

DRAMA: AFTERWORD?

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Essential summary

As theatre professionals have acknowledged the usage of Hans-Thies Lehmann's term of 'postdramatic theatre' as legitimate, it is only pertinent to readdress the issue about the true nature of drama. In fact, Lehmann is looking for a solution to a theoretical confusion that has emerged in recent decades as a result of theatre breaking away from both the classical dramatic form and the model of modern drama.

Though text-based drama no longer dominates contemporary theatre, raising questions about the true nature of drama is as relevant as ever. In addition, the 'dramatic,' as an extension of the 'drama' concept, still features in some aspects of post-dramatic theatre. Moreover, the 'dramatic' has for so long been an integral part of our everyday language that it has been much overused and even abused in public media discourse. The multiple meanings of the concept of 'drama' too pose a challenge in analysing these interactions. 'Drama' is a generic term; it is also a genre that historically emerged later than tragedy and comedy; it further denotes a type of human experience, a type of life events.

The modern interpretation of the concept of 'theatre' required the analysis of two different yet equally valuable phenomena that constituted the concept – the dramaturgical text and the perfor-

mance. Postmodern reflections on theatricality call for an observation of its bilateral existence between the dramatic and the performative. Having been influenced by formalism, structuralism and semiotics, 20th century theatre theory came up with an answer to the question what correlated, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written in rhymes and a storyline, with Beckett's *Not-I*, featuring just some elements of verbal language, some pausing, and some cues for insignificant actions. This answer embraced primarily Roman Ingarden's influential definition in *The Literary Work of Art*¹, namely that drama specifics lay in the simultaneous construction of a world of two parallel texts: *Haupttext*, the main text, which imitated some characters' speech; and *Nebentext*, the side text, which provided the author with some cues about who was speaking and in what circumstances, if any. Thus, performativity appeared embedded in the theatre text itself. The very concept of 'theatricality' expanded and became more sophisticated: performativity was not a category for the stage alone, just as dramatism did not belong to drama alone.

¹ Ingarden, Roman. *The Literary Work of Art*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973. [*Das literarische Kunstwerk. Eine Untersuchung aus dem Grenzgebiet der Ontologie, Logik und Literaturwissenschaft*. Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1931.]

The problem is that this answer remained at the shallow level of discourse. Thus, all analyses based on Ingarden's answer far more clarify the question how the stage is inherently present in texts that we call 'dramas' rather than offer an answer to our understanding of dramatic experience. What really does drama entail in terms of existential experience? Is it even possible to think of drama outside any cultural and historical context?

Research related to historical materialism such as George Lukács' *The Sociology of Modern Drama* and Peter Szondi's *Theory of the Modern Drama* managed to interpret drama as an expression of subjectivity that yet was directly related to objective social customs and mores and historical consciousness. 'Modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie; modern drama is bourgeois drama'², Lukács concluded at the beginning of the 20th century, and in the middle of the same century Szondi defined the birth of drama as a consequence of the Renaissance Man's need for self-expression and self-determination. Szondi also discussed the crisis of drama at the end of the 19th century as a result of 'the alienation between people, and disintegration of human relationships'³. There is nothing that runs counter to such a vantage point to drama: in a way the world of theatre characters is always a projection of the social and cultural relations and historical context. Yet, discussed from this theoretical

² Lukács, George. *The Sociology of Modern Drama*. – In: Jn. The Tulane Drama Review, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Summer), 1965, pp. 146–170. Transl. by Lee Baxandall.

³ Szondi, Peter. *Theory of the Modern Drama*. – In: Jn. *boundary 2*, Vol. 11, No. 3, The Criticism of Peter Szondi (Spring), 1983, pp. 191–230. Transl. by Michael Hays.

vantage point, drama and the dramatic remain more in the domain of historical and philosophical categories rather than in that of human existence categories, given that they are far more related to dramaturgical text than to the stage.

The lasting legacy of the 20th century has left us these fundamental strategies in our understanding of drama; strategies further enriched in recent years by wide-ranging hermeneutic research of concepts that build a bridge to the dramatic principle of Aristotle's era, such as 'tragic', 'catharsis', 'pity' (*eleos*), and 'fear' (*phobos*), etc. In contrast, in the 19th century it was far more important to define the true nature of the dramatic experience; we may add: rather phenomenologically than historically. Undoubtedly, it was Hegel that summarized the entire theoretical legacy that had been compiled since Aristotle, building a sustainable idea about the inner life of characters, whose subjectivity was externalized through action: "[Drama] displays an inner life and its external realization... in drama a specific attitude of mind passes over into an impulse, next into its willed actualization, and then into an action."⁴ In this theoretical perspective, we are able to reconstruct the inner lives of characters through their words and actions. We use the term 'classical' to refer to this perception of drama as a subjective expression and impulse for action, as a repercussion of some violation and challenge of insolvable moral dilemmas.

We may explain the 'modern' in drama far better by making sense of Kierkegaard's conjecture about the tragic: 'Her life does not unfold like the Greek Antigone's; it is

⁴ Hegel. G. W. F. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Arts*. Vol. II. Oxford University Press, pp. 1160–1161. 1975. Transl. by T. M. Knox.

turned inward, not outward. The stage is inside, not outside; it is a spiritual stage.⁵ To Kierkegaard, drama in progress was like pain that hurt the soul and yet remained unshared with others, 'aesthetic pain', as he called it, distinguishing 'sorrow' from 'pain': 'In ancient tragedy, the sorrow is more profound, the pain less; in modern tragedy, the pain is greater, the sorrow less... I have a definition of the tragic in modern times, for an anxiety is a reflection and in that respect is essentially different from sorrow.'⁶

Moreover, it was not only the modern perception of the tragic that would forge new ideas about drama; at the turn of the century Henri Bergson published in *Revue de Paris* three articles on laughter, discussing the comic in relation to some 'eccentricity' of the true 'human', "Society will therefore be suspicious of all INELASTICITY of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity... Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification...'⁷ We can easily run parallels with the 'tragic' by merely changing the viewpoint: the wriggling stiff body is sympto-

⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The tragic in ancient drama reflected in the tragic in modern drama*. In: *Either / Or*. Glyn Hughes' squashed philosophers. Transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. <http://sqapo.com/CompleteText-Kierkegaard-EitherOr.htm>.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Bergson, Henri. *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*. Green Integer, 1998. Pp. 5b–8b [*Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* Paris: Félix Alcan, 1900.]

matic for suffering caused by social repression of any 'eccentricity' of subjectivity; however in comedy it is society that is right, with people confined to 'the body taking precedence of the soul'⁸. It seems that Chekhov felt best this overlapping of the tragic and the comic in that historical period, calling his melancholy theatre texts 'comedies'. Thus, drama, presenting itself beyond history through the masks of tragedy and comedy, found uncharted territory – the dramatic experience could not be expressed verbally, nor shared sincerely; it may only emerge in silence, quietly, in the pauses between speaking, and in the automated insignificant motions. The lack of trust in spoken language, the growing awareness of how problematic language was, caused a rift between the 'classic' and the 'modern'. From now on drama would be construed in two *modi operandi*, depending on whether or not it would be possible for the soul to externalise its pain and suffering through spoken language.

The metaphysics of the pain and suffering of the soul reached its highest peak in the revelations of the 19th century, with Friedrich Nietzsche's interpretations of the tragic. Nietzsche depicted images of exhilaration and rapture of singing and dancing of Bacchic chorus, related to the Dionysian principle: 'This dynamic of the tragic chorus is the original dramatic phenomenon...'⁹ There was a lot of performativity in Nietzsche's vision, which predicted the modern stage, and the dancing satyr might be considered a wonderful meta-

⁸ Ibidem. p. 18b.

⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*. Transl. by Hausmann, Wm. A. In: *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. V. 1. Edinburgh and London. 1910.

Passio domini nostri Iesu ex hieronymo

mo Paduano, Dominico Mancino, Sedulio, et Baptista Mantuano, per fratrem Albidionum collecta, cum figuris Alberti Düreri Nova Editione.



¶ Has ego crudeles homo pro te perfero plagas
Acquiro morbos sanguine curo tuos,
Vulneribusque meis tua vulnera, morteque mortem
Tollo deuspro te plangente factus homo,
Tuque ingrate mihi pungis mea stigmata culpis
Sepe tuis, noxa vapulo saepe tua,
Sat fuerit, me tanta olim tormenta sub hoste
Iudaeo passum, tuque sit amice quies.

Albrecht Dürer. *The Great Passion*. The frontispiece: *The Mocking of Christ* [*Christ As Man of Sorrows Mocked by A Soldier*], 1511. John H. Wrenn Memorial Collection.

phor for the entire theatre avant-garde in the 20th century. But behind the celebratory exultation lurked 'a lethargic element, in which everything personally experienced in the past is immersed'¹⁰; in it sinks into oblivion also 'the horror or absurdity of being.'¹¹ In this modern return to performativity, which drama had contained ever since its inception (*Δράμα* means action, doing), the dramatic experience was easily observable behind the flow of dancing energy or rapture. We no longer think of the dramatic as inner soliloquy that re-

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

mained unspoken but rather as sublime / parodic life awareness beyond the logos: 'the Sublime as the artistic mastering of the horrible and the Comic as the artistic release from disgust at the absurd.'¹²

We may well conclude that the 19th century construed the dramatic as a lonely life of the soul – the soul of the modern man, *l'âme moderne*; a life that happens even before it is construed in spoken language concepts and expressed physiologically through body and voice. This life is inscrutable, it is bound to remain just a metaphysical reality and it can only be illustrated through analogies with the physical feeling of pain, suffering, agony, and the feeling of one being forsaken by God and people. If the dramatic is a human phenomenon alone, then its boundaries lie between the feeling of animal pain and the loss of divine providence, which gives harmony to the world.

The dramatic as passion and melancholy

Beyond its historical meaning, drama is perceived as suffering of the soul, as an irreparable loss of life meaning. Suffering and loss, sorrow and absence cause the soul to get 'ill,' and the soul is imagined through the concepts of passion and melancholy. In the European cultural tradition, the seminal study of passion as a concept was perhaps completed by Erich Auerbach, who wrote his *Passio als Leidenschaft* (*Passio as Passion* in its US edition¹³) in Istanbul during the Second World War. He

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Auerbach, Erich. *Passio as Passion*. Trans. Martin Elsky. *Criticism* 43 (2001): 288–308. [*Passio als Leidenschaft*, 1941 PMLA Vol. 56, No. 4 (Dec., 1941), pp. 1179–1196.]

followed the evolution of this term since Antiquity: from 'pathos', when it implied a passive state, to its contemporary concept of the active connotation of passion. 'Pathos' originally referred mainly to illness, pain, and endurance of suffering. Yet Auerbach commented that even for Aristotle passion had the connotation of active re-action, the motion of soul ('kinesis tes psyches'). In Christian terms, it is God's boundless love that makes God take on human suffering. Christian mysticism intertwined love and suffering into passion. That gave rise to the secular idea of love, glorifying it through suffering in poetic terms. In the 17th century, it was primarily French Classicism that transformed passion into a great, tragic and heroic, human feeling. Later on, in the 18th and 19th centuries, 'feeling' and 'passion' were juxtaposed, with still no clear division between them. That's how the contemporary perception of passion has gradually emerged, and it entails ambivalent meanings of pain and desire, of the sublime, and the sinful¹⁴.

These sometimes completely opposite, ambivalent meanings that passion has incorporated transform it into a dramatic experience. Passion is triggered by some action that befalls the subject whose soul is in pain, but the re-action is so powerful that it becomes a total movement of the soul.

If passion is soul suffering that relates to some desire and purposefulness, then melancholy is indicative of a death wish. Even when the soul is riddled with sorrow, passion is an outward re-action, directed to the world, to the object of desire, whereas melancholy is rather inward bound, with one embracing constant grieving and

¹⁴ Ibidem.

bleakness. The object of desire is lost for good and melancholy life seems to become a never-ending repetition of a dismal memory. Gone is ambition, gone is desire for change, gone is life energy. In fact, melancholy is a condition of continual disintegration of the self, which we refer to as 'depression' nowadays, though this concept, 'compared to melancholy, covered smaller space in Antiquity and Renaissance Europe',¹⁵ claims Marek Bieńczyk, one of the most eminent and emotional researchers of melancholy, which haunted European man over the centuries. Similar to passion, melancholy has also been subject of a growing body of research – in his study Marek Bieńczyk discusses books and texts on melancholy, ranging from Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Freud, Panofsky, to Starobinski, Sontag, Kristeva...

In practical terms, melancholy was seen as related to bereavement, but at the same time it was obvious that unlike mourning, melancholy went beyond the original cause for suffering as if losing it. And unlike the pangs of passion, whose most meticulous metaphor was a 'burning from within,' melancholy was a metaphysical grieving, construed through the metaphors of withering, fading, the sapping of life energy.

Rational explanations of this metaphysics of the soul were either physiological – for centuries on end people believed in black bile, whose increased amount in the human body caused melancholy, or purely psychiatric – expressed in psychological conditions. In 1621, Robert Burton wrote *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and all ensu-

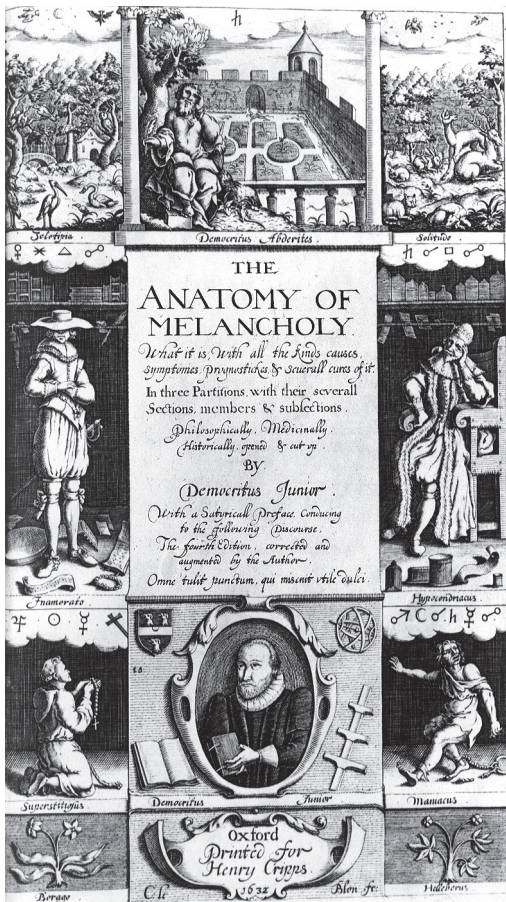
¹⁵ Биенчик, Марек. Меланхолия. СОНМ, С., 2002, с. 16. [Bieńczyk, Marek. *Melancholia. O tych co nigdy nie odnajdą straty*. Warszawa, 1998.]

ing editions and re-interpretations continued to establish the idea of an organic connection between bodily dysfunctions and psychological conditions. In 1917, in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud explained melancholy as a depressive outcome that occurred with loss of desire, an outcome that the self identifies itself with. In fact, both Burton's and Freud's texts were published in times of profound end-of-modernity crises, the new Renaissance period or the Nietzschean individualistic modernism respectively, both saturated with the revelations of their his-

torical periods after the collapse of yet another human utopia and with the historical and medical constraints of the knowledge of the diseases of the body and the conditions of the soul.

To understand the 'dramatic,' one needs to be aware of the history of the medical, that is, philosophical construal of the relationship between body and soul, the possible 'transmission' between them. From Antiquity to modern times blood was the substance circulating in the body whose illegitimate spilling (murder) or mixing (incest) was dramatic on its own; modernism saw nerves as the problematic link in human psychophysics and since mid-19th century the dramatic has been expressed through a variety of neuroses and psychoses. Ancient Greek drama is unthinkable without blood, the same held true for Renaissance and Romantic drama; from Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) to Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), theatre texts were concerned with the manic-depressive person, who 'carried' dramatism in their own (sub) conscious.

The evolution of ideas about the 'dramatic' indicates a gradual transition from the state of being forsaken/punished by God, through the violation of the body to the friction between the conscious and subconscious, the schizophrenic split of personality, the disintegration of memory, etc. Passion and melancholy are the extrovert and introvert projections of the dramatic in the subject, who appears to be the 'vessel' for the ongoing drama. The 'dramatic' is the pain felt when passion and melancholy are being localised and metaphorized through the body organs: the heart (tragedy), the stomach (comedy), the brain (drama). The possible expressions of that pain of the soul are groaning and an-



Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Oxford, 1632 [1621]. Front page.

ger, tears and laughter, the squirming of the body and silence, hysterical speech and schizophrenia.

The perception of the dramatic as an existential phenomenon emerges somewhere between theology and medicine: the loss of a divine look, and the experience of an irreparable trauma of the organism (of the soul-into-the-body).

Traumatic and post-traumatic theatre

Generally speaking, 20th century theatre witnessed a fundamental turning point with the formulation of the hypothesis that mimesis, the representation of life, was not theatre's essential feature. As a result, it transpired that theatre practice could logically follow three paths of development – both for theatre texts and for stage: 1. texts would keep on producing the simulation of inner spiritual life, irrespective of that hypothesis (the theatre of representation); 2. texts would entirely focus on physical expressiveness, a string of events and performativity on stage (performance art, dance theatre); 3. texts would look for an explanation for the traumas in the characters' spiritual lives within the society (the πόλις), and texts would focus on the community problems (the socially engaged drama, the political theatre). Pursuant to a century-long tradition, 2. and 3. are usually considered avant-garde compared to 1., though nowadays texts are rather hybrid instead of strictly belonging to any of the three types.

It is essential to acknowledge that the focus on performativity along with the emphasis on the social led to the gradual

avoidance of any simulation of trauma to the soul so that new territories could be explored outside the soul-into-the-body. Which were these new territories? Space: physical and social. Certainly, as early as their inception as social practices, drama and performance were 'aware' of both their social and performative nature. But whenever drama and performance would become an ideological and performative act, then the interest in the subject's trauma would be transformed into an interest in the social 'ulcers' or in an interest in the way of presentation. History and Topicality were seen as full of dramatism, while the existential and dramatic started to disintegrate in the discussion of ideas and in the documentary factuality, in the experiments with theatre language and in the subsequent new form of stage expressiveness. Early modernism intuitions about the trepidation of the soul dissolved in the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde waves discovering for drama and stage categories that go beyond the individual such as language, movement, play, ritual... Nowadays it is no longer possible to continue to think of drama only through the perspective of the subject's trauma; it is suffice to mention such definitions as Brechtian theatre, anthropological theatre, etc.

Theatre development in the 20th century did not only question the idea of the soul's lonely life, seeing that life as a projection of social conflicts, of archetypes, of rituals, and of language conventions. The true shift in views on the dramatic occurred once the stage no longer just expressed and illustrated the text, but the stage rather became a venue for a novel and one-of-a-kind expressiveness. Dramatic experience was no longer able

to follow the guidelines of written drama; dramatic experience started to showcase itself in the expressiveness of bodies and voices, in the intense moments of movement, in the very co-action of participants in the theatrical act, etc. Along with everything else, the 'dramatic' has become just one (but not the only one) of categories that contemporary theatre works with.

The shift in the interpretations of the 'dramatic' has incorporated the process of these interpretations becoming even more sophisticated: there is no clear divide between 'in' and 'out' (the soul's lonely life – its expression in the world), which also means that that is no longer a clear divide between the signifier and the signified, a juxtaposition that used to be a clear one until now (the stage just showing/telling the symptoms of ongoing drama). Trauma is no longer considered an event that precedes its expression, before its externalisation in the world. The pain in the soul and the body's re-action run parallel to each other, the human body is part of the cycle of movement in the social and physical space. Not only has the 'dramatic' lost its own personification but it has also lost its localization; the 'dramatic' has spread everywhere now, it has metamorphosed into thousands of feelings, movements, words, gestures, and phenomena.

Theatricality itself has encompassed life in postmodern society, the media reality, the simulative social practices. It used to be a metaphor for life events, projecting onto them perceptions of dramatism and stage effects; now in this postmodern world, theatricality has become an integral part of life, its essential feature. It has left the theatre, emerging in all shapes and

forms. From life, theatricality goes back to stage and into texts for theatre, surprising everyone with its ever-changing and expanding boundaries. In its continual crossing of boundaries established in the past, the dramatic experience is likely to get diluted; it becomes heavily fragmented and loses its historical reference: we simply see pieces of trepidations of the soul, pieces of passion, pieces of melancholy from different historical periods... In such a situation, we can easily be tempted into thinking of postmodern theatre as an imaginary museum of dramatic experiences but the analogy with a museum collection is certainly not true; this is just a different state of drama and stage that we could call 'postdramatic' theatre, using Lehmann's term.

Nowadays, with the postmodern euphoria of crossing old boundaries being over, a new type of anxiety is emerging – 'the rise of fears and anxieties of all kinds,' as Gilles Lipovetsky aptly described a society inhabited by the hyper-modern West.¹⁶ Another contemporary philosopher, Francis Fukuyama, outlined the threats human nature faced with the development of biotechnologies and genetic engineering.¹⁷ We might be able to distinguish our previously known anxiety triggered by some trauma from this new type of anxiety related not to the intense anticipation of a single fatal event but anx-

¹⁶ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Sebastien Charles. *Hypermodern Times*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005. [Lipovetsky, Gilles avec la participation de Sébastien Charles. *Les temps Hypermodernes*. Grasset, Nouveau collège de philosophie, 2004.]

¹⁷ Fukuyama, Francis. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002.

iety caused by the premonition of an intimidating future. Hypermodern fear seems to make dramatism domineer over performativity again; the statics of the anxious anticipation takes over the dynamics of the performative act. Contemporary theatre, at least the one that could be seen on alternative stages and in innovative theatre practices in the West, seems to get back to the understanding of human fear as the primary source of dramatism, yet this time it is fear for the very Person. Fear (*phobos*) that Aristotle spoke about in relation to tragedy no longer arises out of the conflict between the Person and

Providence, but rather out of the conflict between the Person and their own power/frailty, out of the opportunities for intellectual deconstruction and technological reconstruction of the 'human'.

True drama today is in crossing boundaries of being human.

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