

THE CUBE AND THE SPHERE*

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All I intend to do is state briefly the principle of a possible discussion about theatrical *space*, involving two different conceptions of staging and perhaps of the art of the theatre taken as a whole. It may be that these conceptions reveal two different ways of thinking; and if this morphology of the theatrical world leads me to speak of spherical or cubic minds, I apologize in advance for such strange terms. The title I have given this paper, *The Cube and the Sphere*, may have seemed somewhat enigmatic to you, but I have no intention of giving you a riddle. My idea is quite simple, and you will see that its point of departure is elementary.

I submit the principle that in all the arts without exception, but particularly in the art of the theatre, the main business is to present a whole universe—the universe of the work—*en patuité*, in a state of patency. This rather rare philosophical term must not frighten you. It denotes manifest existence, existence that is clearly evident to the mind.

A universe that exists manifestly before us . . . a universe presented with all its power to stir us deeply; to overwhelm

us; to impose its own reality upon us; to be, for an hour or two, all of reality.

I used the word universe. *Hamlet* is not only Hamlet; it is Ophelia too, and Horatio, and Laertes, all of them linked together by the action that brings them face to face, torments them, sets them in conflict with each other. It is also the embankment at Elsinore, the waves that break against it, the cloudy sky overhead, the earth under which the ghosts make their way. All of this must exist for us, surround us, take hold of us, be given to us. But given—*ab ungue leonem*—in the form of a tiny fragment, a nucleus cut out of that immense universe, whose mission will be to conjure up for us, all by itself, the universe in its entirety.

For it is impossible ever to reduce the universe of a work to what is presented concretely on the stage. Let us take for example: *Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée*. A man and a woman (the Count and the Marquise) in a drawing-room, that is all that is presented to us concretely, all that appears before us physically and in the flesh—in gross presence, if I may use that term. But how many other presences float around, that are absolutely essential to the action; presences that *work* with our characters in the self-same adventure! There is not only a whole past and a whole future, but all the space that surrounds

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these, and the invisible people in that space who have a part in the action: there is M. Camus, the neighbor out in the country; there is the jeweler to whose shop the ring must be taken; the little girls who bring hats; the draft that comes in the door; there is the weather—the showers beating down on the city, the “celestial wrath whipping windows, umbrellas, ladies’ legs, and chimneys.” And to this external world must be added the internal worlds, likewise invisible and essential to the action: the characters’ feelings and thoughts that must be conveyed to us. All these things are there, sometimes only vaguely present, sometimes acutely and obviously so, actually present although invisible. To take another example, think of *Tartuffe* who does not come on stage until the third act of the play, but whose invisible presence is none the less central from the very start.

And so, once more, a whole universe must exist before us, but conjured up and supported by a central nucleus, by that small bit of realized reality, if I may put it that way, which alone is brought before our eyes and whose *punctum saliens*, the living and beating heart, the active center, is the temporary grouping of the actors on the stage.

But how can this total existence, this common life of the whole universe of the work, be obtained from that small beating heart—from the central point which we actually see in action, and whose essential feature is a small constellation of characters?

At this point, two methods of procedure are possible (obviously, I am simplifying and selecting the most obvious contrasts in the purest and most extreme cases).

The first method is the one I call the *cube*.

Let us imagine that we have before us the entire universe of the work in its

supposed reality, with all its dimensions of space, time, and humanity (the whole “rotten state” of *Hamlet*, or the whole rain-lashed Paris of *la Porte*, or all of the bourgeois group of *Tartuffe*, headed by “the king who is an enemy of fraud”). In this universe we cut out a little cube, as though with a saw—for example, the one that contains just the sentry’s box on the “platform before the castle” at Elsinore; or else the drawing-room of the Marquise with its furniture and accessories: the cushion the Count will kneel on, the log he will throw on the fire, and the inside surface of the door and the window, not forgetting the two characters who are in the room. That is the *stage cube*. Within this cube are rendered concretely, physically, in flesh and bones, in wood or in canvas, with real or sham articles (it does not much matter which), everything that ought to be there according to the hypothesis. And then this cube of concrete, visible, and audible realities is opened on the side facing the spectator; one side is removed. Now, it is this cube, this little open box with its contents, that must maintain in the mind’s eye a clear picture of all the rest; around it there will be constructed and arranged (more or less satisfactorily) the whole universe that remains potential and unrepresented.

This *cube* process entailing the complete *bringing into concrete existence of a small, well-defined fragment, cut out of the universe of the work* has three striking traits from the point of view of the theatre.

In the first place, its *realism*. Everything within the limits of the cube must be incarnated or represented concretely—it may be more or less stylized, but it must be made apparent to the senses. (The Antoine type of stage-setting, where everything within the cube is *genuine*, is merely the extreme limit of the genre.)

This cube has a sharply defined form and precise limits; limits that are invariable until a change of place and of setting presents us with another cube, cut out elsewhere in the universe with which we are concerned.

In the second place, its *orientation* or aspect. The little cube is open on the spectator's side. It faces him. It exerts a force over him, a dynamic force in a horizontal plane pointing like an arrow into the hall. If the actor turns his back on the audience for a moment, it is his back that exerts the force during that moment. A dynamic back. It is this back that becomes the arrow as long as the actor remains in that position; it assumes a function on the stage, it takes on a force directed outward into the hall, and makes an impact on the spectator.

And finally, its third trait: its predetermined, confining *architecture*. This little piece of universe is internally organized, and the physical aspects of this organization are imposed from start to finish on everything that happens within the box. The whole incident, the comings and goings of the characters, all their stage business are constrained and given shape in advance according to the stage setting adopted; and they will have to yield to it, trying to turn it to the best possible account. Such are the colonnades of the temple in Mounet-Sully's well-known piece of business: the blind Oedipus feels his way along the columns one by one, until this maneuver brings him face to face with the spectators, who then for the first time see the bleeding, sightless eyes. Another example is Kitty Bell's staircase (in *Chatterton*), down which the dying Marie Dorval used to let herself slide with a long scream. The staircase is there from the very start, and Dorval must come down it, some way or other, unless she wants to die upstairs. Of course, it may be that all this is ar-

ranged in advance, and that the colonnade or the staircase is carefully calculated to announce prophetically Mounet's tragic journey across the stage, or the pathos of Dorval's slide. That makes no difference. Everything must be adapted to an initial decision about the staging, to a preestablished architecture. Even the couch, placed center stage or diagonally in the corner, is a force of inertia that blocks a point, that interferes with the free use of the available space, and forces the characters to sit down there or walk around it. Hence the importance, the gravity of the initial question: where to put the couch? The decision will give the stage a certain form which will itself be a force.

And now let us pass on to the principle of the *sphere*. As you will see, it is entirely different. Its practical and aesthetic dynamism are not at all the same (of course, I am simplifying once more, and taking an exaggeratedly pure and extreme case).

No stage, no hall, no limits. Instead of cutting out a predetermined fragment in the world that is going to be set up, one seeks out its dynamic center, its beating heart, the spot where the action is emotionally at its keenest and most exalted. This center is permitted to irradiate its force freely and without limits. The actors or the group of actors who incarnate this heart, this *punctum saliens*, dynamic center of the universe of the work, are officiating priests, magicians whose power extends outward indefinitely into open space. The fictitious world of which they are the center develops to dimensions limited only by the incantatory group's power to conjure up and create. They are the center, and the circumference is nowhere—the point is to push it out into the infinite, taking the spectators themselves into the limitless sphere.

No stage! Obviously, you need some utilitarian spot, some platform or other on which the actors can stand and move about; you need some place, some building, open like an amphitheatre or covered over, in which to house them along with the spectators; but whether this be the chancel of a cathedral, or a ring in the circus, the courtyard of an Elizabethan inn, or a Russian-style circular theatre, the site of this theatrical theophany sets no limits, and in no way imposes its form on what is happening. Its only function is to gather actors and spectators around the central point where the happenings that animate the universe of the work vibrate and beat most intensely.

There is no scenery either, properly so-called, if we mean by scenery those box-sides on which are painted one-dimensional representations destined to be seen from a given point directly opposite in the hall. Only what is needed to fix momentarily what will later become intensified and take on local significance in the world that is being suggested. Why not simply a circular area on which are a step-ladder and two boxes, so long as we are willing to take that box at various moments for a chair or a chopping block, a chest or a rock; and so long as the step-ladder can be changed, according to the moment and the dramatic needs, into a tower, a mountain-side, or a ghost? In the other system, that of the cube, all the beings of the world selected for representation necessarily had one or the other of the following modes of existence: either they were real and visible in the box, within the limits of the section cut out, or else they were immaterial and disincarnated in the invisible world outside these limits, in the wings. There are no wings here. At most there are "mansions" as in the medieval theatre, to which characters whose presence is momentarily less use-

ful withdraw to give the effect of a vaguer, more distant presence; later they will return in a form whose realism matters very little, to take on more visibility, a more actual and localized presence, as, under the collective magic spell, they are summoned to appear at the author's command.

If you want to find the basis for this kind of staging by pure, spell-binding suggestion outside the theatre, think of a child sitting in a chair, cracking a whip over another chair. He finds this enough to play at being in a carriage, or at driving a dogsled on some Arctic trail—a convention that is just as valid in the theatre provided we, the spectators, enter into the game, and are tempted like him (or rather like the actor) to act out a part whose main feature lies in the visual and verbal representation of the action. Or, to take an example closer to the theatre, think of the clown who makes all the spectators look up by pretending that the sleight-of-hand artist's pigeon is still flying in circles under the canvas top. But within the history of the art of the theatre itself, think of the actor Garrick wringing tender tears from an audience while cradling a pillow in his arms (it is true that this happened in a drawing room and not on the stage); and then making everyone cry out in anguish when finally, with an imprecation against this illegitimate child, he throws the pillow out the window. As a matter of fact, in this system, it is much more the actor's business than it is the property man's or the scene-painter's or the stage-hand's, to make a carrier-pigeon fly across the sky (as in *Mangeront-ils?*), or to have Marco Polo's caravan file by on the horizon (as in *Christophe Colomb*); or, to come back to our original example, to make gray seas break against the terrace at Elsinore.

Now if this gradual transition by delicate nuances from presence incarnate,

through presence with a bare pretense of representation, to immaterial presence, is in striking contrast with the prime feature of the cubic system—the All or Nothing, i.e., really present or completely absent—there are also other points of contrast.

We do not find here, or at least we find the minimum of, face-to-face relationship, that arrow-like function of the actor with reference to the spectator. As much as possible, the spectators are in the cathedral or around the platform as participants; they are, so to speak, invited along with the actor to enter the universe that is being conjured up. They are within the sphere whose periphery pulsates and is infinitely expansive, a sphere whose walls can encompass them or even go far beyond them. I was saying a short while ago in connection with the cube, that if the actor turned his back on the public, his back assumed a dramatic force. Here, not only does all of the actor's person have dramatic force, but his ideal would be to get the spectator's back to take on such a force. Let me explain what I mean: if, in *Oedipus Rex*, the actor who is playing Oedipus manages, during his tragic inquiry, to make the spectators feel with a little shiver that Destiny is advancing on Oedipus *from behind their backs*, then they are indeed inside the sphere! And it doesn't much matter then, basically, how the stage is laid out. I was speaking a moment ago about a round platform. Obviously, with the cubic principle there is a tendency to organize the stage along the lines of the Italian theatre (which is its natural product); while the sphere calls for a broader organization, one that is less rigid and more inclusive as concerns the audience, like certain Russian stages—or like open-air performances in amphitheatres or arenas. Here the presence of the same real sky over actors and spectators alike, and of

the country-side roundabout, helps to assimilate everyone into the dramatic action. But even on the Italian-style stage this principle of assimilation is followed whenever there is an attempt to produce universal inclusiveness, to obscure the outlines, either physically according to methods of stage design (in which a Gordon Craig, for example, has pioneered) or, in a more general manner, by any means that tends to destroy the evidence of a structural framework formally bound to the stage locale. For after all, the conflict between the Italian-style stage and, let us say, the amphitheatre or the circular platform—or for that matter any other analogous arrangement—is but an episode and a particular consequence of the choice made between these two broad systems, both of which have many other aesthetic implications.

There is a third point of view from which this effort towards universal expansion of a cosmic theatrical nucleus is in contrast with the preestablished architectural constraints of the cubic system, a point of view based on the former's freedom to improvise and to move about. The ideal, the unattainable ideal pursued by the Sphericals (if I may dare speak of them as though they constituted a race, a nation, or a sect), would be the absolute availability, by mere invocation and as though magically, of every manifestation momentarily needed, of every dimension to be traversed or conquered; the absolute malleability of theatrical material, in a perpetual and unimpeded improvisation, without any previous calculation or curb, without "exquisite constraint" (if I may, in this connection, quote Valéry, who was speaking only of versification—but after all, is there not a kind of parallel between this problem, and the duel, among poets, between the partisans of free verse and those of conventional

verse?). Failing the ability to realize this dream, how do the "spherical minds" resolve the problem? Least successfully, by means of the unspecified locale, supplemented either by imaginary or conventional evocations, or by means of mobile drop settings; more recently, by settings involving projections, especially cinematographic projections (but in this case, the fatal presence of a *screen*, of whatever kind, all too easily restores the partition that the screen was intended to eliminate); or finally—for want of a revolving stage, which has never given satisfactory results in this genre—by the division of the set into compartments (the original sets of the *Cid*!). This process has been rejuvenated in America by drawing the attention of the audience first to one compartment and then to another with lighting effects, thus creating the impression that various points of the universe of the work are being conjured up instantaneously and at will, as they are needed in the dramatic unfolding of the story, and according to its particular pattern. But basically, a process of almost pure suggestion, an incantatory magic resting on the power of the word, on the authority of the actor, aided by a bare minimum of visual representation, and consciously conceived as just an imaginative and evocatory pretext (this magic can be quite close to so-called abstract art)—such a suggestive process, I say, still remains the best means (and the most economical!) of contributing to the freedom and to the flexibility that are the ideal or the dream of this form of theatrical thinking.

You see how very different are these two broad conceptions of the art of the theatre, not only in their principles, but also in their artistic aims, in their effects, and in their aesthetic means. At least if they are studied in their pure state, in extreme examples.

But you will now ask me which

one to choose. Which side I approve? Whether I favor the cube or the sphere? Whether I am registered with the Spherical party or the Cubist? Gulliver was similarly called upon to become a Big-Endian or a Small-Endian (I don't remember whether this involved the manner of using a spy glass or of breaking a soft-boiled egg).

Well, I absolutely refuse to take sides, on the grounds that both principles are equally valid conceptions of the theatre; both equally authentic although antithetical. It is up to the artist (whether author, actor, or producer, or all of them working together as a team) to decide how he is going to break the egg. And of course personalities must be taken into consideration. One producer, essentially Apollo-like, will prefer by far an assignment that permits him to play the clever architect; he will lay out in advance the dramatic or spectacular action of his team-mates upon the stage, through the strong and ingenious structure he creates in Olympian fashion at the very start, by the very act of cutting out his block of reality. Another, more Dionysian, will yield to the intoxication of being the sum and substance of all the forces seething on the stage; he will seek to amplify the rhythm of such forces, to set in motion the beat of a freely expanding universe, and to direct a great evocatory rite in which theoretically he has control even over the public. Of course there are also other questions, such as the desires of the spectators, the search for novelty, and a fidelity to established successes or to the nobility of the past.

But all these factors can be examined from a common point of view, and perhaps integrated.

Both, as I was saying, are authentic and valid. The spherical principle, more primitive, more closely related to the beginnings of the theatre—in certain re-

spects, more "religious" (in the very broadest sense of the term)—is perhaps also the one that offers at the present moment most opportunities for new research, for expansion of the present boundaries of the theatre towards new destinies. But the principle of the cube, which is more solid, more classic (although it too can be broadened and diversified), more common in the theatre of the last three centuries, has on its side purity of structure, potential stylization, and a spectacular glamor, that are susceptible of monumental elaboration.

As a matter of fact the art of the theatre has oscillated rhythmically, so to speak, between the two tendencies, as did the Greek theatre, for example, which used them alternately in the contrast between the chorus and the actors, in the preeminence accorded first to the orchestra, then to the *logeion*. The defect of the cubic principle, or (if you are getting tired of hearing those words repeated so frequently) of the principle of the architectonic organization of a selected piece of the universe of the work, presented in such a way that it faces the spectator—its defect, I say, is that it either limits itself too much to a mere, artless reproduction of a piece of reality, viewed as though through a keyhole; or else, if it stylizes and arranges, it tends little by little to fall into excesses of the spectacular that some associate with the "movies." The box is compressed onto a narrow stage on which three or four people in front of a backdrop face the public and talk, then change their places kaleidoscopically and start talking again from new places, and so on until all the combinations of places have been exhausted! Meanwhile, at long, equal intervals, four or five times in all, the shape and color of the box are changed. And the central location of the divan, or the staircase, or the statue of Apollo,

determine (in advance) the steps of this ballet. How great then is the urge to expand all that, to break down all partitions, to explode through space and descend into the midst of the spectators, in an excitement carrying away actors and spectators alike in common exaltation!

Yes, but there is the alternative. Pushed to extremes, the triumph of the spherical principle results in a caricature. A tragedy is reduced to dance movements by several choruses around an area in whose center a few officiating "priests" are intoning their lines or indulging in a kind of ceremonial choreography. They thus proceed, by an essentially verbal theophany, to the evocation of a great legend, or of some myth (of past ages or of future time)—to which a thousand spectators, seated on circular tiers, pay rapt attention, silent, immobile, docile in their hallucination. Or, if we are dealing with a comedy, we find some kind of free and universal saturnalia, or the carnival-like improvisations of communal merry-making. What becomes of the truly theatrical in all this? Of the art of the stage, properly speaking? What a temptation it is to say to those high priests of lyricism: "Climb up on the platform, or, if that is beneath your dignity, delegate some of your henchmen who won't disdain to get up on the stage in front of us and let themselves go—in actions as well as in words, with pantomime as well as with settings!" Or to tell that life-of-the-party at the carnival: "Come out of the crowd; get up on those boards and show us what you can do—as an artist!" Now was it not by just such a selective process that the theatre was born and that it constantly rises anew out of its religious or socially collective origins? Isn't this return to the cube from the sphere a technical reconstruction of the development of the theatre?

And so the true life of the theatre oscillates between these two opposite poles; it quickens and draws enthusiasm from their struggle, from their double and contrasting impulses, from the everlasting nostalgia these two extremes have for each other—neither of them ever completely triumphant, for then the theatre would die.

This basic discrepancy, this double principle (or alternating temptation), seems to me of the very essence of the theatre. And that is the theme that I submit to you for discussion. If, in order to shorten the distance between these two extremes, it seemed necessary to sketch out the outlines of a possible synthesis, I should say that the real theatrical sequence, or at least the most natural and effective, is to start with the cube, and to have it burst, abruptly or gradually, into the sphere. The great advantage of the cube is that its stage arrangement and the nature of its opening scenes arouse the interest of the spectators at the very beginning, before they come under the spell of the drama proper. The spherical principle requires that the audience be spell-bound from the very start, yet it is difficult to seize the spectator's attention immediately and wholly unless a measure of readiness has been built up in him beforehand, in some way. But is it not one of the finest and most complete artistic triumphs to succeed sooner or later in casting this collective spell, in registering this total presence of the universe of the work—a presence that finally pervades the entire audience and permits it to enter into communion? This is a quasi-religious communion, as many have shown.

The reason is that the same is true of art, after all, as of reality: we know very well that man is at once in the world, and looking out on the world. In all art as in all reality, there is a kind of external presence, in front of us, indispen-

sable to us; and also a kind of internal presence that is equally useful and perhaps fills a greater void in our existence. And the triumph of theatrical art is the moment when there begins to grow around the small architectonic structure facing the audience a presence, an existence—one that swells, dilates, becomes more and more vast, more and more cosmic, and that finally carries away high-priests and audience alike in a whirlwind, to a new universe conjured up and imposed by the magic act of art. If I had to become specific about questions of technique and stage structure, I would say that the best theatre was the one that put the fewest obstacles in the way of the following transition: a gradual evolution in which the action was first presented in front of an audience on a shallow stage, then by progressive stages (corresponding to important moments in the play) was broadened. Ultimately it might include a step-by-step descent into the very midst of the spectators, until they were finally enveloped, and were merged with the players in a common act of artistic creation.

But why specify? Each work has its own particular way of blossoming forth. The basic need is for a microcosm, architecturally organized and rich with all the power of *form*, but aiming at the spectator an action that keeps opening, and conquering, and expanding into universal existence. At any rate, this gradual transformation of a microcosm into a macrocosm is certainly the supreme act of the art of the theatre, an act that no other art permits with quite so much breadth. For the theatre alone permits the existence—half-concrete, yet half-abstract, half-perceptible to the senses, yet half-hallucinatory—of a universe in all its dimensions and all its emotional force; and it is this very instant of total existence that constitutes true theatre, theatre in its highest form.