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# “Un luogo della pura rappresentazione”: Theater and Architecture in Italo Calvino’s *Lezioni americane (Six Memos for the Next Millennium)* and Aldo Rossi’s *Quaderni azzurri (Blue Notebooks)*

Jon R. Snyder

“La parola teatro può portare nella mente...un interno che pretende  
di contenere in sé il mondo esterno, la piazza la festa il giardino  
il bosco il molo la guerra.”

— Italo Calvino, “Dall’opaco”

“Inside e outside sono anche il senso del teatro.”

—Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica*

## I.

Among the most prominent intellectual stars to emerge from Italy onto the international scene in the post-1968 period were the writer Italo Calvino and the architect Aldo Rossi (1931–97). Scholars have generally sought to relate Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* (1972, *Invisible Cities*) to Rossi’s path-breaking *Architettura della città* (1966, *Architecture of the City*) in accounts of Italian postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> However, the erudite architect makes no mention of Calvino’s writings in the forty-six pocket notebooks with sky-blue covers known as the *Quaderni azzurri* (1968–92, henceforth *Q/A*), in which he recorded his readings, lecture outlines, project proposals, essay drafts etc., along with freehand black and white or color drawings of objects, buildings, landscapes and persons.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, the Meridiani edition of Calvino’s collected works contains no reference to the architect Aldo Rossi. There is only a note in which the writer—who would have appreciated the Borgesian irony of this gesture—mentions without comment a negative 1964 review by the eponymous minor Italian literary critic Aldo Rossi of one of Calvino’s political essays in the journal *Il menabò*.<sup>3</sup> There is still limited scholarly access, however, to Calvino’s

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<sup>1</sup> Representative of this line of inquiry is M. Fernández Cuyàs, “Italo Calvino y Aldo Rossi en diálogo. Representaciones del monumento en la ciudad,” *TEMPORÁNEA. Revista de Historia de la Arquitectura* 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.12795/TEMPORANEA.2021.02.04> See also Letizia Modena, *Italo Calvino’s Architecture of Lightness: The Utopian Imagination in an Age of Urban Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011), among many others. Rossi’s *L’architettura della città* appeared in 1966 (Padua: Marsilio), while Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* was published in 1972 (Turin: Einaudi). Calvino remarked in 1983 that his novel had become “importante per gli architetti, per gli urbanisti. Lo citano continuamente anche in Italia, anche in Francia, perché parte in fondo da tutta una serie di riflessioni che è comune al mondo degli urbanisti e degli architetti.” See Italo Calvino, interview (Pesaro, Spring 1983), in *Il gusto dei contemporanei*, Quaderno Numero 3 (1987): 13, now in Italo Calvino, *Sono nato in America* (Milan: Mondadori, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, fac. rep. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999). The pages of the notebooks are unnumbered. All translations into English from *I quaderni azzurri* in the present essay are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Aldo Rossi, “Questa volta il tema è troppo superiore alle sue forze,” in *Paragone* 174 (giugno 1964). This is a review of Calvino’s essay “L’antitesi operaia,” which originally appeared in the journal *Il menabò* 7 (1964).

archive; perhaps there may be more to discover concerning his encounters with the architect Rossi's oeuvre. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, it is possible to follow a thread in the *Lezioni americane* (henceforth *L/A*) and other post-1968 writings by Calvino that also runs through the labyrinth of Rossi's thinking—a thread that ultimately leads to the question of theater.<sup>4</sup>

Although both were born between the two World Wars, the future architect Rossi was too young to take part—unlike Calvino, eight years his senior—in the fight against Nazifascism in Northern Italy (1943–45). Yet in the postwar period their respective paths seem to have run parallel. Both Calvino and Rossi were committed Italian Communist Party (PCI) members and activists in the early years of the Cold War; both traveled to the USSR and the Eastern bloc in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> However, by the early 1960s, both men had left the Party and distanced themselves from the Marxist orthodoxies of left-wing Western European intellectual circles. Eventually both became expatriates for a number of years: Calvino moved to Paris in the mid-1960s, while Rossi, after being forced off the faculty at the Politecnico in Milan in 1971 for political reasons, took up a teaching position at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) in Zürich. Calvino knew international success as a writer years before Rossi rose to global prominence as an architect, but as the 1980s began they shared the limelight.<sup>6</sup> Although it seems implausible that they were not cognizant of each other's work, I will leave such biographical matters for others to consider.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, Calvino shared with Rossi a lifelong fascination with the theater and theatrical performance. Although his preferred mode of writing was narrative fiction, Calvino once said of his early literary ambitions: “i miei primi tentativi letterari ... s'indirizzarono verso il teatro; scrissi non so quanti drammi e commedie” (“my early literary efforts ... were directed at the theater; I wrote I don't know how many dramas and comedies”).<sup>8</sup> Of these works from the early 1940s (never staged) for the theater, only one complete play (*I Fratelli di Capo Nero* [The Brothers of Capo Nero]) now survives.<sup>9</sup> According to one recent study, in the postwar period the young Calvino did not want to be involved with prominent Italian theatrical institutions, which were still

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<sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, in *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 1:627–753, with notes included in 2:2957–85.

<sup>5</sup> Rossi truthfully told US immigration authorities that he had indeed been a member of the Italian Communist Party, which created considerable difficulty for him for many years when seeking a visa to visit the US. Judging from his numerous journeys to the US between the 1950s and 1970s, it seems very likely that Calvino, like most other current or former PCI members, chose to answer “no” on the application form for an entry visa. For more on Rossi's journeys to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War, see Maristella Casciato, “An Introduction to Aldo Rossi's *Autobiographical Notes, etc.*,” trans. Jon R. Snyder, *Getty Research Journal* 16 (2022): 119–36.

<sup>6</sup> Calvino's invitation to deliver the 1985 Norton lectures at Harvard does not compare, on the face of it, to the worldwide renown of the Pritzker prize for architectural achievement awarded to Rossi in 1990. Nonetheless, Calvino was the first Italian man of letters to be asked to deliver these lectures: in his prefatory remarks, Calvino points out that “il caso ha voluto che io sia il primo autore italiano” to be invited as the Norton lecturer (*L/A*, 2958).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Calvino contributed to the September 1960 issue (n. 243) of *Casabella - Continuità - Rivista Internazionale di Architettura e Urbanistica*, devoted to “Le sezioni italiane della XII Triennale.” The young architect Rossi participated in Milan in the production of the journal, whose director was the renowned architect Ernesto N. Rogers, for a number of years between the early 1950s and early 1960s.

<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino, response to a survey of Italian writers entitled “Della scissione tra la cultura e il teatro,” *Sipario: rivista del teatro e del cinema* 7, no. 74 (June 1952): 4, now in Calvino, *Sono nato in America*. See also Italo Calvino, interview (Pesaro, Spring 1983), in *Il gusto dei contemporanei*, Quaderno Numero 3 (1987): 14, now in *Sono nato in America*: “sognavo di diventare uno scrittore di teatro.” See also Enrica Ferrara, *Calvino e il teatro: storia di una passione rimossa* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011). All translations from Calvino's work are my own throughout unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 3:441–96. The manuscript is dated “agosto-ottobre 1943.”

largely in the hands of those who had run them under fascism.<sup>10</sup> In 1949–50 he worked as theater critic for *L'Unità*, tasked with reviewing plays that opened at the Teatro Carignano in Turin. In 1955 he wrote a one-act play entitled *La panchina* (The Bench), which was staged in Bergamo in 1956. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in 1955 Calvino also began a multiyear relationship with the well-known stage and screen actor Elsa De Giorgi. In the 1970s, he collaborated with painter-poet Toti Scialoja on a series of fables—Calvino considered each of these to be “una storia teatrale” or “theatrical sketch”—that were intended to be performed in live productions in the studios of Italian state television, while in 1979 he completed a libretto for the composer Luciano Berio.<sup>11</sup> Finally, before his death in 1985, he revised his *Foresta-labirinto-radice* (Forest-Labyrinth-Root) for the stage as well as for puppet theater.<sup>12</sup>

For his part, Rossi gravitated throughout his career to work involving theatrical space and performance: indeed, he stated in his *Autobiografia scientifica* (henceforth *A/S*) that “in ogni mia architettura sono sempre stato affascinato dal teatro” (“I have always been fascinated by the theater in all of my architecture”).<sup>13</sup> He designed a number of theaters over the course of his career, ranging from the unbuilt project for the Teatro Paganini in Parma (1964) to the miniature Teatrino Scientifico (1978) to the principal theater of contemporary Genoa, the Teatro Carlo Felice (1983–89), to sets for theaters from Taormina to the Opernhaus in Zurich (1993) and, finally, the 1996 project to rebuild the Teatro La Fenice in Venice after it was destroyed by fire.<sup>14</sup> This is not the place for a survey of these works; neither shall I be concerned here with what many critics have seen as the essential “theatricality” of Rossi’s architecture and theory of the city, a view that Rossi himself encouraged.<sup>15</sup> In the *Quaderni azzurri*, he remarks approvingly of Shakespeare’s Globe Theater in London: “sotto il globo sarebbe stato scritto ‘Totus mundus agit histrionem’” (“beneath the globe [borne by Hercules at the Globe Theater] was supposedly written ‘Totus mundus agit histrionem’ [all the world's a stage]”)—a motto to which the architect could certainly have laid claim for his own work.<sup>16</sup> Rossi’s most iconic piece of theatrical architecture, Il Teatro del Mondo (The Theater of the World),<sup>17</sup> was a temporary installation, moored on a barge in St. Mark’s Basin, as part of the 1979 Venice Biennale.<sup>18</sup> The original Theater of the World was sadly lost after its disassembly, but in 2004 the structure was replicated in Genoa on the occasion of the exhibition *Arti e Architettura 1900–2000*. Moreover, Rossi not only designed and built theaters

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<sup>10</sup> See Ferrara, *Calvino e il teatro*.

<sup>11</sup> Italo Calvino, *Il teatro dei ventagli*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 2023), xvi. In the preface to this edition, Mario Barenghi notes that “la collaborazione con Scialoja... si sovrappone a un altro progetto teatrale, la composizione del libretto *La vera storia* per Luciano Berio, ultimato nel 1979.”

<sup>12</sup> See Simona Scattina, review of Enrica Maria Ferrara, *Calvino e il teatro: storia di una passione rimossa*, in *Arabeschi* 6 (luglio-dicembre 2015): 125. The review appears on pages 123–25. Roberto Andò’s adaptation was performed first in Rome and then in Palermo.

<sup>13</sup> Aldo Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2009), 51. I will not use Lawrence Venuti’s inaccurate translation of this title into English as *A Scientific Autobiography*, preferring instead *Autobiographical Notes, etc.*, as I recently did in Maristella Casciato, “An Introduction to Aldo Rossi’s *Autobiographical Notes, etc.*”

<sup>14</sup> See Diane Y.F. Ghirardo, “Rossi and the Theater,” in her *Aldo Rossi and the Spirit of Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 137–65.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Alberto Ferlenga, “L’ossessione teatrale in Aldo Rossi,” in *Aldo Rossi: teatri*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Skira, 2012), 21–25.

<sup>16</sup> *Q/A* 26.

<sup>17</sup> Some drawings and photographs of this remarkable installation may be seen on the website of the Fondazione Aldo Rossi: <https://www.fondazionealdorossi.org/opere/1970-1979-3/teatro-del-mondo-venezia-1979/>.

<sup>18</sup> Celant, ed., *Aldo Rossi: teatri*. I would add here that in the *Q/A* Rossi sometimes refers to his masterpiece more prosaically as “il Teatro veneziano” (“the Venetian theater”).

and sets, but proposed two plays for his architectural studio's in-house Teatrino Scientifico (an untranslatable term that might be glossed as "Little Experimental Theater for Architecture"). These were entitled *I non riconciliati* (The Unreconciled) and *I ricongiunti* (The Reunited), in which "persone, vicende, cose, frammenti, architettura... si intersecano scambievolmente" ("people, events, things, fragments and architecture... intersect interchangeably").<sup>19</sup>

Despite their distinctly divergent upbringing and vocations—Calvino's parents were free-thinking scientists, while Rossi was given a religious education—writer and architect shared a very wide-ranging set of cultural references. In particular, from childhood onward, both were voracious readers of literary narrative and verse, subscribing to quite different literary canons that nevertheless overlap in the *L/A* and *Q/A*. In the *Lezioni americane*, Calvino especially engages with—over and beyond the classics of Italian literature from Dante to Leopardi, from Ariosto to Manzoni—major texts of French and Anglo-American literature. Given the context of the Harvard public lecture series, it is not surprising that he pays very little heed to so-called "minor" literatures.<sup>20</sup> In the *Quaderni azzurri*, Rossi's literary centers of gravity are instead to be found in Central European fiction and non-fiction (Goethe, Musil, Wittgenstein, Freud, Kraus, Trakl, etc.), as well as in French experimental modernist writing, above all that of Raymond Roussel, whom Rossi mentions in the notebooks more frequently than any other author, and whose *Impressions d'Afrique*, especially its fictional Théâtre des Incomparables, was a lifelong inspiration for the Milanese architect.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he remarked of Roussel's surreal theatrical fiction that "nessun teatro è più reale, niente, attraverso la rigorosa descrizione, è più necessario per noi" ("no theater is more real; nothing, through rigorous description, is more necessary for us").<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, when Rossi's *Quaderni azzurri* are overlaid onto Calvino's *Lezioni americane* in their published form, their respective galaxies of literary references can be shown not only to intersect, but to do so in ways both predictable and perhaps surprising. For example, in terms of Italian literature the canonical figures of Dante, Leopardi, and Collodi feature prominently in both *L/A* and *Q/A*.<sup>23</sup> The art of the 19th/20th century novel, as exemplified by Balzac, Melville, Flaubert, James, Conrad, Svevo, and Mann, is a touchstone for both. Avant-garde modernism in narrative is embodied for both Calvino and Rossi by the works of Joyce, Musil, and Proust, and modern critical theory above all by Walter Benjamin. This list of mutually admired writers would, however, be incomplete without William Shakespeare, whose works for the theater resonate deeply with both Calvino and Rossi. We now know that Calvino anonymously wrote a number of prefaces to Shakespeare's plays.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Shakespeare's name figures more often than that of any other writer, other than Roussel, in the *Quaderni azzurri*. Indeed, in one of the last notebooks, Rossi does something that he never did before or afterward: the architect pastes a photocopy of the text

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<sup>19</sup> *A/S*, 54. In a later passage of the *A/S* (96) Rossi uses a German title (*Die nicht Versöhnt*) in place of *I non riconciliati*, adding: "amavo vedere mescolate queste due commedie" ("I liked to see these two plays mixed together").

<sup>20</sup> See Laura Di Nicola, "Le Norton Lectures: note per una biblioteca di apocrifi," in this same volume of *CIS*.

<sup>21</sup> *Q/A* 22, 30. For an interesting study of Rossi's prose style, which may have been influenced by his readings outside of Italian literature, see Daniele Vitale, "Dove c'era una volta una solida casa/Where stood a solid house," in *Aldo Rossi: il gran teatro dell'architettura*, ed. Mario Biraghi, Gianni Braghieri, and Martina Landsberger, exh. cat. (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2018), 44–63.

<sup>22</sup> *Q/A* 22.

<sup>23</sup> Rossi and Calvino shared a love of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883): one can think of the character Pin in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, as well as Rossi's often whimsical, sometimes melancholy drawings and sketches of the puppet, and his remarks on puppet theater, in the *Q/A*.

<sup>24</sup> See Luca Baranelli and Tommaso Munari, eds., *Prefazioni a Shakespeare* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020), and Baranelli and Munari, "At the Bard's Grave: Italo Calvino's Anonymous Prefaces to Shakespeare," *Modern Language Review* 116, n. 2 (April 2021): 205–25.

of one of Hamlet's most well-known soliloquys (*Hamlet* II.2: "what is this quintessence of dust?") onto a notebook page before commenting on it at length.<sup>25</sup> For his part, Calvino gives over most of three pages in his lecture on "Leggerezza" to a discussion of Shakespeare.<sup>26</sup>

In mapping out these textual networks, the prominence of an early modern playwright—namely Shakespeare—in the literary pantheon of two leading postwar Italian intellectuals led me to wonder what particular cultural capital was invested in the *idea* of theater in the respective cultural projects of Calvino and Rossi, and what further connections between them might emerge upon closer inspection. In what follows I will focus principally on texts left unfinished and unpublished by Calvino and Rossi while alive (and still untranslated into English today) in which their respective discourses on theater are developed. Much critical ink has already been spilled over the published versions of the *L/A* and *A/S*, not to mention *Le città invisibili* and *Architettura della città*, but it is my hope that an examination of these fragments may contribute to further research into the common ground on which Calvino and Rossi stand.

## II.

Shakespeare's name does not appear in the manuscript of "Cominciare e finire" ("Beginning and Ending"), Calvino's aborted first lecture for the Norton cycle that was left out of the posthumously published *L/A*. He struggled throughout 1985 (up until his untimely death) to make the lecture work within the plan he had drawn up, shifting its position in the line-up before ultimately putting it aside unfinished, perhaps because it had become far more critical-theoretical in tone than the other lectures that he had prepared. With his usual sense of self-irony, in the extant draft Calvino wryly notes of his novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979, *If on a Winter's night a Traveler*) that, "non è questo il solo caso in cui nel mio lavoro il problema di come cominciare è diventato il tema stesso del racconto" ("in my work this is not the only case in which the problem of how to begin became the theme itself of the story").<sup>27</sup> The lecture engages in a wide-ranging discussion of literary beginnings and endings that attend to the forms of narrative fiction and, in particular, to their world-building power. However, although not the primary object of investigation for Calvino here, this lecture also touches on the theater in more than one way.

At the outset, Calvino remarks that until the moment in which writing begins, all authors have

a nostra disposizione il mondo—quello che per ognuno di noi costituisce il mondo, una somma di informazioni, di esperienze, di valori—il mondo dato in blocco, senza un prima né un poi, il mondo come memoria individuale e come potenzialità implicita; e noi vogliamo estrarre da questo mondo un discorso, un racconto, un sentimento: o forse più esattamente vogliamo compiere un'operazione che ci permetta di situarci in questo mondo.<sup>28</sup>

The situation of the author, in other words, alters drastically at the moment in which the story starts to be told or to unfold in the form of a text. For the beginning of a narrative text always marks a

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<sup>25</sup> *Q/A* 44.

<sup>26</sup> *L/A*, 645–47; *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Geoffrey Brock (New York: Penguin, 2016), 21–24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 750.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 734: "available to us the world—that which for each of us constitutes the world, [namely] a sum of information, experience, values—the world given as a whole, with neither a 'before' nor an 'after', the world as individual memory and as implicit potential; and we want to extract from that world a discourse, a story, a feeling: or perhaps more exactly, we want to carry out an operation that will allow us to situate ourselves in this world."

moment of rupture: it constitutes an exit from the sphere of pure subjectivity and an entry into the semiological “world” (as Calvino refers to it six times in this one sentence). The writer no longer has, once the narrative has begun to construct its own idiosyncratic universe of signs, full freedom of access to the flow of memory, imagination, desire, and so on that together constitute consciousness. To write is to perform a disruptive operation, Calvino says, that may provide a fixed point of view for us within the continuous flux of inner life, but at a price. In narrating we can no longer express completely in words the extraordinary abundance of information, memories, and values available to us (“a nostra disposizione”) in our personal mental life-world; through a process of selection and elimination, fragments of this now become externalized as a text—as a partial and limited representation—that exists outside of the mind and is inevitably alienated from it.

Calvino insistently employs spatial metaphors in order to describe this process of the setting-into-work of a narrative text. He remarks in this same section of the lecture:

L’inizio è anche l’ingresso in un mondo completamente diverso: un mondo verbale. Fuori, prima dell’inizio c’è o si suppone che ci sia un mondo completamente diverso, il mondo non scritto, il mondo vissuto o vivibile. Passata quella soglia si entra in un altro mondo, che può intrattenere col primo rapporti decisi volta per volta, o nessun rapporto. L’inizio è il luogo letterario per eccellenza perché il mondo di fuori per definizione è continuo, non ha limiti visibili.<sup>29</sup>

There is a limitless “outside” (“fuori”) of the text which is the unwritten “world” of lived or potential human experience (“il mondo vissuto o vivibile”). The incipit of a narrative text is instead an “entry” or “threshold” that conducts writer and reader alike into a circumscribed space that is separate, and no longer compelled to link itself directly, to what lies “outside” the text. It is here in this enclosed textual space that the representation of a story can unfold. In so many words, narrative constructs a space of representation that uncannily resembles a theater.

Indeed, in “Cominciare e finire,” Calvino next turns to a discussion of the architecture of premodern theaters. He remarks:

Nel teatro antico, la scena fissa rappresentava il luogo ideale in cui tutte le tragedie così come tutte le commedie possono svolgersi. Un luogo della mente, fuori dallo spazio e dal tempo, ma tale da identificarsi con i luoghi ed i tempi d’ogni azione drammatica. I teatri romani che si sono conservati e le ricostruzioni del Rinascimento palladiano ci hanno reso familiare quest’immagine della classicità come disponibilità impassibile allo scatenarsi delle passioni umane: la facciata marmorea d’un solenne palazzo con la porta reale al centro e le due porte più piccole simmetriche ai lati, che poteva essere ogni reggia, ogni tempio, ogni piazza di città. Basta che s’affacciasse un re, o un indovino, o un messaggero, ed ecco che tra le tante azioni potenziali una diventava attuale, senza che la continuità con il resto dell’esistente e dell’immaginabile fosse spezzata.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 735: “the beginning is also the entry into a completely different world: a verbal world. Outside, before the beginning there is, or we may suppose that there is, a completely different world, the unwritten world, the world as lived or livable. Once that threshold has been crossed, we enter into another world that may entertain with that prior world a relationship to be determined on a case-by-case basis, or not at all. The beginning is the literary place par excellence because the outside world is by definition continuous and without visible limits.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 736: “In ancient theater, the fixed scene represented the ideal place in which all tragedies and comedies can take place. A place of the mind, outside of space and time, but such that it can identify with the places and times of

The fixed stage set serves, from antiquity through early modernity, as the place in which both comedy and tragedy may be performed: it has to be equally available to both dramatic registers. On stage, a first action sets into motion a performance, as on the page an incipit sets into motion a narrative, but the architecture of the theater is programmatically neutral in regard to the theme to be represented through on-stage action.

The premodern theatrical stage, with its fixed set, makes itself freely and completely available (“la classicità come disponibilità”) to the dramatist, almost as if it were a blank canvas or page. Playwrights, in accepting this availability as their starting point, are then charged with selecting a single opening action “among the great number of potential actions” that might be imagined to set the plot in motion or, in other words, to actualize a dramatic text or performance according to the criteria of the chosen genre (tragedy or comedy) of the work. At the same time, the essentially generic nature of the premodern stage set acknowledges all that by definition must remain “fuori dell’opera,” in full continuity with everything that exists in reality or could exist.<sup>31</sup> According to Calvino, in the logic of theatrical representation this neutral stage set stands for “*any* royal palace, *any* temple, *any* city square” (my italics) existing in the world outside of the theater. The architecture of the theater acknowledges that, beyond the walls of the building, there is a multiplicity of the real (“la molteplicità dell’esistente”)<sup>32</sup> and an uninterrupted flux of life (“la vita è un tessuto continuo”)<sup>33</sup> that always transcends the particulars of the evening’s performance.

The stage is therefore, Calvino concludes, “a place of the mind,” or, more simply, the place of imagination, in which anything at all (“ogni azione drammatica”) might happen. Theaters are, in the last analysis, a concrete “immagine dello spazio ideale in cui prendono corpo le storie” (“image of the ideal space in which stories take shape”);<sup>34</sup> they are at once a place and an image of the imagination. The mechanism is sustained by a distinction between the particular and the universal, between the limits of representation and the infinite availability of the representable, or, to put it another way, between inside and outside. Although “Cominciare e finire” addresses the situation of radical “availability” premised by the premodern stage, nothing included in the lecture would suggest that this same premise does not hold for modernity as well. Calvino is by no means a radical postmodernist; he would not agree that there is nothing outside of the text, although in “Cominciare e finire” he recognizes that these binary oppositions lose force and tend toward collapse in modernity. Theater thus appears in his lecture as a synecdoche for the literary text itself, which perhaps gives it its importance in the framework of his thought. In fact, according to Calvino these two may be described in almost the same terms: “L’opera letteraria è una di queste minime porzioni in cui l’universo si cristallizza in una forma, in cui acquista un senso, non fisso, non definitivo, non irrigidito in un’immobilità mortale, ma vivente come un organismo” (“the literary work is one of these minimum particles in which the universe becomes crystallized in a form, [yet] in which it acquires a meaning that is not fixed, not definitive, not frozen in a fatal immobility, but

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every dramatic action. The surviving Roman theaters, as well as the Palladian Renaissance reconstructions, have made us familiar with this image of classicality as availability [that remains] impassive as human passions are unleashed: the marble façade of a grand building with a royal doorway at its center and two smaller symmetrical doors on the sides, which could be any royal palace, any temple, any city square. If a king, or a fortune-teller, or a messenger should look out [from the fixed scene], then one action—out of the great number of potential actions—is realized, without any break in continuity with the rest of what exists or is imaginable.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 738.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 751.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 738.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 744.



that is alive like an organism”).<sup>35</sup> The mobile, fluid, and living meaning of a great literary work, that is subject to change over generations and eras, parallels that of theatrical performance, which can by definition never repeat itself without difference.

### III.

In 1964 Rossi remarked, concerning his project for the Teatro Paganini in Parma, that the architecture of the theater necessarily transcends the requirements of any specific performance or production.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the architecture of the theater looks beyond spectrum of theatrical events that will eventually arise on its stage; it instead serves as the a priori condition of possibility of all such events, whether present or future. The architecture of the theater, in Rossi’s view, “non può riferirsi a questo o a quello spettacolo: essa riguarda l’essenza del teatro. Così la forma non muta, e anche l’idea del teatro” (“cannot refer to this or that play: it concerns the essence of theater. Thus the form is unchanging, as is the idea of theater”).<sup>37</sup> In this sense, despite the passage of millennia, the “form” and the “idea” of the ancient Greek theater continue to provide a space for dramatic performance, even in contemporary Europe. Rossi the architect envisions his contemporary theatrical projects as possessing the same possibilities as those inherent in classical theaters. The theater is thus for him a historically transcendent structure within which a sequence of events—in a performance at once contingent and transient—play out on stage and then vanish before our eyes when the curtain falls, without in any way permanently altering or intervening in the form or essence of the building itself. On the contrary, as he remarks of the Teatro Carlo Felice project, the architecture of the theater “ci trasforma quando vi entriamo” (“transforms us when we enter into it”):<sup>38</sup> in interacting with the built environment of the theater, actors and spectators alike are ultimately transformed, rather than vice versa.

What does Rossi, for whom the theater was never far from his thoughts, mean by this notion of architectural agency? In the *Quaderni azzurri*, he posits a distinction between two types of public monuments in the city, namely the museum and the theater. Rossi had long considered these structures to reflect two fundamental poles of all architecture and, indeed, all culture: “ricordo e immaginazione sono come i due limiti entro cui si pone la realtà” (“memory and imagination are like the two limits between which reality is located”).<sup>39</sup> In the next-to-last notebook of the series he returns to this distinction, recognizing that “in un certo senso il museo è il contrario del teatro. In esso non può capitare più nulla mentre nel teatro tutto si deforma e lo stesso testo quasi non è ripetibile” (“in a certain sense the museum is the opposite of the theater. Nothing further can occur in the former, while in the theater everything is in flux and the same text is almost irrepeatable”).<sup>40</sup> The museum, which constitutes a collection of traces and fragments of events that have already happened, is by definition oriented toward the representation of the past: the museum is the place of collective memory. The theater, on the other hand, is the site at which every evening a new, and always different, attempt is made to represent a text through an evanescent live performance. By

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 751.

<sup>36</sup> In what follows I will focus on what Rossi actually wrote—in notebooks, books, lecture notes, etc.—about the relationship between theater and architecture. Not infrequently his musings in the early *Quaderni azzurri* reappear in the *Autobiografia scientifica*, and in such cases I will refer to the text of the latter wherever possible, given that it is available in published form (unlike the *Q/A* which remain available only in a facsimile manuscript deluxe edition).

<sup>37</sup> As cited in Alberto Ferlenga, “L’ossessione teatrale in Aldo Rossi,” in *Aldo Rossi: teatri*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Q/A* 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Q/A* 26.

<sup>40</sup> *Q/A* 46.

the same token, Rossi adds, “non esiste il museo vuoto” (“there is no empty museum”), no more than the past can be said to have left no traces; on the other hand, theaters may stand empty, and as a matter of course are empty most of the time.<sup>41</sup> This observation leads Rossi straight to his point, citing in the same notebook passage the French actor and director Louis Jouvet, who spoke “del teatro vuoto quasi come esso fosse il potenziale massimo dell’azione” (“of the empty theater almost as if it embodied the maximum potential of action”).<sup>42</sup> The empty stage does not represent anything or anyone in particular; rather, it represents in the abstract an almost unlimited range of human action that can always only be partially realized in any given performance.

Rossi reformulates this same thought in *Q/A 24* (he will subsequently reprise this passage in his *Autobiografia scientifica*).<sup>43</sup> Here, in discussing three of his recent projects, the architect again identifies the theater with the faculty of imagination: “Vi sono tre opere costruite[:] una scuola, un cimitero, un teatro. Come dire la vita, la morte e l’immaginazione” (“there are three built projects[:] a school, a cemetery [and] a theater. Which is like saying life, death, and the imagination”). In Western cities the theater is traditionally designated as that ritual public space given over to exploring the workings of the imagination through performance. The task of the architecture of the theater, for Rossi, is not to predetermine the direction of this exploration in any way, but instead to provide a platform upon which words and actions may unfold according to those who are interpreting the dramatic text or script.<sup>44</sup> He remarks in the same notebook: “È certo che l’architetto poteva solo disporre la situazione, la scena fissa dell’azione ma non determinare i volti e i corpi, i movimenti e le relazioni [tra i personaggi]” (“it is certain that the architect could only supply the situation, the fixed scene of the action, but not determine the faces and bodies, the movements and relations [between the characters]”).<sup>45</sup> In so many words, for Rossi the architecture of the theater is the architecture of availability, of *disponibilità*.

Although occupying a fixed point on the urban map, and not free to disregard the practical requirements for structures (walls, foundation, apertures, roofing, etc.), the theater is ideally defined by its openness to the project of representation. Speaking of the Theater of the World in a later notebook passage, Rossi observes of the empty floating structure shortly before its inauguration: “esso risultava perfettamente razionale, logico, disposto e disponibile all’azione. Era già teatro senza uno spettacolo determinato” (“it turned out perfectly rational, logical, open to and available for action”).<sup>46</sup> Paradoxically, for Rossi the empty theater is the theatrical degree zero precisely because, in excluding nothing a priori, it aspires to—and may attain—a pure state of availability to all action and speech. A stage without actors, in a theater without spectators, is the ideal platform upon which any story may be told and any action may be realized. The empty, available theater thus serves as a potent symbol of artistic freedom for Rossi: its state of being not-yet-set-into-work leaves it open to all that the imagination may produce.<sup>47</sup> Yet the architecture of

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<sup>41</sup> *Q/A 46*.

<sup>42</sup> *Q/A 46*.

<sup>43</sup> *A/S*, 110.

<sup>44</sup> *A/S*, 56: “**Il teatro** era anche una mia equivoca passione dove l’architettura era il fondale possibile, il luogo, la costruzione misurabile e convertibile in misure e materiali concreti di un sentimento spesso inafferrabile.”

<sup>45</sup> *Q/A 24*.

<sup>46</sup> *Q/A 26*.

<sup>47</sup> Ernesto N. Rogers, who was greatly influential in Rossi’s development as an architect, promoted the importance of imagination in architecture both in a controversial 1962 editorial in the journal *Casabella* and his 1965 book *Utopia della realtà*: see Letizia Modena, *Italo Calvino’s Architecture of Lightness*, 69. See also *Q/A 26* (Nov. 11, 1979), where Rossi speaks of “Il Teatro veneziano come spazio dell’immaginazione, o all’immaginazione” (“the Venetian theater as [a] space of the imagination or for the imagination”).

the theater would have no value for Rossi if the stage were only a place of imaginative potential; it must also be the place where it is translated into human performance, however imperfect the latter may prove to be when realized on stage.<sup>48</sup>

In his *Autobiografia scientifica*, Rossi states: “ho sempre affermato che i luoghi sono più forti delle persone, la scena fissa è più forte della vicenda. Questa è la base teorica non della mia architettura ma dell’architettura; in sostanza è una possibilità di vivere” (“I have always claimed that places are stronger than people, [and] the fixed scene is stronger than the event. This is the theoretical basis not only of my architecture, but of all architecture; essentially it is a possibility for living”).<sup>49</sup> By this he means to say that although the framework provided by the architecture of the theater is untouched by the stream of passions and actions that play out on stage—the same “disponibilità impassibile allo scatenarsi delle passioni umane” of which Calvino spoke in regard to the fixed stage set—this is by no means to be taken as a sign of architecture’s resistance to, or lack of interest in, humanity. Rather, Rossi understands buildings as inextricably imbricated in the city’s social and cultural life. The former do not claim priority over the latter, nor can their origin be separated from it. The *raison d’être* of the architecture of the theater is to construct an environment that offers humankind a permanent “possibility of living” imaginatively, free of the norms and limits within which everyday existence is bound up outside of the theater’s walls. The permanent availability of the theater represents “[un] modo di vivere” (“a way of living”).<sup>50</sup>

Thus, through these fragmentary reflections, we can begin to grasp the convergence, for Rossi, of theater and architecture in a very specific way. Theaters and architecture resemble one another in what they respectively represent: not lived experience per se, with its “persons” and “events,” but rather structures in which our stories may be given the chance to unfold in space and time. At its best, architecture is not about function but—like theater—instead is about making itself available to the telling of the human story. Rossi’s larger-than-life stage setting installed for the 1986 Milan Triennale (entitled “The Domestic Project”), which he called the Teatro Domestico, was devoid of human figures.<sup>51</sup> Concerning his 1978 Teatrino Scientifico resembling a portable children’s puppet theater, with which he and his associates viewed their architectural sketches and designs in various combinations on its little stage, Rossi said that it was “un luogo della pura rappresentazione” (“a place of pure representation”).<sup>52</sup> At around the same time, in the *Quaderni azzurri* he added that “finalmente mi sembra di conoscere questa relazione favorita, questa disponibilità dell’architettura. Così essa si risolve forse nel prestigio del teatro. La costruzione del teatrino è la disponibilità pura e la forma è essenziale” (“finally I seem to recognize this favored relationship, this availability of architecture. This can perhaps find its outcome in the ‘prestige’ of the theater. As a building, the *teatrino* is pure availability and its form is essential”).<sup>53</sup> The Teatrino Scientifico is where the architecture of the theater becomes one with the theater of architecture. It

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<sup>48</sup> Kurt Forster, “L’essere senza tempo di Aldo Rossi/The untimeliness of Aldo Rossi,” in *Aldo Rossi: Il gran teatro dell’architettura*, 23: “For Aldo, a site he desired *outside* of all familiar places was the theater.” The complete essay is found on pages 18–31.

<sup>49</sup> *A/S*, 76. As cited in *Aldo Rossi: teatri*, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Rossi *A/S*, as cited on the back cover of *Aldo Rossi: Il gran teatro dell’architettura*.

<sup>51</sup> See Ghirardo, 156. *Domus* published a photo ([here](#)) of Rossi’s uncanny Domestic Theater in the Palazzo della Triennale; the progetto/drawing is now found in the Eredi di Aldo Rossi collection ([here](#)).

<sup>52</sup> Aldo Rossi, “Teatro del Mondo,” Fondazione Aldo Rossi, <https://www.fondazionealdorossi.org/opere/1970-1979-3/teatro-del-mondo-veneziana-1979/>.

<sup>53</sup> *Q/A* 24. See Section IV (Note 67) for further discussion of the meaning of the term ‘prestigio.’

embodies the desideratum of architecture—to *become* the place where stories with transformative power may *take* place—pushed to the extreme degree (“la disponibilità pura”).<sup>54</sup>

#### IV.

During its stay in Venice, the Theater of the World was kept moored at the point by the Old Customs House, known as the Punta della Dogana, where the Grand Canal meets the Bacino di San Marco. Rossi thought this to be a perfect site for his floating theater, because the Punta della Dogana was for so many centuries the place where all sea voyages began and ended for the sailors of La Serenissima: “la grande palla d’oro non poteva essere che l’inizio e la fine di ogni viaggio” (“the great gold ball could only be the beginning and the end of every journey”).<sup>55</sup> Just as the gilded sphere turning in the breeze atop the Old Customs House represents the terrestrial globe, a perfect form with neither beginning nor end, the Theater of the World represents the home from which every traveler departs and to which every traveler longs to return, at once starting-point and end-point of every journey. Indeed, Rossi notes in this regard, “il dio dell’inizio è il dio della fine” (“the god of beginnings is the god of endings”).<sup>56</sup> It would not be misleading to say that this holds for his vision of theater as well: for in the architect’s eyes there is a continuum stretching from the ancient Greek amphitheater to the Theater of the World, in which past, present, and future are seamlessly connected. The privileged centrality of the theater for Rossi was to endure over the course of his career, and it can be no wonder that, in a 1994 manuscript, he went so far as to contend that “il teatro è l’edificio che ancora può rappresentare la cultura di un paese” (“the theater is the building that can still represent the culture of a country”).<sup>57</sup>

For Calvino, on the other hand, in composing the Norton lecture cycle he found a solution to the complex problem that he had posed to himself—what are beginnings and endings, and what is their role in literary texts?—only by deferring any definitive answer. Whether unfinished or abandoned, the fragments of his lecture “Cominciare e finire” offer, however, insight into Calvino’s occasional thinking about theater as well as writing for it. I will turn now briefly to one such example. In a now-famous experimental text composed at the beginning of the 1970s, “Dall’opaco” (“From the Opaque”), the writer attempts to record in a stream of consciousness his moment-by-moment, phenomenologically bracketed experience of the sights and sounds of a Ligurian landscape.<sup>58</sup> To set down in language everything that registers on the screen of his conscious mind as it arises turns out to be, not surprisingly, an impossible undertaking for the man who would one day write *Palomar*. What is of interest to me here is that Calvino self-consciously struggles, when looking southward from where he finds himself standing in San Remo, to escape from reliance on the metaphor of the theater. Starting from the observation that “mi trovo sempre

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<sup>54</sup> Modena, *Architecture of Lightness*, 104, impressionistically draws a connection in this regard between Rossi and Calvino: “the page was for Rossi, as it was for Calvino, a space of experimenting... a theatrical stage where combinations take place, a veritable common ground of Lucretian lightness.”

<sup>55</sup> *Q/A* 26; *A/S*, 98.

<sup>56</sup> *Q/A* 25.

<sup>57</sup> Celant, ed., *Aldo Rossi: teatri*, 184, citing a 1994 manuscript by Rossi held at the Fondazione Aldo Rossi.

<sup>58</sup> Calvino’s “Dall’opaco” first appeared in *Adelphiana 1971* (Milan: Adelphi, 1971). There is a somewhat uneven English translation in Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Vintage, 1994). We know from the editors of the 1994 Meridiani edition of Calvino’s *Romanzi e racconti* (vol. 3), Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto, that there exists a fine (undated) handwritten manuscript version of this essay, upon which the typescript version is based. On one copy of the typescript the handwritten title, “Paesaggio ligure,” appears in the author’s hand (*Romanzi e racconti*, 3:1212).

in qualche modo come su un balcone” (“I always find myself somehow as if on a balcony”)<sup>59</sup> overlooking the sea and the coast, while surrounded by “altri balconi o palchi di teatro soprastanti o sottostanti, d’un teatro il cui proscenio s’apre sul vuoto, sulla striscia di mare alta contro il cielo” (“other balconies or boxes above or below me in a theater whose proscenium opens onto the void, onto the strip of sea set high against the sky”)<sup>60</sup> the writer ends up having to admit that “il mondo che sto descrivendo [è] una sorta d’anfiteatro” (“the world that I am describing [is] a sort of amphitheater”).<sup>61</sup> Along the way to this anthropomorphic admission, Calvino ends up turning his gaze away from the phenomenal world in order to focus self-critically on his own use of words: “sono tornato a usare metafore che si riferiscono al teatro” (“I have returned to using metaphors that refer to the theater”),<sup>62</sup> he takes the time to remark disapprovingly, while meanwhile the world keeps on racing past him.

It goes almost without saying that all of Calvino’s efforts, in this wonderfully suggestive piece of writing, to disentangle his gaze from memory, language, and culture were a priori bound to prove inadequate. Nonetheless here he offers *volens nolens* some remarks on theater that point toward the conclusion of the present essay. For the sake of brevity we will have to take one of these instances as representative of the whole. In his search to convey the unmediated acoustic experience of his surroundings in “Dall’opaco,” Calvino feels compelled to draw a contrast between it and the theater, in order to “precisare ugualmente che cosa è un teatro in rapporto coi suoni, come luogo della massima capacità dell’udito, grande orecchio che racchiude in se stesso tutte le vibrazioni e le note, orecchio che ascolta se stesso, orecchio e insieme conchiglia posata all’orecchio, mentre io parlo d’un mondo in cui i suoni si rompono salendo e scendendo” (“to specify equally what a theater is in relation to sounds, as the place in which our capacity for hearing is at its maximum, a great ear that contains within itself all vibrations and notes, an ear that listens to itself, at once an ear and a shell held to the ear, while I am speaking [instead] of a world in which sounds, rising and falling, break up”).<sup>63</sup> In acoustical terms, the theater turns sounds inward onto itself, neatly dividing internal from external noise. Isolated from the hubbub of the outside world, in order to capture and convey with clarity every note and every word of the performance on stage, the theater is like an “ear that listens to itself.” Or rather, if equally metaphorically, it is like a “shell held to the ear,” a rigid structure enclosing sounds that are focused in such a way that our ears are able to distinguish them, unlike those of the outer “world in which sounds, rising and falling, break up” or appear in random fashion. From this perspective, for Calvino the acoustical operation of the theater mimics that of an object—the shell—already present in nature for eons.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, however, the theater transforms the principles inherent in this natural object into part of the cultural system of representation, drawing a dividing line once again between inside and outside.<sup>65</sup>

In conclusion, in the waning years of the twentieth century Calvino and Rossi converged in their respective views of theater as a key Western artistic institution. For both of these artist-

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<sup>59</sup> Calvino, “Dall’opaco,” 89. All translations from the Meridiani version of “Dall’opaco” are mine.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>64</sup> See Mimmo Scarpa’s fascinating essay in this volume of *CIS*, entitled “Calvino Makes the Shell.”

<sup>65</sup> Compare this to Rossi’s reflection, concerning a subsequent theatrical project, that “tra tutte le costruzioni il teatro offre all’architetto una strana serenità, e infine l’interno separa il mondo della realtà da quello della finzione” (“the theater, among all types of buildings, offers the architect a strange serenity, and in the end the [theater] interior separates the world of reality from that of fiction”). See Celant, ed., *Aldo Rossi: teatri*, 96, citing a Rossi manuscript held at the Fondazione Aldo Rossi in Milan.

intellectuals the theater, despite its displacement by newer artforms and media technologies, can be said to possess invaluable social and cultural “prestige,”<sup>66</sup> a term that Rossi in fact employs on numerous occasions in the notebooks and *A/S* in referring to theater. No wonder that Shakespeare—the pre-eminent postclassical playwright of the Western tradition—should figure so prominently in their respective literary pantheons. For Rossi, this belief in the undying cultural capital of the theater was central to his life’s work as an architect. At the same time, however, there is a second meaning to the Italian term “prestigio”—which might be translated as “sleight-of-hand” or “magic trick”—present in Rossi’s dense and sometimes cryptic prose. For him, the imaginative illusion generated by the theatrical apparatus represents cultural magic of the highest degree: “il teatro, e forse solo il teatro, possiede questo singolare prestigio di trasformare ogni situazione obiettiva” (“the theater, and perhaps only the theater, possesses this singular sleight-of-hand of transforming every objective situation”).<sup>67</sup> Although Calvino finds it frustratingly difficult to escape the net of theatrical tropes in “Dall’opaco,” in his notes for “Cominciare e finire” he acknowledges the irreplaceable role that theater holds as an image of the human imagination. At the end of his manuscript draft of the ill-starred lecture on beginnings and endings, he turns to the final page of one of Samuel Beckett’s last works for the theater, *Ohio Impromptu*, by way of a conclusion. Although Beckett’s two characters find themselves at the tail end of an exhausted tradition and in the twilight hour of Western narrative, such that “little is left to tell” (Calvino’s words in English, not Beckett’s), the lecture closes by noting that nonetheless “si continua a raccontare ancora” (“story-telling will continue”).<sup>68</sup>

At least in regard to theater, Calvino and Rossi share a relatively conservative position within the cultural context of emergent postmodernism and posthumanism. Even if no longer horizontally inclusive in social terms, thanks to cinema and television, theater provides both writer and architect with a way of articulating possible forms of community and collectivity that may be organized around imaginative practices of representation and performance in order to resist the forces of disintegration in the late capitalist era.<sup>69</sup> Even more than that, however, it is the essential “disponibilità pura” of the stage that, in the respective eyes of Calvino and Rossi, stands as a figure

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<sup>66</sup> *Q/A* 24.

<sup>67</sup> *A/S*, 56. See also the passage in *Q/A* 30 [dated 1981] in which Rossi—citing Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (a book to which the architect returned time and again)—movingly describes the magic of a puppet theater as experienced by the young Wilhelm. For the sake of brevity, I will here include only the translation of Rossi’s text: “[Wilhelm recalls that,] when he was ten years old, on Christmas afternoon he encountered for the first time the magical world of puppets. *‘I can never forget that hour; I see it still before me; I recollect how surprised I was, when, after we had got our customary presents, you made us seat ourselves before the door that leads to the other room. The door opened; but not as formerly, to let us pass; the entrance was occupied by an unexpected show. Within it rose a porch, concealed by a mysterious curtain. All of us were standing at a distance; our eagerness to see what glittering or jingling article lay hidden behind the half-transparent veil was mounting higher and higher, when you bade us each sit down upon his stool and wait with patience. At length all of us were seated and silent: a whistle gave the signal; the curtain rolled aloft, and showed us the interior of the Temple, painted in deep red colors.’*” There Wilhelm witnesses the story of David and Goliath. That evening Wilhelm staggered off to bed, intoxicated with delight ... This episode anticipated the course of Wilhelm’s life. Starting with his passion for puppets, all his experiences ultimately form part of this same religious itinerary. Hidden behind a door and a veil, he has a presentiment, in the shadows that open up before him, of something hidden and fascinating. With the aid of a human or heavenly messenger, he penetrates the *sanctuary*, where he is initiated; he descends to its lowest depths; he comes to know the *mysteries* that are taught there; or he discovers that the temple is deserted and that the magical veil hides [only] a terrible emptiness.”

<sup>68</sup> *L/A*, 752–53.

<sup>69</sup> Ghirardo, 157: “Rossi perceived the theatrical spectacle as extending far beyond a question of type or the performance enacted on the stage; it burrows into the very labyrinth of life, deep into its internal, quixotic, unpredictable dimensions.”

for their respective artforms, i.e. literature and architecture, inasmuch as it offers playwrights, actors, and spectators alike a possible experience of freedom through, and in, representation. The theater is more than a culturally prestigious system, or a technique of sleight-of-hand, through which things may be made present to us by way of the mediation of the stage. Rather, according to Rossi, and it is likely that even the more philosophically sophisticated Calvino would have agreed with him on this point, it is one place in media-saturated late modernity where it is paradoxically possible to experience presence itself. As the architect remarks in one of his last notebooks: “il presente ha qualcosa della commedia perché in realtà nulla è presente tranne che nella commedia—proprio perché il teatro mimetizza la realtà ed è nello stesso tempo l’unica realtà” (“the present is something like a play because in truth nothing is present except in the play itself—precisely because the theater masks reality and is at the same time the sole reality”).<sup>70</sup>

In the final years of “the long 1960s” in Italy, which may be said to culminate with the kidnapping and killing by the Red Brigades of prominent Christian Democrat politician and statesman Aldo Moro in 1978, efforts to move beyond modernism gained momentum among Italian intellectuals and artists. Swerving away from the *grands récits* of High Modernism, whose tenets of progressive overcoming of the past (supposedly leading inevitably to human liberation) and the supremacy of the “new” (purportedly installing a break or rupture with the tradition) seemed to many to stand on increasingly unstable ground in ideological and philosophical terms.<sup>71</sup> The theater figures for both Calvino and Rossi as a way to integrate the tradition with the changing nature of representation at the end of modernity, rather than to abandon the former like a worn-out shoe. Neither writer nor architect sees that tradition—including its embodiment in the built environment—as constricting or obstructing contemporary practices of representation. The theatrical past instead accompanies the latter, although in a weakened state, and does not preclude new theatrical modes such as agitprop, Living Theater, guerilla theater, street theater, and the like.

Like Calvino, Rossi too was fascinated by seashells. In his *A/S* (drawing on a note to himself in *Q/A* 22), he remarks that as a young man the underlying meaning of a lyric text by the ancient Greek poet Alcaeus, as translated by Nobel Prize-winner Salvatore Quasimodo, “mi aveva spinto all’architettura” (“had pushed me toward architecture”).<sup>72</sup> Rossi cites these lines by Alcaeus as rendered into modern Italian by Quasimodo: “O conchiglia marina, figlia/della pietra e del mare biancheggiante./tu meravigli la mente dei fanciulli” (“O sea-shell, daughter of stone and the foaming sea, you fill children’s minds with wonder”).<sup>73</sup> Commenting on these verses, the architect observes that the rock-hard exterior of the shell (“una crosta dura fatta di pietra”) hides within itself a source of wonder (“la meraviglia”) when held to the ear by a child: likewise the essence of great buildings (“grandi costruzioni”), and therefore of architecture itself, resides in this same power to provoke the mind to wonder.<sup>74</sup> As Rossi notes on this same page, “inside e outside sono anche il senso del teatro” (“‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are also the meaning of the theater”).<sup>75</sup> The theater

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<sup>70</sup> *Q/A* 45.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1985] 1988), which collects a number of the late philosopher’s essays on postmodernism from the 1970s and early 1980s.

<sup>72</sup> *A/S*, 98. See *Lirici greci*, ed. and trans. Salvatore Quasimodo (Milan: Mondadori, 2018 [rev.ed. 1965]), which contains Quasimodo’s rendition into Italian of the verses by Alcaeus entitled “La conchiglia marina.” Quasimodo’s often unconventional verse translations from classical Greek, including Alcaeus’s text, were later set to music by the composer Luigi Dallapiccola.

<sup>73</sup> *A/S*, 98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

is for him like a shell that will yield up its inner wonders to whomever manages—metaphorically speaking—to hold it up to his ear and listen. Moreover, a shell is a dwelling that may become available to others to live in later on. Similarly for Rossi the theater endures in time, making itself available for the imaginations of successive generations of humanity to inhabit: “certo il teatro, come modo di vivere, era un’abitazione” (“certainly the theater, as a way of living, was a dwelling”).<sup>76</sup> On this point writer and architect are in agreement: the theater is where we are given the chance to be at home with fictions and thus with our own selves. If Calvino had had the time to compose to his own satisfaction the sixth lecture of the Norton cycle, perhaps instead of “Cominciare e finire/Beginning and Ending” its title might have turned out to be: “Disponibilità/Availability.”

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<sup>76</sup> Rossi *A/S*, as cited on the back cover of *Aldo Rossi: Il gran teatro dell'architettura*.