of a different model, to make room for the possibility of the dramatic and theatrical symbolic. In doing so, I will transpose, into a theatrical context, Hazard Adams’s approach to the literary symbolic while incorporating certain concepts from the traditions of Western esotericism. The model of theatre and drama formulated in this examination will apply beyond the narrow and circumscribed boundaries of the historic symbolist movement to encompass a view of theatrical activity in a more general sense. Articulating this model will involve, in part, an initiation or renewal of a formulation of theatre that has become buried within the sepulcher of reprobate theory. Further, though I draw upon the concept of holy theatre as I trace the contours of this model, I consider the question of a holy theatre as separate from the concept of theatre as symbolic activity. My concern here is with the latter. The establishment of the latter will make possible the former.

Among the foundational ideas of the mystic metaphysics that informed symbolist philosophy and practice, the concept of correspondence is perhaps the most vital. The symbolists drew this concept from a set of esoteric traditions that includes Kabbalah, Gnosticism, magic, alchemy, and Hermeticism. These traditions are not monolithic. They each constitute a diverse array of beliefs, practices, and philosophies. Further, though they are distinct from one another, each of these traditions is highly syncretic; the branches of their thought intertwine and connect like vines in an overgrown garden. While noting the differences within and among these traditions, Antoine Faivre, one of the founders of the modern study of Western

esotericism, cites several defining characteristics shared by all; the first of these is correspondence.⁴ The ancient notion of correspondence is based on the concepts of the macrocosm and microcosm that seem at once to reinforce and to deny a dualistic understanding of cosmology. According to this idea, human life and action (microcosm) are sensible manifestations of greater cosmic figures, forces, and movements (macrocosm). This concept is most succinctly summarized in the opening lines of *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, lines that are commonly further reduced to the familiar mystic saying, “As above, so below.” Hermes Trismegistus, or “Thrice-Greatest Hermes,” was the Greek incarnation of the Egyptian deity, Thoth, and the supposed author of those documents that form the foundation of the Hermetic tradition. In the Introduction to the anthology *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal states that:

Symbolic and real correspondences are said to connect all parts of the visible and invisible world: “That which is above is like that which is below, to perpetuate the mystery of the one thing” . . . according to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. These correspondences are more or less veiled at first glance; they have to be decoded. Everything in the universe is a symbol or sign. Everything harbors and manifests mystery.⁵

The panoply of Western religions, esoteric philosophies, and mystic and occult traditions, from Hermetism and the magic of the ancient Egyptians to the Kabbalah and contemporary Christianity, exhibits a broad and multi-colored diorama of metaphysical thought. All of these, however, are based upon a dualistic metaphysics that assumes a primordial Fall or at least a cosmogenetic bifurcation of reality into two constituent realms. The first of these two realms is variously referred to as nature, matter, the temporal, the particular, or the phenomenal realm. The second realm is referred to alternatively as the Spirit, the immaterial, the eternal, the ideal, nothingness, silence, the universal, or the noumenal realm. The former realm, characterized by plurality, includes humankind and all that is perceivable to it. The latter is usually described as ineffable and unknowable; it is the realm of—variously, and among others—God, the Platonic forms, *nous*, or the collective unconscious and is characterized by unity. The relationship of these two realms is traditionally described, through spatial metaphor, as vertical. The realm of matter is “below” and the realm of Spirit is “above.”

The term “correspondence” further describes this relationship in a manner that is apparently contradictory. According to the Emerald Tablet, the world of matter can be said to correspond to the world of Spirit because the two realms are not merely similar, that is, the world of matter and multiplicity is not merely a reflection of the Spirit, but rather, they are united in “the mystery of the one thing.”

This “one thing” contains and is contained by the multiplicity and particularity of the material realm. “In a word,” as Emanuel Swedenborg notes, “all things which exist in nature from the least to the greatest thereof, are correspondences.”⁶ So something strange happens when the theory of correspondence is applied to the Fall. Correspondence reveals the essential “one-ness” of the two worlds. The Fall is reversed, and duality is encompassed by unity. There is no bifurcation, for all oppositions are united in the “one thing.” The Kabbalists, for whom correspondence is a foundational concept, call this unity “God.” In *Shi’ur Qomah*, the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Moses Cordovero states:

The Essence of divinity is found in every single thing—nothing but it exists. Since it causes every thing to be, no thing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent.

Do not attribute duality to God. . . . If you suppose that Ein Sof emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent.⁷

The Kabbalists resolve the duality of the Fall and the ancient problem of “the one and the many” by claiming that the opposition of spirit and matter are unified in, and inseparable from, God. This action of unification is the basis for correspondence theory.

The idea of God as a unification of opposites, as a wholeness that encloses a *coincidentia oppositorum*, as an encompassing Spirit that unifies, contains, and is All, is not limited to spiritually esoteric traditions. It is, for example, a foundational idea in Hegelian metaphysics. Hegel, even in his early writings, speaks out against the idea of the Divine as alien, remote, and purely transcendent. For Hegel, as he writes in his “Fragment of a System,” God is the unification of the opposition of the one and the many—or, as he puts it, the infinite and the finite. But not, he claims, simply as a dead relation among a universe of multiplicity, a unity as conceptual abstraction. Rather, God is a “living unity of the manifold.”⁸

For the symbolists, who attempted to communicate a spiritual or universal experience in the language of the sensible and particular, symbols—those objects, images, words, or actions that correspond—are an ideal tool. For if the symbol is that which corresponds, then every word, every object in nature, every action, is a symbol that manifests the mystery of the Divine. Thus did Baudelaire pen the hypnotic suggestion that “man passes through a forest of symbols.”⁹

The mystery of the symbol lies in the inner contradiction implied by this theory, a contradiction between the necessary duality of two realms and a monistic “one thing.” Carlo Sini has suggested that the origins of the word “symbol” both imply and resolve such a contradiction. According to Sini, the term derives from

the original Greek verb *sym-ballein*, meaning “putting together.” The *symbolon* was the broken half of an object that could be united with its other half to serve as a means of recognition. Thus the symbol is a fragment of an original whole. Sini describes the symbol as a very special kind of sign. The symbol, like any sign, still refers or signifies, yet the signifier and signified are not “other.” “The symbol,” claims Sini, “does not refer to an ‘other,’ to a ‘different from itself’ but still to itself, to the ‘same’—*the other to which the symbol refers is still to itself*. . . . Each [part] is there to say that it is what it is because it derives its being from the unity that contained it, that kept it together.”¹⁰

Sini’s description of the self-identification of the symbol, its “non-othered” relation to that to which it refers, is something very close to what we need for our theory. The difficulty with Sini’s claim is that he conceives of the relationship between the symbol and its “not-other” as one of signification, as reference and referent, signifier and signified. But this flies in the face of Saussure and subsequent theorists who have shown that the signifier and signified can never coincide. In order to resolve this difficulty, we need to conceive of the relationship between the symbol and its “not-other,” its “partner,” its “double,” if you will, as something other than signification. We need to identify the nature of this relationship.

Sini’s identification of the symbol as the coincidence of opposed or “othered” elements echoes the thinking of the symbolists and their antecedents, the Romantics, in both Europe and Russia. It is this characterization that differentiates symbol from allegory. In *The Philosophy of Art*, Friedrich Schelling draws the distinction:

That representation, however, in which the particular means the universal, or in which the universal is intuited through the particular is *allegory*.

The synthesis of these two, where neither the universal means the particular, nor the particular the universal, but rather where both are absolutely one, is the *symbolic*.¹¹

It is important to note that Schelling describes the allegoric relationship in terms of signification. The allegory signifies or represents, by means of figurality, that which it is not. Thus the lion is an allegory for courage in that, while the lion is entirely separate from courage, the former refers to or signifies the latter. By contrast, the symbolic relationship is one of coincidence and tautology; both are “absolutely one.” Schelling’s “universal” and “particular” are part of a set of associated oppositions like “one and many,” and “above and below” that are unified in the correspondence theory of the symbolic.

Mircea Eliade describes the relationship between the symbolic “partners” by invoking the concepts of immanence and archetype. He conceives of the world as a non-linguistic language composed of objects that enclose archetypes that are immanent within them.¹² Here, the “above” is identified with archetypes that are in a relationship of immanence with the “below.” Symbols, for Eliade, are these

non-linguistic objects—part of the world—that are signified by words. In this case, the world is a non-linguistic language of correspondences and our own linguistic language is “signification and an imitation of the true language which is the world itself.”¹³ This conception leaves room for a theatrical symbolic if theatre is conceived of as in and of the world, as opposed to something that is somehow set apart from the world and merely signifies objects and events therein. Theatre, in the former case, would be part of the non-linguistic world of symbols that correspond to the archetypes that are immanent within it. Yet for Eliade, there can be no literary or verbal symbolic based on correspondence. In his conception, our language merely refers to the world of symbols through signification. Language and the world are thus, in Eliade, irredeemably separated. We must turn to Hazard Adams and his theory of the literary symbolic if our theatrical symbolic is to include language.

To describe the correspondence conception of the symbol, Hazard Adams uses the example of the Eucharist in which the bread and wine do not merely *represent* the body and blood of Christ, but rather that the bread and wine are *coincident with and contain* the body and blood of Christ.¹⁴ Adams refers to this relationship of correspondence between two separate realities—one of which is “fallen”—as the “miraculous symbolic,” and contrasts it to his own conception of the “secular symbolic.” This “secular” concept of the symbol is similar to the “miraculous” type in that both involve the coincidence of signifier and referent, yet the former operates without the mystical baggage or the Fall implied by the latter. Adams’s conception of the secular symbolic is based on a theory of language as “prolific” or creative rather than as signficatory. I shall return to this notion, a crucial one for Adams, later in this essay.

There are three sets of terms that Adams, borrowing from William Blake, introduces to construct his notion of the secular symbolic: circumference and center; myth and antimyth; and contraries and negations. Center and circumference describe different and opposing metaphysical perspectives. When standing at the center, all that is—experience, nature, or any referent—is without or outside of the self. Even in a mode of reflexive self-analysis, the self is projected outside of the self as other. The entire world is alien and the self is a member of what Blake calls the “priesthood” that interprets this other. At the circumference, all that is inside and part of the self. “You contain the world in the form your imagination, including your power of language, gives it.”¹⁵ The circumference contains and is all, while the center excludes all as other.

Blake’s concepts of myth and antimyth are closely related to circumference and center. The condition of myth, according to Adams, involves the placement of all that is, again, including the power of language, inside the imagination and the identification of each individual element with the whole while maintaining the individuality of each element. Thus in myth, there is a paradox: the particular encompasses the whole and the whole, every particular. Antimyth is the reverse of

this state. It is the externalization and objectification of all that is. It involves, “an isolated, purely subjective and totally passive consciousness, alien to everything else.”¹⁶ At the antimythic pole, one points outward to everything as other, as allegory signifies or points towards that which is not itself. Myth is thus circumferential while antimyth is a center. Adams constructs a continuum, or rather, a cycle, on which he places various humanistic activities including language and myth, art, criticism, history, religion, and mathematics (in that order) in a range between myth and antimyth.¹⁷

The Blakean concept of negation involves a binary opposition—like subject/object—wherein one side is central and privileged and the other side is repressed and marginalized. Furthermore, each constituent in the opposition is identified as what it is by virtue of the fact that it is *not* the opposing constituent. Contrariety is a circumferential form that encloses a duality wherein one side is the distinction between the two elements while the other side is the denial of such a distinction in favor of the identity of the two. “Identity,” for Adams, is precisely the contrary to the distinction difference/non-difference. Thus, rather than deconstructing hierarchical dualities as Jacques Derrida deconstructed speech/writing, the contrary encloses duality in a unity. The terms of the opposition are both different and the same and neither merely the same nor merely different. Contrariety operates as a syzygy in the Jungian sense, the conjunction of a pair of opposites results in the two becoming one.

It is important to point out that the contrariety, as an enclosing union of oppositions, does not affect the complete erasure of all distinction between the constituents. As in Hegel’s “Fragment of a System,” opposites are both posited and united; that is, neither term is dissolved while both are one. This idea is succinctly manifest in the Chinese symbol of the yin-yang. The yin-yang is composed of a circle divided in half by a backwards S-curve. The black half (yin) and the white half (yang) each contain a small circle of their opposite color. That the two apparent opposites are enclosed within the circumference of a circle, the symbol of cosmic unity, reveals that the polar duality of the yin and yang are one. The presence of the small circle of black in yang and the small circle of white in yin reveals that each half contains the seed of the other. As the seed grows, the yin becomes yang and the yang, yin. The two forces are not in conflict, the one negating the other. They are dynamically interdependent, constantly striving to complete one another. They are a duality in unity and a unity in duality.

We see another example of this in Viachelav Ivanov’s essay, “The Essence of Tragedy.” For Ivanov, Apollo signifies the principle of unity, or the monad, while Dionysus signifies the principle of duality, or the dyad. This monad/dyad is an opposition. Unlike Nietzsche, Ivanov sees tragedy as essentially Dionysian. Yet he swerves back somewhat towards a Nietzschean position with regard to tragedy when he briefly uses the term *dyad* in a different sense. The dyad, in Ivanov’s thought, is

the contrary to the monad/dyad opposition. “The concept of the dyad presupposes an initial, intrinsic unity, in which internal opposition is revealed. From the very start, this existence must harbor a certain duplicity within itself—not as an inner contradiction, but as an inner wholeness.”¹⁸ Yet this concept of the dyad harbors the necessity of the temporal. For Ivanov, this contrariety is a unified primordial state that does not endure, for “as the energy concealed in it grows,” the unity is torn apart into opposition, into “masks of division and discord.”¹⁹ This action is depicted in the Dionysian myth through the suffering of the dismembered god.

The concept of contrariety is a paradox involving a *coincidentia oppositorum*—a union of opposites or otherwise “othered” elements. This is a paradox that reoccurs throughout the history of mystic and esoteric thought. It may be seen in the writings of Vladimir Solov’ev in the form of the chemical marriage and the concept of *sobornost* (a social and religious term that encompasses the concept of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity). It appears throughout alchemy in the form of iconography and concepts like the androgyne and the wedding of the King and Queen. In Christianity, it is present in what Kierkegaard referred to as the Absolute Paradox—the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ. This paradox, according to Søren Kierkegaard, is that beyond which thought cannot go. It is the “undoing” of thought, the collision of thought with that “which thought cannot think.”²⁰ Hegel comes to much the same conclusion when he states that the union of oppositions “is not something propounded by the understanding or by reflection but has a character of its own, namely, that of being a reality beyond all reflection.” He thus reaches the conclusion that philosophy “has to stop short of religion. . . .”²¹ In this paradox of contrariety, *a* in *a/b* is both *b* and not *b*. It is a circumferential form. It must therefore be placed at the mythical pole. Antimyth cannot accept such paradox—or any paradox, for that matter—for logic stands at the antimythical pole and the paradox of identity violates both the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. Since it transgresses the fundamental laws of thought, such a paradox, as both Kierkegaard and Hegel suggest, is not accessible by means of rational thought, much less any discursive explanation. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein states, “We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.”²² Later in this same work, he continues this thought: “There are, indeed, things which cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”²³ Wittgenstein is articulating here that there are some things that cannot be said. They must be shown. Hence the iconography of the symbol in mystic traditions. Hence the non-discursivity of poetry. Hence the *theatre*.

Adams identifies the symbolic with the terms myth, circumference, and contrariety. As it involves the paradox of the union of oppositions, the symbolic is a contrariety. Since myth is the condition in which the particular encompasses the whole and the whole every particular, the symbol as correspondence—the

miraculous symbol—is within the circumferential form of myth. It harbors within its circumference both the “above” and “below,” placing these in a condition of identity without effecting the erasure of either. Adams’s secular symbolic is likewise mythic and likewise a contrariety. Both of these conceptions of the symbolic involve the coincidence of “partners,” the symbol and its “double” described by Sini. The symbol is the contrary to the negation subject/object or signifier/signified. It is, as Kierkegaard describes the Absolute Paradox, the condition of “absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness.”²⁴ Allegory and signification, on the other hand, are antimythic, upholding the logical oppositions and negations of sign/referent and subject/object.

At this point, I think it worthwhile to state, parenthetically, two things. First, though the concept of the symbol as contrariety, as a paradox, and therefore as “that which we cannot think,” may seem to be a philosophical giving up, a “game called on account of mystery,” it is no more so than the retreat into mystery that constitutes the arrival at the “play of differences”—a concept initiated by Saussure and one that Derrida, as he takes pains to point out, wrestled away from intelligibility into a realm of utter darkness.

Secondly, this conceptualization of the symbol—the mythic, circumferential contrariety of Adams, the joining of the broken halves described by Sini—suggests a kind of wholeness that stands in marked contrast to the “fissure” or the “gap” that fractures the Saussurean sign, that makes its meaning unknowable and infinitely deferred, that banishes presence. But the “wholeness” of the symbolic as correspondence—insofar as the correspondence symbolic participates in, or is in fact, wholly Divine—is also a kind of “holeness,” a “nothingness.” By this, I mean something more than that the symbol, in this conception, acquires something of the idiot stare of paradox. In the correspondence model, the “above” realm is, as I have noted, often described as Nothing, Silence, ineffable and unknowable. The Kabbalists specifically refer to the Divine, *Ein-Sof*, as *Ayin*, or “Nothing.” The contrariety of the correspondence symbol, the joining of the halves broken by the Fall, may thus be understood as completing not a whole, but a hole; opposites come together to form a nothing, or, rather, Nothing. In this sense, the symbol is a circumference that encloses an “all” and excludes or externalizes nothing while simultaneously enclosing only “nothing.” The circumference is both a whole and a hole, a fullness and an absence. All symbols, in the sense that they are correspondences, participate simultaneously in All and in Nothing which, in the circumference that is the mystic’s Divine, are one. Insofar as it participates in *Ayin*, the fertility of the symbol as the object of a robust hermeneutic activity is understandable. Nature, and our nature, abhors a vacuum; hence the fecundity of the symbol, its indeterminacy, dynamism, and generative capacity.

The structuralist’s “play of differences” offers a similar mystery. Difference—the system that structures, among other things, language—in the hands of Derrida

becomes “différance,” a term he struggles to identify (or not identify) by resorting to a kind of negative theology. He describes what *différance* is *not*. The difference, he points out, that lets phonemes be heard, that allows words to be understood, is itself inaudible. This difference, even in graphic rather than aural contexts, escapes into darkness and away from intelligibility. *Différance* is not a thing; it is not a word or a concept; it cannot be exposed, cannot be present. Rather, it is that which makes the presentation of presence possible. Derrida, in describing what *différance* is, crosses out the word “is”²⁵ to show, not just what *différance* is *not*, but *that* *différance* *is* not, that it does not exist. *Différance* cannot be described, exposed, or said to exist or to be anything, for, if this were so, it would be participating in the system of differences that it, itself, makes possible. Thus exposing, even naming, *différance* causes it to vanish.

The status of Derrida’s *différance* is thus very much like the status of the Absolute, the “above,” the Kabbalist’s *Ein-Sof*²⁶—which is to say, no status whatsoever. In describing it in words or images, in giving it a name, one makes it a thing or a concept like everything else. It becomes, in the antimythical model of language, identified by and through difference. It becomes finite, a being rather than the pre-condition of being. Thus *Ein-Sof* named or described becomes not-*Ein-Sof*. The same holds for *Ayin*. *Ayin* is a nothing beyond nothing, beyond the concept or word, “nothing,” beyond even “beyond nothing,” and so on in an infinite series. Any attempt to expose it, to make it intelligible, diminishes and erases it. But this is the fiction of antimyth.

Derrida rejected all charges of mysticism in his philosophy. *Différance*, he claimed, encloses and is beyond all onto-theology. Nevertheless, his [non-]concept of *différance* is something very close to the [w]hole-ness of the mystic’s Absolute as All and as Nothing, as the gaping, vacant precondition of multiplicity.

To return to our discussion: the conception of the symbol as contrariety allows—setting aside, for the moment, the problem of language—for the theatrical symbolic. If everything in the world is a correspondence, that is, a miraculous symbol, then theatre is symbolic activity. Yet this is true only if theatre is conceived of as in and of the world as opposed to something apart that signifies or points to the world and experience. We need not even stake such a claim to a belief in mystic correspondence in order to recognize the theatre as symbolic activity. If theatre radically *creates* rather than signifies or represents that which is prior and external to it, it is mythic—for myth is the very condition of what Adams calls the “prolific,” or creative—and coincident with the world it creates. That is, if we conceive of theatrical activity not as a copying or re-presentation of a reality that is cast outside and before the activity as an object, but rather as creative, then the objects, images, and actions of the theatre event are coincident with their referent. Indeed, the use of the term *referent* may not even be appropriate here since, in this mythic conception, the world that theatre creates refers only to itself. But even

this is misleading, for there is no referentiality, self- or otherwise, involved. The theatrical event contains all that it creates. There is no duality of signifier/signified. Those oppositions are united in the contrariety of the theatre. It is only from the antimythical stance of the critic, acting as a member of the Blakean “priesthood,” that theatre is pulled away from myth into antimyth and representation. It thus becomes the “prisonhouse of theatre” that can only signify a world that it projects as forever separate and unattainable. Such a world is a fiction created by antimyth, albeit not in the same fashion in which the world created by theatre is also a fiction. For the “world” of antimyth is equally unattainable from within the empiricist “prisonhouse of perception” *à la* David Hume and the “prisonhouse of language” *à la* Fredric Jameson. The difference, from a mythical standpoint, is that the world created by the theatrical event is *coincident with* that event as a circumferential form of myth.

The late nineteenth-century realist/naturalist movement conceived of theatre from an antimythic standpoint based largely on empirical and scientific models. The symbolists’ theatre, developing almost simultaneously, reacted against the naturalists, conceiving of theatre as mythic and creative and utilizing the circumferential forms of symbol and correspondence. Andrei Bely, in his essay “Theater and Modern Drama,” argues for theatre as creative in this radical sense:

[T]he revolutionary force of symbolism lies in its declaration that artistic creativity is the unique principle capable of creating life. The meaning of life is in the creation of it and not in the cognition of it. Life is a form of artistic creativity. The mission of art is to stimulate creative activity. . . . symbolism emphasizes the dynamics of creativity. That is why it opposes academic pedantry as a principle of stasis in art.²⁷

If theatre is creative and symbolic, rather than signficatory, then all theatre, including realist theatre, must be mythic. There must be a cycling back into myth of realism’s antimythic pretense. Adams notes such a cycling back in the humanistic activity of mathematics, which stands at the antimythic pole. He associates myth with the creative or Blakean “prolific.” He further claims that antimyth is always emerging from myth and that the whole continuum, from the mythic to antimythic pole, from circumference to center, is creative. As he notes:

As we pass further and further outward (really, of course, inward, creating more and more externality as we go), what we create is the fiction or antimyth of externality—until we reach mathematics, where something very strange happens—for mathematics proceeds to assert its power to contain claims that

the world is mathematical rather than that mathematics represents the world.²⁸

When antimyth has exhausted itself at the mathematical pole, it finds that it contains and creates that which it describes as external to itself and thus cycles back to the condition of myth. It is precisely this cycling back to the prolific activity of myth that Bely refers to when he writes on realism in his essay "*The Cherry Orchard*." In realism, claims Bely, we have the creation of minutiae in constant repetition. As these minutiae are repeated, we delve deeper and deeper into them, eventually "seeing through" them as through an aperture to Eternity. This "Eternity" is a condition of myth, a circumferential form, a whole that encompasses, and is encompassed by, every minutia. The minutiae are thus coincident with that which we see when we look through them. They are, in fact, symbols. "Thus," claims Bely, "realism imperceptibly crosses over into symbolism."²⁹

Bely's suggestion, made in the context of correspondence theory and the idea of art as radically creative, is relevant beyond his immediate concern with Chekhov's drama. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, in correspondence, everything that is "below" is in a condition of contrariety with the "above;" everything is a symbol. This includes not only the Blakean wildflowers and grains of sand, but also theatrical performances, including the works of Chekhov and other realists. All theatre is holy. All performance manifests mystery. Secondly, since art, including theatre, is, in Bely's conception, radically creative, since it does not stand apart from the "forest of symbols," gesturing to it through signification, it is therefore part of the "below"—indeed, *generative of the "below"*—and thus, like everything else, a window to the Divine. For Bely, the capacity for revelation, the ability to peer through this window, resides in the viewer or reader—one who is ready, as Blake suggests, "to see a world in a grain of sand."

It is not the case that, simply, symbolism is mythic while realism is antimythic. Rather, the theories that informed the worldviews of symbolism and realism are, respectively, mythic and antimythic. For Adams, as for Bely, realist drama—like symbolist and all other drama—is mythic because it is literature, because it is art, an activity that Adams locates near the mythic pole.³⁰ But the extreme empiricism, upon which realism relies for its worldview, ultimately, for Adams, cycles back, like the mathematics described above, from the antimythic pole to the condition of myth.

There is a danger to which some among both the symbolists and those in the mystic and occult traditions fall victim. This is the danger of conceiving of symbols in terms of allegory. Yeats, who remains an important figure in the history of the occult as well as of poetry and drama, in his essay "Symbolism in Painting" agrees with the definition of the symbol given by a modern dictionary "that calls a symbol 'the sign or representation of any moral thing by the images and properties

of natural things,' which, though an imperfect definition, is not unlike 'The things below are as the things above' of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes!"³¹ Here, Yeats accepts a definition of both the symbol and correspondence indicated in the Emerald Tablet as allegoric and therefore antimythical. This symbol is an allegory in that it "represents" or signifies. The occultists were often guilty of sliding into antimyth through their bureaucratization of the symbol as allegory. These occultists and the symbolists claimed power, not, as Bely believed the artist had, through the creative capacity of the symbol as mythic form, but by declaring themselves to be holders of the secret knowledge of the allegoric symbol's hidden referent. Thus, in this conception, both the occultist and the symbolist artist are privileged. Yet such an assertion is self-defeating, for it is based on the same antimythical negation of subject/object that is the foundation of the empiricism and science against which the symbolists rebelled. As Audre Lorde wrote, "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house."³² The symbolists' and occultists' tendency to conceive of the symbolic as a secret code does violence to the symbol through allegorization, thus opening up the above/below divide they sought to overcome. The problem with the code is not that it privileges the symbolist or that it is exclusionary—this is "only" a political issue. The problem with the code is that it is a code. It operates allegorically. The challenge for the occultist, for the symbolist, the challenge facing any theory of the symbolic—theatrical, literary, or otherwise—is to circumvent conceptions of the symbolic as a hermetic and codified system. The challenge is to find a cure for the common code.

Thus far, I have discussed the possibility of the theatrical symbolic aside from the issue of language. Yet if there is to be a true theatrical symbolic that does not limit theatre to mime, or further, a dramatic symbolic, the case must be made for the symbolic in language and literature. For this, we must posit a language of myth.

In the signifiatory model of language, any particular word or signifier is identified by the way in which it is different from other signifiers in the system. Furthermore, since neither the signified nor certainly the referent is ever present in the signifier, the signified is always already deferred in favor of a "play of differences." There is no presence that stands behind and is pointed to by the signifier. Not only do the two not coincide, the latter cannot really be said to signify the former. Only by embracing and taking part in the play of differences can we escape our longing for a presence, a center (not in the Blakean sense), a world, a *logos*, or an origin of meaning. For Derrida, this presence is a myth (again, not in the Blakean sense), while for Paul de Man, it is "hidden" behind and by the signifier.

This conception of language is fundamentally antimythical, upholding the difference/indifference negation as well as that of subject/object. It relies on logical oppositions even while it deconstructs them through acts of Derridian "decentering." It hypostatizes an origin of meaning, which it then either dismisses or mourns as unknowably hidden and separate. This situation inevitably leads to a pathology

of imprisonment wherein we become trapped within language as Hume trapped us within perception. There is no room here for a symbol that would provide a contrary to logical opposition that could, as in Sini, create a harbor for the coming together of signifier and signified. There is certainly no room for a theatre that is holy, for in the signifiatory model of language the Divine becomes a signified, the presence of which is banished irremediably from all utterance. To speak of God is to make God absent. Here, there is only the difference of allegory.

A language of myth would have to avoid a conception of language wherein every utterance (whether onstage or off) or instance of writing (dramatic, literary, or otherwise) is a “copying” or a signifier of a previous origin or world, whether or not that world is to be dismissed or proclaimed unattainable and our copying only play. Adams’s notion of the “secular” symbolic is based on such a language of myth. Though he focuses primarily on poetry, he is unwilling to privilege poetry and extrapolates the functioning of poetic language, as he describes it, out into language in general.

The language of myth is a creative language in a radical sense. It is the language of those whom Blake describes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as the “ancient Poets.” These poets named objects through the constitutive power of language and thus created them. Adams, in describing this action, points out that these poets did not set about naming “real,” preexisting objects, that is, objects that had an existence other than as potential inside the mytho-poetic imagination, but rather that the action of naming radically created the objects. The radically creative power—which is what Adams means by “myth”—is opposed to the “passive reception of subsequently named sense data”³³—or, in Adams’s term, antimyth. This “prolific” power of language held by Blake’s ancient poets is similar to the fabled Edenic tongue, the language of Adam, spoken of in Kabbalah. In the Edenic tongue, to name a thing was to create it. It was a perfectly transparent language in that there was nothing “hidden” behind, or referred to, by the word. The word and the referent were coincident. Kurt Seligmann, in *The History of Magic and the Occult*, speaks similarly of ancient Egyptian incantations that had a radically creative power identical to the Edenic tongue. “Nothing,” claims Seligmann, “could come into being before its name had been uttered. . . . ‘The word,’ the hieroglyphics tell us, ‘creates all things: everything that we love and hate, the totality of being. Nothing *is* before it has been uttered in a clear voice.’”³⁴ In the Gospel of John, the Word has a similar cosmogenetic power. It is responsible for the creation of the cosmos and is furthermore identified as God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.”³⁵ Later, the Word becomes present in the world and thus God coincides with his creation in the person of Christ. “And the Word was made flesh,

and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.”³⁶ Here, the Word not only holds a creative power, but becomes indistinguishable from that which it creates.

This concept also appears in the writings of Bely who posits not only the radically creative power of art—as cited above—but also, and most importantly, of language. Borrowing a term deployed by Solov’ev, Bely describes the work of the poet as a kind of theurgy—the act of invoking the gods, of making them present through magical ritual. Poetic language, for Bely, was magical in a quite serious and literal sense. It produced an effect on the world. Specifically, the activity of poetic language was one of radical creation, of calling-into-being. Bely and other symbolists were reluctant to claim that this theurgic, generative power was an exclusive property of poetry or art.³⁷ They extended this power to language in general. “Language,” claims Bely, “is the most powerful instrument of creation. When I name an object with a word I thereby assert its existence.”³⁸ But, like the activity of Blake’s ancient poets, this naming is not to be conceived as the designating of an already existing thing in a world that lies outside of language. The thing, the world, and even the naming subject him- or herself are all generated through the theurgic activity of language. As Bely states, “consciousness, nature, and the world emerge for the cognizing subject only when he is able to create a designation. Outside of speech there is neither nature, world, nor cognizing subject. In the word is given the original act of creation.”³⁹ Steven Cassedy, in his commentary on Bely’s theories of the theurgic power of language, notes that

Bely’s ideal poetic language is thus a kind of Edenic discourse where words are endowed with the same degree of ontic reality as their referents and are consequently virtually conterminous with them. . . . By implication, then, either the literary aesthetic object or the world created by it (*and there is a strong suggestion that they are the same thing*) enjoys an ontic status of phenomenal reality analogous to that of real objects in the natural world.⁴⁰

Bely is describing a mythic language that creates and contains a world that is, from an antimythic viewpoint, (mis)understood as its referent. Cassedy’s hedging with the term “virtually conterminous” is the contrariety proposed by Adams. The distinction that Cassedy cites between phenomenal reality and the “real” or “natural” world is one that troubles Bely’s thought as he struggles to identify the theurgic properties of language. With regard to these two worlds, the phenomenal and the “real,” there is the strong suggestion that the latter—a world conceived of as external to and independent of language—is produced as an effect by and of the former rather than the other way around. Furthermore, since phenomenal reality is itself produced by the theurgic power of language, the latter likewise produces the “fiction” of an extra-lingual, or “real” reality. Bely’s argument is often confused

and sometimes contradictory in this regard and in others. At times he seems to treat theurgic language as disclosure rather than creation. At these points he slips into an antimythical conception of language by positing language as a revealing, an unveiling of that which does not owe its existence to the making power of language. Elsewhere, however, he states that the creative act of poetic production endows the poetic image with an ontological being that is independent of consciousness. It becomes an incarnation. "It comes to life and acts autonomously."⁴¹

The language of Blake's ancient poets, the Edenic tongue, the incantations of the Egyptians as described by Seligmann, the Word in the Gospel of John, and the theurgy of the Russian symbolists all constitute languages of myth. Language, in the mythical sense, "is the place where being is spoken."⁴² Adams asserts that language, conceived of as prolific and mythical, through the process of naming, does not simply nominate beings *to* their being, but rather generates being. Unlike the language of antimyth, wherein the world precedes language, in the language of myth, the world *follows* language, which creates and contains it. Such language provides the contrary to the subject/object negation of antimyth. Such language is symbolic.

Adams describes the transition of language as creation (mythic) to language as disclosure (antimythic) by again referencing the story of Blake's ancient poets. As Blake's poets developed the language, simultaneously creating the world, a system was developed that brought dissociation between the creating word and the created world through a process of externalization, or what Blake refers to as "devouring." This system

took some advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting
to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus
began the Priesthood.

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the Gods had order'd such
things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.⁴³

These devouring priests take in, ingest, the prolific power of language. But in this ingesting, the mythic language is transformed into its opposite. The ingestion might more properly be understood as "defecation," for in this action, the world created and contained by language is externalized, cast outside and prior to language. This world is conceived as preceding language, temporally and epistemologically. The move is from circumference to center, internal to external. "The devourer," claims Adams, "is a machine for externalizing."⁴⁴ He "swallows" myth and "defecates" antimyth, allegory, and the negation of subject/object. The devourer stands at the center while the prolific ancient poets remain at the circumference.

This devourer is the interpreter, the critic, a member of the “priesthood” who has separated language from the world—or, in the case of the occult priest, the world from the divine—and acts as an intermediary. This intermediary is now necessary to interpret or explain the mysteries of the alien separateness that is the world, and also the poetic text—the former, in his devouring act, having been divorced from the latter. The poetic text is symbolic, and thus prolific, and generates from itself food for devouring, which is to say, interpreting. Ultimately, the position of such priests is ironic, for they stand at a center that is actually a circumference. By this, I mean that their antimyth of externality is itself a creation of language and therefore mythic. It is what Adams calls an “antimythical fiction.”⁴⁵ Language is symbolic and mythical because it contains that which it creates. Any example of poetry or drama creates—as opposed to signifies—a world that is not external but contained within it. This conception of language as symbolic, of literature as a prolific, symbolic activity, is the secular symbolic of Adams.

In this mythic model, we discover that language does not refer to a world that is cast outside and prior to language. Here, language no longer describes the world; it *is* the world. We understand the world through language. Yet the world, in this sense, is not prior to language. On the contrary, it is created by language as the Johnian God created the world through the speaking of the Word, through speaking himself. The world is a linguistic creation of the Edenic Word.

Simply put, we do not know the world through language. We know the world as language.

A number of years ago, I attended a symposium on educational strategies in the academy. I listened as a geology professor explained how he approached his subject. “The rock,” said the geologist, “speaks to me. If I attend to what the rock is trying to tell me, I will discover something about it. I try to teach my students to listen to the rock, to attend to what the rock is trying to tell them.” Of course, the geologist was speaking metaphorically. For him, rock exists outside of language. By examining the rock, he discovers facts about it that can then be expressed through language. The language that the geologist “hears” is language that describes the rock and thus externalizes it. For the geologist, language is only the power to point outward toward things, like rocks and their qualities. The two are separate; subject negates object. The geologist is a Blakean priest who interprets the signs coming from the alien rock, “listening” to them, decoding their mysteries, and, as an educator, initiating his students into the cult of the priesthood so that they too may comprehend the secrets of the code emanating from the rocky beyond.

It struck me at the time that mythic language was the reverse of the situation described by the geologist. The rock does not speak to us. We speak the rock. Mythic language is not expressive or representational; it is generative. For Adams, the notion that language describes a rock that is external to the speech itself is an antimythic fiction. For prior to its creation in, through, and as language, what, after

all, is the rock? It might be compared, in this conception, to the alchemist's *materia prima*, or perhaps to the primal chaos that often characterizes the pre-cosmogonic moment in creation myths, or even, along these same lines, to the mystic Nothing. It is through the language of, in this case, the geologist that the rock is called into being. "Called," in this sense may hold the double meaning of both theurgic invoking and poetic naming—i.e. "named" into being.

This conception of language as symbolic, prolific, and of myth allows for a symbolist theatre, though not as in the modernist movement in Europe and Russia. In this theory, theatre contains worlds that are created by and coincident with it. That is to say, the world generated by theatrical activity is in a condition of contrariety with that activity. The two are not "othered." The former is not the object to the latter's subject. This theatre of the symbolic, the theatre of myth, like the language of myth, is a cosmogonic force that parallels similar notions in the Bible and the Kabbalah, where God is the Word and the Divine is language. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth," states Psalms 33:6.⁴⁶ For the Kabbalists, as Gershom Scholem suggests, God inheres in, through, and as language: "The secret world of the godhead is a world of language."⁴⁷ One might posit that theatrical activity becomes, in this light, a kind of *imitatio dei*, an imitation of divine creation, and thus holy. But "imitation" is the wrong word here, for it suggests an antimythic externalization of the divine and involves the banishment of the imitated. Correspondence allows for no such banishment. It is, rather, to put a theatrical spin on a Hegelian concept, the Divine performing itself. In light of correspondence, both the theatrical activity and the world created by it—which are unified in a condition of contrariety—are inseparable from the Divine. It is through reference to this idea that we may understand the symbolist's characterization of the artist as "theurgist" and Bely's claim that realism is actually symbolism, for the latter term, in this conception, extends beyond matters of historical style to denote the mythic and creative capacity of the theatrical event itself. If we see, in the spectrum of theatre, that the poles of myth and antimyth are characterized in the competing ideas of theatrical activity that support the styles of symbolism and realism respectively, we may better understand Bely's analysis of realism. For, if antimyth is always emerging from myth as the devourer seeks constantly to ingest and externalize the prolific, it is also always cycling back to myth. Thus ultimately, as Bely intuits, the antimythic stance of realism is always cycling back, always returning to myth and to the symbolic characterized by the symbolist movement. We are left with a conception of a symbolic theatre that, in its application, reaches beyond the modernist movement of symbolism to describe the theatrical event as a dynamic of myth and a cosmogonic activity; a theatre of the symbolic, the theatre as symbolic activity.

I have suggested that poetry and dramatic literature, conceived of as an Edenic language of myth, retain a certain cosmogonic force in that they create worlds

while containing and coinciding with that which they create. I further submit that the theatre must also retain such a force. For whereas in poetry and drama, it is language that is the cosmogonic force, in theatre this cosmogonic power is a function of the heterogeneous organization of various theatre “languages” that make up the performance text. These theatre languages include, but are not limited to, the language of the spoken dramatic text, as well as the activities of the actors and the other elements of the *mise en scène*—lighting, scenery, costumes, etc.

Thus far, I have identified two different conceptions of the symbolic: the miraculous and the secular. As I have suggested, in symbolism, as well as in the various religious, mystic, and occult traditions that informed it, a Fall is posited that distinguishes and separates reality into a negation of matter/spirit or sensible/suprasensible. The miraculous symbol is the contrary to these negations. It is a circumferential form that encompasses matter and spirit as a unity in which each constituent also contains the whole. Both the spiritual and the material worlds are symbols composed of symbols, each of which encompasses the whole of both worlds. These are not signifying allegories but creative symbols that create a world that does not precede but rather follows and is coincident with them as the world followed and was contained by the speaking of the original Word or Logos by God. This mirrors the world of the ancient poets, a world created and contained by poetic language. In each model, the Divine Word or poetic word both creates and constitutes the world. If language is thus creative and symbolic in this way, then the miraculous symbol, that symbol that implies yet unifies a Fall or primal bifurcation, is conceivable as parallel to Adams’s secular symbolic, for the separation, the absolute unlikeness, the negation of the Fall when it is created in language, is made into a unity, an absolute likeness, and a contrary by the mythic language. Here, the Fall *is* the action of the Blakean devourer that swallows myth and defecates antimyth, thus bifurcating reality into a series of negations. The emergence of antimyth in the action of the devourers is the separation of the Divine and its power of creation from humankind and the world. Where the Fall is this action, the distinction between the secular symbolic and miraculous symbolic is dissolved or at least lessened. The latter is differentiated from the former only by the fact that it takes into account and maintains the historical opposition of matter and spirit.

Thus the Fall, by this conception, is a linguistic and performative activity that emerges through the signifiatory model of literature and theatre. Here, the Fall is not conceived as history, as something that happened “then,” or even as a mythological explanation of a past rupture. It is always present, it is always happening now, it is always reinscribing itself. We do not speak *of* the Fall. We *speak* the Fall. We perform it. I am writing it now. The Fall is an “antimythic fiction,” a concept that Adams describes in terms of an hypostatizing action. Adams’s description of hypostatization is strikingly similar to many Gnostic and Kabbalistic narratives

of cosmogenetic bifurcation or Fall—narratives involving divine emanation or contraction, narratives in which the self-alienation of the Divine, like Adams’s language, results in the projection of a being (e.g. the Demiurge) or realm “outside” the divine wholeness. As Adams states:

However, even though concepts are creations *inside* and *as* the very form of language, language hypostatizes or projects concepts and fictionalizes an apartness for them. This is what . . . I call the creation of “antimyth”—the fictive projection to an “outside” of something language really retains in itself (thus the creation of the fiction of difference) followed by the fiction that the outside preceded its container.⁴⁸

Within the antimythic conception of signification, every utterance, every instance of literature, and all theatrical activity is a reconstitution of this fiction, a performance of the Fall. Thus may one, through figurality, contemplate the frankly bizarre and amusing notion that there is a parallel to be drawn between the devouring, antimythic “priest” or critic, on the one hand, and the Edenic serpent or satanic “adversary,” on the other. Surely there are many artists who would be willing to support the idea of the critic as Satan, but we need not leap to such extremes.

As Adams would have it, the secular symbol would be coincident with that which it symbolizes only on a “mundane” level. That is, the word “rose,” when it appears in the text of, for example, Aleksandr Blok’s *The Rose and the Cross*, does not point to, copy, or signify a rose or the idea of a rose. The rose in the text *is* a rose (a rose is a rose, is a rose, is a rose . . .). The appearance of a rose in the prolific text, whether literary or performative, creates a rose in the world of the play. The textual word or the theatrical object, even if the latter is only a stick with a red bit of rag tied to it, creates and contains the rose and is coincident with it. This is the secular symbol. However, if the action of the devourers, the activity of antimyth, is precisely the action of the Fall, the primal bifurcation of reality into the negation of spirit/matter, then the symbol, as the activity of myth, is a reparation of this breach. Matter and spirit are thus indivisibly coincident. The textual rose, in this case, is not merely coincident with the actual but mundane rose that it generates. The textual rose is also the extra-mundane or Divine Rose, for the two are also one. This rose is thus, for instance, the divine Rose of Sharon referred to in the Song of Solomon, 2:1, the rose that the Kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, designates as the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence.⁴⁹ I am not suggesting that the rose, whether on the stage or the page, somehow points to or signifies this divine figure. Rather, the rose is *both* a rose *and* the *Shekhinah*. The two are in a relationship of identity. This is the miraculous symbol. These two models of miraculous and secular symbolic are not so far apart. The difference is that, while the secular symbol is the contrary

to the negation subject/object, the miraculous symbol is additionally the contrary to spirit/matter.

This example needs some clarification. It is somewhat misleading to pluck the rose out of the theatrical or dramatic context in which it appears, for the symbolic, secular or miraculous should not be understood as operating in a segregated and static sense. That is to say, the relationship between the symbol and that which it creates and contains should not be conceived of as singular and isolated. The symbolic is an activity of language rather than its atomization. We must not think of the symbolic as a segregated object or trope—or sets of objects or tropes—within the text or performance. Rather, the text or performance is itself a symbolic activity, a dynamic and generative process as opposed to an isolated and static matrix.

A more telling example emerges in Peter Brook's description of Grotowski's *Akropolis*. In his introduction to the filmed version, Brook addresses the problems faced by theatrical producers attempting to create stage representations of the Holocaust. To many artists, claims Brook, a purely descriptive, documentary approach seemed the only way to adequately represent the Holocaust. How, after all, is one to represent the unrepresentable, speak the unspeakable, without doing violence to it? Without, as with *différance* and *Ein-sof* above, diminishing and thus erasing it? Grotowski, according to Brook's description, avoided this conundrum by forgoing representation altogether. Instead, claims Brook, Grotowski was able to create (not "re-create") a death-camp world onstage.

At certain moments in *Akropolis*, because a nameless horror was not described, was not referred to, was not brought into our imagination as something that once happened in a place called Auschwitz, it actually was brought into being there. . . . [Grotowski] has made an imaginative work of art, which at first sight has the trappings of art. . . . And one could say this is turning the naked reality of the concentration camp into something inferior: an attempt by an artist to make a beautiful work of art. . . . And gradually . . . one sees that this is not what happens. What they are doing is making the spirit of that concentration camp live again for a moment. And so in a sense their work is more realistic, because even the statistic refers to the past. Even the man describing, as in a court room, what happened, refers to the past. . . . [Grotowski] actually makes the sense of the concentration camp, for a moment, reappear.⁵⁰

Brook frames *Akropolis* as a cosmogony, as a mythic text that creates and contains rather than externalizes through representation. Here, the death camp is not projected outward from the performance as external and prior. It is present. The languages

of the production contain and are coincident with the “Holocaust world” they generate.

The question of Brook’s identification of Grotowski’s productions with “holy” theatre I shall leave aside for the purposes of this essay. Two further points need to be made about this example. Firstly, Brook is speaking as a critic, and thus his comments involve a certain irony. In speaking of Grotowski’s production, Brook constitutes it as an object external to his own act of criticism even as this act is itself a creating of, and a fictionalization of apartness for, this text. Criticism occupies a position somewhere between the poles of myth and antimyth, somewhere between the circumference and the center. Through the mechanism of a necessarily reductive analysis, it claims to describe or copy something external to itself—the mythic text. It points outward towards the text that it describes. Yet its description is a creative act that fictionalizes an apartness for the creation it contains. The critic is always constituting that which she purports to describe. This is the irony of criticism. “[C]riticism,” claims Adams, “is finally, like all symbolic forms, at least partly a *making* of its own. From its ironic area, it produces an antimyth of bifurcations even while it protects the poem’s myth.”⁵¹ It is a constant pulling back and forth of creation and copying, of the prolific and devouring, of contrariety and negation, of symbol and allegory. *I do not exclude this essay from such irony.* Of course, the hermeneutic or interpretive act is performed not merely by the critic, but, in the theatre, by the director, designer, and audience. Each of these is a link in the chain of creation that is the hermeneutic act. The collection of makings created by this chain of activity that proceeds outward from a text is ultimately externalized by critics as culture.

Yet criticism is not identical to poetry, drama, direction, or design in its creativity. Criticism is a *kind* of making. It is ironically so, for it claims that what it makes is a copy, a description, or a re-presentation of that which is external to it: the prolific text. Though the designer and director may engage in hermeneutic activity with the dramatic text as object, what they *create* is not criticism, but theatre. Theatre, like mythic poetry, is not an interpretation or representation of something prior and external to it (the dramatic text or the world, for example) however much critical and antimythical thought *interprets* it as such. Theatre is creation.

Secondly, Brook identifies Grotowski’s work as creation and opposes it to other works (he specifically mentions Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation*) that he characterizes as representation. These latter works presume to describe that which is prior and external to the work itself. Thus for Brook, *Akropolis* becomes, in our terminology, the mythic text,⁵² while other works are antimythic. But I am not willing to privilege *Akropolis* in this sense, regardless of how much I may admire it. My position is that both of the models Brook cites are constitutive, both are generative, and therefore, both are mythic. Adams, in addressing literature, locates all literature at the mythic pole, regardless of style. In transposing Adams’s

theories of the symbolic into a theatrical context, I am likewise opposed to Brook's distinction. All theatre is mythic, cosmogonic. This holds for *Akropolis*, *The Investigation*, and, for that matter, *Private Lives*.

In summary, if theatre retains a cosmogonic force, if, through the heterogeneous organization of theatre languages, it creates a world with which it is also coincident, then it is a symbolic activity in a secular sense and encloses the opposition of subject/object within contrariety. Further, if the cosmogonic theatre, through correspondence, is a symbolic activity in the miraculous sense, then the identity of subject and object is also achieved. But here, the activity of the theatre is the subject and the divine, its object. The contrariety of this negation, achieved in the radically creative performance, accomplishes the identity of matter and Spirit, of mundane and Divine. In such performance, there is no signification of the transcendent, no deracinated referral or "pointing" to the Divine, for these are created by and coincident with the performance itself. Here, metonymically speaking, the wine is the blood of Christ. The Divine performs itself. It is thus that theatre may be holy, not through signification that only reifies as it re-enacts the Fall, but through the radical creativity of performance.

Notes

1. Umberto Eco, postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1983) 512.
2. Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," *Flowers of Evil" and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Wallace Fowle (New York: Bantam, 1963) 27.
3. It is with some reluctance that I term this perspective a "theory." *Theoria* may be a more appropriate term. By "theory" we often mean a hypothesis, set of principles, or a model whose truth can be demonstrated logically or empirically. *Theoria*, on the other hand, is less rational and more contemplative. It is less subject to discursive terms of proof. I will not say that some of what follows is "beyond" logic, for this would be a misleading metaphor, one that arranges oppositions and hierarchies that should make us suspicious. Rather, I acknowledge that some of this discussion will involve paradoxes and contradictions that logic cannot apprehend in the same way that one cannot read topography from a street map.
4. Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: SUNY P, 2000) xxi.
5. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997) 3.
6. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell: From Things Heard and Seen*, trans. John C. Ager (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995) 77.
7. Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996) 24.
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9. Baudelaire 27.
10. Carlo Sini, *Images of Truth: From Sign to Symbol*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993) 105.
11. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 46.
12. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 141.
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 16. 336.
 17. See the figure in Adams 338.
 18. Viacheslav Ivanov, "The Essence of Tragedy," *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Laurence Senelick (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 213.
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 20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson, trans. revised by Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1936) 46.
 21. Hegel, "Fragment" 312-313.
 22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961) 5.61.
 23. 6.522.
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 25. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982)
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26. Psychologist Sanford L. Drob has done some interesting work in this regard. See especially Sanford L. Drob, "'Tzimtzum' and 'Différance': Derrida and the Lurianic Kabbalah," *New Kabbalah*, 3 Sept. 2004. Accessed Jan. 2006 <<http://www.newkabbalah.com/Derrida3.html>>.
 27. Andrei Bely, "Theater and Modern Drama," *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Laurence Senelick (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 160.
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 29. Andrei Bely, "The Cherry Orchard," *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Laurence Senelick (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 90.
 30. See the figure in Adams 338.
 31. William Butler Yeats, "Symbolism in Painting," *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 146.
 32. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984) 110.
 33. Adams 105.
 34. Kurt Seligmann, *The History of Magic and the Occult* (New York: Gramercy, 1948) 39.
 35. John 1:1-3 (King James version).
 36. John 1:14 (King James version).
 37. See, for instance, Blok, who writes, "The Symbolist, from the very beginning, is already a *theurgist*, that is to say, the possessor of secret knowledge, behind which stands a secret act; but this secret, which only subsequently proves to be universal, he sees as his own." Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moskva-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960-63) 5:427.
 38. Andrei Bely, "The Magic of Words," *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely*, ed. and trans. Steven Cassedy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1985) 93.
 39. 94.
 40. Steven Cassedy, introduction, "The Magic of Words," *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely*, ed. and trans. Steven Cassedy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1985) 18. Emphasis added.
 41. Bely, "The Magic of Words" 109.
 42. Adams 367.
 43. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor, 1988) 38.
 44. Adams 111.
 45. 112.
 46. Psalms 33:6 (King James version).
 47. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965) 37.
 48. Adams 26.
 49. Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, eds., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 vols., trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 3:74a.
 50. Peter Brook, commentator, *Akropolis*, dir. Jerzy Grotowski, [film] dir. James MacTaggart, videocassette (New York: Arthur Cantor, 1971).
 51. Adams 345.
 52. Significantly, for the present argument, Brook invokes *magic*—black magic, to be precise—to describe the effect of *Akropolis*.