

Five Moments from the Theatre of
David Cole

Words for the Theatre

Theatre dreams of persuading writing to come forth and be for the event--be utterance, be action! Yet it is only by abiding, musingly, within itself that writing can be an event for theatre. What is theatre but the spectacle of writing keeping dramatically to itself?

Writing refuses itself to theatre, and theatre goes on to stage the refusal--is, indeed, nought else but the staging of this refusal.

Writing is a Muse that would have absolutely nothing to say to theatre, did not theatre draw endless inspiration from the spectacle of a Muse with nothing to say to it.

Theatre is a hastily arranged meeting between the Muses of Dithyramb and Scenography, over the course of which it becomes less and less clear to each girl why she should ever have consented to the rendezvous.

To this becoming-less-and-less-clear
we customarily give the name of
"dramatic action."

Theatre will not be dictated to
by writing, but may come to find,
in the scene of dictation it forgoes,
the text it desires.

I. THE ICE-FIELD OF THE ABSOLUTE ENCOUNTER

ABRAHAM relates:

Hear now the descent and loss of the ram for the mind's eye:

Across slants of blue ice the ram slips and dashes, getting what support a ram can. And then? The ram attains the shelf of first leaves, and in his step is wildness. And then? The ram plunges into a darkness of slim pines: it is making one's way across a page which the pen has stroked and stroked. Now a great ravine throws itself in the ram's path. Is there no declination? No, none. Nothing for it, then, but to try the walls. Over goes the despairing ram and, though hurtling fast, the walls rush up faster. And then? What's next on the way down? It is a stream to splash about in and get breath. Now it's off again: Head down and horns out, the ram is running at the orange ball in the west. Evening finds the ram still running, on across fields of snow, well off the mountain, in silence, into darkness.

II. THE RESPONSES

THE RABBI recalls:

I shut my eyes to the sea, and immediately I am upon that other sea--which, however, does not long remain "sea" or any one thing, but changes as ventured upon: now a surface with something working the contours from below (and it comes up here, and it comes up here); now a pattern of highlights coming forward on metal as the metal turns in the light--oh, there are moments when only its being sound keeps me from knowing exactly--! This can only be brushed velvet I have been scuffing up against ever since the portico narrowed; of basalt, surely, these outcrops by which I lift myself along from steep to steep But then will come a stretch to which, it seems, nothing visible could correspond; and I am lost not so much in space as for want of it. The places are voices--come at by ways that are also voices: past fields of voice, through groves of voice, in the coverts of a tone: send forth the ear! For all seeking is hearkening in a landscape all voice. And to choose path is to choose to hearken to this tongue sooner than those

III. THE MOMENTS OF THE WANDERING JEW

THE WANDERING JEW reflects:

The Wandering Jew never takes a step. He goes on being characterized by a perception. In no other sense can he be spoken of as "going on."

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The "irresistible urge"? At one time I set great store by that. You know: I got tired of the wallpaper, that was the "irresistible urge" driving me. But was it, really, always actually all that irresistible? True, in the end one always wound up kissing the place goodbye. Still, to find oneself in the path of the cyclone, to happen by the seashore the afternoon of the Saracen raid--is anything more really involved in such cases beyond a tendency to hang on and let the new context come up around you, the sense that the situation has gone wrong itself gradually becoming the new situation . . . ?

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Ah, history--how it absorbs those it absorbs! Nothing becomes history for me. I'll be in an event. A hundred years later they inform me, "That was the Early Middle Ages." "You mean that, back there in . . . ?" Furious nodding of heads: "Did it not feel like the Middle Ages?" "It felt like something!" I'll say one thing for history, though: It's not happening any faster.

* * *

All my energies are directed toward not using everything up. And even then I once carried around an impenetrable mathematical treatise--"The Geometry of Iterated Loop Spaces"--for nearly three centuries, figuring: "Well--always that" Now I had never even particularly shone at carrying-the-twos. But one day I flung the volume from me in horror: I found I was beginning to understand.

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But it is so easy being the Wandering Jew! What has he lost but everything? For him, the whole world has fallen away, leaving no place to be sad. The roads of the world are easy maundering; there is more agony along the little path that runs between a memory and a grief. Centuries go by in a moment; a lifetime . . . lasts a lifetime.

* * *

He is not just on the peripheries of everything; he changes everything. He changes everything by being on the peripheries of it. Everything is differently related to everything else because he is unrelated to any of it. What happens to a world with a Wandering Jew in it is not what happens to a world, period.

* * *

I was ever the flaw in the conception. And time, which has always given the impression of bringing me somewhere, seems to have been bringing me to light.

* * *

I had it! I had it for a moment there! But then I . . .
went past it. It turned out to be just one more of the things
I go past.

* * *

The Wandering Jew never takes a step.

IV. THE MUSE OF SELF-ABSORPTION

THE AUTHOR dictates:

Imagine a Muse whom no voice any longer invokes. Her art--dithyramb, suppose we make it--at no time exactly what you would call a crowd-pleaser, is losing ground fast, as its practitioners--the poor, good "dizzy ramblers," as she is accustomed to nickname her singers in her thoughts--seek out fresh paths.

To find oneself no longer called up or called in--could aught sadder befall a Muse?, you might reasonably ask. Yet for the girl herself, at least on her better days, the situation did not lack charm. For, after all, was it not "something" to have brought one's art to the point where (at least for now) things could go no further, to have inspired a whole course of development to run its course?

Still, the afternoons are long; and the question of how one was to fill the hours of the "Great Disuse" (as this era of dithyrambic downturn has come to be known) grows hourly more acute. She makes the rounds, offering her services here and there, but, predictably, the takers are few. For, among singers of other stripes, rare was the bard who could manage to hear in dithyramb--that one-string, non-dramatic offshoot of drama--a voice speaking to him.

Just to keep her hand in, the Muse tried rallying the sun to shine and the breeze to blow, but, alas, with ever-diminishing results. The day she couldn't inspire a river to chafe against its banks, she knew it was time to be moving on. Not for her the twilight existence of an archaic survival; she would re-group, re-train, return as the goddess of something else, as something else than a goddess

But the more the unsung Muse pondered her options, the plainer her course appeared. She knew only the writing dyad; it was script or be scripted, be written or be written off. (That's "dyad" with a y. Retain as variants: "duo" and "couple.") So, partly to view the damage from a fresh angle, but chiefly for want of other resource, she began . . . to dash off some impressions, to scribble some views, to--as at some point it no longer availed to hold off naming it--well, to write.

"And what more natural for a Muse?" you may think. But think again! A Muse, after all--has no Muse! (Note-to-self: be sure and do something here with self-invocation: "Who's the goddess supposed to hail in--herself?" etc.) Then, too, authors are told to "write from experience," and a Muse, being a pure source, won't have had what you or I would call experiences--other than the experience of coming before an author, and that is more a position than an experience. Worst of all,

the girl had ever to struggle against the conviction that nothing was so far beneath her as writing--make that: lower than writing. For, after all, seen from the Muse's end of the transaction, the literary life is only so much cocking an ear, and, as such, is best left to those without a whole heck of a lot to say for themselves or to others (our girl had plenty). In fact, from where the goddess sits, "writing" resembles nothing so much as (ellipsis, italics) . . . taking dictation--a resemblance that no doubt explains the mirth of her fellow-muses--they, whose springs, unlike the fountains of dithyramb, as yet gushed clear--upon word of our friend's new line reaching them. "What a comedown!" exclaimed the Sister Arts (to employ our heroine's little private name for her colleagues): "From Muse to Stenographer!"--and laughed till it hurt. To which, for all reply, our lass only hunkered down deeper over the waiting page, and entered: "To write is no longer to distinguish the Muse from the Stenographer in oneself"--a tableau that inspired Onemene, Muse of Dismissive Characterizations, to one of her best efforts: "Ladies, I give you--Autohymnia" (Note-to-self: That's autos, "self," plus hymné, "singer" or "song"--am I on firm ground here?) "Ladies, I give you Autohymnia, a.k.a., The Muse of Self-Absorption."

At which, the laughter of the Muses broke forth anew,
producing sudden but welcome infusions of comic energy
into all the genres over which these sisters
presided--a big improvement, in most cases, it was felt.

V. TROY WINS!

THE TROJAN PRAYER foresees:

It is evening in a city. A weary boy drinks from her trough. The smoke of cookfires, over which joints of meat turn slowly, lifts skyward. Cries of children at play ring out from the next street. In this street, a Sunday painter yet plies his brush. He has set himself to capture a square of late-afternoon sun on his garden wall. The Sunday painter works quickly, for night nears and the light he paints, and paints by, must soon fail.

But say it fail: shall he not return to his painting next Sunday afternoon, and next, even as the sun returns to the wall? At thought of all these many sabbaths of labor before him, the Sunday painter's hand slows; then quickens. The thirsty boy drinks from her trough. The smoke of cookfires diffuses. The cries of children in the next street grow faint. Stars appear. The light the Sunday painter paints, and paints by, lessens. The painter paints on.

It is, in truth, an ordinary scene, such as might be met with any place, any time. But this is not any place. And it is not any time. It is tomorrow in Troy.

But now inevitably comes the moment when there wants saying what none is present to speak. To write the voice that speaks in that crisis, that speaks for that crisis, whose speaking is that crisis. To write the haggle between silence and song to be the story of that crisis.

"Alone at last!" cries a voice in the great silence of writing.