

Prefaces

Elio Franzini

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The kind of experience described in the following pages is an example of the work the University of Milan carries out at the “Cesare Beccaria” Juvenile Detention Centre¹ and other correctional facilities across our city. This work deserves a great deal of attention and depends on the close collaboration between our staff and the prison staff, all of whom are guided by the principle that “punishment” should never violate a person’s dignity and rights. I must, therefore, thank the key players and protagonists in our prison programme.

What happens at the Beccaria also has a cultural value, a sign that culture can make an individual think and grow. And, finally, it uses theatre, a theatre that embodies the highest form of artistic expression, that of William Shakespeare. This is not without its consequences and holds symbolic value. Shakespeare perfectly understood the ambivalence of the human mind and recognised that we live our lives at a crossroads, where mysterious forces are at work.

Reading his plays, one always has the impression that there is a hidden truth that can never be fully confirmed. This creates a sense of uncertainty in the reader or spectator, as the textual fractures present us with open symbols, thus preventing a definitive moral judgement. As early as 1858, Elizabeth Montague observed that symbols are not only philosophical but also produce a pervasive anxiety that alters the viewer’s perception, as it naturally does whenever the reversible nature of signifiers and values is revealed. Through such symbols, we are constantly driven towards a dimension in which the boundary between a category and its opposite grows thinner, thus promoting superhuman associations of qualities that hide immeasurable substitutes that transcend humanity. This inner split reality is not abstract but signals a deep cultural and philosophical rupture.

¹ We use indifferently both terms Juvenile Detention Centre and Youth Detention Centre.

We are, therefore, on the edge of two worldviews, each with a specific symbolic methodology. I believe that the Beccaria boys understand this in a “visceral” way because they consciously enter a vast hall of mirrors. Through Shakespeare we enter a new dimension that automatically restores and transforms. When it transforms itself into a representation, precisely because it is “idea” and *Sinn-Bild*, both meaning and image at the same time, the symbol is not limited to its historical significance. Still, it embodies an instance of knowledge that is historically and spiritually grounded. The images that populate a work are experiences and representations which enter into a process of meaning that they traverse, suggesting further symbolic possibilities and creating new images. The theatre thus appears as an authentic synthesis of experiences: a historical sign of a magical reality, which, taken to its extreme consequences, goes beyond its necessary symbolic conclusion – the reunification of forces – to inaugurate a new dimension.

It is impossible not to “feel” Shakespeare’s words and the demons that inhabit them, even before considering the necessary historical awareness. Undoubtedly, the influence of Renaissance culture prevents Shakespeare, unlike Spinoza, from demystifying the demonic in favour of enlightened reason; on the contrary, the devil that emerges from medieval and Renaissance mythologies is “interiorised” and begins, as it were, his descent into the soul: here lies the Cartesian possibility of representing the most negative passions, describing them as “real” objects and dividing the world into contrasting representations. The darkness lurking in the heart of man is, thus, given a new possibility, that of “experiencing” evil without embodying it in devils, witches, or ghosts. The fact that the diabolical is transformed into a “symbol” is indicative of a theoretical substrate that Spinoza, in the same period, found in his struggle against those devils in which people believed: human beings are not damned creatures, guilty of original sin and incapable of turning to good. Instead, they are mathematical and physical entities, with passions, like hot and cold air. This metaphysical basis is the reason why many “Enlightenment” intellectuals believed that the fears instilled in individuals by images of hell were a tool of civil and religious power that we must fight in the name of human freedom. Shakespeare, like Spinoza, is a forerunner in this struggle, aware that the spirits of negativity can take on different and often faceless forms. They represent the “passions of the soul,” which *internalise and spiritualise the places of Hell* but which remain an

enemy to be defeated and demystified, albeit with different tools. In this way, two traditions emerge that are typical of modernity. The first is libertarian and culminates in the Enlightenment. It leads to a rationalist and naturalist denial of Hell and, therefore, of its images. The second sees Hell as a “literary” image of the soul’s passions, which reason can illuminate but by which one can still be trapped because duality is at the heart of subjectivity itself. In this way, a “modernity” of Hell becomes possible, and new ways of looking at it emerge, ways that can undoubtedly be exemplified by Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* but that have their original “manifesto” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and in *Macbeth*, in its “interiorisation” of the witches.

In other words, Shakespeare enters the soul of the boys at Beccaria because he speaks of the ambivalence of the soul’s places. He does this not abstractly but through representations, actions, and words, thus creating a new way of “doing metaphysics.” In other words, he seeks the foundations of human action. The metaphysics to be rejected is therefore, as in Spinoza, that which “splits in two” the cognitive relationship with the outside world, while the metaphysical instance to be recovered is one in which the devil makes sense because he participates in a symbolic, and not diabolical, genesis and metamorphosis that unifies and produces a new symbolic necessity. There is neither a dialectical synthesis nor an unequivocal position: the symbol and the devil are contained in what Goethe called “polarity,” where the symbol, namely an organic and metamorphic thought, needs the devil because in it “what is separated seeks itself again and can be found and reunited once more,” leading inevitably to “a third, new, superior, unexpected thing!”² In this incessant metamorphic force, it is, therefore the symbolic tension, the will to always find a meaning for things, that defeats this opposing force and, with it, the nihilistic form it has taken in our time, where it has also become an abyss for the artist, ready to swallow their whole. The experience at the Beccaria therefore has a profound cultural and formative value: it is the beginning of a metamorphosis that starts from what Schlegel called the “corporeality” of Shakespeare’s work, affirming that, like nature, it “produces beauty and ugliness without separating them and with the same exuberant richness.” In his works, beauty and ugliness are always juxtaposed. They are never beautiful things free from “impure residue,” useful “for some other purpose,” driven as they are by “some characteristic or

2 J. W. Goethe, *Metamorfosi delle piante*, Milano, Guanda, 1983.

philosophical interest.” The symbolic is not – and I would like to stress this in conclusion – the regained harmony, the closing of a dialectical circle, but rather, as Leibniz states in the same years, a baroque symbolic fold (according to Deleuze’s interpretation), a confusion of the rational and the sensible that contains within it a strong cosmological tension. Therefore, when we speak of harmony, we should acknowledge that differences and contrasts permeate it. Hence, the meaning of a work is all the richer, the more the things that live in it. As Leibniz writes, harmony “is made pleasant by the dissonances which are inserted and are compensated for with admirable rationality.”³ Drama is not an illusory harmony but rather the result of the creation of meaning, which produces organisms in which different possibilities harmonise, thus imitating the possibilities of nature itself, its infinite gradations. Shakespeare is understood and appreciated because he shows us an aporetic universe pierced by an irreconcilable sense of unease, by the ever-emerging unconscious that threatens harmony and truth. Here is a world without monolithic and immutable values but rather a reality that presents itself as a system of references capable of establishing a dialogue between differences, especially between the different faculties that live in the spirit itself, that is, between sensitivity and intellect, between reason and rhetoric.

Theatre can make those people who have already experienced the contradictions of life understand that the world of things does not present itself in a static and formal space, on an immobile screen along which illusory images move, but rather in a living space that cannot be reduced to its mere historicity. At its core is *a subject who lives in and inhabits the world*. Looking at things is not a metaphysical procedure but rather a search for mediation – of different kinds and nature, and according to different modes – through which they are represented, thus placing oneself between the idea and the image, between the thinking of things and the intuition of things. Mediations that seem to deprive knowledge of its “immediacy,” of that naive worship of “presence” linked to an intuitive contingency. The cognitive meaning of appearance must participate in a generative, mediated, and stratified process.

At the Beccaria detention centre, in conclusion, the individual learns through theatre to describe the genesis of knowledge, thus exploring conceptual territories as a way of questioning things, without the presumption

3 G. W. Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, Napoli, Cronopio, 1992.

of “defining” or “explaining” them. Therefore, the image, the scene, is not a “derealisation,” access to a more or less mediated virtuality, but a starting point to show the symbolic, expressive, spiritual meaning of our life. As Goethe said, it is a “descent to the Mothers” that teaches us and the boys at Beccaria that the world is a complex reality that needs to be organised: it is not a window onto an ideal or utopian city but a way of interpreting the space in which we live, with all its ambiguous, uncertain horizons. Suppose the “normal” world is “deformed” by theatre. In that case, it does so, not to create an illusion but rather to show that this world is only one possibility, and that creative power cannot be reduced to a single datum or to a univocal relationship with things. Those who experience theatre from the inside develop a penetrating eye. This eye delves into the possible and sees that creation is never finished and that new horizons, forms and “formations” are always possible.

Francesca Perrini

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The theatre experience described in the following pages gave the boys at the “Cesare Beccaria” Juvenile Detention Centre a chance to be something else and talk about themselves. It also invited them to “enjoy the opportunity of being somewhere else,” wearing someone else’s shoes on a stage. The boys could “have fun” and “disagree,” the latter, a very strong impulse when you’re a teenager, until you discover that, to your great surprise, even though your life stories are different, your emotions are just the same. They were given a chance to think about their lives through their emotions.

They were allowed to have a name that represents their inner state and does not just evoke their unlawful actions. This dichotomy between social and personal identities, name and essence, is often experienced by both boys and girls in custody. It is *Romeo and Juliet’s* dilemma.

The social rehabilitation of young boys and girls who are detained in the penal system is an institutional duty, as well as a social one. In the same way, it is our shared responsibility to encourage these minors to take part in experiences that can help them grow and learn.

There’s no doubt that theatre holds a strong pedagogical and rehabilitative power. This is clear to Giuseppe Scutellà and Lisa Mazoni, who have worked for many years at the Beccaria and have seen how theatre workshops can be an important trigger of personal growth for many imprisoned young people. As a matter of fact, the masks the boys wear onstage not only teach them to find their true selves and to think about their past lives in a future perspective, but they also invite the community to look at these young people in a different light, and to see them as opportunities and resources, rather than “criminals”; not just individuals to be punished, but young people with talent and dreams, who are capable of embracing opportunities which help them leave their unlawful past behind.

The project “SceKspir at the BeKKa” derives from a successful collaboration between the Puntozero company, the University of Milan, and the Beccaria juvenile detention centre. It is part of a cluster of educational programmes that allows the boys at the Beccaria to experience a different reality from the one they are used to. When university students and imprisoned young men work side by side, they all have an opportunity to grow. For the

young men in prison, it is important to cooperate with the students. They get an idea of how different their life could be, they start questioning themselves, and hopefully, they end up wishing to be something else. For the university students, instead, the workshop is generally their first experience inside a prison and allows them to question themselves and to challenge any prejudices they might have regarding prison life and the young people in prison whom they work with.

Contemporary society, which makes it so difficult to create meaningful connections and often fails to offer concrete alternatives and answers to young people's needs, would benefit from similar initiatives that break down barriers and can create a stimulating, productive and fun dialogue between inside and outside, as the "SceKspir at the BeKKa" programme is doing. Everyone, inside and out, would benefit from these experiences.