

## 2 | Making Up a Life

And even if grey drafts of emptiness  
blow from the stage,  
I yet remain.

Rilke, 'Fourth Duino Elegy'

### **Narrating Ourselves**

I have argued in Chapter 1 that the work of perception is mostly hidden from us: that we usually experience ourselves as merely finding the world, rather than as participating in making it. We are rarely aware either of the continual activity of shaping underdetermined impressions into patterns, or of the malleability of these patterns by the influences with which we surround ourselves. This is true not only of our understanding of the world that surrounds us, but also of our understanding of ourselves.

Charles Guignon tells the story of the Reformation and its aftermath (imprecisely but evocatively) as a story of disillusionment with authority as a guide to good order, and an inward turn towards conscience and personal faith, fuelled by a belief that the presence of God can be found in the core of our selves. Gradually, Guignon recounts, the

idea of God fell away, and we were left with a faith in an inner deity, an inner core of authentic selfhood: and if only we could find and be true to that inner self, hidden independently of social obligations and roles at the heart of our own being, then we would have access to what defines truth and goodness, and be 'true selves'.<sup>1</sup>

But the suggestion at the heart of this ideal of authenticity – that there might be a self to be found that is unmediated by roles or constructions – is unrealistic. Rather, the self is accessed and lived out in the form of an unfolding, but also constantly re-narrated, story about ourselves. One might say, indeed, that telling a story about our own lives, projecting a whole out of its parts, is a primary work of the human imagination. We cannot understand or grasp ourselves apart from telling our story, a coherent narrative in which we ourselves are the protagonist. In this process, there is a strange dynamic at work: for the creation of our story often feels to us supremely like a work of *finding* – of unearthing our true story, and thereby making sense of our lives – while it is also, undeniably, a work of *construction*. By construction I do not mean merely that we create the story of our lives by living it: of course it is, amid everything else, our choices and actions that shape the story we live. By 'construction' I here mean, rather, the ways in which we narrate our past to inform our present choices and our future possibilities. In order to have a moral space in which to move in the present and future, we have to *believe* in the story we tell about our past; otherwise, it cannot serve as an orienting framework. And yet (mostly unconsciously), this telling is a work of the

form-giving imagination, which selects from the myriad and ever-shifting data points a narrative pattern. We can see the cracks of its reality or objectivity when we come to crisis points that force us to re-narrate our past: a radical failure, a disillusionment, a break-up. And yet even then, the emotional force of the re-narration will usually be one of *discovery* rather than *construction*: ‘This, finally, is the truth of my life.’ Until the next crisis.

Psychology has vital things to say about the importance of narrating our lives to achieve and maintain a healthy self. Narrative therapy is based on the insight that the experiences we cannot narrate are often those that control us; that severe trauma is so debilitating partly because it makes it impossible to tell a coherent story about ourselves; that narrating our story is a form of taking hold of it, of inhabiting it consciously rather than unwittingly, and therefore of liberation. All this is true and important. But it often comes at the cost of pretending that our story is something we find more receptively, construe less actively, than is in fact the case. This has multiple risks. The first is that the more we insist on our individual stories, the less aware we often are of how conventional the roles we take are, and of how influenced we are by the narrative models touted by the latest films, books, or influencers. What feels like authenticity is often mere cliché. The second is that ignorance of how much our stories rely on the active selection and interpretation of nodal points and events makes us rigid, and often crowds out other perspectives and people. In particular, they force other people into roles within our narrative, selecting and matching their actions to a pattern that makes sense within

the plot unfolding in *our* mind. But our narrative roles are always, in some basic sense, incommensurate with one another. We are always the *protagonists* of our own lives, and cast others in roles vis-à-vis ourselves with which they (almost by definition) cannot themselves fully identify: supporting or antagonistic roles. Of course we acknowledge, at least in theory, that others, too, are protagonists to themselves; but it is something of which we need continually to remind ourselves. Conversely, what role we play in one another's consciousness is often beyond our knowledge and certainly beyond our control.

This dynamic can lead to profound loneliness and disorientation. Charles Taylor's condition of the 'buffered self'<sup>2</sup> has been intensified in nearly unimaginable ways in the new habits of digital interaction embedded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Online meetings connect us, but radically change our sense of presence. They allow us to reduce each other to squares on our own screens, to be pinned, shifted, minimized, muted, and turned off at will. To some extent, they actively realize the vision of the world played out in Descartes' *Meditations* (or in a darkened theatre): we are no longer corporeal persons in a shared space, whose relative movements affect one another, but apparitions slotted into plays or stories that are increasingly of each one's solitary imagining.<sup>3</sup> The more we insist on the role of protagonist and cast others into supporting or antagonistic roles, the more we manoeuvre ourselves into competition or worse, find ourselves the only players among non-player characters in a cosmos without coordinates.

What does all this have to do with theology? To some extent, the simple answer is that it is an axiom of theology

that we are not the ultimate tellers of the stories of our lives; that our lives are, indeed, part of a larger story, in which we do not have to be perfect protagonists, but are, as sinners who are loved by God, forgiven and restored to a story in which love places *all* at the centre and *all* at the service of all others. C. S. Lewis captures this powerfully not only in the great dance that concludes *Perelandra*, but above all in *Till We Have Faces*, in which the story Orual tells about herself crumbles in her hands and runs through her fingers. It is only when she is told her own story by a god that she, too, can be Psyche, *soul*; that her story turns out to be intertwined, redemptively, with the stories of those she has loved but has wounded and lost. This may well be the form that the Last Judgement will take: this retelling of our stories that integrates them into a larger story of love. It is our fervent hope that this will be so.

But while we await that judgment, we live in a world in which we cannot escape our own imagination, both individual and collective; in which our imagining of ourselves and others is at once inescapable, inadequate, and often mutually incommensurate. This is true even of our place within the Christian story, insofar as we accept it. Though the Christian story of creation, fall, and redemption is genuinely larger than we are, it is nevertheless to some extent our responsibility to locate ourselves within it narratively, and we can get entangled in our own telling. (Talk to anyone who has had a major crisis of faith or life and looks back with puzzlement and disappointment on the way she has been telling her own spiritual story. This is one of the reasons why liturgy and community are so very important.)

Our *practical* work may well be, above all, to sit lightly to our imagining: to be willing constantly to revise our own narratives in light of the gospel, of new evidence, and of the presence of others. But this is no easy thing to do. It is indispensable, therefore, to think critically and reflectively about the imaginative work involved in constructing roles and narratives, here between the times.

### **Role-Playing**

I have been talking about the narrative roles that we assign ourselves and others in the stories we constantly tell – in our heads and often increasingly on social media – about our lives. But these are not the only type of roles that structure our lives: there is another life-structuring type of role which I will call ‘social roles’. Although also a matter of imagination in my sense, social roles are a product of the *collective* imagination of a society more than of any individual imagination. They are roles that originate within a social web and which we inherit and perform, in some sense, communally and in public. These roles vary greatly in their scope and perdurance: some last a lifetime while others come and go; some can be combined while others are mutually exclusive. There are biologically grounded and enduring roles such as child, sister, or mother; status-defined roles such as benefactor or patron; life-stage-specific roles such as pupil, student, or pensioner; professional roles such as accountant, teacher, or plumber; and the shifting and varied roles of friend, lover, volunteer, or hobby sportsman. All these are defined not individually but socially, by their

position within a social web; they are communally positioned, communally passed on, and at least to some extent publicly available. They are therefore, in all their variety, rightly called social roles.

To offer a critical appreciation of social roles within an account of the irreversibility of the modern condition seems at first counter-intuitive precisely because the older, irretrievable ideal of a fixed moral order was often acted out through equally fixed, socially indexed roles. To be a good citizen or a good Christian was to step into social roles that prescribed frameworks of behaviour and excellence: squire, clerk, *pater familias*, servant. Those who were subordinate within the overarching order also had to accept subordinate roles in society. In the emancipatory climate of Western modernity, social roles were therefore increasingly seen as instruments of oppression: inflexible moulds pressed down on inner lives in stifling and unfairly stratifying ways. Kierkegaard associates this kind of role play with an inauthentic 'Christendom' that stands over against an authentic 'Christianity'. Heidegger associates it with 'das Man' – the tyranny of the impersonal 'they'.<sup>4</sup>

But what are social roles? In practice, they are behavioural patterns that have developed over long periods of trial and error to enable and maximize certain aims or values. It could be said that roles are some of the key forms in which societies find, negotiate, and pursue their goods. What is passed on with a role is a whole complex of implicit knowledge about social goods (in this sense of aims and values) and how to realize them, codified in patterns of behaviour whose purpose no individual may fully

understand but which he or she can nevertheless help realize. Roles, in other words, pass on possibilities of comportment and movement within the world, and allow one to achieve certain modes of excellence. For example, I have inherited the role of university professor. This role comes with agreed privileges and obligations, agreed patterns of behaviour that include practices which would seem strange or rude in a different context. If I returned a letter from a friend with the same brisk red annotations with which I habitually fill my students' essays, she would likely resent me. Yet this practice is accepted as conducive to the characteristic goods of a university: education and the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

This means that social roles also represent risks and temptations. They are neither immutable nor 'safe'. On one side of the spectrum, they can be means of codifying and justifying exploitative behaviour. On the other, they can develop their own dynamics and run away from any consciously chosen purposes. (Take, for example, the social media influencer, a role arising in part from the artificial reward mechanisms of social media, which create patterns of behaviour whose consequences we do not yet comprehend.) The deep anxiety and contestation surrounding the way teachers, pastors, and parents should act – what their responsibilities and privileges are – reflects a profound communal uncertainty about the meaning of the values their institutions exist to pursue.

Even when they are relatively stable structures for the pursuit of certain goods, roles are optimized for what works best in the aggregate: individual situations might call for different responses or actions. For this reason, the notion

of a ‘virtuoso’, familiar from the arts, is relevant also to social roles: A virtuoso is capable of mastering or internalizing a role, but also of improvising, and thereby extending its range of possibilities without distorting its purpose.

Despite their risks and limitations, roles can be spaces of freedom and exploration precisely because they are at once load-bearing and malleable. Amid the profound anxiety of our age, it can seem impossible to take hold of one overarching good by which we might orient our lives. But we can understand ourselves and each other under particular *descriptions*, that is, in particular roles: daughter and sister; pupil and friend; student; worker; parent. Many of these roles are rooted in physical realities but are also associated with characteristic goods and virtues. They give us spaces for action; within them, we can achieve excellence and meaning. Our roles, though we often assume them deliberately, in an important sense also precede us: they are, in some ways, bigger than we and can become moulds into which we can pour our liquid selves. In role-playing of this sort, the anxiety of authenticity falls, at least for a while, legitimately away: sincerity *follows* rather than motivates choice. In that sense, it is more important to choose the right role than to strive for authenticity. As Kurt Vonnegut said: ‘We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.’<sup>5</sup>

Charles Taylor talks about inescapable frameworks of moral action.<sup>6</sup> In practice, within the global horizon of the dialectic of life and death, our frameworks are mostly defined not globally but by social roles. My values are those of a mother, a wife, a scholar, a member of certain

communities. It is within these roles that certain things count as goods or as non-negotiable conditions: it is as a mother that I delight in the flourishing of these children and that my allegiance to them is non-negotiable. It is as a scholar that I derive satisfaction from a well-given lecture or a well-received article, and that commitment to certain kinds of truth is non-negotiable. Roles, as I said, are scripts of behaviour for the realization of certain goods, and it is the attainment of these goods that makes us happy. Likewise, it is when we find ourselves incapable of realizing the goods of a particular role or when we cannot derive joy from them that we experience existential crises.

These descriptions also suggest a dimension that is perhaps less immediately obvious but equally important to our consideration of roles as ways of inhabiting the world well. Roles not only create spaces for action, attainment, and delight; they also delimit our obligations. ‘What do we owe others?’ is an intensely fraught question in philosophy and literature: Emmanuel Levinas dogmatically resolves it in favour of infinite responsibility; Stanley Cavell never comes to transparent terms with it; Rowan Williams, following Hegel, sees it as one of the basic themes of tragic drama.<sup>7</sup>

A common answer is that we owe others whatever we have incurred by debt or bindingly undertaken to give. But even if this is so, we immediately have to add that such undertakings only *sometimes* take the form of explicit promises (‘I vow to avenge you’) or concrete debts (‘I owe you my life’). More often, they arise as part of contracts and scripts between social roles which we enter with more or less consciousness as we make use of their forms. In other words, we seldom

merely act; we take on actions that pertain to certain roles. And we seldom merely speak; we use language that is part of particular patterns (whether long established or newly defined by current literature and other media). And these roles and patterns always have a *scope* that extends beyond singular action. Indeed, we might say that roles are, among other things, long-calibrated patterns of mutual obligation and privilege, scripted ways of fulfilling each other's needs and our own. (Painful crises in life arise when we are in a role which comes with an obligation to fulfil needs which we as individuals are not, however, capable of fulfilling.)

Cavell and Levinas both suggest that as soon as we see the humanity of someone, we (should) realize that there is no limit to our obligation towards them. This is true, but unliveable. Roles give us a framework to *delimit obligation* and to do so legitimately. This does not, of course, let us off the hook. Choices regarding what roles to assume and how much scope to grant them are themselves (at least sometimes) our responsibility; and some calls transcend the boundaries of our roles. Similarly, that different roles may create conflicting obligations is one of the central themes of ancient tragedy. In Shakespeare's tragic canon, the dilemma is well dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet's obligations as daughter and as lover are in literally deadly conflict. The conflict raises the difficult question of the relative claims of role-internal obligations and the right or obligation of assuming or relinquishing roles in the first place. The question, in Juliet's case, is *both* what she owes Romeo as his betrothed *and how* to assess the legitimacy of assuming that role. Her antecedent role as daughter of

the House of Capulet precludes it; and this raises the difficult question, never to be answered by rote, of the scope of that former role. If she assumes a role that conflicts with another, should she relinquish the first or should she remain committed to as much of it as she can, bearing the constant conflict this will create for her and others?

Once relinquished, a role's internal obligations cease with it (which is why it can be so liberating to shed a role). At the same time, this sometimes comes at the price of the incalculable debt or burden – incalculable in the strict sense that there is no agreed calculus for it – of having abandoned the role in the first place. Sometimes, the limit or end of a role is scripted into the role itself: the end of a term of office; the passing of the baton to another; mutual agreement. But often, it does violence to oneself or others. Once one has broken up with a romantic partner, one no longer has the obligation or privilege to console her; but how is one to calculate the responsibility for acquiring that lack of responsibility in the first place? It is beyond the contracts of one's roles.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, therefore, obligations are mediated (except in very concrete, specific circumstances) by social roles which together make up a social compact, though by no means a coherent or unified one: obligations accrue to roles which do not always cohere with other sets of roles. Obligations are, in that sense, not matters of our choosing, control, or even surveyability, though to perform a role well just means to know and shoulder its obligations, which makes one, as Katherine Hawley argued, trustworthy.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there are always ambiguities in the obligations that accrue to our role-playing. These arise,

above all, at the beginning and end of role-playing: in the questions how to assess the legitimacy of assuming a role (think of Juliet's betrothal) and relinquishing it (think of King Edward VIII or Pope Benedict XVI). But they arise also from the always incomplete 'fit' between self and role. Sometimes this incompleteness is a matter of capacity (Fantine may be incapable of fulfilling the role of mother) and sometimes of intention. I have said that we seldom 'merely' speak or act, but rather inhabit the patterns of certain roles whose scope exceeds individual words or acts. We often half-consciously try on roles that entail certain responsibilities, using language and gestures whose entailments we do not (and perhaps cannot) fully survey. The extent to which this use incurs the responsibilities as well as the privileges of the roles to which these words and gestures belong is often not easily arbitrated and is a frequent source of conflict and hurt. Often, there is deliberate or unintended misalignment between one person's understanding of the limits of their involvement in a social or language game and the understanding of those they speak and play with. Does flirting with Rosamond commit Lydgate to the role of suitor? Does marriage to a prince oblige a woman to a perpetually public life as princess, whether or not she understood this when she married him? This ambiguity can arise between people or within the self. If I give a homeless person food, I have done so as a single act of charity. But I also feel the pull of the fact that once I have acknowledged this as a reality *in which I play a role*, the role is not easy to shed, and may entail ongoing responsibility.

## Finding the Cracks

The description in the opening section of this chapter, of (internal) *narrative* roles that go through and beyond our (external) *social* roles, may make it sound as if these ambiguities can be resolved by reliable recourse to a more constant, not role-indexed sense of self: as if we could step in and out of social roles as we can of theatrical ones. But most of the time, this is not so. Each of us has deep and distinctive instincts, needs, and desires. However, they do not congeal into an authentic self that we can access and consult apart from roles, like an oracle. It might seem like we do; but often, what we appeal to is just a different role that we are trying on for size or a narrative of selfhood that is itself malleable. Yes, we have needs and desires that run deeper than any role. But they do not themselves make up a self, though they can become paths to one. In moments in which our roles fail us, we often turn towards these needs, desires, or remoter visions that we recognize as stable or unshakeable beyond particular roles. Sometimes, it is an incontrovertible value or truth ('Whatever else may fail, nature is majestic and beautiful'). Sometimes, it is an urgent and undeniably worthy cause ('Whatever else one might do, the fight against malaria is worth dedicating oneself to'). Sometimes, it is a profound, animating desire ('Whatever else I've done, I have always wanted to paint'). Sometimes, it is the radiant reality of one other person ('Whatever else, I am made for this one'). Many great books and movies dramatize precisely such moments. But whether or not the movies show it to us (and usually they

do not), the *aftermath* of these moments generally takes the shape of new roles: mountaineer, charity worker, painter, wife. And if we are lucky, those roles are precisely what roles ought to be: spaces of growth and exploration; spaces that themselves remain penultimate.

Our life with roles is so poignant because we nearly always understand ourselves ‘under some description’ and do not possess a dressing room away from roles where we are simply ‘ourselves’. And yet, roles are also brittle and unreliable. On the one hand, roles are in some significant sense ‘bigger than we’: they are load-bearing structures on which we can lean and within which we can orient ourselves, seeking meaning and excellence. On the other hand, roles are always at best penultimate: within society, they are fluid, giving shape to inchoate senses of overarching meaning and value. Within lives, they display gaps, inconsistencies, tensions, which we cannot use the roles themselves to navigate. And at some point, most roles demand not fulfilment but relinquishment: our parents pass away; our children leave home; we retire from our jobs; death doth us part. Grief for our roles is also a form of grief for a lost self.

Roles, in other words, do not solve the problem of selfhood for us. However, they locate it. Shakespeare’s theatre is so deeply moving partly because it harnesses the power of theatrical roles to explore the power and perplexities of the roles we play in life. Contrary to what the ideal of authenticity declares, the question of selfhood arises, when it does, most often not as the unmoored question, ‘Who am I?’ but in the gaps and tensions of our roleplaying. It arises

when we seem too liquid to cast ourselves into any roles (as Prince Hal bemoans in *Henry IV*); when a social role we have assumed clashes with our desires (as it does for Anthony in *Anthony and Cleopatra*); when the demands of our social roles seem fundamentally ambiguous or indeterminate (as for Hamlet as the son of a Protestant father who is, impossibly, in purgatory); when the demands of two social roles clash (as they do for Hermione as wife and friend in *The Winter's Tale*); or when the internal reward structures of roles go against their wider social aim (as for Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King of Scotland).

Perhaps the most urgent and personal moments of our lives arise in the gaps and tensions within and between the roles we assume in society. Shakespeare's most arresting emblem of this is King Lear, standing on a heath in the storm that blows from just those gaps, recognizing both himself and Edgar (another inveterate role-player) for one brief moment as the same 'poor, bare, forked animal'. And yet Lear, like Shakespeare's other great characters, cannot simply stop acting. He, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Leontes all know the pathetic insufficiency of roles, but they also recognize that there is not simply a space beyond roles into which they might confidently step: Life is 'but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more'. 'There is no cure for that', as Samuel Beckett said.<sup>10</sup> When, in Shakespeare's (or Beckett's) work, characters do try to step into such a space, shedding their roles – when, perhaps, they might reach a point of authenticity beyond role-playing – why then the play is at an end.

## Seeing Each Other

It is one of Stanley Cavell's great legacies to have shown that the theatre (as well as other art forms) does not merely provide illustrations or analogies for philosophical questions, but that our experiences with it can enlarge philosophical thought. This is partly because the arts, through their curious mechanisms of distillation, projection, and mirroring, allow us to see dynamics that we can never, in ordinary life, bring into focus directly, but which nevertheless inform it. Philosophers who are sensitive to these dynamics and mechanisms can examine what they could not themselves conjure. 'The conditions of theater literalize [certain] conditions [of our] existence outside', Cavell writes, and thereby effect their catharsis.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, theatrical roles embody the potential and limitation of life roles, and therefore help us to get them into view. Juliet, Hamlet, Hal, Othello, Macbeth, Hermione, Leontes, and Prospero are not mere illustrations; their multilevel existence touches and interrogates ours.<sup>12</sup>

This dynamic is more complex than explored so far. As I have just noted, the existence of these characters spans multiple levels; and these levels do not only echo the ordinary conditions of our own lives, but also implicate the audience, precisely in its role as audience, in ways that uncover even further conditions of selfhood. By being acted on stage, for us, theatrical characters interrogate the human need and condition of spectatorship: the extent to which selfhood is formed by the sense and reality of being seen by others. The theatre literalizes this condition and,

in the hands of master playwrights, reveals its possibilities and dangers, and by creating an imaginative experience affects our life with them.

Rowan Williams remarks in *Being Human*:

I can't think without thinking of the other. I can't even think of my body, this zero point of orientation, without understanding that it's an object to another. *I am seen*, I am heard, I am understood; and [when] I am talking about myself ... I am bound to be imagining what is not exhausted by one solitary viewpoint.<sup>13</sup>

The theatre has a particular way of literalizing the sense that to be a self is to be seen. For of course even in our minds, we always play for others. When we observe or experience ourselves, we see ourselves instinctively as we imagine others to be seeing us. The theatre temporarily releases its audience from this condition. It organizes shared perception in a way which in ordinary life is inescapably private, by presenting a publicly available *dramatis personae* with protagonists, supporting parts, and antagonists. In doing so, it gives us the opportunity to see figures other than ourselves as uncontested protagonists and so suspends our usual jostle for space. In the theatre, we are a real audience watching *others* as protagonists, rather than each internally watching ourselves as we imagine others (impossibly) to be watching us as protagonists. Our own role in relation to these protagonists is at once entirely marginal (we are outside their play space) and, in another sense, indispensable to the work of the play: we see the action and characters from a perspective that no one inside the play possesses, and which alone makes sense of them both.<sup>14</sup>

This necessity of witnesses for an achievement of understanding is not a theatrical artefact but a condition of life. The need for recognition or acknowledgement is woven through Shakespeare's corpus, especially the late plays. Perhaps the most moving example is the once popular but now little-performed *Pericles*. Pericles, Prince of Tyre, has lost his wife and newborn daughter in a shipwreck, and has wandered the seas despairing of life. His daughter Marina, lost at sea and believed dead, was in fact found, and has been raised to a life of servitude and abuse in Mytilene. Near the end of the play, he, now an old man, harbours at Mytilene, and Marina, who has become known as one who calms and cheers others with her radiant presence, is sent to encourage him. Not knowing each other, she offers him her story: and in a poignant moment of vulnerability, it is in his hands to validate or dismiss her identity. He acknowledges her as his and is, in turn, reborn in the recognition of his daughter: 'Thou that begett'st him that did thee beget.'<sup>15</sup>

At first sight, it seems as if the theatre is a poor analogue to this need for recognition, precisely because there is no interaction between audience and characters. We are not in each other's lives. There is nothing we can do for one another. But this is not precisely true. Stanley Cavell argues that being an audience in a darkened theatre in fact 'literalizes' the harmful ways in which we all too often relate to each other in ordinary life (and in which the tragic protagonists Lear and Leontes relate to their own loved ones within the worlds of their plays): not by witnessing others openly, allowing them to affect us, confuse us, and change

us, but by surveying them from a position of safety, commanding their presence while ourselves remaining emotionally hidden. Cavell diagnoses this attitude, which he calls ‘theatricalization’, as a ubiquitous defence mechanism against the existential unknowability and unavailability of the world: ‘The conditions of theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside – hiddenness, silence, isolation – hence make that existence plain. [...]n giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop.’<sup>16</sup>

Cavell’s analysis of tragic catharsis is acute but does not exhaust the richness of the metatheatrical exchange. At least in some great works of drama, being a theatre audience does not compel us to re-enact the temptation to surveil others from the dark, but brings us face to face with this temptation and gives us the chance to renounce it precisely by releasing the characters before us from their roles. This prepares us for a double movement of affirmation and renunciation which the existence of those we love demands but which is difficult to sustain or even comprehend. To acknowledge others is always both to recognize the roles they play and to confess their abiding elusiveness.

In their late plays, Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett demand such a double movement from both their characters and their audiences. The poignancy of the central figures in many of Beckett’s plays, including *Endgame*, *Not I*, and especially *Play*, lies in their struggle to bring their own roles to an end. The short abstract drama *Play* presents three characters named only (with brutal stress on their stereotypicality) M, W<sub>1</sub>, and W<sub>2</sub>: a husband, his wife, and the

woman with whom he has had an affair. They are lit alternately by an interrogative spotlight, which compels them to speak. Near the end of the play, they become conscious of the light.

M: And now, that you are ... mere eye. Just looking. At my face. On and off.

[Spot from M to W1.]

W1: Weary of playing with me. Get off me. Yes.

[Spot from W1 to M.]

M: Looking for something. In my face. Some truth. In my eyes. Not even.

[Spot from M to W2. Laugh as before from W2 cut short as spot from her to M.]

M: Mere eye. No mind. Opening and shutting on me. Am I as much –

[Spot off. Blackout. Three seconds. Spot on M.]

M: Am I as much as ... being seen?<sup>17</sup>

The repeated plea for acknowledgement – ‘Am I as much as ... being seen?’ – functions on multiple levels. Within the play, it is a plea not to be reduced to a stereotype, to be acknowledged as a person. The spotlight is an instrument of interrogation without acknowledgement: a demand for self-justification that repels self-disclosure. The scene echoes the trial scene in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, in which Hermione is unable to defend herself against the charge of adultery because her husband Leontes has already cast her in the role of adulteress and liar (here associated with the medieval stock character Vice). This casting makes him deaf to any possible defence because he can reinscribe any defence into the role: ‘I ne’er heard yet/ That any of these bolder vices

wanted/ Less impudence to gainsay what they did/ Than to perform it first.<sup>18</sup> Hermione's only hope is to plead the insufficiency of the role into which her husband has locked her:

You, my lord, best know,  
 ... my past life  
 Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true  
 As I am now unhappy, which is more  
 Than history can pattern, though devised  
 And played to take spectators.<sup>19</sup>

Hermione's plea for acknowledgement fails, and Leontes sentences her to death: a fate to which he has in some sense already condemned her in reducing her to a mere stock character. 'My life stands in the level of your dreams', she capitulates, 'which I'll lay down.'<sup>20</sup>

In both *Play* and *The Winter's Tale* (the generic titles are not coincidental), characters feel trapped in stock roles and plead other characters for release from those roles, for recognition as more. The theatre is an ironic place for that. After all, we know, these people only exist as roles. They are begging their interlocutors to acknowledge them as exceeding the roles in which they have been cast while we, the audience, look on as they perform their scripted roles. In *Play*, the two levels are skilfully collapsed: the interrogation spotlight is also the stage light.

What are we to do – we who have come to a theatre to watch people play roles and who are, in any case, incapacitated from action? Beckett, I think, deliberately sets us in this space to provoke us to balk at its constriction. The actor who performs M literalizes the condition of the

character: that of being trapped in a role under the watching eye of an anonymous audience. Precisely through the highly formalized, highly restrictive arrangement, he makes us see the restrictiveness of role-casting and feel the desire that there be more. 'Am I as much as being seen?' There is, in fact, nothing more to see. The character is merely M. But Beckett makes us *wish* there were.<sup>21</sup>

Shakespeare, more mercifully, releases us by giving us imaginative work. In *The Winter's Tale*, too, the condition of the theatre literalizes the predicament of its protagonists. We are implicated in Leontes' tyranny: it is for us that Hermione's history is 'played to take spectators'. This is why her resurrection at the end of the play is at the same time poignant and ridiculous: a miracle and theatrical hocus-pocus. The ambivalence is deliberate: we can only see her come back to life at the price of acknowledging that as long as she is on stage, we continue to trap her in a role which we must let go. The central metatheatrical puzzle of *The Winter's Tale*, whether Hermione really died or whether she hid herself, is unresolved precisely because in the theatre, they are one and the same: no one on a stage really dies. For her to rise, 'it is required [we] do awake [our] faith', in Coleridge's sense of willingly suspending our disbelief.<sup>22</sup> And this also means that we must be aware that that is what we are doing, and be willing to release her from her role.<sup>23</sup> Hermione, Puck, and Prospero plead for an acknowledgement from the audience which is at the same time their disappearance as characters. 'But release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands', says Prospero in the epilogue. 'Give me your hands if we be friends', says Puck, knowing that our acquaintance

will not survive the gesture.<sup>24</sup> Yet our release is not simply a repudiation of roles. We are not embracing John Gielgud or Frederick Peisley as if they had finally escaped the fetters of Prospero and Puck. (In truth, we might have no interest at all in Gielgud and Peisley independently of their roles.) The trick is not to circumvent theatricality and roles, but at once to hold on and to let go: to embrace the presence granted by roles and their insufficiency.

In ordinary life, we are never an audience in the dark – we are fellow players in the lives of other people, and they in ours. But although we may not be able to step out of our own roles into a more authentic self known to us, we can recognize *others* as exceeding mere roles or as potential inhabitants of different roles; and this recognition can help them know themselves better. To display virtue and virtuosity in our lives with others means, in part, to open up possibilities for them by the ways in which we interpret their behaviour to them and give them space to develop it. There is a profound sense in which the narrative roles in which we cast *ourselves* may be less true or capacious than the possibilities created and recognition enabled by our role-playing with others. There are times and ways in which, as Stanley Cavell has insisted, others can know us better than we know ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

## Theological Epilogue

This is a profoundly risky suggestion. It takes out of our hands any final control over the meaning of our lives and selves, suggesting that how we play into others' lives and

how they see us may be equally important as our own sense of self. This seems to place into the hands of others some measure of power over that sense of self – and I am aware how much damage it can cause if people’s selves are reflected back to them through twisted roles. And yet this sense that our roles are not primarily *defences* but open spaces – that our selves are to some extent given us in our encounters with others in these spaces – is grounded in a deep theological conviction, which does not depend on the capacities of concrete others. ‘Who has the authority to tell the story of a life?’ is, among others, a theological question. Religion is often associated with roles in both senses I have used: narrative and social. And it is true that religious faith and communities are a powerful source of roles, with all their potential and risks. Religious communities supply clearly defined social roles, which can be great goods if they offer frameworks by which to shape useful and meaningful lives; though it is also important to recognize that they can sometimes become lifeless or distorting. More importantly, perhaps, the Christian faith offers a very powerful narrative role: within its cosmic story of creation, fall, salvation, and sanctification, we are able to take our place as part of a larger narrative, in which we do not have to be perfect protagonists but can admit to failure and need for help.

In these ways, role-taking in both its social and narrative forms is essential to religious faith and can help to shape lives that display virtue and meaning. But even more than being about roles, faith and theology are precisely about their gaps: the times when our social roles break apart, whether by being overwhelmed or by being hollowed out;

and the times when our narrative roles – our sense of our life as a coherent story in which we play an integrative role – fail, whether because we realize that in cultivating our own story we have made other people unreal to ourselves and hurt them, or because our story appears to be coming to an abrupt end in the face of crisis or death. Psychology and philosophy have crucial things to say about such breaking points, including in therapeutic contexts. But theology says something quite different in kind to both of these.

Ultimately, theology suggests that we need roles because we are not yet ourselves. I do not mean this *primarily* in the obvious sense that selfhood within a role is always deferred: that a role is complete only when anagnorisis has been achieved (as by Othello, Lear, Leontes) and the poor player is finally dead (like Richard II, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Lear again); or when identity has been revealed (think of *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*) and the hapless hero is finally married (think of *Much Ado*). We are not, or not guaranteed to be, or never stably, in a play that moves towards such anagnorisis or catastrophe or reconciliation.

Rather, the claim that we need roles because we are not yet ourselves is rooted in the eschatological vision of the Psalmist, the writer of Job, and the New Testament writers. God's thoughts about us are precious and 'more numerous than the sand' – 'when I awake', the Psalmist marvels, 'I am still with thee'.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the deepest wellspring of who we are and how we are to orient ourselves in the world is found neither in fixed and impersonal values nor in the citadel of our inner selves, but in the calling and love of God. St Paul suggests that it is not in introspection but in allowing

ourselves to be seen by God that we both are and know ourselves: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'<sup>27</sup> For the New Testament writers (as, in a more limited sense, for Heidegger), this fullness of understanding is not achievable within earthly life, where all our actions are incomplete, and God remains partly hidden. It is an eschatological promise. C. S. Lewis asks provocatively at the end of his great late novel, 'How can the gods meet us face to face till we have faces?'.<sup>28</sup> But it is equally true to ask, 'How can we have faces until He meets us face to face?'

I have already suggested the ways in which roles enable encounter. I will elaborate in the final chapter how it is such encounter, rather than roles in and of themselves, which most deeply anticipates eschatological personhood. For now, I conclude that on the one hand, we hope for a good role, unashamed, in the great play of history; on the other, we must remember how limited our seeing through roles is, how much we miss, how much we construct. We can only rely on the God who carries us. Our roles, like our images, are not towers to be defended, but boats in which to travel out to sea.

## Notes

1. See Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004). Histories and critiques related to Guignon's (and mine) are developed in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA:

- Harvard University Press, 1992). The ideal of authenticity is defended in sophisticated form e.g. in Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995); Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 27 and *passim*.
  3. Stanley Cavell calls this attitude to others 'theatricalization': see a later section of this chapter, as well as Chapter 5.
  4. See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon 'Christendom,'* edited and translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944); Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27.
  5. Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (New York: Avon, 1961), v.
  6. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–107.
  7. See esp. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Terry Pinkard's excellent discussion of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Hegel's use of it, in Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 144–145.

8. For a complementary view of the contract-less-ness of romantic love itself, see Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995), 60.
9. Katherine Hawley, *How to Be Trustworthy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
10. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1957), 33 and 41.
11. Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 267–353, p. 333; reprinted in Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 39–123, p. 104. See also the other chapters of Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*.
12. Tzachi Zamir does sophisticated philosophical work in this space; see e.g. *Acts: Theater, Philosophy, and the Performing Self* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
13. Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 11.
14. The same is, in a slightly different way, true of novels: It is the multiplicity of perspectives that makes a novel like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1872) such a deep human experience.
15. William Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, edited by Doreen DelVecchio and Antony Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.182.
16. 'The Avoidance of Love,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 333–334, and in *Disowning Knowledge*, 104. On the concept of the unavailability of the world, see esp. Stanley Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Studies in the Possibility of Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).
17. Samuel Beckett, *Play* (London: Faber, 1963), 64.
18. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.2.53–56.

19. Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*, 3.2.31–36.
20. Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*, 3.2.79–80.
21. For a fuller reading of Beckett's late plays, see Erik Tønning, *Beckett's Abstract Drama* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).
22. Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*, 5.3.94–95.
23. I give a fuller reading of *The Winter's Tale* in 'Hermione's Sophism: Ordinarity and Theatricality in *The Winter's Tale*,' *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1A (2015), A83–105.
24. Chapter 5 will return to this theme.
25. Stanley Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 238–266, p. 266.
26. Psalm 139.
27. 1 Corinthians 13.12.
28. C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), pt 2, ch. 4.