

Introduction

Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

The theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transported into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*



There is something unexpectedly salutary in the Duke's declaration to Jaques in the middle of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c. 1599). It is hard to say if this derives from simple recognition of the misery of others ("Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy"), a kind of restorative *schadenfreude* rooted in a basic perception of human suffering on a global scale, as if the Duke were pointing to another man's calamities as proof of a satisfying truism ("See—things could always be worse!"), or, perhaps, as if the momentarily salutary force of his words were the only proper response to the arrival of the homeless newcomer (Orlando, in this case), whose desperate intrusion provokes the Duke's remark—an answer, in other words, to the sheer undeniable fact that "we are not all alone," the recognition that there are others in the world, even in the wilds of the Forest of Arden, refugees whose coming can interrupt our existence, our circle of friends and loved ones, others whose sorrow or misfortune might intrude on our lives in ways that force us to reevaluate our own relationships and endeavors, binding us to these newcomers in a specific fashion that makes of them more than simply creatures with whom we share the air and trees, the sky and water.

Cold, hungry, and lost in the Forest of Arden, Orlando discovers "good

comfort” at the hands of the equally cold and homeless Duke—and with it the hope of a nascent polity in the unlikeliest of places, without even the basic protection of human artifice, institutions, or buildings (2.7.135). “I thought that all things had been savage here,” he admits before learning of his own autobiographical ties to the banished Duke (2.7.107). The narratives that are later “whisper’d” (2.7.195) between Orlando and the Duke, however, are ultimately less instructive than the Duke’s memorable exchange with Jaques:

DUKE

Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.

JAQUES

All the world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and their entrances. [2.7.136–41]

Orlando’s misadventures, which carry him far from home to this scene upon the bare earth of the Forest of Arden, offer themselves as the occasion for the Duke’s proclamation; his emigration turns out to be the latest dramatization of the sheer fact that the world is full of scenes.

And this fact is presented from within Shakespeare’s work as irrefutable; indeed, it springs from an ontology that reveals the world itself, prior to any human institution or artificial construction upon its surface, to be essentially destined to house and sustain an infinite variety of scenes: all the world *is* a stage.

Jaques’ utterance remains for us a distilled expression of perhaps the only grand announcement that passes unquestioned throughout Shakespeare’s body of dramatic works. Indeed, the plays themselves function as the most eloquent testimony to the ontological parity of world and stage in that they stand as a supremely crafted mimetic expression of the infinite variety of interactions, stories, and scenes that continue to arise dramatically from the ontological horizon affirmed by Jaques and the Duke.

Tellingly, it is *this* affirmation that has burned itself into our cultural memory of Shakespeare’s play. It still echoes, anachronistically, in our own era, in which comparisons of the world with a space for dramatic action are no longer, as they still were four centuries ago, common turns of phrase. After all, the melancholy Jaques’ subsequent clichéd litany of the seven ages of man now resonates for us far less than the simple observation that it follows. More than anything else, our ears remain cocked for the simple affirmation that “all the world is a stage / And all the men

and women merely players / They have their exits and their entrances” (2.7.139–41).

Indeed, Shakespeare’s (or Jaques’) phrase resounds today as a kind of oracular pronouncement, giving voice to a wisdom whose origins we no longer recall, whose truth and profundity we doubt not—and yet whose full significance we cannot immediately grasp and can only barely decipher. Like a knowledge that is almost bodily, instinctual, buried within us like the primitive awe of fire or fear of snakes, we *know* that upon the world’s surface—unpredictably, tragically, memorably, comically, unbearably, continually—scenes unfold, just as we know that human scenes correspond to “exits and entrances,” deaths and births, and that human interactions correspond to the human condition of natality and mortality.

But what does this knowledge give us? And can it move from ontology to politics? If we are “merely players” upon a world stage, without (as of yet) the possibility of being anywhere else but upon this stage, or anything other than creatures who enter it, exit from it, and interact upon it, how do political ties arise from and respond to this ontology?

POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY

The ancient comparison of the world with a theatrical space—the *theatrum mundi*, or world stage—is most likely even older than its long history as a discursive metaphor suggests. The origins of the metaphor do not lend themselves to narration. After all, the moment at which the world came to be called a stage can be dated with no more precision than can the emergence of theatrical space, or drama, itself.

The subsequent expropriation and reification of the world stage as a discursive *figure*, *image*, or *metaphor*, however, can be dated with more precision.

The figuration of the world as stage¹ lies subsequent to the development of Greek tragedy and at the origins of Plato’s political philosophy, such that this figuration is not simply one metaphor among all the others; rather, it is a metaphor essential to the emergence of political philosophy in Plato’s writings.

This book, by reading the dramatic work of William Shakespeare and others against two major treatises in political philosophy, Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, stages an encounter between drama and political philosophy that demonstrates the indispensability of the former for key discursive articulations of the latter in the texts of Plato

and Thomas Hobbes. Dramatic activities ranging from ancient epic to Renaissance theater are figuratively expropriated in both the *Republic* and the *Leviathan* in ways that are constitutive of fundamental claims for these discourses. For example, the very notion of political representation that emerges in the *Leviathan*, and Plato's theoretical definition of political life that allows political philosophy to understand itself as a science, have their origins in such figurations even as they work to deny the centrality of drama for politics.

This methodology of "returning" to Shakespeare, Hobbes, or the Greeks is not intended as an evasion of the present, nor is it an effort to codify or mask nostalgia for other historical moments or earlier forms of political life. Rather, I focus on Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, in relation to Plato and Hobbes, first because ancient Greece and early modern England are two crucial eras in which to construct a plausible, historical frame for this encounter between drama and political philosophy² and, second, because of the central place occupied by the Platonic and Hobbesian *topoi* I analyze (such as "mimesis," "representation," and "image-making") in subsequent writings on both politics and drama.

By leveraging exegetical analyses of dramatic works by Shakespeare and others against the political philosophies of Plato and, above all, of Thomas Hobbes, this book engages the terrain of political philosophy by contesting the figural ground from which it emerges. The book aims to challenge a Hobbesian notion of political representation along with the antidramatic character of *theoria* by developing a different political lexicon that makes the dramatic scene—or, better, scenes—a fundamental category for thinking about political life.

In this way, the book also proposes a speculative political discourse that abandons taxonomical and scientific ambitions in order to correspond more closely with an ontology that reveals the world as stage, and that orients itself from the start toward an interactive horizon of words and deeds among unique actors and witnesses.

Specifically, I turn to plays by Shakespeare not only for their suggestiveness as works of art, full of promising lexical tools and categories (such as Shakespeare's unique exploitation of the world-stage metaphor) but also for the theoretical and historical purchase that they provide, in order to respond to a remarkable paradox in the political philosophies of Hobbes and Plato. The paradox is that Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes's *Leviathan* expel a broad horizon of dramatic representation, whether Homeric narration or Elizabethan stagecraft, from the domain of politics while at the same time relying upon precise figurations culled from

the same horizon, through terms like “mimesis” (Plato) and “representation” (Hobbes), in order to perform this expulsion.

In contravention of the Shakespearean ontology, which is most neatly expressed in the announcement that the world *is* a stage, Plato’s philosophy sets down its roots in an ontology that continually seeks to overcome the horizon of dramatic experience, and that locates the sense of political life in such otherworldly principles as justice, or in various other ends and aims according to which laws and institutions are to be erected and maintained. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes this as the degradation of politics into a “means to obtain an allegedly ‘higher’ end.”³

In the first four chapters of the book, drawing on Arendt’s reflections on politics and action, I show how, in the *Republic* and even more radically in the *Leviathan*, this paradox grounds politics in an ontology that has nothing to do with the sharing of words and deeds between singular people or with the relationships that result from these interactions. Chapter 1 examines the lexical and conceptual stakes of the derivation of “theory” from “theater” in Plato’s texts and the concomitant emergence of political science vis-à-vis a specific linguistic appropriation of terms that formerly designated an elemental horizon of dramatic representation encompassing both Homer and Attic tragedy. Chapter 2 provides a close reading of the third and tenth books of Plato’s *Republic* and explains how the semantic evolution of the term “mimesis” from the narrow sense of “dramatic impersonation” to “mimesis as such” (*mimesin holos*) in these texts facilitates what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe calls a “fundamental mimetology”—namely, how the conditions proper to dramatic representation devolve through Plato’s changing use of the term “mimesis” to a political order from which all dramatic representation is banished from the start.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the figurative expropriation of the dramatic representation of Shakespeare’s age through an extended analysis of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. I argue that crucial passages in chapter 16 of the *Leviathan* rely, in a manner analogous to Plato’s *Republic*, on constitutive *topoi* from the dramatists of Shakespeare’s generation—such as Hobbes’s notion of “person” and his political concept of “representation” that he claims “from the Stage hath been translated”—in order, precisely, to use these originally dramatic categories to articulate a political sphere that disavows dramatic representation in favor of sovereign unity and power. However, Hobbes’s writing reveals an even more forceful break with dramatic representation, upon which, after all, Socrates’ logos and lexis still

depended, for not only does the *Leviathan* divorce the political life of the commonwealth from (to paraphrase Arendt) the sphere of human interaction and interlocution that is proper to dramatic representation, Hobbes's text also expropriates this sphere from the ontological horizon of human life to which his politics corresponds—the famous “state of nature,” or *bellum omnium contra omnes*, which understands human life as a sheer “motion of limbs.” Chapter 4 goes on to show how the Leviathan—both as a uniquely powerful image and as a discursive figure—portends the artificial production of a political sphere rooted in the formation of a visual framework in which appearances are rigorously regulated by a principle of sovereign unity and by the effacement of difference within the image's frame. Through an analysis of Abraham Bosse's celebrated frontispiece, I also suggest ways in which the Leviathan might help us to better grasp the stakes of what Hobbes presciently calls the “artificial” or fabricated character of the public sphere of appearance—namely, the utter foreignness of such image making to the singular, spontaneous, relational scenes of human interaction—by contrasting Hobbes's monstrous *deus mortalis* to the “virgin queen” Elizabeth, for whom sovereignty still meant being “set on stages in the sight and view of the world.”

The book's second half aims to recuperate from the dramatic canon, specifically from three plays by William Shakespeare, a different theoretical articulation of politics, one that critiques the centrality of Hobbesian representation and that, moreover, forgoes a comprehensive theoretical account of what constitutes a polity in order to articulate political existence more contingently, in terms of the singular webs of scenes and relations from which political life is spun. In chapter 5, I offer a reelaboration of Hannah Arendt's reflections on politics and action, in relation to the work of the contemporary philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy, Adriana Cavarero, and others, in order to propose some working definitions of terms like “scene,” “drama,” and “action,” intended not as normative foreclosures of meaning but rather as necessary sketches that might allow the reader to better gauge the theoretical plausibility of the chapters that follow. I then return to some scenes from the very dramatic traditions that precede and condition the political philosophies of Plato and Hobbes—namely, Greek tragedy and Shakespearean drama. Chapter 6 rehabilitates a tragic scene from one of the earliest works of Greek tragedy, Phrynichus' *Fall of Miletus*, in order to articulate a notion of the scene which challenges the relation between mimesis and politics that will, subsequent to the flourishing of tragedy, take shape in the works of Plato and Aristotle. By recuperating certain features of these Shakespearean scenes—illuminating, as it were, discursive and dramatic preconditions

of Hobbes's philosophy—the book aims to reassess a tradition of modern political philosophy that might be understood to originate with Hobbes, and to imagine for it a different trajectory. Chapter 7 elaborates a specifically Shakespearean notion of the scene in relation to political life by looking at how polities are formed and reformed through the speech of one witness to another in *Hamlet*. Chapter 8 offers a close reading of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, a reading that aspires to rethink the ancient bond between logos and politics by attending to Shakespeare's exploitation of the singularity of the human voice in that play. Finally, the epilogue revisits the ancient image of the *theatrum mundi*, or world stage, a metaphor that is precisely as old as Plato's political philosophy, in order to see how Shakespeare's *As You Like It* marks a literalization of the philosophical metaphor, and how a Shakespearean ontology of the world stage might help us to gauge the limits of the political-philosophical tradition from which it inherits the *theatrum mundi* image.

In this way, this book seeks first to frame historically, theoretically, and rhetorically the obstacles we still face, in political terms, when it comes to fully reckoning with the ontological parity of world and stage and affirming the variety of scenes on the world stage as the *proprium* of politics. What is needed, perhaps, is a different lexicon for this *proprium*, one that does not aim at a more rigorously scientific description of political organizations, movements, or trends but instead forgoes the epistemic principles of classical "theory" in order to better come to terms with politics as the infinitely complex, ultimately uncategorizable unfolding of scenes on the world stage.

Thus the broader aspiration of this book is at once ambitious and simple. In elementary terms, it lies in introducing ways in which we might reorient our understanding of politics by making the dramatic scene (or, better, scenes) a fundamental category for thinking about political life.⁴ And, by the same token, it aims to ground politics in an ontology that grasps the world as stage and that orients itself from the start toward an interactive horizon of words and deeds among unique actors and witnesses. This means, first of all, rejecting the ontological authority of otherworldly principles or ideals whose epistemic stability functions as the guarantor of theoretical reflection (and as the precursor of modern scientific categories like data or evidence) and starting instead from a Shakespearean ontology that locates the human condition in the parity of world and stage, and that lends itself to the contingency and unpredictability of scenes that unfold upon it.

This may seem to some like a rather excessive aspiration for what is at bottom, as the reader will soon find out, a series of exegetical essays on

scenes composed by Shakespeare and others. Rather than excess, however, the perspective I wish to propose is simply one of futurity, oriented toward the potential rewards of rehabilitating dramatic scenes for a theoretical account of political life that does not seek to obscure or deny their centrality.

By the same token, let me assert from the start that my aim here is not to propose a new “theory” of political life that would account for human interaction as a totality or fixed object of contemplation. Instead, a “politics of the scene” might simply be the name of a shared theoretical orientation that suspends grand ontological claims about the nature of political life in order to attend to the formation of polities on the singular scenes of their birth and rebirth.

This means, for a start, leaving open what we mean by the terms “polity” and “political community.” It seems (to me, at least) that we ought not pretend that we can comprehend what exactly we are talking about when we say “that polity” or “this community,” for these are not stable, confinable, or even fully identifiable entities but rather ongoing interminglings of lives, webs of varying sizes and complexities, networks of relationships that are in constant formation and dissolution, and that always exceed the control and intentions of their participants. Indeed, giving up a comprehensive theoretical account of politics as such—letting go of political life as a theoretically framable object of study—might challenge theory itself to more fully come to terms with the radical contingency, unforeseeability, and sheer variety of scenes on the world stage. “Politics” as a theoretical object of study is, after all, as much a theoretical fiction as is “Man.” As Hannah Arendt puts it, “Man is a-political; politics is born *among men* . . . thus there exists no properly political ‘substance’; politics is born in the *between* and is affirmed as relation.”⁵ Returning politics to the “scene” thus means abandoning a comprehensive taxonomical account of actual polities, or of the “polity” as an object of inquiry. Instead, those of us interested in opening new avenues for theoretical inquiry and intellectual dialogue about politics, from outside the traditional canons of political science, might begin to articulate “the political” in terms of the infinite variety of interactions and relations of which political existence is, finally, composed.

Attending to this infinite variety does not mean, at least in my view, that theoretical or scientific accounts of politics lose all meaning, nor does it mean reverting to a kind of endless, pretheoretical exchange of subjective opinions and beliefs about what was said and done on this or that scene. It is not enough to value, as has sometimes been proposed, civic deliberation or practical judgment or collective *doxa* over eternal truths.

All the same, the theoretical orientation that I wish to provisionally designate with the phrase “politics of the scene” is intended—for “theory” itself—as a departure from the clear, foresighted epistemic command of political life that characterizes Plato’s deployment of the verb *theorein*. If we are to be faithful, so to speak, to the endless variety of scenes in “this wide and universal theater” as the first principle of politics, then this no doubt means giving up the goal of ever defining politics in a wide and universal way.

Indeed, the value of the “scene” as a theoretical category for politics lies precisely in the extent to which scenes do not allow themselves to be apprehended “theoretically.” There can be no taxonomy of scenes, no catalogue of the relations to which they give rise, no hierarchical de-cension of the interactions that spin themselves into political bonds that themselves end up being too dense to fully untangle, each one different from every other. Rather than represent a deficiency, a kind of epistemic limitation that weakens theoretical activity, I propose that we consider the irreducibility of scenes to objects of contemplative study or taxonomical analysis as the very way in which the “scene” might operate as a theoretical category that finally allows us to speak meaningfully of political life in properly dramatic terms.

In this way, theoretical reflection might serve us best if it seeks language with which to comprehend human words and deeds as they have unfolded on particular scenes, leaving behind reformed political bonds in their wake. This does not mean that “theory” becomes a euphemism for storytelling, or that the task of the philosopher usurps the task of the ancient narrator. Rather, it means the reappropriation of certain theoretical categories and methodologies for an understanding of political life as it emerges on an ever-changing world stage.

Admittedly, numerous risks and frequent occasions for confusion accompany this exercise from the start. In the interest of clarity, and in the hope of averting undue bewilderment, I would like now to offer some preliminary definitions, intended not as normative foreclosures of meaning but rather as necessary sketches that might allow the reader to better gauge the plausibility of my analyses.

DEFINING “SCENES”

In contrast to other key terms and their etymological cognates in the dramatic lexicon—“action,” “representation,” “theater,” “stage,” “persona,” “mask,” *hypocrites*, *prosopon*—the term “scene” has not been

widely expropriated conceptually or linguistically by political philosophers. Of course, some philosophers, particularly French philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy, have employed the term *scène* in the context of considering political questions.⁶ However, because the word “scene” remains relatively unused by political philosophers, it is not an overdetermined philosophical category or problem like “action” or “representation.” My choice of this word stems in part from the relative freedom of usage allowed by this.

However, the term is also useful because it designates more than just the “space” for dramatic action, not only because Greek *σκηνή* and Latin *scēna* designate both the “stage” or platform as well as the entire architectural structure around it but also because the English word “scene” invokes meanings that go behind the architectonic origins of classical etymology.⁷ The “scene” might refer both to the location and to the action that unfolds there. Also, the word has been used to designate a “play” or piece of dramatic writing as well as a particular “subdivision” of a play—a given “act” or a “situation *between* certain actors.”⁸ Over the course of the twentieth century, primarily in American usage, a “scene” has come to refer to a “particular activity” carried on among particular people in a particular place (for example, the jazz or beatnik “scene”), a social or musical scene that need not manifest any immediate connection to the playhouse or architectural site of the theater. And so we have the idioms “to make a scene,” “to be on the scene,” “the scene of the crime,” and so forth. Indeed, the term is so loosened from its architectural moorings that it finally designates nothing less than “some portion of human activity” or “the realm or sphere” of such activity.⁹ Thus, remarkably, the semantic history of the word “scene” moves from a valence dominated by technical fabrication to a valence that privileges the unpredictable here-and-now interactions of human beings.

Here the dictionary loses control of the term because the possible horizons, experiences, episodes, and interactions that it might catalogue prove resistant to taxonomy. Scenes, it would appear, have a way of proliferating in ways that resist easy definition. And, as a result, the word “scene” has demonstrated remarkable semantic latitude, latitude that, I would argue, arises from and corresponds to the Shakespearean ontology with which we began. As much as possible, I want to hold on to the nontaxonomical character of scenes as precisely what makes the “scene” a useful category for thinking about politics.

That said, by “scene”—or, better “scenes”—I propose to designate any particular horizon of human interaction, inaugurated by the words and deeds of someone or some group, here and now, with the result that

a singular relationship or web of relationships is brought into being, sustained, or altered among those on the scene.¹⁰ In addition, I propose that a scene emerges only insofar as it immediately leaves behind the potentiality for a future, testimonial address between or among those who were “on the scene.” This anticipatory temporality—whereby a scene begins presently only insofar as the relation that it inaugurates here and now is, from the start, oriented (beyond all intentions or desires) toward a future testimony among witnesses from the “original” scene—is, I shall argue, essential to its centrality for political life, for it is this implicit anticipation, without which there would be no scene, that orients a polity, like any human relationship, toward a future of its own, and not just toward an indifferent “tomorrow.” In other words, what is at stake here is not a general unknown “future” or *avenir* for a nation or for humanity but rather the anticipated spoken or enacted affirmation, in life, of an ongoing web of particular relationships. This anticipation, which inheres in every word and deed, need not be an explicit or formal promise or vow; rather, it is a fundamental orientation toward a future for *this* or *that* particular relationship, without which promising, or vows more generally, would not be possible.

Paradoxical as it may seem, therefore, the anticipation of this *ex post facto* “testimonial” address is a crucial prerequisite for a scene’s very emergence, for the unique sense of a given scene lies in the relationships that it inaugurates, alters, or affirms, and therefore in the particular futurity, however limited, of these relationships. And, by the same token, this very futurity is bound up with the anticipation of an address between actors and witnesses, one that will look back on a prior scene or prior scenes. It is as if the memory of a shared scene were not only a matter of recalling to one’s mind or heart a past event but rather, anachronistically, of anticipating a “future” scene—an implicit promise, beyond any vow, that is the ongoing condition of possibility for any living relationship or meaningful polity.

It should go without saying that not all scenes lead in any direct or necessary way to ulterior scenes. Our contemporary days and nights, more and more lived out in cities of growing enormity, are crammed with encounters, interactions, exchanges, furtive glances, trafficking of all sorts with others whom we will never see or hear from again. Indeed, our public life is, from a historical point of view, progressively more defined by these sorts of scenes that, in contrast to life in a traditional town or village, are played out among strangers, refugees, and people in transit. As is often noted, urban polities are both defined and facilitated by the disjointed or discontinuous character of their inhabitants’ interactions. It

is extremely unlikely that each request for information from a stranger on a city street, that every gesture of mutual acknowledgment in an airport or train station, will find itself revisited by the actors and witnesses involved. In a sense, this extreme unlikelihood helps make our lives bearable, easing and sustaining what freedom of movement we have.

However, this in no way alters the fact that the potential for a future exchange of "judgment," a future commemorating address between those on the scene, is born at the very moment of the initial interaction. Even the most fortuitous encounter or interaction among absolute strangers, or among total refugees, is a "scene" that gives rise to a singular relationship that might—*notwithstanding* the desires or intentions of those involved, and no matter how improbable—find itself confirmed and prolonged by a testimonial address between those on the scene; for every scene, every single action, structurally anticipates the eventual possibility of a testimony actively exchanged by at least two of those who were on the scene.

Ongoing dialogue in general depends upon this anticipation insofar as the interlocution will eventually have occasion to refer back, at least implicitly, to its own history—to words uttered five minutes, or fifty years, ago. This anticipation, furthermore, is a guiding precondition of our legal system and our courtrooms as well as of our theaters, schools, places of worship, and all other public institutions—which, by the same token, means that no human-made institution, and no oath, can furnish or guarantee it.¹¹ It is as if human scenes of interaction anticipate their own futurity, not only by presuming the ontological survival of more than one witness, or by crafting institutions or laws that might withstand the onslaught of new generations. Rather, every scene orients itself toward a future of its own by enabling those witnesses, at the very moment at which they become "those witnesses," to actively address *one another* in memory of the scene.

Where there is only one survivor, can there have been a scene? What destruction leaves behind—the so-called scene of the crime, or of a catastrophe—is, in the final analysis, the mere trace of a scene, one whose outlines and features must henceforth be read, deciphered, or given over to the detective work of legibility and speculation. Hereafter, the meaning of the actions is written and formed by others who arrived later, rather than by the ulterior interaction of the participants themselves. Indeed, the work of reading begins in earnest above all when there are no longer at least two witnesses in whose active address the living sense of the interaction might find its affirmation, for at that point it is as if that scene has vanished from the earth and lost its living—and therefore, I shall ar-

gue, its properly political—sense. The political sense bestowed on a given scene is therefore of an entirely different order from the understanding provided by the scholar, archivist, or archaeologist who was not on the scene, and is even of a different order from the narrative testimony provided by an eyewitness for the benefit of those who were not there (for example, future generations).

Primo Levi was often adamant about his task as a writer who would bear witness to the scenes of Auschwitz for those who were not there, especially for future generations—for those to whom he would never be able to speak. “I had written,” he affirms, “in Italian, for Italians, for my children, for those who did not know, those who did not want to know, those who were not yet born.”¹² This activity of written testimony begins, as he notes in the opening pages of *The Drowned and the Saved*, as a direct response to the avowed aim of the SS militiamen: “However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness.”¹³ Thus the act of writing and publishing is itself, as Levi often insists, a rejoinder, or perhaps the only remedy, to the objective of the Nazis, if not to the act of killing generally, for it ensures the remainder of testimony above all for *others* who were not on the scene. This aspect of Levi’s written work, of his work as a publisher, and many other so-called testimonial texts have rightfully received much critical attention.

Beyond this desire to leave a testament for others who were not there, however, Levi alludes, toward the end of *The Drowned and the Saved*, to a different sort of testimonial address, and he also names the impulse behind it. In these closing pages, he describes his reaction to learning that his earlier book *Survival in Auschwitz*, originally published in Italian as *Se questo è un uomo*, would also be published in German in 1959:

When I heard that a German publisher had acquired the translation rights, I felt overwhelmed by the violent and new emotion of having won a battle. In fact, I had written those pages *without a specific recipient in mind*. For me, those were things I had inside, that occupied me and that I had to expel: tell them, indeed shout them from the rooftops. But the man who shouts from the rooftops addresses *everyone and no one*; he clamors in the desert. When I heard of that contract, everything changed and became clear to me: yes I had written the book in Italian, for Italians, for my children, for those who did not yet know, those who did not want to know, those who were not yet born, those who, willing or not, had assented to the offense; but its true recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun, were they, the Germans. Now the gun was loaded. One must remember that only fifteen years had passed since Auschwitz; the Germans who would read me were *those*, not the heirs. Before, they had been oppressors or indifferent spectators; now they would be readers. I would corner them, tie them before a mirror . . . *them*, the people, those I had seen from up close.¹⁴

It should be underscored that the text Levi had written, the pages of *Survival in Auschwitz*, was not wholly rewritten for this occasion but rather translated and published for a German audience.¹⁵ The “content” of Levi’s testimonial record therefore technically remained the same; however, “everything changed” with this shift in the addressees from “everyone and no one” to “those . . . them, the people, those I had seen from up close.” Indeed, this fundamental change made “clear” to Levi himself, in retrospect, the “true recipients” of the original testimonial impulse. In the end, those for whom he had believed he had written—namely, the “yet unknowing world,” as Horatio says at the end of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—were not the original addressees, the “true recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun.”

It could be said that Levi here understands the publication of his text in German in 1959 to be a form of revenge insofar as the text functions, in his words, like a loaded gun. The choice of metaphor, however, not only underscores the desires (perhaps) of its author but also reveals the special character of this publication, for the text no longer functions solely as an archival record or cry in the desert, addressed to “everyone and no one,” but rather as an address that has found its proper addressees—namely, “those” with whom he shared the original scenes in question. In fact, the text no longer serves, in this context, as a written record at all insofar as the advent of the 1959 publication itself takes on a sense that, for Levi at least, exceeds the significance of the textual character of the text (first written “in Italian, for Italians”) that is published. In other words, the text itself “speaks” here as if it were an interactive address or, better a violent action; its translation and publication are akin to loading a gun, or tying *those* Germans (“not the heirs”) “before a mirror.”

We might conclude that Levi’s well-known and exemplary testimonial impulse, which arises directly from his having witnessed and survived the scenes of Auschwitz, finds its final clarity not only in whatever can be written down in this or that language, archived, or made public for a generalized future audience or “unknowing world” but also, or rather, in the address of one witness to another, for the semantic content, the language, the idiom, and the discursive style of the testimonial address cease to be the safeguard of its final significance. In the address of one witness to another, that which gets confirmed above all is not the “content” of the testimony but rather the irreducible singularity of the ongoing relationships that were inaugurated or altered in the scenes played out in Auschwitz.

It might not be too much to say that the political meaning of Levi’s

life as a survivor of those scenes finds its affirmation, *ex post facto*, not just in the extension of his bodily life beyond the camps—a life to which Levi himself apparently put an end in 1987. Instead, the political sense of survival, as he explains it, lies in the testimonial address, not only to future generations, or to those who were not there, but also and first of all in the address of one witness to another.¹⁶

As I will argue at greater length in later chapters, it is in such testimonial addresses between one witness and another that the political sense of a given scene—as opposed to the historical, moral, epistemological, institutional, scientific, theological, cultural, or purely personal sense of a given event or action—is manifested.

For the moment, I would propose that Levi's powerful distinction between the meaning of bearing witness for "everyone and no one" and the act of bearing witness to "those" with whom we have shared scenes on the world stage shows us how to locate the *political* sense of such scenes, in contradistinction to more traditional categories according to which the meaning or import of events might be weighed.

His reflections thus provide a kind of compass for a reorienting of politics insofar as this notion of politics comes to correspond to the specific, infinitely varied scenes that play out on the world stage, and to the equally singular relationships that these interactions leave behind—interactions that are, from the beginning, oriented beyond all intention or desire toward an eventual address of one witness to another.

POLITICS OUT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

In *The Human Condition* and in other writings, Hannah Arendt provides another set of lexical and theoretical coordinates in relation to which the pages of this book are situated. Therefore, some continual critical reevaluation of her work over the course of this book will be, I think, helpful for clarifying the stakes of a politics of the scene.

As a start, it will be useful to recall Arendt's insistence that the "true result[s]" of human interactions are the "relationships" that these interactions establish.¹⁷ According to her, the particular, irreplaceable relationships that result from human interactions characterize the "specific productivity" of human actions—as if no "action" can be said to have occurred if no human relationship is altered or begun.¹⁸ Furthermore, Arendt argues that this characteristic of action is prior to the question of its content, its sociohistorical import, or its message. "Action," she

states categorically, “no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.”¹⁹

This emphasis on the establishment or alteration of the “web of human relationships” without regard to “limitations” or “boundaries” is one of many claims that distinguish Arendt’s reflections on action from Aristotle’s definition of *praxis*.²⁰ I mention this here in order to underscore the complexity of Arendt’s relation to Aristotle, and to classical thought generally, as well as to foreground the irreducibility of her use of “ancient” terms like “action/*praxis*” or “politics/*polis*” to their classical valence.²¹ Read in this way, her work appears not as a nostalgic return to ancient Greece but in fact as the dismantling of classical philosophical categories in order to help theoretical reflection better come to terms with the *proprium* of politics—understood by Arendt as the contingency and unpredictability of human interactions, the new beginnings, the new stories and relationships, that we bring into the world when we disclose ourselves in word and deed.

Indeed, what makes Arendt’s reelaboration of Aristotle significant is not so much the way in which she redefines the ancient philosophical category of “action” as the way in which this redefinition of action suggests a politics that is unmoored from the metaphysical ontology in which it is classically founded. In other words, Arendt elaborates a politics that unmasks the clamorously fictional foundations of the various ontologies to which political philosophies have often corresponded. This is what Arendt means when, contrary to metaphysical political philosophies, she defines the human condition as the simple fact that “men, not man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”²² The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, a perspicacious reader of Arendt whose work has provided crucial points of orientation for my own reflections, puts it this way: “As a fictitious entity of the ancient philosophical vocabulary, ‘man’ inaugurates a tradition in which the plurality of unique beings appears from the beginning as an insignificant and superfluous given.”²³ Read in this light, *The Human Condition* redefines politics through the advocating of an antimetaphysical ontology that is not founded on the activity of theoretical contemplation, or on abstract entities like Man or Individual or Subject, but that is, rather, irremediably rooted in an embodied, contextual relational ontology—everything that Arendt calls “the human condition of plurality.”

For Arendt, this implies making what she calls “natality” the “central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought,” since the political category of natality corresponds to her fundamental ontol-

ogy, the fact that we are all “human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives or will live.”²⁴ Indeed, it could be said that, for Arendt, politics is the affirmation of this human condition of plural uniqueness; politics is that which affords each human life its particular meaning. Put another way, politics is the way in which the “human condition” is valued above all else, at the same time that politics is the threshold at which the “given” of the human condition takes on a meaning that is not simply or not only ontological.

Of course, the sheer fact of human plurality—that we are all “human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live”—seems as undeniable as the Shakespearean ontology that holds the world to be a stage upon which each of us has our “exits and entrances.” Natality, like mortality, is not an easy category to deny, precisely because the ontological horizon to which it corresponds appears to us irrefutable. We are each born unique, and we all live lives that are unsubstitutable until our deaths. And yet what Arendt continually dares us to reflect upon is not merely the “fact” of the human condition, thus described, but rather how our political tradition—precisely to the extent to which it has founded itself on fictitious ontologies—has witnessed the rise of political realities that threaten to abolish the human condition itself. This is why she writes, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, of the way in which totalitarianism ultimately seeks to eliminate not just the “juridical” or “moral” person but also the “uniqueness” of each one.²⁵

The advocating of the correspondence between the human condition of plural uniqueness and politics is not, therefore, simply a theoretical corrective to some ancient metaphysical errors; rather, it is a response to dire political threats in the contemporary world. Arendt’s suspicion, after all, is not only that the *proprium* of politics—natality and the spontaneous new beginnings and unique relationships that each newcomer portends—faces annihilation. She also warns that the human condition of plurality to which politics corresponds might be eradicated. Indeed, this suspicion seems to motivate her striking suggestion that totalitarianism itself is not the culmination of the threat to politics: “It may be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.”²⁶

The present work does not offer an explicit analysis of events from the recent past, nor does it provide a direct reckoning with the political history of the past century. Nevertheless, as will hopefully be apparent to the reader, the contemporary world and the “predicaments of our time” form the implicit context for this book. It is true that the philosophical

and dramatic works to which I devote the most attention have their origins in linguistic and historical contexts utterly different from our own; however, the decision to refer to these texts arises from the hunch that contemporary problems cannot be adequately addressed in purely contemporary terms, and that seemingly foreign or antiquated words, categories, or experiences have a surprisingly transformative power when expropriated in certain ways.

My arguments, if they can be called arguments, are unabashedly speculative and based primarily in exegetical analysis. However, it is my wish that this speculative, exegetical character might furnish the opportunity to radically reconsider the tension between dramatic experience and politics by suspending the authority and methodologies of more traditional political science or political theory. This, I note in passing, is not inconsistent with Arendt's own analytical methodology, which begins with the admonition that the most pressing political dilemmas of our time "can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians."²⁷

Arendt, it is important to note, does not propose the suspension of scientific perspectives on politics simply because of the inherent gulf between epistemic contemplation and political life to which I referred above.²⁸ Rather, she mistrusts the "political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists" because "they move in a world where speech has lost its power."²⁹ And the act of speaking, she asserts repeatedly in the context of another reelaboration of Aristotle, "is what makes man a political being."³⁰ The importance placed by Arendt on the bond between politics and speech-as-performance has interested her readers greatly, and I will take up this theme myself in relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* in chapters 7 and 8.

Tellingly, and largely as a result of the attention paid to Arendt's work by Jürgen Habermas, speech is often (though not always) understood by her readers as an intersubjective medium of communication, a capacity to signify political concerns or things of importance for the polity.³¹ Speech is here characterized by its "universality" for human beings; which is what allows Habermas to claim that speaking means participating in a universal community.³² Thus readers of Arendt who follow Habermas's lead, such as Seyla Benhabib, tend to emphasize the importance of "rationality and collective deliberation" in political speech, wondering all the while, for example, why "Arendt was unduly neglectful of [the] procedural dimension" of town wards and the like.³³

It is symptomatic that this line of reading finds itself in some bewilderment when confronted with Arendt's repeated assertions that what

makes speech political is not its rationality or its communicative capacity but rather the fact that the act of speaking reveals to others, here and now, the uniqueness of the one who speaks. According to Arendt, whose writings in *The Human Condition* are straightforward on this point, what makes speech political is not that it is a “means of communication or a mere accompaniment to something that could also be achieved in silence.”³⁴ Rather, to use Cavarero’s formulation, “speech becomes political on account of the self-revelation of the speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking.”³⁵

What is at stake here is not just a philosophy of human speech; Arendt is not proposing another theoretical definition of logos that would transcend particular performances of speech. Rather, her aim is to offer a reevaluation of the ontological questions to which politics should correspond. If the “communicative rationality” version of political speech understands, along with Aristotle, the crucial political questions to be “What is just?” and “What is good for the community?” and so forth, then the Arendtian version of politics holds that speech should above all respond to “the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’”³⁶

The theoretical consequences of this transposition call to be explored further. In her forceful and generative analysis, Cavarero notes that this amounts to “the rejection of the ontology that centers itself on the question of *what-ness* of being and focuses instead on the question of *who* each one is.”³⁷ And this in turn means a total reconfiguration of the parameters of politics because suspending the question of “what-ness” also means suspending the traditionally foundational ties between politics and ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, and so forth. As Bonnie Honig rightly notes, “From Arendt’s perspective, a political community that constitutes itself on the basis of prior, shared, and stable identities threatens to close the space of politics, to homogenize or repress the plurality and multiplicity that political action postulates.”³⁸

To avoid confusion, this does not mean that “social” issues (to use the Arendtian shorthand) regarding, for a start, race relations, poverty, or gay marriage should, or could, somehow disappear from political speech, any more than it means that the sphere of politics, thus conceived, excludes or precludes the question of justice, for example. On the contrary, a close reading of *The Human Condition* shows that political speech need not be defined by the exclusion of social issues, although Arendt herself was not always clear about this elsewhere.³⁹ Rather, the point to be made here about speech and politics is that the regulation or censorship of what is said or sayable ought not fully determine or circumscribe the scenes of political life.⁴⁰

Obviously, shifting the question for politics from *what* is said, or *what* identities are included or excluded, to *who* is on the scene does not do away with identity politics or community memberships, nor is it even meant to do so. But, as Cavarero argues, “it does keep them from becoming the foundation of politics,” and it does so by making the uniqueness of each one, prior to any quality or “what-ness,” the first value of politics.⁴¹ In this way, politics becomes the name for the valuation or redemption of human uniqueness-in-plurality insofar as politics confers meaning on the human condition itself.

I wanted to recount all of this because the perspective I wish to offer over the course of the following pages finds inspiration in Arendt’s reflections on politics, refined provocatively by Cavarero and others.⁴² Like Arendt’s attempts at “understanding politics,” this book similarly seeks to take measure—not *the* measure, but *a* measure—of how different configurations of “politics” respond to ontologies that either value or devalue the question of who is on the scene.⁴³ One aim in what follows is, then, to see if this question might be able, today, to furnish the elemental demand to which politics corresponds, and from which politics arise in the form of singular scenes and relationships insofar as they begin to respond to this demand.

At the same time, Arendt’s own analyses, as well as those of her most careful readers, leave us with a host of questions: Why should the active disclosure of “who” one is in word and deed be the paradigmatic focus of political action? Does this paradigm necessitate the priority given to the Homeric hero in Arendt’s own account, or are there other conclusions toward which her account of action might be pushed, in which this version of heroism might in fact be criticized? What is the place of the body, or of the actor’s embodiment in this ontology, and in a politics of the scene? Why have I chosen the scene as the category through which to radicalize these somewhat idiosyncratic reflections on politics?

Responses to these questions are provided at various stages over the following chapters. However, before I bring these introductory remarks to a close, I would like to briefly outline some ways in which the politics of the scene, which I shall submit for examination here, might help us to put generative pressure on some features of the Arendtian inheritance, with the understanding that a critical or scholarly account of Arendt’s work is far beyond the scope of this book. Rather, Arendt’s writings provide a kind of guide or inspiration, one who, like Virgil to Dante in the *Divina Commedia*, is waiting for us at the start but might not follow us to the end.

The “disclosure of ‘who’ someone is in contradistinction to ‘what’

somebody is,” according to Arendt, “is implicit in everything somebody says and does.”⁴⁴ Cavarero pushes this notion to its limits in *For More than One Voice*, where she notes that the very uniqueness of each human voice reveals or discloses the embodied uniqueness of each speaker in a manner that might be called political, prior to the question of semantics or of “what” is said. She calls this “a politics where the speakers, no matter what they say, communicate first of all their vocalic uniqueness.”⁴⁵ Through the vocalic resonance of the voice, she argues, the speaker discloses herself in a manner destined toward politics. Cavarero’s interpretation thus carries the interesting implication that no one could ever fail to disclose himself or herself in the act of speaking insofar as the performance of speaking always implies and discloses a unique voice, a uniqueness that resonates. Every vocal creature is disclosed when she vocalizes in resonance with another, Cavarero maintains, such that politics is possible, or nascent, in the embodied musicality of the human voice.⁴⁶

Among many theoretical perspectives on “the body” in relation to political life that have been offered by feminist philosophers over the past generation or so, Cavarero’s is perhaps the most radical in its positioning of embodiment in the interstice of ontology and politics. She seeks to ground politics in an ontology of relational, singular embodied beings, where even the first breath of vocalization aspires to make itself political. Indeed, her theses might be read as the culmination of many theoretical efforts—from Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s to those of French feminist thinkers like Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous—to politicize the body or embodiment in response to the “abstracting” tendencies of metaphysical thought or the so-called phallogocentric tradition, for Cavarero does not just aim to rehabilitate “the body” as a philosophical figure or category; she also thematizes, in an original way, the singularity of each human embodiment as manifested in the uniqueness of the voice.

Arendt herself, however, apart from the brief phrase from *The Human Condition* that I cited earlier (to the effect that the “disclosure of ‘who’ someone is . . . is implicit in everything somebody says and does”), does not push matters in quite the same direction. In her account of action, Arendt is careful to point out, through explicit reference to the voice, that what is essential to human actions is not solely the fact that they are rooted in the embodied singularity of the actor. Rather, she adds, what is also essential to action is the capacity of this embodied, singular actor to initiate or begin something new.⁴⁷ Arendt even goes so far as to claim that this capacity for beginning is made possible by the actor’s embodied uniqueness but yet not fully *conditioned* or determined by that actor’s body, or by his or her material, contextual, ontological relation to others.