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Theory of the
Modern Drama

Peter Szondi

A Critical Edition

Edited and Translated by Michael Hays

Foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse

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Foreword

On the Difference between a Mimetic and a Semiotic Theory of the Modern Drama

Jochen Schulte-Sasse

I.

In the thirty years since it was originally published, Peter Szondi's *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1956) has become one of the more successful works in literary criticism, both in intellectual and in economic terms.¹ But astonishment that it has taken this long to translate the book into English must be accompanied by another question: Are there still cogent reasons why after thirty years this book should be introduced to an English-speaking audience?

Some of the minor reasons for an affirmative answer to this question are obvious: Over the last decade Szondi has been widely recognized as a seminal literary critic. His *Theory of the Modern Drama* is an early, amazingly well developed example of his critical method. Furthermore, this book—written in the most precise and polished critical discourse imaginable—contains so many suggestive and precise insights into the history of modern drama and related issues such as film aesthetics and its relation to epic features prevalent in modern drama and theater that these strengths alone might justify the belated publication of this book in English. But to my mind there is a more important reason. Szondi's *Theory of the Modern Drama* can be seen as a counterpart to Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*. In 1958 Adorno hailed the latter as a book distinguished by its "depth and dashing conception" that "set a standard for philosophical aesthetics which has been maintained ever since."² Consequently, Lukács's essay has been widely acknowledged as a key work in the philosophy of literature, generating books several times its own length.³ Szondi's book might therefore have been

worthy of translation if he had simply repeated for the drama what Lukács had done for the novel.

But Szondi does not just duplicate Lukács's achievement for another genre; there are distinct differences between the two books in terms of their historicophilosophical foundations and their readiness to branch out into a diagnosis of the times. I will start from a comparison of the similarities and differences between the two books to lay the groundwork for a critique of Szondi's historicophilosophical and semiotic presuppositions. What Paul de Man has said in reference to Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, namely that its "weakness and strength exist on a meaningful philosophical level,"⁴ can also be said about the *Theory of the Modern Drama*. Its achievements are linked with its method, and its method is rooted in philosophical presuppositions that have to be uncovered to know how far Szondi's results might reach.

II.

Szondi acknowledges three sources for his own approach: besides Lukács's work he mentions Walter Benjamin's *Origins of the German Tragic Drama* and Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music*. All three publications made use of Hegel's dialectical notion of the form-content relationship, insisting that aesthetic forms also need interpretation and that discordant forms reflecting a tension between the thematic and formal features of an artistic work can be as significant as harmonious ones. Furthermore, all three are indebted to Hegel's diagnosis of modernity, that is, of bourgeois society, as a system of social relations dominated by the "force of division and difference." Early on Hegel had recognized that the French Revolution was an event of global historical proportions that had to be understood as the decisive attempt of bourgeois industrial society to constitute itself politically. He interpreted the objectification of all social relations in modernity not sociocritically and pessimistically as a cultural decline, as the deterioration of an originally harmonious world, but as a necessary precondition for the possibility of free subjectivity.

Hegel's refusal to glorify a state of original harmony left few traces in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, which starts out with a hymnic celebration of that very state:

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all the possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home . . . each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning—in sense—and complete for the senses; rounded because the soul rests within itself even while it acts.⁵

The literature of this age, the epic, reflects in Lukács's view a community that "is an organic—and therefore intrinsically meaningful—concrete totality" (p. 67). He perceives the novel, in contrast, as the artistic form of an

age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality. . . . The epic gives form to a totality that is rounded; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life. The given structure of the object (i.e. the search, which is only a way of expressing the subject's recognition that neither objective life nor its relationship to the subject is spontaneously harmonious in itself) supplies an indication of the form-giving intention. All the fissures and rents which are inherent in the historical situation must be drawn into the form-giving process and cannot nor should be disguised by compositional means. (pp. 56, 60)

Although Lukács attempts to concentrate on the historicophilosophical reasons that determined the transition from the epic to the novel—an attempt that partly counterbalances the romantic, nostalgic undertones of his essay, it is obvious that social critique is one of the driving forces of his discourse. That social critique acknowledges, to be sure, that the harmonious state of Greek culture is irretrievable and obsolete (see p. 33: "the circle whose closed nature was the transcendental essence of [Greek] life has, for us, been broken; we cannot breathe in a closed world"). Nevertheless, his analysis gains its impetus from a desire to overcome existing conditions.

Szondi obviously does not share this desire. One effect this has on his study is the lack of any in-depth interpretation of paradigmatic examples of the traditional dramatic form. He is content to reconstruct some ideal-typical features of that form. These features serve as background for what holds his real interest, namely the process of disintegration and fragmentation of established cultural formations. In comparison to the balance characteristic of Lukács's treatment of the two ages, which simultaneously is a balance between nostalgia and the historicophilosophical conviction that nostalgia is unjustified, Szondi's essay seems uneven. This unevenness, though, has its roots in the author's methodological convictions. Szondi is fascinated with moments of transition and crisis because they create tensions, discrepancies, epistemologically productive ruptures on which the critic can dwell and from which he can comprehend social features as features of difference. In other words, Szondi expands and radicalizes Lukács's observation that we could no longer breathe in a mythic, closed world epistemologically. The critic, striving to grasp the form-content dialectic and its relation to social structure, is forced to utilize moments of crisis as epistemological tools in his or her cognitive efforts.

This method explains why Szondi felt a life-long fascination for the Early

Romantics who had developed similar insights. The first article he published, at age 25, was an essay on "Friedrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony," in which he connected Schlegel's characterization of the modern novel as a form that can "hover on wings of poetic reflection between the depiction and the author of the depiction, perpetually intensify this reflection, and multiply it as in an endless series of mirrors" with Lukács's characterization of the novel:

With this important first step toward a theory of the novel (which was subsequently elaborated by Georg Lukács), this form appears as the modern equivalent of the epic. The epic was the depiction of the entire world in a presubjectivist period whose wholeness was never questioned and which was unaware of the split between the ego and the world. In the modern age, which has been marked by this split at least since Kant, the reconciliation of the subjective with the objective in the work of art has seemed impossible.⁶

Unlike Lukács, the critic Szondi makes himself at home in the realm of consciousness represented by the novel and by Romantic irony. The absence of nostalgia is matched by the absence of a utopian perspective.

III.

I will return to the strange intersecting of voices indicated in the last paragraph (Schlegel, Hegel on Schlegel, Lukács on Hegel and Schlegel, Szondi on the last three, and, in addition, Paul de Man on all of them). At this point I would like to elaborate briefly on the background against which Szondi projects his comprehension of the form-content dialectic of the modern drama. Lukács's treatment of the epic as a form-content dialectic reflecting mythic, harmonious ages is reminiscent of the tripartite historicophilosophical scheme of German Enlightenment and Idealism. The epic corresponds to the idealization of Greek culture in, for instance, Schiller's essay *On Naive and Sentimental Literature* (1795); the category of the naive in Schiller is functionally equivalent to the category of the epic in Lukács. Lukács's historical scheme is thus not purely Hegelian; it is a combination of Schiller and Hegel, which explains its nostalgic features and its utopian dimension. Schiller's legacy in that scheme anticipates Lukács's later turn to a Marxist philosophy of history more than Hegel's legacy does.

There is no similar dependency on the eighteenth century's tripartite historicophilosophical scheme in Szondi's reconstruction of the history of the drama. For, interestingly enough, Szondi does not simply replace the form-content dialectic of the epic with that of the "absolute drama," likewise relating it to a historicophilosophical era of original harmony. Lukács, and Szondi after him, characterized the age of the epic as a totally whose wholeness was never questioned by those living at the time. The epic is, to repeat Szondi's formulation,

"the depiction of an *entire* world in a *presubjectivist* period." This means that the age of the epic could not have generated a form like the absolute drama which is, as Szondi makes clear enough, the form of an age that represents itself in the aesthetic production of interpersonal relations: "The Drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance. It was the result of a bold intellectual effort made by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of the medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone" (p. 7). In other words, the historical emergence of the absolute drama already presupposes a relative juxtaposition of subject and object in the consciousness of this age. The distance between subject and object is here, to be sure, not yet perceived as an unreconcilable split—a split reflecting the development of objective conditions that are able to determine and change the subjectivity of the subject.

Lukács had argued that the transition from the epic to the novel was caused by the intrusion of time: "Time can become constitutive only when the bond with the transcendental home has been severed. . . . In the novel, meaning is separated from life, and hence the essential from the temporal; we might almost say that the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time" (p. 122). Contrary to what Lukács says about the drama (p. 126), time undoubtedly has entered the world of the absolute drama even if the subject is conceived of as being able to sublimate the effect of time, to reconcile the differences being brought about by the intrusions of time. For time does not need to be considered an independent "power of transformation" to become problematic. In other words, there is an early modern perception of time, a breach of the timeless wholeness supposedly constitutive for the age of the epic, that shapes the form-content relationship of the absolute drama. This is clearly reflected in the thematics of the plays of Schiller, who paradoxically was one of the early major thinkers to recognize the intrusions made by the divisions and differences in modernity, and who at the same time can serve as a paradigmatic absolute dramatist in Szondi's scheme.

In his *Letters on Don Carlos*, Schiller wrote: "a benevolence that was subsequently to extend over the whole of humanity would have to proceed from a more intimate bond,"⁷ referring to the friendship in his play between a future king, Don Carlos, and a politician, Marquis Posa. Schiller considered an increase in "intimate bonds" to be both a political precondition for any humanization of society and the most natural aim of aesthetic pleasure. In the letters accompanying his play he therefore wanted to speak "about a favorite topic of our decade—about the spread of more pure, gentle humanity, about the highest possible freedom of *individuals*, along with the highest blossoming of the state, in short about the most perfect condition of mankind" (p. 33). It becomes clear a bit later just what the object of his attention was, as well as the fact that he perceived it as a public concern and not just a private one: "I am neither an Il-

Illuminati nor a Mason, but if both fraternal orders have a moral purpose in common, and if this purpose is the most important for society, then it must be at least very closely related to the one that Marquis Posa proposed" (p. 337). In 1785 and 1786, Schiller had immersed himself in the vehement, public discussion of the Illuminati then raging, and he had read the writings of the order's founder Adam Weishaupt. The theory of the Illuminati as of so many other Freemasonries was based on the premise that only the moral improvement of a state's citizenry and not the overthrow of its government would bring about positive changes in the political condition of society. Change—both in the state and in society—depended upon principles of social interaction that could be influenced positively only by individuals. For the Illuminati, as for Schiller, the key was the "intimate bonds" of friendship. The order, like most Masonic groups, conceived of itself as an oversized amalgamation of friends, whose principles, functioning in small groups, were supposed to spread gradually through society, eventually permeating all aspects of political life, including the behavior of the rulers. Schiller's reference to the dominant topic of contemporary political discussion and his parallel construction of Posa's plans is hardly accidental: in the 1780s, he too saw close personal friendships and larger, organized groups of friends as the point of crystallization for the moral renewal of society and the state.

Szondi's reconstruction of the absolute drama makes it clear that such thematic concerns, no matter how varied they might be in detail, determine the form of the absolute drama as well, and that this shift from thematics to form constituted a form-content dialectic that had as its basis the unbroken belief that social totality could be reproduced and mirrored in interpersonal relationships. Szondi's reconstructions, though, evidently do not share the historicophilosophical ambitions of Schiller, Hegel, and Lukács. Historicophilosophically, his reconstructions are open-ended on both sides of the chronological continuum because they do not idolize a state of original harmony, of an absolute origin. Nor does his argument imply that current divisions should or could be sublated in a future harmonious state. The question remains whether this open-endedness can escape a basic presupposition of the Hegelian form-content dialectic: The presupposition that art is a fundamentally mimetic discourse, reflecting dominant features of social totality. In my view, Szondi's epistemologically and methodologically motivated interest in ruptures ultimately turns out to be insufficiently radical; his belief in the mimetic nature of art neutralizes his critical methodology.

IV.

I have already indicated that in his *Theory of the Novel* Lukács had cited Schlegel's concept of irony affirmatively:

The self-recognition and, with it, self-abolition of subjectivity was called irony by the first theoreticians of the novel, the aesthetic philosophers of early Romanticism. As a formal constituent of the novel form this signifies an interior diversion of the normatively creative subject into subjectivity as interiority, which opposes power complexes that are alien to it and which strives to imprint the contents of its long-abstract and, therefore, limited nature of the mutually alien worlds of subject and object, understand[s] these worlds by seeing their limitations as necessary conditions of their existence and, by thus seeing through them, allows the duality of the world to subsist. At the same time the creative subjectivity glimpses a unified world in the mutual relativity of elements essentially alien to one another, and gives form to this world.⁸

As Paul de Man has argued in the essay mentioned above, Lukács seems to free himself here "from preconceived notions about the novel as an imitation of reality." Irony, de Man continues, "steadily undermines this claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience."⁹ As I have argued in an introduction to another book in this series, "de Man's semiotic understanding of Romantic irony indeed comes very close to the semiotic foundation of the concept of irony in Early Romanticism. Novalis, for instance, was fascinated by the duplicity constitutive of any act of representation: 'The nature of identity can be demonstrated only by a pseudo-sentence of identity [since the formula $A = A$ expresses a simultaneity of sameness and otherness]. . . . We leave the identical in order to represent it.' By emphasizing the "re" in representation, that is, by stressing the duplicity of being and representation that can never be sublated or conflated, Novalis conceives of representation as something that necessarily undermines any metaphysics of presence. This makes it logically impossible to conceive of art as a mimetic discourse, at least if one applies the rather narrow definition of mimesis or imitation underlying the Hegelian notion of form-content dialectics."¹¹

But Lukács never really freed himself "from preconceived notions about the novel as an imitation of reality" when he appropriated the Romantic concept of irony for his own purposes. Disregarding what Hegel had to say about Friedrich Schlegel and the Romantic concept of irony (cf., for instance: "The general meaning of . . . irony is a concentration of the ego in and on itself—an ego for which all bonds are broken and that only wants to live in the bliss of self-enjoyment. This irony was invented by Herr Friedrich von Schlegel, and many others have repeated it" and so forth),¹² Lukács interprets Romantic irony from a Hegelian point of view. He sees the force of difference and alienation, which according to Hegel entered history with the emergence of modern societies, as

a historical precondition for the ironical self's free activity. In reflecting upon the limitations engendered by the forces of difference and alienation, the ironical self frees him- or herself from those limitations. Lukács obviously combines the Romantic notion of free activity with Hegel's reflection on the duality of rational domination over nature as a precondition of human freedom and the inroads of difference and alienation that domination engendered. He therefore can suppress the semiotic foundations of Romantic irony which would collapse any comprehension of art as an imitation of life and can conceive of Romantic subjectivity as an objectified manifestation of modernity, not as an activity that should be fostered despite its fundamental inability to achieve what it sets out to achieve. As an observed, juxtaposed subject, Romantic subjectivity displays for Lukács the same ruptured, discrepant form-content dialectics he sees represented in the novel. His method arrests subjectivity in an interpreted image and never reflects it as an agency of self-representations.

The question is to what extent does Szondi share Lukács's emphasis on the mimetic nature of art? When he says of Schlegel's concept of irony: "Directness of expression has given way to self-consciousness. . . . Life is contemplated from the perspective of a 'deep and infinite meaning' that is not immanent to it,"¹³ Szondi seems to come close to a semiotic understanding of art that starts from the duplicity of being and its representation. The same can be said of a statement in Szondi's interpretation of Benjamin's *City Portraits*: "The tension between name and reality, which is the origin of poetry, is only experienced painfully, as the distance separating man from things."¹⁴ But a closer look reveals that these remarks are always compatible with a Hegelian notion of the historical emergence and decline of specific form-content relationships.

Adequate forms emerge only after periods of crisis. Szondi conceives of the emergence of adequate historical forms as a semiotic struggle whose outcome is predetermined. Talking about "the process by which reality becomes an image," Szondi quotes Benjamin: "Finding words for what lies before one's eyes—how hard that can be! But when they do come they strike against reality with little hammers until they have knocked the image out of it, as out of copper plate."¹⁵ The

Hegelian implications of these remarks become clear when he adds: "The competition between the two [name and reality] always ends, to be sure, with the victory of objective reality." From here it is not far to statements that presuppose a rather narrow notion of the aesthetic reflection of reality, as when he says, in his *Theory of the Modern Drama*, that the aesthetic realm "is supposed to reflect", that is, to represent, "the conversion and dispersal of historical process" (p. 36). Paul de Man's critique of Szondi's interpretation of the Romantic concept of irony as a "belief in the reconciliation of the ideal and the real as the result of an action or the activity of the mind"¹⁶ can, if read against the background of his critique of Lukács, help us understand Szondi's representational presuppositions as well. His interpretation of the history of dramatic forms is rooted in a mimetic concept of art.

V.

From here the intertwining of Szondi's method with his reconstruction of the history of the drama and the shortcomings of that reconstruction should become apparent. His reconstruction is unable not only to comprehend but to even notice other forms of the modern drama. There are at least two such forms; they are located on either side of the spectrum Szondi's method covers. In the direction of a radical notion of art as an imitation of reality, one that does not share the open-endedness of Szondi's historical philosophy and starts from a closed notion of history, plays can be found that attempt to preserve major features of the absolute drama while simultaneously trying to overcome an idealist notion of the subject as an independent and self-identical agent. I am referring to allegorical forms developed by Marxist playwrights such as Peter Hacks, Heiner Müller, and Helmut Lange.¹⁷

There is, to be sure, a decisive difference between the dramatic form these playwrights developed and the form of the absolute drama described by Szondi: The microcosm and the macrocosm in these plays are no longer united or related organically (cf. p. 36); rather their relation to one another is discrepant. An adequate understanding of them requires two readings: For the microcosm, an allegorical reading of the historical development of human society. Such forms, of course, presuppose a self-assured epistemology that is completely alien to Szondi's epistemological skepticism and to the dependence of his critical method on the breakthrough of historical and formal difference in moments of crisis.

More importantly, neither Szondi's reconstruction of the history of drama nor his Hegelian notion of the form-content relationship leave space for a dramatic form based on a semiotic understanding of theatrical practice. Although numerous examples of such practice exist, for example, Piscator's theater productions in Weimar Germany, Brecht's epic theater, forms of living theater from the 1920s to the early 1970s, contemporary feminist theater productions like those of *At the Foot of the Mountain* and the *Women's Theater Project*, two feminist theaters in Minneapolis, I will use Brecht's *Lehrstücketheorie* (insufficiently translatable as "theory of didactic plays") as an illustration of twentieth-century tendencies to develop a critical semiotic understanding of theatrical practice. In its theoretical aspects, if not in its practical realizations, Brecht's conception of such a theatrical practice is by far the most advanced form.

Brecht had always conceived of the epic theater, for which he gained fame, as a transitional form of theatrical practice that still accepts and performs within the restricted framework of the institution of bourgeois theater. He called the social intentions of his epic theater the "little pedagogy," contrasting it to a theater of the future, the concept of which he developed under the name of "great pedagogy".

The Great Pedagogy alters the role of acting completely. . . . It eliminates the system [i.e., the division] of actor and viewer. . . . It only knows actors who simultaneously are students, according to the principle "where the interest of the individual coincides with the interest of the state, the comprehended gesture determines the mode of operation of the individual." [Here] imitating acting becomes the major part of pedagogy. . . . In contrast, the Little Pedagogy achieves only a democratization of the theater during the transitional period of the first revolution. [In the theater of the Little Pedagogy] the duality [of stage and house] remains intact.¹⁸

Underlying the intention of eliminating the duality of house and stage is Brecht's conviction that, first, any successful and momentous learning process has to be grounded in concrete, bodily experience of attitudes or social action and that, second, only the successive experience of adverse, mutually exclusive attitudes or actions in modes of "imitating acting" will have a lasting effect. Thus, he wants actors to play different, conflicting roles during the same performance for them to learn, that is, to experience, the effect of a specific social behavior bodily. In other words, actors, now acting for themselves, should experience the ideological difference of binary attitudes on their own bodies through constant role changes.

In a way, Brecht sees the same epistemological dependency of human cognition on spaces of difference as Szondi does, except that he grounds this conviction materialistically and insists that a theatrical practice that produces such spaces can be created. Furthermore, he does not orient such a practice toward cognitive results that arrest the learning process. Because of the problematic nature of self-representation, of the duplicity of representation and being, Brecht conceived of the "great pedagogy" as a medium that opens up an endless road of self-representations on which we can always only approximate an understanding of our being. Such representations are not geared toward contemplative cognition but rather toward social praxis.

Such modes of theatrical practice, based on the unsublatable duality of experience and representation, had to fall through the net of Szondi's Hegelian categories. Nevertheless, if one does not read Szondi's depiction of modern drama as an inclusive one, this book offers an understanding of the epic tendencies in the modern theater that is rich in insight and in many ways still unparalleled.

Translator's Preface

In the introductory section of this book, Peter Szondi indicates that one of the primary assumptions underlying his critical practice is that the form of a work "provides evidence about human existence." Having made this bold assertion, he can go on to say that the dramatic forms he intends to investigate should, therefore, be identified as literary-historical phenomena, as "documents" of human history. Anyone who has read his other critical work knows that Szondi applies this principle not only to dramatic texts but to textual production in general. A fundamental aspect of Szondi's hermeneutic method is constituted by his search for the moment of tension between form and content that will reveal the historical ground on which a text is built. It is also this desire to allow the text to "speak," to announce its own historicity, that emerges in his decision not to add to or substantially revise this book when it appeared in a new edition some ten years after its original composition (see his afterword to the 1963 edition in this volume).

As editor and translator of this edition, I have chosen to honor this important critical principle in the hope that the reader will not only discover a new way of approaching the development of the modern drama, but that she or he will also note the historical boundaries of Szondi's own rhetoric. Thus it is that I have kept certain rhetorical turns and critical formulations that, given Szondi's often very advanced theoretical insights, might well have been rendered in a style more in keeping with current poststructuralist discourse. This is also the reason I have let stand the masculine pronoun where today one might prefer to find a less gender-bound formulation. One should not, however, in the name of a more

democratic usage, be prevented from noting the historical valences of such supposedly neutral terms as *Mensch*—and their essentially masculine orientation when employed by Szondi and his contemporaries.

There are, of course, certain difficulties that must remain unresolved: word play and turns of phrase that simply do not have an English equivalent. I have tried to retain the core of these locutions in the translation, but in so doing the range as well as the playfulness of Szondi's language has sometimes suffered irreparable damage. To restore something of what has been lost, I have appended a series of notes and comments that I hope will help guide the reader through some of these difficult spots and to a better understanding of the sources and the implications of Szondi's language and critical orientation. I hope, too, that this translation can serve as a token of the esteem in which Peter Szondi was held by all those who studied under him in Berlin and elsewhere.

M. H.

Introduction

Historical Aesthetics

and Genre-Based Poetics

Theorists of the drama have condemned the presence of epic features in dramatic works ever since Aristotle. But anyone who attempts to describe the development of recent drama can (for reasons he ought to clarify for himself and his readers) no longer feel called upon to make such judgments.*

In earlier dramatic theory, the expectation that one adhere to formal rules was justified by a particular notion of form, one that recognized neither a historical nor a dialectical relationship between form and content. The assumption was that a preexisting form was embodied in dramatic art through its union with a subject matter chosen with this form in mind. If the preexistent form was not adequately realized—if the drama possessed any forbidden epic features—the error was attributed to the selection of subject matter. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle insists that the poet must remember not to “write a tragedy on an *epic* body of incident (i.e., one with a plurality of stories in it), by attempting to dramatize, for instance, the entire *Iliad*.”¹ Even Goethe and Schiller’s effort to distinguish between epic and dramatic poetry had as its practical goal the avoidance of faulty subject matter.²

This traditional view, which is based on an initial separation of form and content, admits of no historical classification either. The preexistent form is historically indifferent, only subject matter is historically bound. By conforming to this pattern, which is common to all prehistorical theories,* the drama appears to be the historical embodiment of atemporal form.

*Asterisks correspond to explanatory information in the Editor’s Notes and Commentary.

That dramatic form is conceived of as existing outside history also means that such drama can always be written and can be called for in the poetics of any age.

This connection between a transhistorical poetics and an undialectical conception of form and content is restated in that culminating moment of dialectical and historical thought—the works of Hegel.* In his *Science of Logic*, he states that “the only true works of art are those whose content and form prove to be completely identical.”³ This identity is dialectical in nature: earlier in the same discussion Hegel asserts the “absolute correlation of content and form, . . . their reversion into one another, so that content is nothing but the reversion of form into content and form nothing but the reversion of content into form.”⁴ Identifying form and content in this way destroys the opposition between the timeless and the historical found in the old conceptual relationship. The result is the historicization of the concept “form” and, ultimately, of genre poetics (*Gattungspoetik*) itself. The lyric, epos, and drama are transformed from systematic into historical categories.

After this change in the fundamental principles of poetics, three paths remained open to critics. They could conclude that traditional poetics’ three primary categories had lost their *raison d’être* along with their systematic character—thus Benedetto Croce exited them from aesthetics.* In diametrical opposition to this view stand the efforts made to flee from a historically based poetics, from concrete literary modes, back to the timeless. Emilij Staiger’s *Poetik* (along with R. Harlt’s rather unrewarding *Versuch einer psychologischen Grundlegung der Dichtungsgattungen*) bears witness to this effort. In Staiger’s work, the genres are anchored in mankind’s various modes of being and, finally, in the three “ecstasies” of time. That this redefinition alters the nature of poetics in general and particularly the relationship of poetics to literature is evident in the unavoidable replacement of the three basic concepts, “lyric,” “epos,” and “drama,” by “lyrical,” “epic,” and “dramatic.”

A third possibility existed, however—to remain within the historical perspective. This led, among Hegel’s followers, to works that elaborated more than a historical aesthetics for literature: Gleorgj Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*; Walter Benjamin’s *Origins of German Tragic Drama*; Theodor W. Adorno’s *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Hegel’s dialectical notion of the form-content relationship was turned to productive use here. Form could be conceived of as “precipitated” content.⁵ The metaphor points both to the solid and lasting nature of form and to its origin in content—thus its capacity to state something.* A valid semantics of form can be developed along these lines, one in which the form-content dialectic can be viewed as a dialectic between the statements made by form and content. The possibility arises, thereby, that the statement made by the content may contradict that of the form. If, when there is an equivalence between form and content, the thematic [the subject of the content]* operates within the framework of the formal statement as a problem contained, so to

speak, within something unproblematic, a contradiction arises, because the indisputable fixed statement of the form is called into question by the content. It is this inner antimony that causes a given literary form to become historically problematic. This book is an attempt to explain the different forms of recent works for the stage as efforts to resolve such contradictions.

This is also the reason the discussion remains within the realm of aesthetics rather than branching out into a diagnosis of the period.* The contradictions between dramatic form and the problems of contemporary life should not be set down *in abstracto*. Instead, they should be examined as technical contradictions, as “difficulties,” internal to the concrete work itself. Of course, it seems natural to want to define that displacement in modern theatrical works which arises from the growing problem of dramatic form in terms of a system of genres. But we will have to do without a systematic, that is, a normative, poetics—not out of any desire to avoid the inevitably negative evaluation of the epic tendencies in these plays but because a historical-dialectical view of form and content eliminates the possibility of a systematic poetics as such.

The terminological starting point for this analysis is simply the concept “drama.” As a time-bound concept, it stands for a specific literary-historical event—namely, the drama as it arose in Elizabethan England and, above all, as it came into being in seventeenth-century France and was perpetuated in the German classical period. Since the concept provides evidence of the assertions about human existence that were precipitated in dramatic form, it identifies this form as a literary-historical phenomenon, as a “document” of human history. It serves to expose the technical demands of the drama as reflections of existential demands. The totality it outlines is not of a systematic but of a historico-philosophic nature. Since history has been ostracized to the gaps between literary forms, only by reflecting on history can these gaps be bridged.

The notion “drama” is historically bound in its origins as well as in its content. But because the form of art always seems to express something un-questionable, we usually arrive at a clear understanding of such formal statements only at a time when the unquestionable has been questioned and the self-evident has become problematic.* It is in this tight that the drama will be dealt with here—in terms of what impedes it today—and this notion of the drama will be examined as a moment of inquiry into the possibility of modern drama.

Therefore, only a particular dramaturgic form will be designated “Drama” in the following pages. Neither the clerical plays of the Middle Ages nor Shakespeare’s histories belong in this category. Working within a historical frame of reference also eliminates Greek tragedy from consideration, since its being can be examined only under a different set of conditions. The adjective “dramatic,” as used hereafter, will have no qualitative meaning (as it does, for example, in Emilij Staiger’s *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*).⁶ It will simply express the idea “belonging to the Drama” (a “dramatic dialogue” = dialogue in the

Drama), "Theatrical works," in contrast to Drama, will be used in the largest sense to designate anything written for the stage. * If "drama" is at any time used in this sense, it will be placed within quotation marks.

Since modern theatrical works develop out of and away from the Drama itself, this development must be considered with the help of a contrasting concept. "Epic" will serve here. It designates a common structural characteristic of the epos, the story, the novel, and other genres—namely, the presence of that which has been referred to as the "subject of the epic form"⁷ or the "epic *I*."⁸

Preceding the eighteen essays in which an attempt is made to apprehend this development as it manifests itself in specific texts is a discussion of the Drama itself. All that follows will refer to this analysis.

I. The Drama

The Drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance. It was the result of a bold intellectual effort made by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of the medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone.¹ Man entered the drama only as a fellow human being, so to speak. The sphere of the "between" seemed to be the essential part of his being; freedom and obligation, will and decision the most important of his attributes. The "place" at which he achieved dramatic realization was in an act of decision and self-disclosure. * By deciding to disclose himself to his contemporary world, man transformed his internal being into a palpable and dramatic presence. * The surrounding world, on the other hand, was drawn into a rapport with him because of his disclosure and thereby first achieved dramatic realization. Every-thing prior to or after this act was, had to remain, foreign to the drama—the in-expressible as well as the expressed, what was hidden in the soul as well as the idea already alienated from its subject. Most radical of all was the exclusion of that which could not express itself—the world of objects—unless it entered the realm of interpersonal relationships.

All dramatic themes were formulated in this sphere of the "between"—for example, the struggle of passion and devoir in the Cid's position between his father and his beloved; the comic paradoxes in "crooked" interpersonal situations, such as that of Justice Adam; the tragedy of individuation as it appeared to Hebbel; the tragic conflict between Duke Ernst, Albrecht, and Agnes Bernauer. *

The verbal medium for this world of the interpersonal was the dialogue. In

the Renaissance, after the exclusion of prologue, chorus, and epilogue, dialogue became, perhaps for the first time in the history of the theater (excluding the monologue, which remained occasional and therefore did not constitute the form of the Drama), the sole constitutive element in the dramatic web. In this respect, the neoclassical Drama distinguishes itself not only from antique tragedy but also from medieval clerical plays, from the baroque world theater, and from Shakespeare's histories. The absolute dominance of dialogue—that is, of interpersonal communication, reflects the fact that the Drama consists only of the reproduction of interpersonal relations, is only cognizant of what shines forth within this sphere.

All this shows that the Drama is a self-contained dialectic but one that is free and redefined from moment to moment. With this in mind, the Drama's major characteristics can now be understood and described.

The Drama is absolute. * To be purely relational—that is, to be dramatic, it must break loose from everything external. It can be conscious of nothing outside itself.

The dramatist is absent from the Drama. He does not speak; he institutes discussion. The Drama is not written, it is set. All the lines spoken in the Drama are disclosures. They are spoken in context and remain there. They should in no way be perceived as coming from the author. The Drama belongs to the author only as a whole, and this connection is just an incidental aspect of its reality as a work.

The same absolute quality exists with regard to the spectator. The lines in a play are as little an address to the spectator as they are a declaration by the author. The theatergoer is an observer—silent, with hands tied, lamed by the impact of this other world. This total passivity will, however (and therein lies the dramatic experience), be converted into irrational activity. He who was the spectator is pulled into the dramatic event, becomes the person speaking (through the mouths of all the characters, of course). The spectator-Drama relationship is one of complete separation or complete identity, not one in which the spectator invades the Drama or is addressed through the Drama.

The stage shaped by the Renaissance and the neoclassical period, the much-maligned "picture-frame" stage, is the only one adequate to the absoluteness of the drama and bears witness to it in each of its features. It is no more connected to the house (by steps, for example) than the Drama is connected (stepwise) to the audience. The stage becomes visible, thus exists, only at the beginning of the play—often, in fact, only after the first lines have been spoken. Because of this, it seems to be created by the play itself. At the end of the act, when the curtain falls, the stage is again withdrawn from the spectator's view, taken back as if it were part of the play. The footlights which illuminate it create the impression that the play sheds its own light on stage.

Even the actor's art is subservient to the absoluteness of the Drama. The

actor-role relationship should not be visible. Indeed, the actor and the character should unite to create a single personage.

That the Drama is absolute can be expressed in a different manner: the Drama is primary. It is not a (secondary) representation of something else (primary); it presents itself, is itself. Its action, like each of its lines, is "original"; it is accomplished as it occurs. The Drama has no more room for quotation than it does for variation. Such quotation would imply that the Drama referred to whatever was quoted. Variation would call into question the Drama's quality of being primary ("true") and present it as secondary (as a variation of something and as one variation among many). Furthermore, it would be necessary to assume a "quoter" or "varier" on whom the Drama would depend.

The Drama is primary. This also explains why historical plays always strike one as "undramatic." The attempt to stage *Luther the Reformer* requires some reference to history. If it were possible, in the absolute dramatic situation, to show Luther in the process of deciding to reform the faith, the Reformation Drama could be said to exist. But at this point, a second problem arises: the objective conditions which are necessary to motivate the decision demand epic treatment. An interpersonal portrayal of Luther's situation would be the only possible foundation for the Drama, but this account would be understandably alien to the intent of a Reformation play.

Because the Drama is always primary, its internal time is always the present. That in no way means that the Drama is static, only that time passes in a particular manner: the present passes and becomes the past and, as such, can no longer be present on stage. As the present passes away, it produces change, a new present springs from its antithesis. In the Drama, time unfolds as an absolute, linear sequence in the present. Because the Drama is absolute, it is itself responsible for this temporal sequence. It generates its own time. Therefore, every moment must contain the seeds of the future. It must be "pregnant with futurity."² This is possible because of the Drama's dialectical structure, which, in turn, is rooted in interpersonal relationships.

From this point of view, the demand that one adhere to the unity of time acquires new meaning. Temporal fragmentation of the scenes in a play would subvert the principle of absolute presence and linearity because every scene would have its own antecedents and results (past and future) external to the play. The individual scenes would thus be relativized. In addition, only when each scene in succession generates the next (the kind of progression necessary to the Drama) can the implicit presence of a *monieur* be avoided. The (spoken or unspoken) "three years later" presupposes an epic *I*.

A comparable set of conditions leads to the demand for unity of place. As with time, the spectator should not be conscious of a larger spatial context. Only then can an absolute—that is, a dramatic—scene arise. The more frequent the change in scene, the more difficult this is to accomplish. Besides, spatial frag-

mentation (like temporal) assumes an epic *I*. (Cliché: Now we will leave the conspirators in the forest and return to the unsuspecting king in his palace.)

It is generally agreed that Shakespeare's plays differ most markedly from the French neoclassical form in these two areas. But his loose and multiphase succession of scenes should be examined in conjunction with the histories (e.g., *Henry V*) in which a narrator, designated "Chorus," presents the individual acts to the audience as chapters in a popular history.

The insistence on motivation and the exclusion of accident are also based in the absoluteness of the Drama. The accidental enters the Drama from outside, but, by motivating it, accident is domesticated; it is rooted in the heart of drama itself.

Ultimately, the whole world of the Drama is dialectical in origin. It does not come into being because of an epic *I* which permeates the work. It exists because of the always achieved and, from that point, once again disrupted sublation of the interpersonal dialectic, which manifests itself as speech in the dialogue. In this respect as well, the dialogue carries the Drama. The Drama is possible only when dialogue is possible.

II. The Drama in Crisis

The first five essays focus on Ibsen (1828–1906), Chekhov (1860–1904), Strindberg (1849–1912), Maeterlinck (1862–1949), and Hauptmann (1862–1946) because the search for the initial situation in which the modern play arose must begin with a confrontation between works from the late nineteenth century and the phenomena of the classic Drama just described.

Of course, it could well be asked whether this kind of back reference might not subvert the historical purpose of the analysis and lead one to fall back into the kind of systematic normative poetics rejected in the introduction—especially since that which was tentatively described in the preceding pages as the Drama arising in the Renaissance coincides with the traditional conception of the Drama. It is identical with that which handbooks on dramatic technique (e.g., Gustav Freytag's) taught and against which modern plays were at first and, occasionally, still are measured by critics. But the historical method, applied here to glean information from the form about the historicity of this "normative" Drama, is in no danger of becoming normative itself—even if theatrical works from the turn of the century are examined in terms of the Drama's historical image. After all, around 1860 this form for the Drama not only was the subjective norm of the theorists but also represented the objective state of the works of the period. Whatever else there was at hand that might have been played off against this form was either archaic in character or tied to a specific thematic. The "open" Shakespearean form, for example, which is constantly compared with the "closed" neoclassical form, cannot really be detached from Shakespeare's histo-

ries. Whenever it was successfully employed in German literature, it served the purpose of historical fresco (*Goetz von Berlichingen, Danton's Death*).

The connection established in what follows is, therefore, not normative in origin; rather, it will deal conceptually with objective-historical relationships. To be sure, the relationship to neoclassical dramatic form is different for each of the five dramatists discussed here. Ibsen did not take a critical stance vis-à-vis traditional dramatic form. He achieved fame in great part because of his mastery of earlier dramatic conventions. But this external perfection masked an internal crisis in the Drama. Chekhov also adopted the traditional form. He no longer had any firm commitment to the *pièce bien faite* (into which the neoclassical Drama had alienated itself) though. On this inherited terrain he constructed a magical, poetic edifice that nonetheless has no autonomous style, gives no guarantee of a formal whole, and, instead, continually exposes the bases of its construction. Thus, he revealed the discrepancy between the form he used and that demanded by his thematic. And if Strindberg and Maeterlinck came upon new forms, they did so only after a conflict with the tradition. Then again, sometimes this conflict remained unresolved and visible within their works—a signpost, as it were, on the road to the forms developed by later dramatists. Finally, Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* and *The Weavers* allow us to see the problems created for the drama by a social thematic.

I. Ibsen

Access to the problems of form in a play like *Rosmersholm* has been hampered by the idea of an analytical technique, which has led Ibsen's work to be compared with that of Sophocles.* If, however, one is aware of the aesthetic connections in relation to which Sophocles' analysis was employed and how it was discussed in the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller,* the notion ceases to be an obstacle and, in fact, turns out to be the key to Ibsen's late work. On October 2, 1797, Schiller wrote to Goethe that

For the past few days I have been very busy trying to find a tragic subject which would be of the same sort as *Oedipus Rex*, one which would provide the poet with all the same advantages. These advantages are infinite, even if I name only one: the most compound of actions, though it militates against the tragic form, can nonetheless be its basis if the action has already taken place and so falls entirely outside the tragedy. In addition, that which has happened, because it is inalterable, is by its very nature much more terrible. The fact that something *might have* happened affects the spirit quite differently than the fear that something *might* happen—*Oedipus* is, as it were, merely a tragic analysis. Everything is already present. It is simply unfolded. That can be done with the simplest of actions and in a very short time, no mat-

ter how complicated the events were or what conditions they depended on. What an advantage for the poet! — But I am afraid that *Oedipus* represents a genre all its own and there is no other like species.

Half a year earlier (on April 22, 1797), Goethe had written Schiller that the exposition was hard work for a dramatist "because one expects him to produce an eternal forward movement, and I would call that dramatic material best in which the exposition is already part of the development." Schiller responded, on April 25, that *Oedipus Rex* approached this ideal to an amazing degree.

The starting point for this thought process is that the form of the drama exists a priori. The analytical technique is pressed into service to permit inclusion of the exposition in the dramatic movement and thus remove its epic effect or to permit use of the "most compound" of actions, those that at first do not seem to fit the dramatic form, as subject matter for a drama.

This is not what happens in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, however. Aeschylus' earlier, lost trilogy had already provided a chronological account of the Theban king's fate. Sophocles could forgo this epic presentation of widely separated events because it was, for him, less a question of the events themselves than of the tragic qualities they embody. This tragedy is not tied to details though; it rises above the temporal flow. The tragic dialectic of sight and loss of sight—that a man loses his sight through self-knowledge, through that one eye "too many" that he has¹—this peripeteia (both in the Aristotelian and Hegelian sense) requires only a *single* act of recognition, the anagnorisis,² to become a dramatic reality. The Athenian spectator knew the myth; it did not have to be acted out. The only person who has yet to experience it is Oedipus himself—and he can do so only at the end, after the myth has become his life. Exposition is unnecessary here, and the analysis is synonymous with the action. Oedipus, blind through seeing, creates, so to speak, the empty center of a world that already knows his fate. Step by step, messengers who come from this world invade his inner being and fill it with their horrible truth. It is not a truth that belongs to the past, however. The present, not the past, is revealed. Oedipus is his father's murderer, his mother's husband, his children's brother. He is "the land's pollution"³ and has only to learn what has been in order to recognize what is. Thus, the action in *Oedipus Rex*, although it in fact precedes the tragedy, is nonetheless contained within its present. The analytical technique is, in Sophocles' case, called for by the subject matter itself, not to reproduce a preexisting form but rather to show its tragic quality in its greatest purity and depth.

In differentiating the dramatic structures created by Ibsen and Sophocles, one is led straight to the formal problem that confronted Ibsen, a problem which exposes the historical crisis in the Drama itself. There is no need to prove that for Ibsen the analytical technique, rather than being an isolated phenomenon, is the mode of construction in his modern plays. It should be sufficient to remind the

reader of the more important of them: *A Doll's House*, *Pillars of Society*, *Ghosts*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Masterbuilder*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *When We Dead Awaken*.

The action of *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) "passes one winter evening, at the manor house of the Rentheim family, in the neighborhood of the capital." For eight years John Gabriel Borkman, "formerly managing director of a bank," has lived in almost complete isolation in the "great gallery" of the house. The drawing room below is occupied by his wife, Gunhild. They live in the same house without ever seeing one another. Ella Rentheim, Gunhild's sister and owner of the house, lives elsewhere. Once a year she comes to see the estate manager. During these visits she speaks neither to Gunhild nor to Borkman.

The winter evening on which the play opens reunites these three people, who are chained together by the past but are at the same time profoundly estranged from one another. In the first act, Ella and Gunhild meet. "Well, Gunhild, it is nearly eight years now since we saw each other last."⁴ The second act brings a discussion between Ella and Borkman. "It seems an endless time since we two met, Borkman, face to face."⁵ And in the third act, John Gabriel and his wife stand opposite each other. "The last time we stood face to face—it was in the Court, when I was summoned to give an account—"⁶

Ella, who suffers from a terminal illness, wants the Borkmans' son, who was her foster child for many years, to come and stay with her again so that she will not be alone when she dies. This wish motivates the conversations in which the past of all three characters is brought into the open.

Borkman loved Ella Rentheim but married her sister, Gunhild. He spent eight years in prison for theft of bank deposits after his friend Hinkel, a lawyer, exposed him. Ella, whose fortune was the only one in the bank that Borkman left untouched, bought back the family estate for him and his wife when it was auctioned off. After he was freed, Borkman withdrew to the house and the gallery. During this period Ella raised the Borkmans' son, who was almost an adult when he returned to his mother.

These are the events. But they are not recounted here for their own sake. What lies "behind" and "between" them is essential: motives and time.

"But when you, of your own accord, undertook to educate Erhart for me what was your motive in that?" Mrs. Borkman asks her sister.⁷

"I have often wondered what was your real reason for sparing all my property? That and that alone?" Ella asks her brother-in-law.⁸

And thus the true relationships between Ella and Borkman, Borkman and Gunhild, and Ella and Erhart are revealed.

Borkman gave up Ella in order to get Hinkel, who was also Ella's suitor, to back his career at the bank. Although he did not love Gunhild, he married her instead of Ella. But Hinkel, who was rejected by a despairing Ella, thought Borkman's influence was the cause and took vengeance by turning him in. Ella,

whose life was ruined by Borkman's unfaithfulness, now loves only one person—Erhart, Borkman's son. She had raised him to be her own child, but when Erhart grew older his mother took him back. Ella, whose terminal illness was caused by that "spiritual shock," Borkman's faithlessness, now wants Erhart back during the final months of her life. But Erhart leaves both his mother and his aunt to be with the woman he loves.

Such are the motives. On this winter evening they are dragged out of the ruined souls of these three people and exposed to the glare of the footlights. But the essential has not yet been mentioned. When Borkman, Gunhild, and Ella speak of the past, it is not individual events that stand in the foreground or their motivation but time itself which is painted by them: "I shall redeem myself . . . redeem my ruined life," says Mrs. Borkman.⁹ When Ella tells her she has heard that Gunhild and her husband live in the same house without seeing each other, she replies: "Yes; that is how it has been, Ella, ever since they let him out, and sent him home to me. All these long eight years."¹⁰ And when Ella and Borkman meet:

Ella: It seems an endless time since we two met, Borkman, face to face.

Borkman (gloomily): It's a long, long time. And terrible things have passed since then.

Ella: A whole lifetime has passed—a wasted lifetime.¹¹

A bit later:

Ella: From the day your image began to dwindle in my mind, I have lived my life as though under an eclipse. During all these years it has grown harder and harder for me—and at last utterly impossible—to love any living creature.¹²

And in the third act, when Gunhild tells her husband she has thought more than enough about his dubious past, he responds:

I too. During those five endless years in my cell—and elsewhere—I had time to think it over. And during the eight years up there in the gallery I had still more ample time. I have retried the whole case—by myself. Time after time I have retried it . . . I have paced up and down the gallery there, turning every one of my actions upside down and inside out.¹³ I have skulked up there and wasted eight precious years of my life!¹⁴

In the last act, in the open space in front of the house:

It is high time I should come out into the open air again. . . . Nearly three years in detention—five years in prison—eight years in the gallery up there—¹⁵

But he has no time to get used to the fresh air. His flight out of the prison of his past does not bring him back to life. It leads to his death. And Ella and Gunhild, who on this evening lose both the man and the son they love, take each other's hands, "two shadows—over the dead man."

Here the past is not, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, a function of the present. On the contrary, the present is rather an occasion for conjuring up the past. The accent lies neither on Ella's fate nor on Borkman's death. No single event from the past is the thematic of the play either—not Borkman's rejection of Ella, not Hinkel's vengeance, nothing from the past. Instead, the past itself, the repeatedly mentioned "long years" and the "wasted lifetime," is the subject of the play—a subject that does not lend itself to the dramatic present. Only something temporal can be made present in the sense of dramatic actualization, not time itself. Time can only be reported about in the Drama; its direct presentation is possible solely in an art form that includes it "among its constitutive principles." This art form—as Georg Lukács has shown—is the novel.¹⁶

"In the drama (and the epos) the past either does not exist or is completely present. Because these forms know nothing of the passage of time, they allow of no qualitative difference between the experiencing of past and present; time has no power of transformation, it neither intensifies nor diminishes the meaning of anything."¹⁷ In *Oedipus* the analysis transforms the past into the present. "This is the formal meaning of the typical scenes of revelation and recognition which Aristotle shows us; something that was pragmatically unknown to the heroes of the drama enters their field of vision, and in the world thus altered they have to act otherwise than they might wish to act. But the force of the newly introduced factor is not diminished by a temporal perspective, it is absolutely homogeneous with and equivalent to the present."¹⁸ Thus another difference becomes clear. Truth in *Oedipus Rex* is objective in nature. It belongs to the world. Only Oedipus lives in ignorance, and his road to the truth forms the tragic action. For Ibsen, on the other hand, truth is that of interiority. There lie the motives for the decisions that emerge in the light of day; there the traumatic effects of these decisions lie hidden and live on despite all external changes. In addition to the temporal present, Ibsen's thematic does without presence in this topical sense as well—a presence which the Drama requires. The thematic does arise out of interpersonal relationships, but it is at home only in the innermost being of these estranged and solitary figures, as a reflex of the interpersonal.

That means it is impossible to give it direct dramatic presentation. This material has need of the analytical technique, and not simply to achieve greater density. As the subject matter of a novel, which is basically what it is, it can only be staged thanks to this technique. Even so, the thematic ultimately remains alien to the stage. However much the thematic is tied to the presence (in both senses of the word) of an action, it remains exiled in the past and the depths of the individual. This is the unresolved formal problem in Ibsen's dramaturgy.¹⁹

Because his starting point was epic in nature, he was forced to develop an incomparable mastery of dramatic construction. Because he achieved this mastery, the epic origin of his plays was no longer visible. The dramatist's dual enterprise—to give his material presence and function—was an inexorable necessity for Ibsen. But he never quite succeeded.

A great deal of that which serves to create presence is rather surprising when examined on its own—the leitmotiv technique, for instance. It is not used, as is the case elsewhere, to indicate sameness in change or to make cross-connections. Instead, the past lives on in Ibsen's leitmotifs, conjured up by their mention. In *Rosmersholm*, for example, Beate Rosmer's suicide becomes an eternal presence because of the millpond. Symbolic events are used to link the past to the present: the tinkle of glass in an adjoining room (*Chorus*). The motif of genetic inheritance serves more to make the past present than it does to embody the antique notion of fate: Captain Alving's conduct reappears as his son's illness. Only by way of this kind of analytical analysis is it possible, if not to present time itself—Mrs. Alving's life at the side of this person—at least to represent it as an awareness of time elapsed, as a difference in generations.

And making the material dramatically functional, which would otherwise serve to work out the causal-final structure of a unified action, here serves to bridge the gap between the present and the past—a past that cannot be presented objectively. Ibsen seldom managed to give equal status to the action in the present and the thematic action the play conjures up. They are often only rough-joined. In this respect, *Rosmersholm* again seems to be Ibsen's masterpiece. The topical political theme can hardly be separated from the internal theme of the past. This past is not hidden in the depths of the characters' souls but lives on in the house itself. Furthermore, the former makes it possible for the latter to maintain a twilight presence appropriate to its nature. They are completely united in the figure of Rector Kroll. He is both Rosmer's political enemy and brother of a woman driven to suicide—Mrs. Rosmer. But here too Ibsen fails to motivate the end of the play sufficiently in terms of the past. He fails to demonstrate its inevitability. The tragedy of a blind Oedipus led back into the palace is not accorded to Rosmer and Rebecca West when, summoned by the dead Mrs. Rosmer, they plunge into the millpond.

Here one also sees the distance from tragic fall that the bourgeois world in general enjoys. The immanent tragic condition of this world does not originate in death but in life itself.²⁰ This life, Rilke said (in direct reference to Ibsen), "had slipped into us, had withdrawn inward, so deeply that it was scarcely possible to conjecture about it anymore."²¹ Balzac's comment belongs here too. "We all die unknown."²² Ibsen's work stands wholly under this sign. But because he tried to reveal this hidden life dramatically, to enact it through the dramatic personae themselves, he destroyed it. Ibsen's figures could survive only by burrowing into themselves and living off the "life lie." Because he did not enclose

them in a novel, because he did not leave them within their life but instead forced them to publicly declare themselves, he killed them. So it is that in periods which are hostile to the Drama, the dramatist becomes the murderer of the creatures he has created.

2. Chekhov

In Chekhov's plays, the characters live under the sign of renunciation—renunciation of the present and of communication before all else, renunciation of the happiness arising from real interaction. This resignation, in which passionate longing and irony mix to prevent any extreme, also determines the form of Chekhov's plays and his position in the development of modern theater.

To renounce the present is to live with memories and utopian dreams; to do without human interaction is to be lonely. * *The Three Sisters*, perhaps the most fully realized of Chekhov's plays, is exclusively a presentation of lonely individuals intoxicated by memories and dreaming of the future. Their present, overwhelmed by the past and future, is merely an interim, a period of suspended animation during which the only goal is to return to the lost homeland. This theme (around which, moreover, all romantic literature circles) becomes concrete in *The Three Sisters* in terms of the bourgeois world at the turn of the century. Thus, Olga, Masha, and Irina, the Prozorov sisters, live with their brother, Andrei Sergeevitch, in a large garrison town in East Russia. Eleven years earlier they had left their home in Moscow to go there with their father, who had taken command of a brigade. The play begins a year after their father's death. Their stay in the provinces has lost all meaning: memories of life in Moscow overflow into the boredom of their daily existence and grow into a single despairing cry: "To Moscow!"¹ The wait for this return to the past, which is also supposed to be a wonderful future, absorbs the three sisters completely. They are surrounded by garrison officers who are consumed by the same fatigue and longing. For one of these officers, though, that moment in the future which is the intended goal of the Prozorov sisters has expanded into a utopian vision. Alexander Ignatyevich Vershinin says:

And then, in another two or three hundred years, life on earth will be beautiful and wonderful beyond anything we can imagine. Man needs such a life and while we don't have it yet, we must become aware of its impending arrival, wait for it, imagine it, and prepare the way for it.²

And later,

It seems to me that everything on earth is bound to change, little by little, and in fact it's already changing right before our eyes. Two or

three hundred years or a thousand years from now—it's immaterial how long—a new happy life will come about. Of course, we'll have no part in that life, but nevertheless even today, we live for it, work for it, well yes, suffer for it, and thus we are bringing it about. And that alone is the purpose of our existence and, if you like, in it lies our happiness.³

We're not meant to be happy . . . we won't be happy. . . . We must just work and work and work and someday our descendants will be happy. If I can't be happy, at least my grandchildren's grandchildren. . . .⁴

Even more than this utopian orientation, the weight of the past and the dissatisfaction with the present isolate the characters. They all ponder their own lives, lose themselves in memories, and torment themselves by analyzing their boredom. Everyone in the Prozorov family and all their acquaintances have their own problems—problems that preoccupy them even in the company of others and, therefore, separate them from their fellow beings. Andrei is crushed by the discrepancy between a longed-for professorship in Moscow and his actual position as secretary to the rural district council. Masha married unhappily when she was seventeen. Olga believes that "in the four years [she has] been teaching at the school, [she has] felt [her] strength and youth draining away drop by drop."⁵ And Irina, who has plunged into her work to overcome her dissatisfaction and sadness,⁶ admits:

I'm going on twenty-four already. I've worked for years now and my brain's all dried up. I've grown old and thin and unattractive without having ever found anything the slightest bit satisfactory or rewarding and time goes by and I feel I'm going farther and farther away from a real, beautiful life, slipping down into some sort of an abyss. I've lost all hope and I don't even understand how it is that I'm still alive and haven't killed myself yet.⁷

The question is, then, how does this thematic renunciation of the present in favor of memory and longing, this perennial analysis of one's own fate, fit with a dramatic form in which the Renaissance creed of the here and now, of the interpersonal, was once crystallized? The double renunciation that marks Chekhov's characters seems inevitably to necessitate the abandonment of action and dialogue—the two most important formal categories of the Drama and, thus, dramatic form itself.

But one senses only a tendency in this direction. Despite their psychic absence from social life, the heroes of Chekhov's plays live on. They do not draw any ultimate conclusions from their loneliness and longing. Instead, they hover midway between the world and the self, between now and then, so the formal