

Dramatic Meaning – and Beyond

Jon Fosse's Late Modernity
in *Autumn Dream*

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The contrast between the illusion of stopping time through repetition [...] and the reality of linear time – death, developed from the opening lines – strikes the spectator with extraordinary force. The conclusion is of course ironic: the audience is well aware of the characters' self-deception, but the irony doubles back – another reason we can no longer smile.¹¹⁷

Repetition remains the great unifier in life and literature; but inhuman repetitiveness, repetition leading nowhere – with all its isolating and soul-destroying consequences – has become the mark of our age.¹¹⁸

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For more than two decades now, Jon Fosse has published extensively and has firmly established himself as a major modernist. Like in his prose fiction of novels and tales, Fosse also in his plays to a great extent employs the techniques of focus on objective detail, repetition and rhythm. At the same time, he selects his dramatic form from Ibsen, Chekhov, Mae-

117. Clayton A. Hubbs, "Repetition in the Plays of Chekhov", in *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXII, Number 4, December, 1979, p. 118.

118. Hubbs, *ibid.*, p. 123.

terlinck, Strindberg, and from playwrights in the traditions of Constraint and Conversation Plays – from those major figures in the dramatic tradition that Peter Szondi in his classical study *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1956) refers to as writers of “drama in crisis”.¹¹⁹ In other words, Fosse clearly and openly *epicizes* and *perspectivizes* his dramas, and develops further the dramatic forms from before and around 1900. In those forms thematic foci are on the past, on memory, or more generally on *temporality*; on characters’ *inner selves* and spiritual lives; and on *dream* (yearning, longing, and fantasy building). These are also Jon Fosse’s major dramatic themes. In addition, in his dramas is frequently embedded a *fourth theme* as a special further development of the masters’ critical conventions: the theme of *language*, signs, names, words, and what they are able to carry and convey. In this theme sometimes meta-poetic problems are involved.

Jon Fosse is by now the most frequently staged Norwegian playwright in Norway and abroad, even compared to Ibsen. In his plays – as in his fiction – late modern man’s everyday experience provides the tragic subject matters, including questions of God, death, and the claws of *Angst* in our era. Like Fosse’s fiction, his plays, too, consist of thematic and formal repetitions that go on and on and are sensual in their effects. Now, the repetitions are not only of a serially, churning, and dissolving kind. Another kind of repetition convinces us that the plays are also very well composed, almost like modernist novels. And this feature, too, no doubt belongs to the epicizing of Fosse’s dramatic writing.

In what follows I will discuss the possibility of dramatic meaning in Fosse’s epicizing and perspectivism in one of the milestones of the playwright – *Autumn Dream* (written 1998, first staged 1999).¹²⁰ I will show how the major themes (the effects of *temporality*, the substance of inner selfhood, the function of dream, and the nature of language) are distributed

buted on the two kinds of textual repetitional forces that I have indicated. My hypothesis is that in searching for phenomenal meaning, the play promises a totality by way of creative *compositional* repetitive devices, while, on the other hand, this meaningful totality is paradoxically (or ironically) undermined and short-circuited by a *churning and dissolving* repetitional force. Is then anything indicated *beyond* the meaning that the text establishes, and dissolves?

My own terms for the play’s two forces of form are *cohesion* and *collation*, ironically tugging in opposite directions. These will lead me to comment on a *formal* or *stylistic change* that seems to be underway in Fosse’s dramatic production, in the direction of the *prosaic*. A fundamental consequence of epicizing is increased perspectivism, and in my reading I shall pay particular attention to *Autumn Dream*’s use of *eyes*, *gazes*, and *the sense of vision* as devices, but also to epicism’s and perspectivism’s relation to *death*. I am particularly concerned about the *cryptographic qualities* of the play. As a basic trait *Autumn Dream* possesses an orphic quality. In rudimentary ways, this drama also plays with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, as we shall see, involving both characters, playwright, and readers, as well as the very problems pertaining to its own dramatic form.

II The level of “action”

Autumn Dream is set in a large churchyard, where five characters convene at funerals for loved ones. The Man, The Woman, Mother, Father, and The Man’s ex-wife Gray meet each other in shifting groups as well as *ensemble*, conversing by a single bench surrounded by graves – and sometimes meandering while reading tombstone inscriptions. In the course of the action, which shifts back and forth in time, The Man’s Grandmother, his Father, his (not dramatized) son Gaute, and The Man himself have died, finally leaving only Mother, The Woman, and Gray behind.

In spite of this, no “tragic rhythm of action” characterizes *Autumn Dream*. Compared to Francis Fergusson’s reformulation of Kenneth Burke (and Aristotle)¹²¹ into the meaning-productive series of *purpose* (of

119. Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama: A critical edition*, ed. and transl. Michael Hays, forew. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Theory and History of Literature; 29), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). (*Theorie der modernen Dramas* (1880–1950), orig. 1956, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965.)

120. Published as *Dramm om hausten* in Jon Fosse, *Teaterstykker 2*, Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 2001, pp. 103–25. An English version of Fosse’s drama is available (electronically and as photo copy) as *Autumn Dream*, transl. by Kim Dambeck, at Colombine Teaterforlag/Prod. AB, Gallegränd 1A, S-111 30 Stockholm, Sweden. Kim Dambeck originally translated the title as “Dream of Autumn”, but confirmed to me in April 2001 that he by then opted for “Autumn Dream” as the English title. In this article the English quotations from the drama are my own translations, and are based on the published Norwegian edition cited above, which also provides the Norwegian quotation.

121. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays: The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective*, Princeton, N. J. (1949), 1972.

action), *passion* (suffering), and *perception* (insight, for new action),¹²² Fosse's drama would yield little phenomenal meaning. It would reveal merely *passion* – human pain and suffering, as well as incurable fleshly desire – extending to cover almost the entire text. In my understanding, Jon Fosse's dramatic rhythm is rather linked to dramatic form and to linguistic structures.

Autumn Dream has no act divisions, but 18 scene segments established by entries and exits, as well as by time level shifts: There are six different time levels, plus an undramatized seventh one, in which The Man and The Woman have known each other in a past long ago. – What happens? The existentially lonely Man, grieving over a stricken marriage, reencounters the lonely, unmarried Woman, a meeting they both have dreamt about. They move together in hotel rooms and in a series of old houses, and The Man leaves his wife Gry and his son Gaute. While time levels keep shifting, The Man and The Woman converse about pasts and their present, about loneliness and desires, and they indulge in coarse genital intercourse. They converse about disappearances and the deceased, and about the tombstone inscriptions that they, and the others, keep reading ("Dorthe von Obsthfelder 1876–1903" (122, 137); "Knut Hjelmeland 1959–1982" (122); "Ida Gjentoft" (147)). They even indulge in lengthy, sexually coarse speculations about how the deceased were conceived.

The Man and The Woman also talk about dreams and fantasies, and about names and language: how it occurs that beautiful names may be experienced as sad, and how *that* which language names, in this case: birds, cannot be seen when we enter the space of the signified, e.g. when travelling by aeroplane. This conversation extends to observations of how words and language kill what is named, an impression one might have, e.g., when one talks about sex, and about God. While waiting for the funerals, they also speak about the substitutionalism in both life and things: Everything under God is seen as a series of towns, streets, houses, and graves that are merely locations and shells for human beings to occupy temporarily and then move away from, in substitution for others. Both men and dwellings are only substitutions, it occurs, in long chains – just like words and names substitute for things and for each other.

At this churchyard The Man's Mother and Father and later on Gry arrive, too in order, respectively, to wait for the various funerals (Grandmother's, Father's, the eventually mortally ill son Gaute's, and finally The Man's). – Mother suffers severely from *Angst* that her son will die in the company of the new Woman, and she conjures up images of a meaningful past with the whole family intact. Amidst scenes of reckoning, she dreams of a similar future with family come-togethers, including the new Woman too, whom she starts to accept. – The three ladies gradually take to each other, and without any specific funeral being dramatized (other than in the form of the perpetually repeated phrase "Tida er der" ('It is time')), Grandmother and the three men die and are buried. The play ends with Mother, Gry, and The Woman being reconciled, slowly walking out of the churchyard arm in arm.

III Thematics

This sketch of the play's action has indicated the typically Fosse'an everyday subject matter, and brought out the four major thematic strands. We identify *the inner self* of loss and loneliness, and – as almost always in Fosse – that self is in part helplessly displaced outwards into a coarsely sexualized and dehumanized bodiliness. The theme of *dreams* figures in the longings to re-create and bring forth the other person, in the desire for fleshly unification, and in yearnings for a life other than this. The dream also figures in Mother's images of family life, and in discussions of God's all-encompassing love. However, as it occurs both to characters and to audience, dreams also threaten to evaporate and to be displaced from realization. Metapoetically, this might even apply to the *Autumn Dream*, i.e. to the drama at hand, or even to drama as such – thereby raising the question of its very possibility. In that case, this *drama dream* is then depicted as equivalent to a season (late modernity?) of death and demise of that which, on the contrary, should dramatically depict interpersonal life. Drama up to modernity, as we know, has been the poetic form in which to render the "[always] present, interpersonal event[s]" according to Peter Szondi.¹²³

Furthermore, the theme of *temporality* can be identified in the frequent time level shifts, in the characters' groping in the past for the condi-

122. An interesting discussion of tragic rhythm in relation to repetition in Chekhov's plays can be found in Clayton A. Hubbs, "Repetition in the Plays of Chekhov", *op.cit.*, pp.

115–124.

123. Szondi, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

tions of possibility of a happier future than the present, and, naturally, in all the "passage of time"-reminders in the *Leimotif* phrases "Det er tid" and "Tida er der" ('It is time'; 'Time is there'; i.e. time to attend funerals). That motif, though, also strangely reminds us that when it is time to act (which is to take part in funerals), the "action" in question is to witness an acting life's perpetual rest. So, the temporality theme is also given in the deaths, the funerals, and the death paraphernalia of tombstones.

Intertwined in all of this lies the fourth and specifically Fosse's theme of *names, words, and language*. It is indicated emblematically in the compositionally repeated motifs of the sadness inherent in beautiful names, and of the non-existence of named birds (112 f., 133, 147). But the language theme is also given in the serial-like reading of the *cryptography* of the tombstones, as well as in the series of utterances occurring in the abasing and sexually charged language of the main characters. This seriality is parallelized in the already mentioned thematization of the empty sideways substitutions of man's dwelling places (from God's creation, over towns, streets, houses, and to graves; 120 f.), as well as in the continuously ongoing substitutions of old houses by The Man and The Woman.

IV Perspectivism and stylistic change

How can this reading of motifs and thematics be corroborated in a reading of the play's forces of form? – Let me turn first to the play's *perspectivism*: We are able to perceive the four thematic strands because the play is *epicized*: They are told, narrated to us in the characters' dialogues, and in the playwright's totalizing outlook (this is part of the Ibsen-Chekhovian form convention, reinforced by the use of elements from the Constraint and Conversation Plays). But *Autumn Dream* is also imbued with an even heavier perspectivism, so powerful that it takes on an orphic quality: The whole drama exists as if in an ambivalent border area – it undermines and makes uncertain the status, the reality, and the possibility of precisely the selves, the dreams, the past, present and future, as well as the carrying force of language. – How? – By continually, mainly in stage directions, underlining the characters' sense of vision, their gazes, and that the things they speak about are merely *seen*, in *perspectives of apperception*. In this manner, *Autumn Dream* places

itself and what it speaks about in a border zone between phenomenality and the possible spectrality of negation, dissolution and death.

Let me include a few examples of this formal structure, before I proceed to a reading of the play's two forces of form (the cohesive and the collative). – Firstly, in the opening scene, we witness how The Man, among the graves, presses lips and eyes together and thereafter suddenly opens his eyes, and how he then "*ser skrått ut i ingenting, og medan han stir slik kjem ei kvinne gåande*" (107).¹²⁴ He now sees The Woman that he has longed for, dreamt about, and creatively imagined. But what, then, is her status? Can she last? Can he last, who has re-created her in his longings and dreams, and now brought her back after a long separation? This certainly – not doubles or copies, but plays with the myth of Orypheus and Eurydice. – With the genders relations changed, the next time level provides a second example. There, it is the fearing Mother who, as it were, both creatively and destructively directs *her* gaze at The Man and The Woman, who, after an instant, temporary exit from the churchyard. She perceptively "creates" them, and, simultaneously, sees her own son with The Woman disappear "frå alt, frå sirt eige liv, rett inn i sin eigen død" (150 f.).¹²⁵ With the same textually underlined gaze the Mother then sees the two of them return among the graves (163 f.). And in this fashion it goes on: At each time level shift, someone with his or her perspectival gaze – in a double movement, creatively and destructively – sees who and what goes away, and who and what is brought forth in this manner, all the time leaving an ambivalent uncertainty behind about the status of the seen.

A third instance makes this structure spookier still: It is even we, as readers/audience, who by looking at them, find ourselves perceiving the whole drama in a similar fashion. It figures as a paradoxical structure of redemption and disappearance, highlighted in the end in the emblem of the three reconciled ladies exiting: "arm i arm går dei tre kvinnene sakre ut" (255).¹²⁶ They have lost their loved ones. We have read, seen, brought forward, and now see dissolving in the dim stage lighting, precisely those figures. Where are they going? Where did they come from? What status do they have? What meaning is brought out? – Even the playwright himself is part of this structure; he – the dramatist – endeavours,

124. "... [he then] opens his eyes wide, gazes obliquely outwards into nothing and while he is standing like this a woman approaches".

125. "... from everything, from his own life, straight into his own death".

126. "... arm in arm the three women exit slowly".

Like us, to (re-)create something in an old drama form, attempting to hold it together. *He* does so in his creative, compositional perspective; but what does he achieve, what meaning does he bring forth? In other words we might say that it is the whole crisis-ridden modern Ibsen-Chekhovian drama form and his development of it that Fosse, in his compositional perspective, here puts on the block. But not only the playwright, also *we* as readers and spectators are with our perspectival gazes made part of the venture of (re-)creating this form, trying to keep it alive in asking it to render phenomenal meaning for us. A meaning, so to speak, slightly harder to come by, it turns out, than it might seem at first sight. Right there in the twilight zone, we are made to experience a form convention being revived at the same time as it is shown about to ebb, to disappear, to dissolve. So, its status and meaning remain uncertain. Still, and paradoxically, it is an ingenious perspectival creation Fosse has made and has forced us to be spectrally part of in *Autumn Dream*.

Reading Fosse's dramatic production like this enables us to ask the important question of what *stylistic change* there might be underway in his art. To use Peter Szondi's Hegelian terminology in *Theory of the Modern Drama*: What new precipitation as form or formal features – out of the complex of the included thematics – might be seen embedded in Fosse? What formal precipitation might be witnessed here as a possible further development of a dramatic form tradition, still keeping it alive and even making it so appealing to many readers and audiences around 2000? My hypothesis is that to find an answer, we have to focus on the elements in Fosse of a radicalization of the modern epicizing trends of the 19th century "crisis forms" – into a late modern, churning *proliferation* of the dramatic text, and I surmise this feature has to do with the inclusion in Fosse of the theme of names, words, and language. In order to substantiate that hypothesis I shall have to bring to the fore the ironic tug-of-form between this play's cohesive and collative forces.

Part of my horizon in this analysis is, besides Szondi and Th. W. Adorno,¹²⁷ also Georg Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* (for we are certainly on epicized and perspectival territory!).¹²⁸ Lukács' study gives resonance to *Autumn Dream*'s lack of an encompassing existence, and to

the characters' massively repeated fears of disappearance and death in love (the lovers long to be paradoxically "äleine saman" (133, *et passim*),¹²⁹ but realize early on that "viss vi [...] slo oss saman / så ville alt [...] forsvinne" (127; 245 f.)).¹³⁰ Similarly, they complain about the unbearable mix of "Kjærliek og død / berre kjærliek og død" (132); "Død / Død og kjærliek" (236)).¹³¹ In his study, Lukács writes that "[Being-Human] in the New World is to be solitary."¹³² Lukács refers to modern solitude as "transzendental[e] Obdachlosigkeit"¹³³ ("transcendental homelessness";¹³⁴ or even: 'roof-lessness'). Precisely like the young couple's situation in Fosse's play *The Name*, *The Man's* and *The Woman's* homeless situation in *Autumn Dream* is the very image of this modern non-transcendental experience: There is no nuclear family, neither is there any encompassing dwelling-place or transcendental "Obdach" any more; there are only scattered rooms, and a series of old houses that *The Man* tries to repair, but which they keep abandoning, one after the other. And at another level – when they search at the churchyard for meaning in their existence, they do not find any links to God there, but merely the deceased, and the crytopography of the inscriptions on their tombstones.

The formerly closed, transcendental cohesion between man and world has in modernity been replaced by subjective perspectives. The modern art form, the novel, writes Lukács, therefore endeavours to create an artificial cohesion and totality by way of the subjective compositional grasp of the writer himself. But, – this is a tenet in Szondi's study,¹³⁵ also in modern drama there is "epicizing" and subjectivization, since the late 19th century's new themes can only be "told" (e.g. in characters' perspectives, or by various kinds of narrators or stage managers, or side-textual arrangements), or else be presented compositionally by the playwright's artistically creative, encompassing and grasping hand: The

127. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel. A historic-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, transl. Anna Bostock, London: Merlin Press, 1971. (G. L., *Die Theorie des Romans. Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der großen Epik*, orig. 1916/1920, Newwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1974.)

129. "... alone together".

130. "... if we became a couple, then everything would disappear".

131. "Love and death / merely love and death"; "Death / Death and love".

132. Lukács, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

133. German edition, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

134. Lukács, English edition, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

135. *Theory of the Modern Drama*, *op.cit.*

127. I refer in particular to Adorno's reading of Beckett in "Towards an Understanding of Endgame", in Bell Gale Chevigny (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969, pp. 82–114 (orig. in *Noten zur Literatur*, Bd. II, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1961, pp. 188–236).

thematic past and the thematic self can in the dramatic form only be narrated, not depicted in any absolute dramatic manner. All of this is related to the perspectivism of modern drama, that we have already seen some examples of in Fosse's late modern play.

These formal features are precisely functions of modern man's solitude. But in depicting the historically specific, more intensified solitude of late 20th century man, the structure of Fosse's drama finds in its interior the competing forces of both a subjective, totalizing compositional grip, and an idling prosaic series of dissolving, reified linguistic repetition structures — of the kind that probably Beckett first showed us the meaningless meaning of. These two forces, brought together and made to work within the same formal structure, turn Fosse's drama into an *ironical* one, to be sure. However, the formal paradox is historico-philosophically conditioned, and it is tied in with Fosse's "fourth theme": the current problem of language. It is when a totalizing and phenomenal, liveable meaning is no longer in sight — within the modern thematic bounds of the past, the self, and in dream — that also language itself must be thematized, in which process it in Hegelian terms "passes over" and sits down into the late modern formal variant.

By way of some examples I will now proceed to sketch the two formal forces of cohesion and collation in Fosse's drama, and how the four themes are distributed in relation to them.

V Cohesion: Form and existence

The characters' lack of a "transcendental vault" is epically compensating for by an artificial, overarching and cohesive composition: *This* perspectivism is subjective of the playwright, striving to round the work off in a *Formvollkommenheit*. The composition extends promises of phenomenal meaning, and endeavours to anchor the drama in an existential *Lebenswelt*.¹³⁶

In *Autumn Dream* this existentially anchoring cohesion can be seen on three levels. Firstly, in the framing repetition of some central motifs. The estranged, loveless existence that the main characters suffer is, at the beginning and at the end of the text, counteracted by an artificially provided meaningfulness in the repetition of the frame motif, uttered by The Man: "Kjærliek og død / berre kjærliek og død" (132), and at the end once more: "Død / Død og kjærliek" (236). This frame endeavours

to imbue the characters' variants of worthless love with a meaning after all, but obviously as an artistic device. Even the steamingly general segments are built into an encompassing frame like this (pp. 221 and 236). The characters' existential "homelessness" turns into artistic-artificial "homeliness". The drama certainly knows what might figure as "Obdächer".

Further examples: Mother's lines after her first entry, and again near the end of the text, about how she envisages that her son will die, and that his new girl-friend will lead him into that death, create an encompassing frame even out of her existential *Angst* and the negativity she senses in The Woman. The same frame-making is seen in a number of repeated character gestures and in descriptions given in the narrative stage directions (The Man "may have wept" at the beginning (107), and towards the end the same goes for The Woman (213); both Mother (164) and The Woman (220), in symmetrically composed gestures, put hand and arm on The Man's shoulder to the effect of comforting him and of easing his life's misery; and so on).

These romanesque or novelistic means of dressing meaningfulness, grief and misery up as meaning and existential home-being are clearly artistically created. — The second level of compositional devices can be witnessed in the abundance of things and objects repeatedly employed as *Leitmotive*. To mention just a few, let me refer to the bench (which collates and supports the grief-stricken); the tombstones (providing the characters with a sense of familiarity between then and now); the old bonnets (in his own understanding, The Man has invested time in refurbishing them to take care of that which has and those who *have been*); furthermore, and finally, the wreath (held by the Mother, abundantly repeated as the perhaps most signifying of the encompassing, reconciling *Leitmotive*-objects): Each time she gets up and sits down, touching her loved ones, the wreath is mentioned by the narrator in the stage directions, and each

136. In Fosse's dramatic production the holistic compositional formal force figures in a number of variants, for instance: Spectular (and mirroring) act structure (*The Name, The Son*);

architectural organization of scenes and *Aufzitate* (*The Name*); the use of exits to and entries from a locality off-stage (*Autumn Dream*); temporal and situational shifts (*Autumn Dream*); frame narrations/story double characters (young/old); epic/narrative "relays" (*A Summer's Day*); *Death Variations*); compositional character narrating prologue and epilogue; and marking changes in the scenic room (*A Person*); inner vs. outer rooms, distribution of affects and action sequences on characters (*Someone Will Arrive, Winter*); reality level shifts, jinking of characters through objects (*And Never Shall We Part, The Child*);

characters as functions of objects (*Night Songs*).

time family and generational bonds as well as the possible link between earth and heaven are discussed, the wreath is involved. Still, we should make no mistake about it: When the three ladies Eurydice-like finally disappear under our gaze, leaving churchyard and stage, drama and traditional (modern) drama form, the well-plaited wreath with its formal plenitude and symbolic overtones has been substituted for a *bouquet of flowers* in Mother's hands (254). In my reading, the bouquet is here expressive of that which is severed and dying, an emblematic image of separated (floral) bodies – unanchored and disseminated members, artificially held together by force.

Thirdly, the reconciliatory, cohesive formal force of the play is above all seen in the distribution of the *theme of temporality* to be handled epically by the work's encompassing composition. To be sure, this totalizing attempt crackles and breaks down. However, it is a strong artistic force in the text. Although we are able to sense the time shifts as they occur, they figure so frequently and rapidly that the artistic will to assemble all time levels comes close to being overpowering. What does that signify? It means that this formal feature strives for repetition of life situations, and, through repetition, works to have time stand still (or: to have time pass only in circles). In other words: The cohesive formal force is one of redemption, and strives not to yield to (nor accept) the irrefutable reality of linear time, and thereby death.

Unmistakably Chekhov-like, we hear time and again: "det er så lenge siden" (Mann, 220); "Alt er lenge siden / og vi kan ikke være her" (Kvinne, 249); "ingenting er lenge siden" (Gry, 249); "Vi har jo nettrøft kvarandre / og så er det liksom vi har vore her alltid" (K, 217); "Ingenting er det same" (M, 236); "Og alt er det same" (K, 237); "Alt har skjedd / og ingenting" (K, 248).¹³⁷ Perceivingly, we hear utterances to the same effect by those about to take part in the funerals: "Vi er tidleg ute", "De er tidleg ute, de òg", and "Tida er der".¹³⁸ – *It is time*: This powerful repetitional force totalizingly indicates that all times, actions, and relationships are in cohesion with each other, or even "are" the same. Time, in this manner, is artificially depicted as an existential continuum

of reconciliation, and even of redemption. However, this is the case only on the condition that the reality of linear time, and thereby of death, is bracketed. In this way, the illusion is created that time can be stalled – by metaphorical, cohesive repetition. It is as though it were the same funeral that is being waited for throughout the whole work.

But at the same time, though, *Autumn Dream* reveals its seams and pleats. Every time the play's action shifts from one time level to another, the text underscores its own built-in perspectivism: that it is one of the characters who sees by directing his or her eyes and gaze towards the new or the old time level's characters and movements. I.e. we are "told" that it is a vindicated and mediated continuity that is established between time levels. Time and temporality, then, cannot figure as absolute (present) – and certainly never could have done so, either. Here is one of the instances: "(Moral) stansen, ser i reiningen av der mannen og kvinna gjekk. – MOR: snakkar etter dei No må du komme tilbake [...] Du må ikkje berre forsvinne [...] Det begynner å gå skjævingar gjennom kroppen bennar, ho sner framfor seg [...] (150 f.)¹³⁹ – and so on, throughout the text (e.g. 163, 209, 220, 230, 248, 254). By way of the relativized perspective, the conjured-up "absolute" fullness of time disappears again, precisely in the gaze, like for Orpheus: The underscored epic perspectivism reminds us of the paradoxical – ironic – *orbic quality* of *Autumn Dream*: What status do characters, actions, thoughts, and the dramatic form itself actually possess here?

The morbid quality of disappearance, dissolution and death in the play is what the final section of this essay will deal with. For the cohesive force of the illusion of stopping linear time and of proceeding in dream-like temporal circles is countered by a quite different formal force, which de-subjectivizes the characters, and reintroduces death and temporal seriality as a reality for the living. It even lends to some of these characters a tinge of tragedy.

137. "... it is so long ago" (The Man, 220); "Everything is long ago / and we cannot stay here" (The Woman, 249); "... nothing is long ago" (Gry, 249); "But we have just met each other / and still it feels as if we have been here for ever" (W, 217); "Nothing stays the same" (M, 236); "And everything stays the same" (W, 237); "Everything has happened / and nothing" (W, 248).

138. "We are early"; "You are early, you too"; "It is time".

139. "(The Mother) stops, sees in the direction in which the man and the woman went away. – MOTHER: speaks after them Now you must come back [...] You must not just disappear [...] Her body begins to be transfused with trembling, and she gazes straight ahead of her [...]"

VI Collation: Form and dissemination

As in the former section, two things interest us here, *viz.* to grasp the structure of the formal force in question, and also to identify the themes that the text distributes to be handled by it. It soon strikes the reader's eye that it is the inner self, and the characters' dreams, as well as the language-philosophical theme that we are forced to read as enmeshed in collative aggregations: like metonymic, serial repetitions of motifs, phrases, and perspectival structures. The structure of the formal force in question here is one of repetitions that are in principle endless. I will focus on some examples.

First, the initial narrative stage direction (it is exemplary of later ones, as well) focuses on the perspectivisms of eyes, gazes, and inner consciousness, as well as – semantically – on the inner human self, its dreams, and on language. In the presentation of The Man, The Woman, and the setting given to them, we encounter an apocalyptic figure of penetration, based, as apocalyptic discourse tends to be, on a blend of penetrating perspectival gazes, and unfulfilled promises of insight, of meaning. The figure enacts itself in a series of atempted interpretations, or: in relays of meaning-fulfilling reading attempts:

På ein liten del av ein stor kyrkegård. Sein haust. Det bar nett regna. Svarte tre, nokre lauvs heng att, nokre lauvs ligg rundt omkring. Ein grusgang. Ein malingsfiken benk. Ein mann kjem gåande på grusgangen, går ut or grusgangen, bort til ei gravstøtte, les det som står på den, blir ståande og sjå mot den, går til ei anna gravstøtte, les også det som står på den, står ei stund og ser på den, går så ned igjen i grusgangen, går og set seg ned på benken. Han ser opp, og han kan ha gråte. Han trekkjer frakken bevre om seg, ser ned mot den våte grusen. Han reiser seg, gøper med munnen, skal liksom seie noko, blir ståande slik stivt ei stund, men pressar så mann og ange saman, ei smerte går gjennom andlætet, så sperrar han anga opp, ser deratt ut i ingenting og medan han står slike kjem ei kvinne gåande, ho ser han, men prøver å te seg slike at han ikkje skal legge merke til henne, ho veit ikkje heilt om ho skal snu eller gå forbi han, nøler, og han merkar henne såvidt, ho ser ned, han set seg ned igjen på benken, sjener, brydd, han ser så forsiktig mot henne, og kjemner henne att (107).¹⁴⁰

The passage figures a narrator speaking (and interpreting!), but also more than that. It is based on the process of seeing and unveiling a pro-

posed inner meaning. The figure that operates here has no less than five levels, or relays, which all base their activity on perspectival seeing-reading-interpreting that which in side texts normally are external descriptions. By way of its shifts between direct and free indirect discourse, the dramatic discourse in the passage presents us with nothing short of a novelistic segment (epic!). It involves the five relays of playwright, reader, an active narrator moving from outside to inside the characters (external to internal focalization), then the active character minds of The Man and The Woman, and finally: even the tombstone inscriptions. All of them turn out to be attempting to perform an unveiling reading, but the apocalyptic figure goes on and on, and ends up – irretrievably – in the reading of inscriptions for that which is dead.

In other words, the figure yields no inner meaning. It even reverses the movement, making the irretrievable dead "speak" through the gravestones, to the characters, to the narrator, to the reader/spectator, and to the dramatist, as well. In this manner the whole figure analyzed here – a remarkable serial and sideways, metonymic figure – is also a loop-like one, which is collative and stands paradoxically opposed to the cohesive force studied in the former section. Indeed, it adds further to the previously indicated orphic quality of *Autumn Dream*. At work here is a notingness which dehumanizes phenomenal human activity by way of serial repetitions.¹⁴¹

Second, in *Autumn Dream* a series of phrases and motifs, striving to depict the inner selves and the dreams of the characters, are also figured in collative, churning repetitions. They reveal no substances of selves, nor any horizon on which dreams might come true. Instead, the sought-for inwardness frequently becomes inverted, and tends to take the shape

140. "In a small section of a large churchyard. Late autumn. It has just been raining. Black trees, some leaves are still left hanging; some leaves are lying round about. A gravel path. A bench with faded paint. A man approaches on the gravel path, steps out of the gravel path, approaches a tombstone, reads what it says, remains standing looking towards it, walks to another tombstone, reads also what that one says, stands for a while looking at it, then returns again down onto the gravel path, walks over to and sits down on the bench. He looks up, and he may have been weeping. He tugs his coat tighter around himself, looks down towards the moist gravel. He gets up, opens his mouth wide, is, like, about to say something, remains standing stiffly like this for a while, but then presses mouth and eyes together, a pain passes across his face, he then opens his eyes wide, glances obliquely outwards into nothing and while he is standing like this a woman approaches, she sees him but tries to behave in a manner so that he will not pay attention to her, she does not quite know whether to turn around or to pass him by, hesitates, and he notices her barely, she looks down, he sits down again on the bench, shy, embarrassed, he then carefully looks towards her, and recognizes her" (107).

of a material, bodily exterior – not of the existential *individuum*, but of sheer serial biology. Here are a few examples:¹⁴² In the massively repeated stage directions there is hardly an end to the way characters do *not* communicate with each other as full selves, but instead revert to physical activities; they “set ned” (to the ground), “sparker i grusen”, and stand passively “sienert”.¹⁴³ The narrative voice, moreover, hardly ever depicts characters as fully developed individuals, but reverts to interminable repetitions of *quantifying* ways to qualify their actions, feelings and thoughts. What they do, might feel, dream of, or think is rendered merely by approximations: “lirt”, “liksom”, “nesten, ganske”, etc.¹⁴⁴ Neither the will to act nor the language to produce oneself seems to be at the characters’ command.

Furthermore, selves and dreams are repeatedly turned into expressions of mere bodily lacks, tactility, and sexual desire, rendered in a deflated language devoid of individual traces (for instance: “eg gikk hit [...] for å treffe deg [...] treffe deg [...] har sakna deg [...] tenke eg [...] kom til å treffe deg [...] har jo sakna kvarandre lenge [...] saknar deg [...] saknar deg [...] du er [...] nesten inne i kroppen min” (116, 125, 141 f.)¹⁴⁵). Spoken is a random language that the characters are unable to mark in any personal way: It is a language speaking above and past them, but in their voices.

Their togetherness is not one of plenitude; their nearness to each other consists merely of being *bodily* and “metonymically” beside one

141. Apocalyptic (as well as parabolic) language and figuring is a common phenomenon in Jon Fosse, in his dramas as well as in his prose fiction. For such discourse in Fosse, cf. also my articles on the novel *Morgon og kveld* (Morning and Eve): “I staden for død – i staden for gaddom: Ande, tøyser, lys og ord i Jon Fosses roman *Morgon og kveld*”, in *EDDA*, 2/2002, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002, pp. 216–225; and “On the Terms of Words: Masks of a Christian Life”, in *Scandinavica*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Norwich: Norvik Press, Nov. 2001, pp. 285–299. For apocalyptic and parabolic discourse, see also J. Hillis Miller’s informed analysis of the paradoxes and ironies of meaning, language and figural rhetoric in Conrad, in “Heart of Darkness Revisited”, *Traps, Parables, Performances: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature*, New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1990, pp. 181–193.

142. Theodor W. Adorno’s reading of Beckett has been an inspiration in what follows; see his “Towards an Understanding of *Endgame*”, in Bell Gale Chevigny (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of *Endgame**.

143. “... look down” (to the ground), “kick their feet into the gravel”, and stand passively “embarrassed”.

144. “... a little”, “in a way like...”, “almost”, “rather/pretty much”.

145. “I came here [...] to meet you [...] meet you [...] have missed you [...] thought I [...] might happen to see you [...] did miss each other for a long time [...] miss you [...] miss you [...] you are [...] almost inside my body” (116, 125, 141 f.).

another. This is made churningly clear in the widespread repetitions of phrases like “Vil du ikkje setje deg [...] her på benken, atrmed meg her på benken”,¹⁴⁶ in a de-subjectivized, unmarked language. The characters’ understanding of love, too, is inhuman, or at least regressive and infantile: Another of the sideways churning repetition structures is that of the motif of being “*alene saman*”, which The Man and The Woman endlessly repeat, as if such a paradox were a practically feasible option to them. The material repetitiveness that we witness in their lines is a phenomenon which reveals itself linguistically, and that invades their voices, turning what we now have to call their so-called selves into sheer material biology. These “selves” present a late modern version of what Th. W. Adorno in Beckett calls “the stubbornness of bodies”. Repeatedly through Fosse’s play, The Woman speaks of licking – and she as well keeps groping for – The Man’s genitals there on the bench. Their so-called dreams repeatedly turn out to be merely of not leaving one another, managing to be staying together, and of lying naked next to one another in bed, in a room, on a bench. Massive repetitions such as these figure as a shaping force in Fosse’s dramatic text, opening selves, minds, actions, and dramatic form to an infantile, material idling of language.

At this point, we again encounter the stylistic change that seems to be underway in Jon Fosse’s late modern dramas. Language and its de-subjectivizing, “estranging” power – made emblematically thematic in the passages, referred to above, on how beautiful names tend to be sad, on how birds we talk and dream about simply are not there when we enter their sphere, and on how words even kill what they name – this kind of language is what we here witness precipitating and sifting down as form in Fosse’s dramatic text. In its late modernity, it is a *non-referential*, uprooted language of repetitive automatism, of “liquidated subjects (with an ontology run *ad absurdum*)”, to use Adorno’s formulation. The characters repeat empty phrases in interminable series, and indulge in a contiguous actional automatism, frequently genital, of bodies and touch. The Man even reduces tombstone inscriptions and the once living humans they were supposed to represent, into vile and lustful “dream scenes” of how the deceased were once conceived by their parents’ automatic and degenerated carnal activities (135–138). All of this are functions of a linguistically overrun, late modern biological

146. “Will you not sit down [...] here, on the bench, beside me here on the bench”.

individual, with "a self" and with "dreams" turned outwards into degenerated instances of the corporeal.

The sole "humanness" left in these characters figures in the dialogues as empty, churning repetitions of how fortunate it was for Grandma to be able to pass away, having lived for such a long time. It also figures as the automatism of the most frequently repeated phrase in the text: how important it is to come for visits to each other, and how nice it is to see one another.¹⁴⁷ But if this is so, we also have to ask – with reference to what seems to be the final shred of twisted humanity in the text, *viz.* the characters' frequently repeated trepidations and *Angst* that everything: people, relations, love, and dreams, will simply disappear, "forsvinne" – What, then, are they so afraid of? What do they fear so much?

I think some answers have been indicated already. The churning, repetitional seriality, the collative apocalyptic force in narrator's side texts, and in these late modern characters' discourse and action automatism, including the forceful seriality of the characters' *Angst*, figure as a power that has invaded them and betrayed them of the plenitude of human selves. It has turned them into de-humanized material bodies, in which thoughts and affects, cares, affections and dreams have become second-degree, and "governed"¹⁴⁸ – by an overpowering linguistic might stemming from societal community at large. Jon Fosse's drama is an observer of this ongoing degeneration and de-ontologizing (to use Adorno's phrase). When feelings and thoughts, dreams and selves, linked to such prosaically churning linguistic structures, become second-degree material, subjects are also derived and merely imitate each other serially (precisely into biological individuals and the mere stubbornness of bodies). And so the play's paradoxical formal handling of its themes leaves its characters, and perhaps even its readers-spectators, with the inexplicable, non-understandable, non-human affect *par excellence*: the *Angst*, "the terror glimpsed", "the sheer blind violence" that Paul de Man discusses in some of his essays. It seems to be an affect (human), but it is also a function of late modern (inhuman) language and its enumerated (or quantifiable) elements of prosaization, beyond the epicized perspectivism of modernity.¹⁴⁹ Again, with reference to Peter Szondi and his observation and critical understanding of stylistic change: The themes of self and dream intertwined with the theme of language included

by Fosse, precipitate as altered form in this sideways, serially-repetitive dramatic form language that we have studied.

VII

I have discussed the conditions of possibility of dramatic meaning in Jon Fosse's *Autumn Dream*. In so doing, I have focused on two paradoxically contradictory, ironical forces of form in his drama – at work for cohesion, and for collation, respectively. On the one hand, compositional devices and the handling of the theme of temporality work metaphorically and in space, endeavouring to provide the characters with an existential "home" and a meaningful existence. On the other, the differently powerful repetitional structure of metonymic, sideways seriality and automatism, takes hold of the narrator's voice in the side texts, as well as the themes of the inner self, of dreams, and of language in our time. This structure threatens to dehumanize the characters, and to turn them into derived functions of a linguistic and actional materiality and automatism, exposing them to a radicalized historico-philosophical "homelessness".

As I have shown, dramatic meaning in Fosse's late modernity still is a possibility, on conditions, but it is being severely threatened by societal linguistic counter forces. They challenge phenomenal and existential reality, and open the already modern existential *Obdachtlosigkeit* for further reflection. But what, then, lies beyond the traces of dramatic meaning that can still be found in Fosse's late modernity? Do the shadows cast by a spectral deharmonizing power that we have encountered indicate a different realm – a *beyond*, that also figures in the title of this essay? My answer can only be tentative, and by no means conclusive, but still: There is an emanation, or a breath, of a morbidity – also linked to the extensive graveyard imagery of *Autumn Dream* – a morbidity that the massiveness and abundance of linguistic structures in our time, glues man to. It invades human lives, and it expresses itself without

147. To fathom the frequency, cf. pp. 173, 177, 178 f., 181, 182, 183, 192, 193, 194, 198, 200, 201, 202, 203, 208, etc.

148. Norw.: "forvalter".

149. For further discussions of such linguistic structures, forces, and paths, cf. e.g. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, Minneapolis, 1996; and the more recent Tom Cohen et al. (eds.), *Material Events*, Minneapolis and London, 2001; see also de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Tom Trogue in the Lyric", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, 1984, pp. 239–262, and "Hypogram and Inscription", *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, 1986, pp. 27–53.

man's existential involvement, but in his voice. This morbidity, however, frightening though it may seem, is something that always already rules our lives, and that we paradoxically live but also keep dying in, every single day. In its capacity to fathom, and to show the stakes in and the reality of this, *Autumn Dream* is indeed about the cryptography of drama as well as of life. And in this capacity, the play offers reflective insights; it even appears as highly realistic – stemming against aesthetic as well as everyday ideologies.

At the same time, Fosse's production shows us the precarious state of drama in our time, what ambivalent status it possesses, and how it is challenged as form. Still, he works *with* and *inside* the tradition of form, in my view in the only viable manner, a way that takes responsibility for a tremendously important and problem-oriented cultural heritage: by entering the critical forms of *modernity*, and openness and receptive developing them further to meet demands on a *late modern stage*. In a sense, this is a rescue job to be done, but in Fosse's dramatic strategy it is also an attempt to open dramatic language up to societal forces, thereby making drama "current" again. The strong appeal of his plays, I think, may be seen in that light – that appeal is, unquestionably, testified to by the strong interest of large groups of readers and spectators worldwide.

Jon Fosse's work is an endeavour to reopen dramatic expression to forces of *negation* – that have indeed imbued it since Antiquity. For drama – drama is about something much, much greater, and more powerful, than ourselves.

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Vakkert eller boring?

Ein resepsjonshistorisk tilgang til Jon Fosses dramatik

Rolv Nørvik Jakobsen

Jon Fosse er, saman med Cecilie Løveid, ein av dei dramatikarane som får teaterrekstane sine utgitt på eit stort forlag samtidig med premieren. Han er altså ein *litterær dramatikar* òg i heilt banal meining ved at skodespela er tilgjengelege som litterære tekstar. (Derre er ikkje lenger ein vanleg framgangsmåte. Men det var ein utbreidd praksis på 1800-talet. Henrik Ibsen t.d. ville vere ein litterær forfattar i den meininga. Og han har med tida blitt det: Kven les no gåsldagens dagsmeldingar av urpremierar for å forstå Ibsens srykke?) Det spennande ved dramatekstane til Jon Fosse, som av utslånad er til forveksling lik romanane og essaysamlingane, er at desse tekstane berre heilt unntaksvis blir meldt som tekstar, som bøker i dagspressa. Det er urpremieremeldinga som dominerer. Det har sine fine sider. Det tar vare på det spontane møtet mellom ei oppføring og eit publikum. Det gjer rett mot tekstens teatralitet, at den er laga for å bli spelt på ei teaterscene.

Men dramateksten er jo også skapt for å bli oppført *fleire gonger*, og urframføringa er ikkje kanonisk. For å bedømme sjølv srykket, og ikkje den konkrete framføringa den dagen, har melderane eit problem som er heilt parallelt med meldingar av urframføringar av samtidsmusikk: korleis skilje mellom teksten/partituret og oppsejinga den konkrete dagen, korleis "unscramble" omeletten? Meldingane av Fosses srykke gir fleire eksempel på slike forsøk med å skilje mellom oppføring og srykke. Av typen: Musikken var god, men framføringa var dårleg. Eller enda meir problematisk: Framføringa var god, men musikken var dårleg. (Derfor blir det faktisk spennande når eit srykke blir oppført for andre gong.

Kulturstudier nr 40

I skriftas lys og teatersalens mørke

Ein antologi om Ibsen og Fosse

Gunnar Foss (red.)

Program for
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I skriftas lys og teatersalens mørke

Forord

Gunnar Foss

Denne boka rommar ni artiklar om våre to største dramatiske forfatarar og har sin bakgrunn i ein konferanse arrangert av NFR-prosjektet "Blikket" ved NTNU, Trondheim, i 2002. Ibsen og Fosse skulle neppe trenge noen nærmare presentasjon. Alle kjenner Ibsens einestående posisjon i moderne teaterhistorie. Fosse skulle også vera vel kjent; han har gitt ut kritikarroste bøker i 20 år, og dramatik har han til no skrive i ti av desse åra. Det som her har ført dei saman, er ei viss litteratur- og teaterfaglig undring overfor desse to suksessfenomena. Kva er det som gjer Ibsens dramatik så slitesterk? Kva er det med Fosses dramatik som kan forklare den enorme gjennomslagskrafta den har hatt på scenar snart verda over? Kort sagt: Kva er det med Ibsen og Fosse?

Enten perspektivet er litteraturvitskaplig eller teaterfaglig vil svara på slike spørsmål sjølvstakt vera å finne i eigenskapar ved tekstane sjølve. Gjennomslagskraft og slitestyrke er i alle fall eit spørsmål om tekstlige kvaliteter, om poetisk energi og eit rikt tolkingspotensial, som gjer at desse tekstane i skriftande situasjonar evnar å utfordre lesarens eller tilskodarens fridom til å dikte med. Men detre er ei form for fridomsutøving som ikkje alltid kan rekne med å vera gjenstand for opphavsmennenes sjenertøse nåde: Ibsen harselerer i *Peter Gynt* over "de halvfjerssindstve Fortollkeres Kreds", som han til alt overmål plasserer i "Dårekisten i Kairo". Samtidig let han hovudpersonen sjølv, den litt ubestremmelige signifikanten Peet, bli unemnt til "Fortollkeres Keiser". Det blir han ikkje nettopp mindre kompleks av. Fosse har ikkje vore meir nådig i