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Theories of the Theatre

*A Historical and Critical Survey,
from the Greeks to the Present*

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a praiseworthy or a reprehensible ambition."⁹ The hero is destroyed not for evil deeds, mistaken judgments, or even hubris, but simply because he is an individual: "All action, when confronted with fate, that is with the world-will, dissolves into suffering."¹⁰ As a simile for life, Hebbel suggests a great river in which individuals are lumps of ice that must inevitably be melted and absorbed into the flow.

Since little of Hegelian reconciliation was left in this theory, it is not surprising that the Hegelians generally attacked Hebbel as pessimistic and even philosophically bankrupt. He held his ground, however, insisting, in a doubtless unconscious echo of Büchner, that "it is foolish to require of the poet what God himself does not provide: reconciliation and the resolution of dissonances." All that can be asked of the poet is to show "that the catastrophe is inevitable, that it, like death, is established by birth itself."¹¹ The only solace offered is that of the reaffirmation of the unchanging Idea, and Hebbel suggested that tragic heroes should not die "sullen and unreconciled" but gain in death "a clear view of the individual's relation to the whole." Instead of a true Hegelian reconciliation, Hebbel saw this as a kind of Stoic acceptance of the inevitable.

Nevertheless, his rejection of Hegelian optimism did not take Hebbel in the direction of Schopenhauer, to a desire to reject the workings of the will to life altogether. He saw the will as a necessary part of life's process, and the drama a means of providing, if not a reconciliation of life's dualism, at least a temporary resolution of dissonance "as soon as this appears too prominently"; his image is of two circles in water that merge into a single large one. There always remains a more fundamental dissonance that neither drama nor philosophy attempts to resolve, the original one that caused individuation or duality in the first place. Tragic guilt is inevitable because this inner cause remains unrevealed, even when the individual gains a partial insight and dies in peace. "I have never found the answer to this," says Hebbel, "nor will anyone else who seriously considers the problem."¹²

These general observations on the dynamics of tragedy are given a more particular focus in the "Vorwort zur *Maria Magdalena*" (1844). Here Hebbel repeats his contention that the function of drama, "the summit of all art," is to illustrate "the existing state of the world and man in their relationship to the Idea."¹³ He argues that great drama can occur only when some significant change is occurring in this re-

⁹Ibid., 11:4.

¹⁰Ibid., 11:52.

¹¹Hebbel, *Tagebücher*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1903), 2:269.

¹²Hebbel, *Werke*, 11:31-32.

¹³Ibid., 40.

lationship, a situation which has appeared only three times in the history of the drama. The first was during the period of Greek tragedy, when the old naive conception of the gods was challenged by the new concept of fate. The second was at the time of Shakespeare, when the rising Protestant consciousness shifted attention to the individual, and the conflict between man and fate changed to a tragic dualism within the single individual. In his own age a new source of tragic dualism had appeared—intimated, Hebbel thinks, in certain of Goethe's works—a dualism within the Idea itself, or at least in that part of it that we can comprehend. "The existing institutions of human society, political, religious, and moral" have become problematic, he says, and tragedy can be developed on the basis of perceived contradictions in these manifestations of the Idea. Modern man does not desire to overthrow traditional institutions, but to reestablish them on firmer, less contradictory foundations. Drama of social criticism can be a major aid in this process.

This provocative essay concludes with a spirited defense of bourgeois tragedy, which, it argues, has been cheapened by inferior craftsmen who neglect the essence of all tragedy: that it must portray universal conflict through individual cases. Modern authors, says Hebbel, have substituted external and avoidable conflicts such as lack of money or class conflict for the pathos of tragedy. Further, they have either artificially heightened and falsified the speech of their characters in an attempt to ennoble them or have turned them in the name of realism, into "living blocks of wood, whose very ability to say Yes and No is cause for no little surprise."¹⁴ A rich and interesting language of the people is available to the perceptive artist, but even more important, the bourgeois tragedy will be significant only to the extent that it deals, as great tragedy has always done, with the basic tensions of the human condition.

The tone of resignation and pessimism so often found in Hebbel's writing helps to mark him as one of the last representatives of the generation, beginning with Schopenhauer and Grillparzer, that rejected the moral optimism and even the revolutionary zeal found in Schiller. The next generation, whose coming to maturity was signaled by the revolutionary upheavals of 1848-1849, tended to agree with Hebbel that art should be concerned with contemporary society, but with a reforming enthusiasm much closer to that of Schiller. A central example of this new generation of theatre theorists is Richard Wagner (1813-1883). Wagner was just beginning to gain a reputation when involvement in the 1848 riots in Dresden forced him to exile in Zurich, where he remained for ten years. During this time he wrote most of

¹⁴Ibid., 63.

his prose works and solidified the theories that supported his greatest operas and profoundly influenced the course of modern theatre.

The exile came, if such a circumstance can ever be positive, at a most favorable time for Wagner. With *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1848), he had pushed traditional romantic opera to its limits and was ready to launch into something much more experimental. His exile gave him the time and opportunity to chart out a new path and to harmonize it with those growing social concerns that had led to his involvement in Dresden politics to begin with. The title of his first major essay, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849), made this clear, and in his later introduction to this essay in the *Gesammelte Schriften* (1872), he wrote: "I believed in the Revolution, as in its necessity and its irresistibility . . . and felt called upon to indicate the path to its salvation." This did not mean, he explained, that he wished to suggest the form of the necessary new political order; his concern was with the new art, which must be built simultaneously with that political order on the ruins of the discredited past.¹⁵

Die Kunst begins with a rapturous invocation of ancient Greek drama, a political and spiritual creation at which the whole people (*Volk*) gathered "to understand themselves, to comprehend their own activities, to achieve an inner unity with their being, their fellowship, their god."¹⁶ With the decline of Athens came the decline of this drama, and as the common Greek spirit "split into a thousand egotistic concerns, so the unified art work of tragedy split into separate artistic genres,"¹⁷ and philosophy replaced art as the interpreter of reality. The Romans and the Christians rejected the drama for opposite reasons, the former by a denial of spirituality, the latter by a denial of sensual pleasure. When art revived in the Renaissance, it appeared as an amusement for the rich and powerful. A pleasure meant for all mankind became an indulgence of the affluent. Both artists and audiences were thereby corrupted, art becoming a trade and a tool of capitalism. Greek art was conservative, "the deepest and noblest expression of the people's consciousness," but to regain this function, art must be revolutionary and begin by rejecting what it has become under the influence of modern society.¹⁸

The essay *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850) uses less of the rhetoric of revolution and seeks the source of this new art in the *Volk*. Wagner defines the *Volk* as "the sum total of all those who feel a common

¹⁵Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10 vols. (Leipzig, 1871-72),

3:2.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

need,"¹⁹ as opposed to those who feel no true need but substitute for it the indulgence of luxury, capitalism, and godless science. Each subdivision of art has become corrupted, dance turning to mime, music to abstract form, song to operatic aria, and drama itself to "the dead form of literature."²⁰ The *Volk* must respond to their felt need, reunify the arts, and rediscover the only real, free, and universally meaningful art work, a total work like that of Greece.

Oper und Drama (1851), Wagner's major theoretical text, continues to explore the unhappy state of art and to suggest how it must be changed. In the first of its three sections, "*Die Oper und das Wesen der Musik*," Wagner summarizes the history of opera to illustrate what he sees as the basic fallacy of the genre: "that a means of expression (music) has been made the end, and the end of the expression (drama) the means."²¹ The second section, "*Das Schauspiel und das Wesen der dramatischen Dichtkunst*," undertakes a parallel survey of dramatic poetry which, by allying itself with literature, has degenerated to "shallow realism." It has lost the basic purpose of Greek drama, which was to convey "the content and essence of myth in the most convincing and intelligible form."²² The final section, "*Dichtkunst und Tonkunst im Drama der Zukunft*," discusses the reunification of the separated arts of poetry and music, and what each would gain thereby. Poetry, whose medium is words, necessarily addresses itself primarily to the understanding, while music speaks directly to the emotions. If a single artist, both musician and poet, could unite them, he would fulfill the need of the *Volk* for an expression of their total being.

The great sociopolitical document of the period, the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), appeared on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals of 1848. A significant body of modern theatre criticism acknowledges Marx as its intellectual father, though the writings of Marx and Engels on literature and art in general and on drama in particular are neither extensive nor easily reducible to a system. Nevertheless, since those that exist are relatively consistent among themselves and within the total context of Marxist philosophy, they have served as a basis for a subsequent variety of more comprehensive theories. Key documents for the drama are the letters of opinion solicited in 1859 from both Marx and Engels by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) on his historical drama *Franz von Sickingen*. Their responses, though not coordinated, are strikingly similar. Both speak first of the strongly favorable impression the work made

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 112.

²¹*Ibid.*, 231.

²²*Ibid.*, 4:34.