

Dramatic form and meaning in Jon Fosse
– with a special focus on *The Name* (1995)

I

In Jon Fosse's dramas, currently more than 15 in number, as well as in his extensive prose fiction, we encounter masterful elaborations of a variety of subject matters. Some of them are modulated in a series of recurring and recognizable themes. I consider the intentionality of Fosse's writing to be epistemological and investigatory in orientation. Not only his narratives, but also his dramas contribute to a steadfast and continuous investigation of the hazy and slippery foundations of modern existence in its everyday shapes. This investigation relates to ordinary human beings as well as to the social outcast.

Thematically, Fosse's dramas grope for and probe the very conditions of possibility of such problem areas as our modern solitude and the yearning for togetherness, the conditions of affectionate love, often in triangular or problematic love relations; they look into the question of interpersonal bonds, and the realm of sensual affections. They inquire about the essentials of our daily toil for a living, they investigate parental influences, they focus on the past and on characters' upbringing. The dramas also raise the question of generations, and of man's potentials in origin and heredity. They touch upon the conditions of the intrusion of madness, and they shed light on the role of memory and its status today. Even the conditions of possibility of that unnamable area which we sometimes refer to as "divinity", sometimes as "the sublime", and which in Fosse's dramas time and time again surfaces as *det merkelege* ("the peculiar", "the

curious", "the strange", "the occult"), the drama texts launch out for and bring into play.

The latter is, by the by, a reality which in the characters' experience is frequently far removed from metaphysics. To *them* it is as physical as anything else in their lives, in that they sense that "peculiarity" as either painful or pleasurable palpitations in their very bodies: as dread or *Angst*, or as the paradoxical presence of a soothingly embracing absence.

Further such fundamental themes in Fosse are the questions of a god or of a (holy) spirit, that of the givens of man's life and work, as well as the theme of life as an essential waiting. What human life stems from and is fundamentally progressing towards, what exigencies it has to grapple with, questions pertaining to the realm of sheer negation: death (in life) – these are also important parts of the thematic fabric in Fosse's dramas.

At the same time, in my reading of the drama texts, I also find the theme of an inseverable dependence of characters upon things. Through-and-through, there is a tendency to depict modern man as a function of material things. Think, for instance, of the role of china, glasses and cutlery, photos, phone receiver, pillows, and overcoats in *And Never Shall We Part*, where She as a character is even said to stem from the very context or concatenation precisely of things, of whose presence She is the centre. Or, think of the photos, the deck of cards, and the crutch in *The Name*; or of the bus shed, the bottles, the lighter, and the whole medical hospital complex that govern Agnes, Fredrik, and Arvid in *The Child*. Similarly, in *Night Songs*, where we find the metal bowl and the pans, the table

cloths, and the photo albums chaining The Young Woman to The Young Man, preventing her from a final shift to Baste at the moment of truth.

It is likewise in *A Summer's Day*, where the refrain of "pictures and things", "pictures and things" hovers over the play, and is as indicative of the existential coordinates for the Woman (both in her Older and Younger versions), as are the boat and the fjord for her husband Asle. So also bench and house and tombstones in *Autumn Dream* partially function as anchoring impediments to the realization of a lasting union between The Man and The Woman. In *Visit* the drinks, plastic bags and electronic gadgets, in *Winter* the bench, the cheap hotel room, and the various clothes items are, in a sense, what actually makes up the characters – not to speak of the cardboard boxes that, like Erna, Georg, Asle and Elise, are shifted around in *Afternoon*.

In a number of the dramas it is possible to simplify this list of comprehensive, existential thematic strands, and to consider them as variants of the set of themes that became paramount and demanded to be dealt with in European drama from that time on when the classical drama tradition was severely shaken, viz. in the second half of the nineteenth century. I am thinking of 1) images of the intrusion and the role of *the past* and that which conditions us (in Fosse, sometimes also visible as dream, memory, and yearning, and sometimes as well directed towards the future); and 2) the depiction of *the self*, of the "soul life", of the inner personal solitude, and the investigation of the psychological layers and qualities of the characters.¹ In addition to those two major themes, some

¹ Those dramas in which the past plays a role are *Someone Is Going to Come*; *And Never Shall We Part*; *The Name*; so it is also to a certain degree in *The Child* (through Arvid, who plays a role in Agnes' past); furthermore, in *Mother and Child* and in *The Son*; the past is not particularly prominent in *Night Songs*; but

Fosse dramas also include 3) the question of how far *language and linguistic structures*, as well as our reservoir of *cultural forms* are able to carry us in our attempts at grasping precisely *that which has been*, and *that which stirs inside us*: Sometimes in Fosse, linguistic structures are depicted as enabling and indicating; sometimes, and probably more often, they are, in their sheer materiality, shown to dismantle and emasculate.

Having now identified and singled out as particularly interesting at least some of the major themes in Fosse's dramatic production, we come to the question of form. I would not hesitate to point to two clearly discernible features in almost all of Fosse's dramas: One the one hand – and obviously – there are the churning repetitions, in the dialogues, of phrases and motifs, and of the rhetorical figure of *anakoluthon* and broken-off, aborted expressions and sentences. On the other hand, we find the never-failing attempt from Fosse's side of "orchestrating" the dramas, within a clearly discernible architecture, which is at work in rounding them off in a form-at-large, in a tug towards a "*Formvollkommenheit*" – in spite of the lack of fullness and of the rents that characters, motifs, and human existence in general may be confronted with on the individual pages. This

again, it is prominent in *A Summer's Day*, to a certain degree in *Autumn Dream*, definitely in *Visit*, (however, not essentially in *Winter* and in *Afternoon*), and, to be sure, in *Beautiful*, and in *Death Variations*.

Dramas in which the inner self is a thematic complex are *Someone Is Going to Come* (not the least through the "alone together" motif); we find it in *And Never Shall We Part* (cf. the identity crises and processes, as well as the layers of interpersonal (subject/object) relations between He and She, and the dread that imbues the play); it is central in *The Name*; in *The Child* (e.g. through the question of inner belief in a deity); furthermore, we find it in *Mother and Child* (e.g. the identity problems stemming from unbalanced relations to (absent) mother and father); it is prominent in *The Son* (cf. the consequences of village gossip for personal identity); it imbues *Night Songs* (e.g. through the "alone together" motif; we discern it in The Young Man being reflected but shy, and in The Young Woman being superficial but action oriented; and it is connected to the widespread dread); we witness it in *A Summer's Day* (in the two layers of Older/Younger Woman, and Asle's unfathomable dread); it is paramount in *Autumn Dream* (the "alone together" motif; dread); in *Visit* (e.g. sexual abuse, "incest"); in *Winter* (the "alone together" motif; dread); in *Afternoon* (in motifs of dread, in the sensations of "the peculiar" and "the curious"), and certainly in *Beautiful*, and in *Death Variations*.

Dramas in which thematic elements of dream, memory, utopia and "Erinnerung" are used extensively are *And Never Shall We Part*; *A Summer's Day*; *Autumn Dream*; *Beautiful*; and *Death Variations*.

totalizing force is the dramatist's subjective hand at play in the texts; that hand which, albeit in various and ingeniously invented ways from play to play, rounds them off and provides their artful and artistic totality. This artful holistic design is perceivable regardless of the concrete compositional variant from case to case. In Fosse it may be based on the structuring of acts, and of scenes, or on time and situation changing devices, like the use of exits to and entries from an off-stage room next door. It may be based on the doubling of a character (young/old), or on the use of a compositional character performing prologue and epilogue as well as marking changes in the scenic room. Sometimes we also see it in contrasts and parallels between rooms, or in identical sequences with variable characters, and so on.

In my attempts to come to grips with Fosse's dramas as I have described them here, and in my perspective as a scholar of comparative literature, I have turned for support to two "classics" among the young "left-Hegelians", viz. Peter Szondi, and (of the Frankfurt School) Theodore W. Adorno. Particularly I have done so, since these scholars, taken together, are excellent commentators on those dramatic form conventions and on those dramatists that Fosse seems to have much in common with: Ibsen, Chekhov, and Beckett, as well as, to some extent, the The Conversation Play (the *Konversationsstück* as discernible in e.g. Hofmannsthal's and Beckett's *œuvres*), and the tradition of the dramatic Situation of Constraint (where characters are made to 'have to speak' in interpersonal relations).²

² Further definitions below.

Furthermore, Peter Szondi's *Theory of the Modern Drama*,³ and Adorno's commentaries in his essay on Beckett's *Endgame*⁴ – my two main theoretical references here – are, I think, when taken together, able to throw some light on those areas in Fosse, where contemporary drama may be seen to be in the process of a couple of stylistic changes, of a kind and with a momentum that few dramatists have materialized before. I am thinking of instances in Fosse, where subject matters (as contents) are brought *from* our late-modern society into Fosse's dramas as parts of thematic content bundles, are refunctioned there, and are precipitated out as new form, thereby threatening to explode the old one.

Certainly, there are individual differences between Fosse's many dramas, and there are various ways of trying to read them, too. However, against the background of what I have said so far, let me share with you some rudiments of an attempt I have made at reading *The Name*. My intention is, on the one hand, to present *The Name* as a *type* of Fosse-ian drama with paradoxes and ironies in the relations between thematics and form, and, on the other, to contribute with a *possible reading* of Fosse's dramatic production.

II

In *The Name*, a young couple, who are expecting a child, are temporarily without a roof above their heads, and so seek the girl's parental home. In this lies the seed for the drama's discussion of existential, temporal, linguistic and formal

³ Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880–1950)*, [1956] Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1965; transl. as P. S., *Theory of the Modern Drama. A critical edition*, ed. and tr. Michael Hays, forew. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Theory and History of Literature; 29), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 (Cambridge : Polity Press, 1987).

⁴ Th. W. Adorno, "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].

problems, that bear on man's situation and conditions of possibility in late 20th century modernity. The dramatic form, as we shall see, progresses in two directions – one towards totality and fullness, an architectural design that gives promises of a graspable meaning, albeit frail; the other towards "disappearance" and dissolution.

The drama possesses two recognizable, well-established themes (the past; as well as the theme of the inner self, or the soul life and psychology of the characters). In addition, a third theme poses the question of the functions in human life of names, language, and cultural forms at large. – My hypothesis is that the shape taken by the theme of the self tugs the drama in the direction of dissolution. *And* that the theme of the past, as well as the compositional form of the drama at large, are at work in favour of a cohesion, a "meaning". This latter force, in my view, represents a restorative movement, since the dramatic form is threatened here, but not undone. In *Fosse*, this precarious contradiction, but also balance, between *dissolution and restoration* is quite noticeable.

Georg Lukács, in his *Theory of the Novel*, writes that "[Being-Human] in the New World is to be solitary" (36),⁵ and he refers to the solitude of modernity as "transzendental[e] Obdachlosigkeit" (32; Germ. ed.); ("transcendental homelessness" (41; Engl. ed.); or perhaps more precisely: 'roof-lessness'). The young couple's situation in *The Name* is the very image of this modern experience. The formerly unified and self-contained, all-encompassing and transcendental cohesion between man and world, has in modernity been replaced by subjective perspectives, because of a split – the modern rent between subject,

and object world. The modern art form *par excellence*, the novel, therefore, tries to create an *artificial* cohesion and totality, in which all perspectives, even so, are subjective and relative, be they those of characters, or of narrators, or the very compositional grip of the writer. But this is also the case, writes Szondi, in modern *drama* – not in the unified, classical drama with its “[always] present, interpersonal event” or action (e.g. 45) – but in the “crisis” forms from Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann on. Even there we find “epicizing” and subjectivization, since the late 19th century introduces new themes (*for example* the role of the past, and the inner psychology of man) that can only be “told” and presented by compositional means: the past and the subjective self can only be narrated, not depicted in any absolute manner in drama.

These are precisely functions of modern man’s solitude. Fosse’s texts do select elements from the crisis forms of Ibsen and Chekhov, and from some of the later dramatic rescue attempts, like the Conversation Play, and the dramatic Situation of Constraint.⁶ They do so in order to depict late modernity’s solitude, the bearing on it by a hazy past, and the painful consequences of this past in the soul of the self. But late modern man’s solitude is even more intensified and reified than a hundred years earlier. So, in depicting the historically specific solitude of the late 20th century, the structure of Fosse’s dramas finds in its interior the competing forces *both* of a totalizing, compositional grip, *and* of idling series of dissolving, reified linguistic repetition structures, of the kind that

⁵ Cf. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, transl. Anna Bostock, London: The Merlin Press, 1971. The German text here has “[...] und in der Neuen Welt heisst Mensch-sein: einsam sein” (28); the English translation “for to be a man in the new world is to be solitary” (36) seems too light, somehow; therefore my intrusion of “Being-Human”.

⁶ Definitions (cf. Szondi pp. 52-54, and 57-62): In a Conversation Play, characters are brought together on stage in a situation, a social occasion, or something similar, which function as the motivation for the fact that cited or quoted phrases and/or subject matters are brought in from the contemporary social sphere in order to be discussed on stage.

probably Beckett first showed us the meaningless meaning of, and which may be compared to horizontal "spirals", drilling their passages *sideways* through the text. These two forces taken together make Fosse's drama into a *late* modern form, and, to be sure: a paradoxical, "ironical" one.

III

The compositional cohesion of *The Name* can be seen in the structuring of acts and scenes. The play has a specular act-structure, in that acts 1 and 3, similar in motifs and themes, are mirroring each other, at the same time as they are mediated to one another through act 2, which has its focus on the relationship between human beings and language – by way of the "language philosophical" discussion that The Girl and The Boy conduct there (this discussion in its turn has thematic relations to the two outer acts).

The question then arises: What is the status of this dramatic structure? Is this "formal language" phenomenally tied to the dramatic characters and their necessary actions? Or is this specular form (a mirror structure) a subjectively provided pattern, a figure torn away from a human life world, functioning as (metonymic) sideways, figural substitutions? It is impossible to find a clear-cut answer to this problem in the drama, not on any of its levels. And it turns out that this paradoxical-ironical *impasse* is one of the basic characteristics of *The Name*: For – just the same question, *mutatis mutandis*, is on a lower level the focus of the important discussion between Girl and Boy in the central act: Will a *random* name do, *before* the child is born? Or will they have to decide on a *suitable* name, based

– In the dramatic Situation of Constraint – framed by e.g. a room, a garden with a bench, a graveyard, etc., characters are brought together in order to *make* them speak.

on the phenomenality of the child *after* birth? Do names anchor and tie us existentially to a meaningful world (The Boy's view); or are names a freely figuring and substituting force within a linguistic reality, that unties us from a life world, from meaning, and from a firm identity (this seems to be The Girl's view)? Are we facing here a reality without ground?

The sympathetic characterization of The Boy convinces us *locally* in act 2 that his view is the "right" or "adequate" one. But not completely. This also leaves a doubt as to the artistic composition of the drama: Is it sideways and substitutional; or is it cohesive and totalizing, tying the characters to a meaningfulness, *in art* replacing the historico-philosophically conditioned lack situation by now providing a home or a roof, transcendental or not?

A marked and noticeable composition is also given to the structure of scenes in *The Name*. The drama is ordered and respectively divided into *seventeen* (act 1), *three* (act 2), and *seventeen* (act 3) scenes (cf. Germ. *Auftritte*) – another symmetrical, compositional grip. But again: Does this give the drama a *phenomenally cohesive*, or a *linguistically collative* form? Thus, the composition is firm and noticeable, rounds off and ties motifs, characters and action to an existential life situation; and yet it is paradoxically frail.

These three levels (the name and language theme, the scene structure and the act form) all point to a fundamental problem area in this drama: the question of cohesion and/or collation; or put differently: This work contrasts two types of repetition structures, one creating fullness and totality, and one which is disappearingly levelling; one "metaphorical" and one "metonymic". It raises the question whether language and form are forces of existential binding (to

situation, time and place), or figuratively substitutional and displacing forces. Precisely in this we discern the "irony" of late modern drama, in which modern existence oscillates between belonging, being "bound to a home", and being "homeless".

The Boy would like a fitting name when they have come to know the child; his opinion is obviously based on a "mimetic" view of language, of representation, referentiality, expressivity, and on an idea of existential ties between name and life world. *The Girl's* view of names is obviously that they are *simulacra*, possibly able to even create new realities (but will *they* then be *human?*). Constantly, by way of parallelism between name discussion, language and compositional form (acts and scenes structure), the drama oscillates between the values of a meaningful existential phenomenality, and the forces of a transitory linguistic reality, that might even be uncontrollable. – So also, when *The Boy* goes as far as suggesting that if a male, the child could be (re)named for Bjarne – since *The Boy* has understood perfectly well that the already existing Bjarne and *The Girl* have been lovers, just as he has understood that *The Girl's* father prefers Bjarne and not himself as a future son-in-law. But his paying heed to motivating cohesions and ties between language and reality in this way, leads nowhere: *The Girl* retorts by highlighting the fleeting character of her world: "We are not staying here for long" (73).⁷ – The problem of a meaningful and cohesive, identity-building phenomenal universe, exposed to the forces of nominal, formal and linguistic figures, is kept open for us in this drama throughout.

IV

We have briefly looked into the theme of names, langue, and cultural forms in *The Name*. Let us proceed to the *theme of the past*. There is a clear Ibsen'esque strand in the fabric of this drama, both in the introduction of the past and the self as central themes, in the way the cohesive form of the drama works to cover up the epicizing of these themes, as well as in the way the drama presents problems of the past, which, when disclosed, *might* function as motivations for solutions through conscious action in the present. But although the way the theme of the past is handled here strengthens the "*Formvollendung*" and the phenomenality of *The Name* and promises meaning, the figuring of this theme at the same time *also* indicates a terrifying abyss.

Through The Girl's comments on the series of family pictures hung in her parental home, this family's understanding of the past as a generator of suffering and a haunting curse is clearly established. The photos are The Girl as a child (she says she was "not at all beautiful", adding "and so will not...", thus indicating and including as well her own coming baby; 9f, 14); furthermore, her parents' wedding photo ("they have always quarreled"; 15f); and, finally, the photo of her older sister Anny (16): Anny, it turns out, has defied her Father in the question of a love partner, and has consequently been ousted and banned from home (precisely into homelessness). Anny is still even a bleeding ulcer in the family, so much so that The Mother later has to revert to conciliatory and redeeming lies about Anny's homecoming in order to harmonize the family atmosphere (99f).

This family lives and is, so to speak, generated by a painful past, giving them a present of estrangement and isolation. But the situation *could* be mended,

⁷ Jon Fosse, *Namnet*, Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1995/1998; translations are mine.

could it not, if life lies and wrongs were consciously atoned for in a meaningful interpersonal world *with* a transcendental roof, once the skeletons had tumbled out of the cupboards? – No, not in Fosse’s drama. In Fosse’s text this situation cannot be mended, for the dimension of the past turns out to be established and encoded for us precisely in the form of *pictures, images, photos*: These have the function of turning a formerly living past into a *frozen, petrified, paralyzed, and reified past*. Consequently, the versions of the past become numerous, unclear, and contingent, and threaten to remove that cohesion between past and present which could facilitate an existential problem-solving. This world cannot be made whole (again) interpersonally. It can only be (re)created subjectively and epicizingly again and again: in the characters’ interpretations of the past, and dramatically merely by the artful and *artistic* supply of compositional means that may indicatively promise a meaningfulness and a cohesion. The question of a truth about the past remains without an answer in Fosse, since the characters are left with only few occasions for phenomenal ties in a *Lebenswelt*.

Also when The Mother and The Father later *attempt* to discuss what happened that time, long ago, when someone had phoned, and Father went to pick up The Girl from an awkward situation somewhere (this is his second daughter, Beate; 89f), then The Father is tired, he does not want to talk about it. What is more, he even lacks a living language to relate himself to the past in, just like all the other characters in this drama, except for The Boy, who continually reads books. – But more importantly, we here witness another structure repeating itself: The relationship between Father and Anny surfaces again in the relationship between Father and Beate (The Girl). *Both* daughters have met with

an authoritarian father who demands subordination to his opinions as to who the right life partner for his daughters will be. Anny has defied this parental power; Beate, it seems towards the end, is in the process of complying with her father's wishes, and with his negative attitudes to The Boy.

But since these characters do not possess an adequate language to handle painful problems of the past in, by acting now in the present, the question again arises: What kind of repetition structure are we dealing with here? Are we witnessing the repetition of an existential father/daughter relationship in a life world; or are we facing another instance of reified form, or a linguistic structure, repeating itself sideways, metonymically, and, as it were, above and beyond the consciousness of the characters? Again we face the *impasse* of, on the one hand, a totalizing repetition structure within a meaningful universe, and, on the other, a serial repetition, making characters not the governors of their own lives, but making them governed by an in-human reality. This is underscored by the many petrified phrases of The Girl referring to, but not grasping the problems of the past. This reveals her inability to come to grips with her phenomenal life situation: "Everything returns", "Everything remains as it was", "I cannot stay here" (repeated throughout the play), along with all her churning attacks upon The Boy for his reported carelessness, in spite of his obvious ability to care, and his capacities for adaptation and for empathy.

The repetition structures are therefore ambivalent, they are "ironical". The repetition of the past does not lead to adequate insight, or reconciliation, or atonement. Precisely here is the lesson of Peter Szondi paramount: *We are witnessing a thematic field, the past, which is about to untie itself from the depicted*

human situation, in order to precipitate itself out as part of the formal-linguistic structure of the work of art. So also with the three-partite structure of problematic love relations of fighting, quarreling and subordination: Father/Mother; Anny/her unnamed partner; Beate/her two possible partners (The Boy and Bjarne). This structure *may* be read as a repetition-with-variation within a meaningful and solvable existential context. But also, paradoxically, its figuring rises up in front of us in the form of sideways repetitions, of a kind that go above, pass by and beyond the minds of the characters, and everything that might be called human.

V

Let us now turn to the third central theme of the play – that of *the inner self*, the fundamental solitude of the soul, and of the characters' psyche. In my reading, this theme is treated in a qualitatively completely different formal pattern than the totalizing, albeit frail and ambivalent, yet subjective thrust for cohesion, the will to "*Formvollendung*", that redeeming restoration in a painful and problematic, but still meaningful universe, that we have looked at so far. To my mind, this is where we might have something to gain in our understanding by referring to Th. W. Adorno and his reading of Beckett's *Endgame* (and so, some of the terms and points of view in what follows, will be familiar from Adorno).

The repetitions that the selves are rendered in in this drama, are of a clearly reified linguistic kind, and operate beyond the scope of the individual characters' intentions, meanings, and identities. We encounter a language in its materiality here, that largely stems from the contemporary public sphere, from our so-called community, and which is here not interpersonal but objective. In its *modus*

operandi it testifies to forces of dissolution that by and large belong to a redemptionless universe. In this capacity, the characters seem derived, their mental agencies, their thoughts and feelings, and their utterances are turned into "second degree" material, produced by something *other* than them, something which governs and overdetermines them, yet is spoken through their voices.

Let us look at some prominent motifs within this thematic complex. – Most of the characters are imbued with an *unreflected automatism*. For example, The Girl utters time and time again that The Boy "does not care" – but this *far* from tallies. Like in a *metallic spiral* this and other simple formulations are repeated, thus working to dissolve the meaningful, totalizing composition we have looked into. The Boy is the exception; he reflects and reads books "inwardly", as opposed to the *stimuli-like consumption of newspapers*, merely automatically leafed-through by the family members, over and over again. The automatism in question can also be witnessed in the characters' movements, like in the repeated *fingering flesh-contact* that here counts as eroticism between Bjarne and The Girl in the sofa (did we hear that *The Boy does not care?*). Similarly, *The Father completely neglects The Boy*, time and time again, and once over: Who *cares?* – The automatism in the repeated phrases in The Girl's, The Father's, and The Mother's utterances indicate a fracture between utterance and person. *Language is idling* in The Girl; she merely grabs it without marking it in any individual manner. In the materiality of the repetitions language passes The Girl by, but *it speaks her, in her voice*. She, and her family, are deprived of a language to handle their selves and psychological states in; sensations and utterances have lost their mutual relationship. Dissolvingly, *thoughts and feelings are being reduced to second-degree materials, reified phenomena*.

This automatism, and its serially repeated language, points to liquidated subjects and intentionalities.

Something catastrophic must have happened, says Adorno about such a state of affairs, and this catastrophe is unutterable. Language has become privative, taking away from the individual his inner relationship to the past, to History, as well as to thoughts, feelings, and meaningful totalities. History and time have become reified. This, as already indicated, makes character reactions and movements derived. But that entails that the phenomenal content of life takes the shape of linguistic and formal traits, which become repeated over and over again: "Consciousness" has turned into imitation, into inhuman sentimentality, and into immediate gratification. It is in this light that the sofa-eroticism of Bjarne and The Girl receives its most adequate understanding. The same goes for The Mother's repeated sentimentality (continuously filling in gaps and silences with imbecilities and stupid laughs), as well as for The Father's characteristically particular kind of "human" care for his daughter by spastically grasping for his wallet.

Existential meaning has run out in this automatism, and is being replaced by sheer serial materiality – a linguistic pattern. This obviously also throws light upon the characters' repeated turning to tools and gadgets when nothing more is to say, cf. the deck of cards that kills time, or the crutch that supports movement. The materialization of existence can also be witnessed in the repeated phrases of paralysis and bodily pain – The Mother's walking problems, The Father's stiffening body. As a matter of fact, possessing a body is in this drama equal to the pain or tension which that body yields. Furthermore, the bodily functions are repeated

throughout – in the churning, never-ending mention of rest and of sleep, of food and of beverage. It is fair to say that these desintegrated individuals are overdetermined by a governing materiality.

Particularly the parental couple present images of what Adorno calls the biological individual, or the stubbornness of bodies. Their bodies utter empty laughs to fill in pauses, and they conduct senseless, gossipy trips to shop and kiosk; they are, in addition, subordinated under the churning sounds from doorsteps, thresholds, and stairway – sounds that are so interwoven in dialogue and stage directions that they become the very indicators of conversation and togetherness in this universe. So do all the repeated anakoluthons and aborted sentences. Love and affection have been turned into regression and infantilized relations to the Other – Fosse's drama forces us to witness materialized relations between bodies. And when The Boy has realized that this is no place for a meaningful existence, and has left, – and when Bjarne has had his share with The Girl and leaves, too, The Girl is left behind, so utterly lonely. She remains a biological body, pregnant with a child, transcendently homeless. We witness the reduction of the subject and of interpersonal relations into objectively produced things. And the question becomes unavoidable: Will breeding be the next stage?

The force of the repetitional language and behavioural patterns which carry the drama when dealing with the inner self of the characters imbues Fosse's text with a clear tendency to non-phenomenal de-generation, to de-humanization, and to de-ontologizing. And again, Peter Szondi's theory of stylistic change may be a case in point: *A thematic field (the inner self, feelings, and psychology) is here about to precipitate itself out as new form, in that it is being turned into objectivized, reified,*

incessantly repeated language. Or, formulated the other way round: This sideways, serially-repetitive language is here actually about to become "thematic". – In the midst of *these* instances in Fosse's drama, we are far removed from phenomenal humanity.

VI

Finally, two important elements in the drama call out for comments: the *language motif* at the *end* of act 2, which we still have not touched upon; and the very *emblematic motif* of the drama, which happens to be equally distributed in all three acts. In my reading, both of these motifs are the drama's own commentary on the historico-philosophical problem that I started these reflections with, viz. the contradiction, on all levels of this dramatic work, between building a "home", and being thrown out into "homelessness."

First, *the emblem*: This image is a repeated topographical motif: "Haugen", or, as it would read in English: "The Mound", with its natural and meteorological characteristics. Every time The Girl and The Boy speak about it, or visit it, or connect it in their thoughts to the child which is about to be born, the Mound is depicted as the intersection between horizontal movements, and verticality. This Mound is a hillock, near the ocean, subjected to *sideways* storms and winds. From it, you see the ships on the horizon, and it is a place for reflection and notions of getting away. But as a mound, it also rises *vertically* up out of the landscape below, and it is exposed to the downpouring, hammering rain, and the dense darkness settling down upon it at night.

The repetition of this emblem keeps alive a consciousness in us when reading the text (but never reaches the level of any transcendence) of both belonging and homelessness. The reader's mind is made to shift between the phenomenally cohesive ties of man, and the sideways, free-floating drifting, which also presents itself as a condition of possibility to man in late modernity. This is another (repetitional) rewriting of the contradiction which we have seen enacted also in name and language discussions between the characters, as well as in the use of compositional devices and the intrusion of formal-linguistic patterns in the drama at large. Fosse's drama stems from and progresses towards this unsolvable paradox between meaningful restorative ties between man and world, and an ongoing de-humanizing drift of figural forces, that seems to be specific to our stage of modernity. This is an *impasse* in *The Name*, also an artistic *impasse*.

Are there, then, possible solutions to these ironies? In *the language motif* at the *end* of act 2 The Boy seems to ponder upon that. There he sets forth the redeeming dream about, or possibly an atoning *memory* of, "*the language of angels*" (73-79) – that language, which, as also Walter Benjamin, like The Boy, sees it, once upon a time *was* able to, and once again perhaps *might* cohesively tie together everything and everybody, in all temporalities and in every space, unborn, living, and dead alike. This would be the language, that – *unlike* man, his language, cultural patterns and forms of art in modernity's "fallen" world – has *not* had to sever The Name from The Named, the Signification from the Signified, or even The Medium from The Message. With such a totally un-instrumental language, a transcendental, all-encompassing "home" or "heaven" is thinkable. This element in Fosse's text, in fact, comes nothing short of pointing to an alternative being,

where everything and everybody, even all temporalities and every topography, would be totally integrated. Fosse's drama calls this cohesive existence "spiritual", and "belonging to the soul". Benjamin, in his reflections, calls it "mental".⁸

"Wasn't that nice?" (79) asks The Boy after having uttered his chain of thoughts to The Girl, just before he turns uneasy and dreadful over the estrangement of late modern man. We may interpret his question as a hint about the role of Art and The Beautiful in late modernity. This performative practice, Art, perhaps more than anything else, has been endowed the task to make us sense, see, reflect upon, and make the severed parts of our existence cohere, as far and as long as that might still be done. The enormous difficulties inherent in that project, Fosse's drama in its formal-thematic capacities, and my reading here, endeavour to shed some light upon. *The Name* possesses an "ironic" structure, in trying both to restore cohesions of meaning and authentic life, at the same time as it, perhaps out of necessity, tugs dissolvingly in quite the opposite direction, towards a reification of interpersonal relations. As it were, it ushers in a reification of just that interpersonal pact which, as we know, it has, paradoxically, been the traditional task of precisely the drama to discuss and improve.

The paradoxical structure of *The Name*, then, is on the one hand, a compositional figuring, subjective of the writer, which epicizes, totalizes, creates. We witness it in act-form, scene-structure, in the theme of the "philosophy of language" in act 2, as well as in the structuring of the Ibsen-inspired theme of the past. This is the restorative force of meaning and cohesion of this drama – also in

⁸ Cf. Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" [1916], i *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz, New York: Schocken Books,

the sense that Fosse here has selected to enter and to elaborate already "dated" dramatic form conventions (Ibsen, Chekhov, the Conversation Play, and the dramatic Situation of Constraint). All of this encompasses a cohesive thrust for meaning which works in the direction of a "transcendental home" for man and his interpersonal relations. – On the other hand, *The Name* is struck by an excessive type of repetitional figuring (to some extent seen, as well, in Beckett), which dissolvingly undermines the dramatic form conventions that Fosse works within. These sideways churning, displacing spirals are forcefully intertwined and entangled into the theme of the inner self. These parts of the drama *sever* the meaningful cohesion within the dramatic universe. Language and existence are reified; characters turn into derived phenomena, as functions of a historico-linguistic reality, which is incongenial to humankind. In an even more extreme form than here, such repetition structures as these could make late modern drama into what Adorno has called "a rattling mechanism"⁹ – a primarily aesthetic form in which themes and contents have been fully precipitated out as formal and linguistic elements, to the reifying detriment and displacement of interpersonal relations, that are so fundamental to the dramatic form. In *The Name*, though, this does not occur completely, since, as we have seen, *this*

1986, ss. 314–332.

⁹ In his comments to Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno writes: "This loss of meaning, it must be understood, undermines the dramatic form down to the innermost structure of its language. In the face of this dilemma the drama cannot simply react negatively, by grasping the remnants of meaning or its absence and making this its new substance; were it to do so, the effect would be to transform the essence of drama into its opposite. The specificity of drama was traditionally constituted through its metaphysical meaning. If the drama seeks to outlive the demise of this meaning by defining itself as a purely aesthetic form, it necessarily becomes inadequate to its substance and degrades itself to a rattling mechanism for the production of ideological demonstrations ["zur klappernder Maschinerie weltanschaulicher Demonstration"], thus becoming the vehicle of abstract notions, as is largely the case in Existentialist drama. The desintegration of metaphysical meaning, which alone assured the unity of the aesthetic structure, destroys the coherence of the traditional dramaturgical canon with the same implacable necessity evident in the general decay of aesthetic forms", "Towards an Understanding of *Endgame*", *op.cit.*, p. 83.

dramatic work also possesses an opposite force. Fosse's drama, nonetheless, balances delicately here.

Its equilibrium of "form" and "content", of restoration of forms and meaning, and of dissolution of any phenomenally meaningful cohesion, makes it stretched out between two irreconcilable sets. On the one hand, we witness the endeavour to provide our lives with an encompassing "roof" and a "home", and, on the other, we are simultaneously forced to bear testimony to the drive towards a "homelessness" – which does not only threaten to throw late modern man into solitude, but that, in the next instance, even might rarify him.

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