The Drama of Phenomenology


Tradition has it that Plato was involved in the theater—he was a dramatist—until he met Socrates. He was converted to Philosophy at once and, invoking the fire-god, committed his plays to the flames. While that seems to constitute a rather definite commentary on the relationship between the theater and Philosophy, yet one indication of Plato’s possible irony here is the fact that even after he embraced Philosophy he composed dialogues and nothing like a straightforward philosophical treatise.¹

There is also Aristotle’s well-known, if enigmatic, declaration to the effect that drama would be more philosophical than history, since the latter only presents things as they actually have been, while tragedy, for example, is an imitation of the possible and is thereby in the element of the universal.

Yet it is the strict opposition between theater and Philosophy, or, more generally, between art and Philosophy, which, in the main, has dominated from Plato and Aristotle on. Of course, the ascendency of Phenomenology and Existentialism has been accompanied by a *rapprochement* between Philosophy and art, and even specifically between Philosophy and drama, but Wilshire’s book is no doubt the most comprehensive and explicit attempt to appreciate the philosophical value of the theater.

For Wilshire, theater makes contact with Philosophy in this way,
putting it in broad strokes and following the author’s terminology: By essence, man is mimetically involved with his fellow man. To be himself, man must imitate, conform to, and be authorized by his fellows but must also individuate himself by opposing them. These phenomena—mimesis, authorization, individuation—are theatrical *par excellence*. The theater, or metaphors deriving from the theater, are needed to thematize and elucidate for us our essential condition; they make real and concrete for us what Philosophy, or Phenomenology, will argue for in concepts.

Much revolves around the author’s notion of “mimetic involvement,” “identification-with,” “standing in for.” In general, it seems simply to refer to the “primitive impulse” to mime, or incorporate into our own behavior, something of that which we encounter. In the first place, it occurs even in our experience of things: “With a small thing we kneel down, contract the body, squint and narrow the focus of the eyes. With a quiet thing we grow quiet in order to hear it, etc.” (p. 198) (The author gives no other examples, except that with a loud thing we grow loud—to make ourselves heard over it—and I leave it to the reader to attempt to carry out this “etc.”) The really important mimesis, however, concerns other people. It amounts to reproducing the attitudes and behavior of those we meet, “drifting in with them, falling into step:” (p. 197) “To laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep . . . .” (p. 14) This mimetic fusion is the first stage on the way to becoming a self for in it we learn the appropriate behavior, the behavior that others will “authorize,” or in which we will find “confirmation.” Now, for the most part, this imitation of others is covert and unthematic. What theater does is to make us explicitly aware of it: “Through the actors’ deliberate identifications-with and standings in we discover our largely undeliberate identifications-with and standings in.” (p. 14) To put it more fully:

Theatre is the paradigmatic mimetic art and it deals with the paradigmatically mimetic features of human life. The actor stands in for the character. But the character is a type of humanity with whom the audience member can identify, either as a stand-in for his own person, or indirectly as a stand-in for others whom the audience member recognizes, and with whom he can be empathetically involved. If the character is one who stands in for us, then we can also stand in for him, and indeed we do stand in for him through the actor’s standing in for him. The basic facts energizing theatrical art (1) that persons identify with others, even to the point of assuming permanently their modes of being and behavior (as in the family), and (2) that persons can bring this and