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The Actor: A Creature of Fable

Abstract: *In Part II, the anachronistic conclusion is drawn that actors' exposure on stage, while they are engaged in the creative act, automatically catapults them into an awareness of the pathos of human existence. Actors, creatures of fable in a manner of speaking, affirm this knowledge and give themselves over to it on stage. As a result, actors become accountable for their art. The question becomes more pointed: why would one want to be an actor?*

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Why do you want to be an actor?

Back to the very first page, to the overused but stimulating question: *Why do you want to be an actor?* Back to the stream of all possible and impossible reasons for this desire, this dream, this felicitous and infelicitous act. Realistic and unrealistic associations flowed free and forthright while the writer was sitting at the computer of course, not lying on the analyst's couch, even though Sigmund Freud's study at Berggasse nineteen is only a stone's throw from here. But why should we curb our thoughts? Who could make us censor ourselves? There is no need to camouflage the paths our reflections take. Nobody is giving out grades, at least not in enlightened zones, they say. So why constrain ourselves? Why shouldn't the arts, why shouldn't artists, slip outside their time? After all, actors know all about slips, whether a banal *lapsus linguae* or a more dire, fatal mistake, like the bloody slip Penthesilea commits against Achilles, for which she finds only the words

So it was a mistake, a kiss a bite
 The two should rhyme for one who truly loves
 With all her heart can easily mistake them [...]
 By Artemis my tongue pronounced one word
 For sheer unbridled haste to say another¹

Slips (of the tongue) are so common in the actor's art – why rein in our imagination if we want to understand the *autotelos* of the actor? Why not continue as we started, raving about where the actor comes from and where he is going, asking all we can of this fabled creature of truth? Why not? Why not play with the truth? Why not say about the pathos of his knowledge, his *nous pathetikos*, that he “posses[es] his pathos knowingly, insofar as the pathos would be an apprehension of existence returning upon itself”?² Could it be a site of remembrance, a reminder of what we, qua our existence, might have become? Why not?

Does the reigning discourse hold dominion over us? The old discourse? The new one? The newest?

1 Heinrich von Kleist, *Penthesilea*, trans. James Agee (New York: Harpers, 1998), 184.

2 Pierre Klossowski, “Nietzsche, Polytheism and Parody,” in *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*. Vol. 14/2 (Fall, 2004), 82–119, 94.

(incredulously) *What?*

Every era issues its own decrees?

I beg to differ!

(with a slightly mocking expression) *Excuse me?*

Every era has its holy cows?

(laughs) *Bullshit!*

So, is the actor a fabled creature of truth? No, not an animal in a fable (even if Aesop's fox and his friends are not the worst of roles), but himself fabulous because of his profession. What do we associate with the word "fable," without losing sight of the actor? The spontaneous answers: Stories, make-believe, tall tales, fake histories, fabrication, narration. All fits. But we also said "fabulous." Spectacular, legendary, fantastical, strike a pose. All good fits. And then there is fabrication. Fits. And the less well-known intransitive verb, to fable, derived of course from the stories themselves, to tell as if true, to lie. Also fits. And speaking of derivation, etymologically "fable, *fabula*, comes from the Latin verb *fari*, which means both 'to predict' and 'to rave' (*prédire et divaguer*); *fatum*, fate, is also the past participle of *fari*."³ Now we are going out on a limb. When, pray tell, does an actor predict fate? Oedipus's guilt perhaps or Lear's madness? Or the end of bourgeois theater? Or of a consumer culture that has become completely blasé? Or ... ?

The zenith of our associations with the word fable is Friedrich Nietzsche's oft-cited aphorism "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable."⁴ In this "History of an Error," the world, in an analogy with the history of creation, disappears in six historical phases. Successively, the perceptible world of phenomena and the imperceptible world of ideas slowly merge. At the end, at high noon, the two worlds, the true world and the apparent world, collapse and disappear into one another. The world is *refabulated*. It has again become a narrated event. The world's wheels of fortune or misfortune, of fate in all its variants and variations, turn. The world is again fabulous.

3 Ibid., 88.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20. Hollingdale, whose translation is otherwise used here, translates *Fabel* more freely as "myth."

“Thus when we say that the world has become fable, we are also saying that it is a *fatum*; one raves, but in raving one foretells and predicts fate.”⁵

But if the world, as our merciful or unmerciful fate, appears only in the form of fables, only exists in the eventfulness of fabling, then who is that person whose art it is to tell – and live no less – about the world and our fate in it?

Assuming the actor is (perhaps) more than Nietzsche allows for in his *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, “They press close to the soul but not into the spirit of their object. [...] Let us never forget that the actor is no more than an ideal ape, and so much of an ape that he is incapable of believing in ‘essence’ or the ‘essential’: with him everything becomes play, word, gesture, stage, scenery and public.”⁶ If the actor can (perhaps) be more than this ideal ape, able to imitate so well, what *more* can he do?

Perhaps we need to look at this question together with the word “fable” and its meanings. Perhaps, Herr Professor Nietzsche, a somewhat brighter dawn?

In general, the actor is not a moralist. He is not interested in the *fabula docet*, the moral teachings of the beast fables of antiquity that have long belonged to the bourgeois canon. *Good* or *evil* are merely dramatic figures, not moral problems. But why not take a well-known beast fable as the beginning of an extramoral question?⁷ What happens, for example, when we read Grimm’s “The Hare and the Hedgehog” as a fable about the relationship of the actor to truth, lies and fiction?

What happens then?

The hare and the hedgehog make a bet about who can run faster. The wager makes no sense because the result is clear. But the cunning hedgehog starts the race knowing it is not necessarily a lost cause, because he has already positioned his wife at the finish line to wait for Mr. Longlegs. The hare, of course, cannot tell the difference between the two hedgehogs. The hedgehog wife is indistinguishable from her husband, and the

5 Klossowski, 88.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Psychology of Actors,” in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 160.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche. “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968), 42–47.

hedgehog wins despite his shorter legs. The hare cannot believe it and demands they start again. Dashing back and forth, he finally collapses from this identity runaround, because he can never distinguish the “true” hedgehog from the “false” hedgehog.

Read for the theater, this fable raises the question of whether actors also experience such an “identity runaround.” Do actors also rush back and forth without any chance of winning until they drop dead of exhaustion?

Is the actor not in a similar fix as the arrogant hare, with the difference being that he himself is at both ends of the course? He is at once both hare and hedgehog, in constant competition with himself. He is, so to speak, his own opponent. He beats himself by fooling himself – because *he himself* is the site, medium, and intermediary of his play. Because *he himself*, his whole being from head to toe – his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his ears – depends upon, falls back upon, his own complex existence. But he can never catch sight of himself while he is playing, neither literally nor metaphorically.

This must cause a slew of questions to explode in the actor, be they ever so vague. What actually happens to the ego when an actor acts? What about the others? What about the character and his relationship to him, and to the characters of the other actors, as character and as himself? But even more disconcerting, almost alienating, what about his own ego in general? “Oh, to be someone else for once! Just for one minute,” yearns Georg Büchner’s Leonce.⁸ Then he would be OK. But does not another contrary desire join this one that expresses itself thus: “Je est un autre.”⁹ Is the actor not haunted by multiple persons who speak through him and monkey about in the shadows? Among these persons are many whose visors are down. Is the actor then many? Considering all this, who would not fall flat on his face, fall over backwards, fall headlong into disaster like the poor hare? Who is not lost in a labyrinth, in a runaround, because the concepts of the enlightened consciousness, of critical reflection and logical analysis, suddenly no longer help us to take control of the situation?

8 Georg Büchner, *Leonce and Lena*, trans. Henry J. Schmidt, in Hinderer and Schmidt (eds.), *Georg Büchner. Complete Works and Letters*, Act I Scene I, 166.

9 Arthur Rimbaud, “Lettre du voyant” (letter to Paul Demeny), May 15, 1871, in Walter Jens (ed.), *Neues Literatur-Lexikon*. Vol. 14 (Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1996), 156.

Never mind the fact that we have cast our vote for emancipation.

In playing, the actor is in the grip of the dark, repressed knowledge of pathos. And pathos does not have much of a reputation anymore. Nevertheless it permeates the actor. Literally. It attacks him. Intractable, it awakens “that which cannot be explained by Reason or Understanding,” as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said of the demonic in his *Conversations with Johann Peter Eckerman*.¹⁰ And he stresses that he does *not* mean Mephistopheles, who is too negative. Nothing could be further from his mind than the nihilism of Mephistopheles, who believes that everything that has been created should be destroyed. Rather the demonic is, according to Goethe, an active, affirmative power, a creative power.

Now let us go back to the question of why people might want to become actors.

Could it not have something to do with this demonic power, this dubious, emotional zone beyond reason, unreasonable? Does this demonic power exert a seductive, erotic pull that makes people want to become actors? It is the liberation from the law of identity. *A* does not have to be *A*, but can also be *A* plus *n*. Is that not the underlying desire for and fascination with the stage? And, at the same time, is not the demonic – the erotic act of play that couples the canny with the uncanny¹¹ – also the distinctive eros of the actor? Is that not the nature of the eros that, in the end, draws in the audience? Eros, the Greek daimon of love; Eros as a medium, the middle, the intermediary, the mediator between knowing and unknowing, between phenomena and ideas, “spans the chasm that divides them and therefore in him all is bound together.”¹² This is the source of the power and the aura of all theater. This is the event the audience perceives.

Perhaps we can describe the actor as a fabled creature of truth as follows: The actor as a creature of fable – remembering the common root of *fabula* and *fatum* – tells us of the human fate of exposure to the world. But he tells us not only through the narrative – though he tells a story

10 Goethe, J.W. and Eckermann, J.P. *Conversations*, trans. John Oxenford (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998), 392.

11 See again Freud’s analysis of the etymology of the word “uncanny” in *The Uncanny*.

12 Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Dover, 1993), 26.

whose fateful threads become visible to the audience as they are played. No, it is the actor himself in the act of acting whose body becomes the demonstrative site of the vulnerability of exposition. He is its mask, its face, its name – as if to remind us, as if to remind us of the specter, the spectacle of our being, before the eyes and ears of others.

The actor's demonic power is perhaps the way in which he brings together the canny and the uncanny. Perhaps he is an erote, a messenger of the fatality of our existence. Through his act of aisthesis, in his possession of the knowledge of pathos – laughing, cursing, murdering, whoring, stammering, praying, loving, truth saying, soothsaying – he reminds us that we cannot escape this facticity nor manage without it. That we can only, by playing masterfully, re-sign ourselves to it.



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