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Theatre in Theory 1900–2000 *An Anthology*

Edited by
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Chapter 11

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)

George Bernard Shaw was a prolific author, playwright, and essayist as well as a socialist and vegetarian. At first a novelist, he eventually turned to art and music criticism, and then to theatre. His criticism established ideas of theatre that would soon inform his own plays. Among his critical works were *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) and *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). He was a theatre critic for the *Saturday Review* from 1895 to 1898. Author of over fifty plays, his well-known dramas are *Candida* (1898), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1898), *Arms and the Man* (1898), *The Devil's Disciple* (1897), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), *Man and Superman* (1903), with the third act consisting of the "Don Juan" play, *Major Barbara* (1905), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), *Misalliance* (1910), *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), *Pygmalion* (1912), *Heartbreak House* (1919), and *Saint Joan* (1923). He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925.

Shaw was a Fabian socialist, a member of the Fabian Society that sought to bring about socialism in England through peaceful means. In his plays, novels, and essays he examined marital problems, politics, ethics, democracy, music, and evolution. Beginning in 1904 he wrote many of his plays for Harley Granville Barker, who assumed the directorship of the Court Theatre in England. Shaw opposed the longstanding censorship of the Lord Chamberlain and bitterly opposed war after the end of World War I. The following text is from his Preface to three plays by Eugène Brieux (1858–1932), a French author who shared with Shaw a penchant for social dramas. Shaw criticizes the "well-made play," though he regards its essential attributes as crucial for playwriting. For Shaw, drama must engage with the topical issues and social concerns of the times rather than evade them. Social questions, he wrote in his essay "The Problem

Excerpts from G. B. Shaw, "Preface," in *Three Plays by Brieux* (New York: Brentano's, 1913), vii–liv.

Play – A Symposium" (1895), "are produced by the conflict of human institutions with human feelings." Such conflict "affords material for drama" and "drive[s] social questions on to the stage."¹ In the following, Shaw distinguishes between the social problem play and the "well-made-play," the former concerning social matters and the latter a recreation of the trivial. A great admirer of Ibsen, Shaw hoped to influence the theatre as a forum for social debates.

Against the Well-Made Play (1911)

Zolaism as a Superstition

[...] Zola and Ibsen could not, of course, be confined to mere reaction against taboo. Ibsen was to the last fascinating and full of a strange moving beauty; and Zola often broke into sentimental romance. But neither Ibsen nor Zola, after they once took in hand the work of unmasking the idols of the bourgeoisie, ever again wrote a happy or pleasant play or novel. Ibsen's suicides and catastrophes at last produced the cry of "People don't do such things," which he ridiculed through Judge Brack in *Hedda Gabler*.² This was easy enough: Brack was so far wrong that people do do such things occasionally. But on the whole Brack was right. The tragedy of Hedda in real life is not that she commits suicide but that she continues to live. If such acts of violent rebellion as those of Hedda and Nora and Rebecca³ and the rest were the inevitable or even the probable consequences of their unfitness to be wives and mothers, or of their contracting repugnant marriages to avoid being left on the shelf, social reform would be very rapid; and we should hear less nonsense as to women like Nora and Hedda being mere figments of Ibsen's imagination. Our real difficulty is the almost boundless docility and submission to social convention which is characteristic of the human race. What balks the social reformer everywhere is that the victims of social evils do not complain, and even strongly resent being treated as victims. The more a dog suffers from being chained the more dangerous it is to release him: he bites savagely at the hand that dares touch his collar. [...] Now the formula of tragedy had come down to the nineteenth century from days in which this was not recognized, and when life was so thoroughly accepted as a divine institution that in order to make it seem tragic, something dreadful had to happen and somebody had to die. But the tragedy of modern life is that nothing happens, and that the resultant dullness does not kill. Maupassant's *Une Vie*⁴ is infinitely more tragic than the death of Juliet.

In Ibsen's works we find the old traditions and the new conditions struggling in the same play, like a gudgeon half swallowed by a pike. Almost all the sorrow and the weariness which makes his plays so poignant are the sorrow and the weariness of the mean dull life in which nothing happens; but none the less he provides a final catastrophe of the approved fifth-act-blank-verse type. Hedwig and Hedda shoot themselves; Rosmer and Rebecca throw themselves into the mill-race; Solness and Rubeck are dashed to pieces; Borkman dies of acute stage tragedy without discoverable lesions.⁵ I will not say again, as I have said before, that these catastrophes are forced, because a fortunate performance often makes them seem inevitable; but I do submit that the omission of them would leave the play sadder and more convincing.

Chapter 13

Georg Lukács (1885–1971)

Georg (György) Lukács was a Marxist critic and leading advocate of realism in drama and literature. He rejected abstraction and expressionist drama because in his view these movements lacked social commitment. He also rejected naturalism, finding it mere reportage of surface data. Following Marx's concept of exposing reality in all its permutations, Lukács wrote: "If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately on the surface. If a writer strives to represent reality as it truly is, i.e., if he is an authentic realist, then the question of totality plays a decisive role, no matter how the writer actually conceives the problem intellectually."¹ This totality meant incorporating the underlying economic conditions that inform character motivations and social interactions. Lukács believed that Hegelian historical realism embodied in conflicts of proletarian conditions in bourgeois literature (Balzac in particular) offered the correct model for drama. Although the subject matter of bourgeois literature avoids the working class, the conflicts it conveyed could appropriately be transferred to the worker's plight. He was alarmed by expressionism and naturalism, which he felt sensationalized the exotic. These aesthetic movements laid their devices over drama like a patina, creating a gloss which masked a deficiency of the soul. Rather than accentuating form, which modernists sought, the form should reside seamlessly in the background, serving as a function of the conflicts the theme embodies. Although audiences should understand and perhaps even identify with the protagonist, the spectator is to be made aware of the conflicting social issues raised by the play's narrative. For Lukács what

Georg Lukács, "The Sociology of Modern Drama" (1914), tr. Lee Baxandall, copyright Baxandall, 1965; originally appeared in Hungarian in 1909, in German in 1914; reprinted here from *Tulane Drama Review* 9.4 (Summer 1965), 146–70. © 1965 by Lee Baxandall. Reprinted by permission of the author.

mattered in drama is the proper combination of the universal and the particular, the specifics of individuals and their social environment combined with the general creation of "types." This type, he says, is "determined by objective forces at work in society."² The author must present a world view (*Weltanschauung*) that takes into account both the individual and surrounding social conditions. Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* might be said to exemplify the character "type" – the play's protagonist is the prototypical "salesman" concerned with his individual situation, but the play also expresses conflicting social conditions.

The Sociology of Modern Drama (1914)

Modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie; modern drama is bourgeois drama. By the end of our discussion, we believe, a real and specific content will have filled out this abstract formulation. . . .

The drama has now taken on new social dimensions.³ This development became necessary, and necessary at this particular time, because of the specific social situation of the bourgeoisie. For bourgeois drama is the first to grow out of conscious class confrontation; the first with the set intention of expressing the patterns of thought and emotion, as well as the relations with other classes, of a class struggling for power and freedom. . . . Although in Elizabethan drama the representatives of several classes appear, the true human beings, the dramatic characters, are derived on the whole from a single class. Infrequently, we find a figure that represents the petty nobility, as in *Arden of Feversham*.⁴ The lower classes merely take part in comic episodes, or they are on hand simply so their inferiority will highlight the refinements of the heroes. For this reason, class is not decisive in structuring the character and action of these plays. . . .

A new determinant is joined to the new drama: value judgment. In the new drama not merely passions are in conflict, but ideologies, *Weltanschauungen*, as well. Because men collide who come from differing situations, value judgments must necessarily function as importantly, at least, as purely individual characteristics. . . . The moral outlooks of Hamlet and Claudius, and even of Richard and Richmond, are at bottom identical. Each man is resolute, and feels contemptible if he acts contrary to this moral view. Claudius knows the murder of his brother to be a sin; he is even incapable of seeking motives that might justify his action, and it is inconceivable that he would attempt a relativist justification (as Hebbel's Herod⁵ will, following the murder of Aristobolus). Also the "skeptical" and "philosophical" Hamlet never for a moment doubts that he is impelled as though by categorical imperative to seek blood revenge. So long as he remains incapable of acting as he knows he must, he feels sinful and blameworthy. Hegel is therefore correct when he says the deeds of Shakespeare's heroes are not "morally justified." For the ethical value judgment of that epoch rested upon such solid metaphysical foundations, showed such little tolerance for any kind of relativity, and gained universality from such mystic non-analyzable emotions, that no person violating it – for whatever reasons and motive – could justify his act even subjectively. His deed could be explained by his soul's condition, but no amount of reasoning could provide absolution. . . .

The conflict of generations as a theme is but the most striking and extreme instance of a phenomenon new to drama, but born of general emotion. For the stage has turned into

the point of intersection for pairs of worlds distinct in time; the realm of drama is one where “past” and “future,” “no longer” and “not yet,” come together in a single moment. What we usually call “the present” in drama is the occasion of self-appraisal; from the past is born the future, which struggles free of the old and of all that stands in opposition. The end of each tragedy sees the collapse of an entire world. The new drama brings what in fact is new, and what follows the collapse differs qualitatively from the old; whereas in Shakespeare the difference was merely quantitative. Looked at from an ethical perspective, the bad is replaced by the good, or by something better than the old, and at any rate decidedly different in kind. In *Götz von Berlichingen* Goethe depicts the collapse of a world; a tragedy is possible in this case only because Götz was born at that particular time. A century or perhaps even a generation earlier, and he would have become a hero of legend, perhaps rather like a tragi-comic Don Quixote; and a scant generation later as well, this might have been the result. . . .

What we are discussing here is the increased complexity which determines dramatic character. We find it can be viewed from different sides, in numerous perspectives; characters in the new drama are more complicated than in the old, threads that are more intricately run together and knot with one another and with the external world, to express the interrelationship. In turn the concept of the external world grows more relative than ever. We have said of the drama that, in general, destiny is what confronts man from without. In Greek and even in Shakespearean drama we can still easily distinguish between man and his environment, or, speaking from the viewpoint of drama, between the hero and his destiny. But now these lines of division have blurred. So much of the vital centre streams out of the peripheries, and so much streams from there into the vital centre of man, that the concepts which distinguish man from his environment, flesh from spirit, free will from circumstance, hero from destiny, character from situation, are nearly deprived of meaning in the face of the complexity of constant interactions. Destiny is what comes to the hero from without. If we are to continue composing dramas, we must hold to this definition regardless of whether it is true in life; otherwise we would find it impossible to maintain the contending parties in equilibrium (supposing a two-dimension composition), nor would there be foreground or background. . . . Most simply, what must be located is the equilibrium between man and the external world; the relation of a man to his action is really still his.

The more that circumstances define man, the more difficult this problem seems, and the more the very atmosphere appears to absorb all into itself. Man, distinct contours, no longer exist; only air, only the atmosphere. All that modern life has introduced by way of enriching the perceptions and emotions seems to vanish into the atmosphere, and the composition is what suffers. . . .

To what extent is modern man the enactor of his actions? In his actions man elaborates his entire being, he arrives at himself in them: how much are they really his? How much is the vital centre of man really deep within him? This relation will be the prime determinant of style in every drama. All stylization, all structure bases itself on where the one and the other diverge and coincide, how the one determines the other. . . . All reflection on the drama comes to this: how does man achieve a tragic action? Is it indeed he who achieves it? By what means? The question truly at the bottom of the theory of tragic guilt is this: did the tragic personage really do his tragic deed, and if he did not, can it be tragic? And the real meaning of “constructing the guilt” exists in building bridges between the deed

and the doer, in finding a point from which one will see that all proceeds from within despite every opposition, a perspective which rescues the autonomy of tragic man. . . .

We have to ask whether there can still be a drama. The threat to it is indisputably great, and in naturalism, for instance, we see that it virtually ceases to be dramatic. And yet only the origin of the mutually-opposing forces has been altered; the forces themselves must not be allowed in turn to grow so out of balance that a drama is not possible. In other words, we are faced in the final analysis with a problem of expression, and need not necessarily concern ourselves with the problem of the drama's existence. It matters little whether the will which is set against destiny originates entirely from within; it matters as little whether it is free or constrained, or determined by circumstances of whatever sort. These matters count for little, because a drama remains possible so long as the dynamic force of the will is strong enough to nourish a struggle of life and death dimensions, where the entire being is rendered meaningful.

Hebbel was the first to recognize that the difference between action and suffering is not quite so profound as the words suggest; that every suffering is really an action directed within, and every action which is directed against destiny assumes the form of suffering. Man grows dramatic by virtue of the intensity of his will, by the outpouring of his essence in his deeds, by becoming wholly identical with them. So long as this capacity retains sufficient force to symbolize the entirety of man and his destiny, the displacement earlier noted results merely in a new form of the same relation. The heroes of the new drama – in comparison to the old – are more passive than active; they are acted upon more than they act for themselves; they defend rather than attack; their heroism is mostly a heroism of anguish, of despair, not one of bold aggressiveness. Since so much of the inner man has fallen prey to destiny, the last battle is to be enacted within. We can best summarize by saying that the more the vital motivating centre is displaced outward (i.e., the greater the determining force of external factors), the more the centre of tragic conflict is drawn inward; it becomes internalized, more exclusively a conflict in the spirit. For up to a certain limit, the inner powers of resistance upon which the spirit can depend become greater and more intense in direct proportion to the greatness and intensity of the outwardly opposing forces. And since the hero now is confronted not only with many more external factors than formerly, but also by actions which have become not his own and turn against him, the struggle in which he engages will be heightened into anguish. He must engage in the struggle: something drives him into it which he cannot resist; it is not his to decide whether he even wishes to resist.

This is the dramatic conflict: man as merely the intersection point of great forces, and his deeds not even his own. Instead something independent of him mixes in, a hostile system which he senses as forever indifferent to him, thus shattering his will. And the why of his acts is likewise never wholly his own, and what he senses as his inner motivating energy also partakes of an aspect of the great complex which directs him toward his fall. The dialectical force comes to reside more exclusively in the idea, in the abstract. Men are but pawns, their will is but their possible moves, and it is what remains forever alien to them (the *abstractum*) which moves them. Man's significance consists only of this, that the game cannot be played without him, that men are the only possible hieroglyphs with which the mysterious inscription may be composed. . . .

The new drama is nevertheless the drama of individualism, and that with a force, an intensity and an exclusiveness no other drama ever had. Indeed, one can well conceive

an historical perspective on the drama which would see in this the most profound distinction between the old and new drama; such an outlook would place the beginnings of new drama at the point where individualism commences to become dramatic. . . . We said previously that new drama is bourgeois and historicist; we add now that it is a drama of individualism. And in fact these three formulas express a single point of demarcation; they merely view the parting of ways from distinct vantage-points. The first perspective is the question of sociological basis, the foundation on which the other two are based and from which they grow. It states simply that the social and economic forms which the bourgeoisie opposed to remaining vestiges of the feudal order became, from the eighteenth century onward, the prevailing forms. Also, that life proceeds within this framework, and in the tempo and rhythm it dictates, and thus the problems this fact provokes are precisely the problems of life; in a word, that culture today is bourgeois culture. . . . Both historicism and individualism have their roots in the soil of this one culture, and though it may seem from several points of view that they would be sharply conflicting, mutually exclusive opposites, we must nevertheless ask how much this opposition really amounts to an antagonism. . . .

In the course of German Romanticism the historicist sense grew to consciousness together with and parallel to Romantic individualism, and the two were never felt to exclude one another. We must regard as no accident the way both of these sensibilities rose to consciousness coincidentally and closely associated with the first great event of bourgeois culture, and perhaps its most decisive, the French Revolution, and all that happened around and because of it. . . .

If we examine even the superficial externals of modern life, we are struck by the degree to which it has grown uniform, though it theoretically has engendered a most extreme individualism. Our clothing has grown uniform, as has the communications system; the various forms of employment, from the employee's viewpoint, have grown ever more similar (bureaucracy, mechanized industrial labour); education and the experiences of childhood are more and more alike (the effect and increasing influence of big-city life); and so on. Parallel to this is the ongoing *rationalizing* of our life. Perhaps the essence of the modern division of labour, as seen by the individual, is that ways are sought to make work independent of the worker's capacities, which, always irrational, are but qualitatively determinable; to this end, work is organized according to production outlooks which are objective, super-personal and independent of the employee's character. This is the characteristic tendency of the economics of capitalism. Production is rendered more objective, and freed from the personality of the productive agent. An objective abstraction, capital, becomes the true productive agent in capitalist economy, and it scarcely has an organic relation with the personality of its accidental owner; indeed, personality may often become superfluous, as in corporations.

Also, scientific methodologies gradually cease to be bound up with personality. In medieval science a single individual personally would command an entire sphere of knowledge (e.g., chemistry, astrology), and masters passed on their knowledge or "secret" to the pupils. The same situation was true in the medieval trades and commerce. But the modern specialized methodologies become continually more objective and impersonal. The relation between work and its performers grows more loose; less and less does the work engage the employee's personality, and conversely, the work is related ever less to the worker's personal qualities. Thus work assumes an oddly objective existence,

detached from the particularities of individual men, and they must seek means of self-expression outside their work. The relations between men grow more impersonal as well. Possibly the chief characteristic of the feudal order was the way men's dependencies and relations were brought into unity; by contrast, the bourgeois order rationalizes them. The same tendency to depersonalize, with the substitution of quantitative for qualitative categories, is manifested in the overall state organization (electoral system, bureaucracy, military organization, etc.). Together with all this, man too develops a view of life and the world which is inclined toward wholly objective standards, free of any dependency upon human factors.

The style of the new individualism, especially the aspect of importance to us, is defined by this displacement in the relations of liberty and constraint. The transformation can be briefly formulated: previously, life itself was individualistic; now men, or rather their convictions and their outlooks on life, are. Earlier ideology emphasized constraint, because man felt his place within a binding order to be natural and consistent with the world system; and yet, all occasions of concrete living offered him the opportunity to inject his personality into the order of things by means of his deeds. Hence a spontaneous and continuous individualism of this sort was feasible, whereas today it has grown conscious and problematic as a result of the transformation we have sketched. Previously it was – in Schiller's sense – naïve, and today sentimental. The formulation is this, applied to drama: the old drama, by which we mean here primarily that of the Renaissance, was drama of great individuals, today's is that of individualism. In other words, the realization of personality, its *per se* expression in life, could in no wise become a theme of earlier drama, since personality was not yet problematic. It is, in the drama of today, the chief and most central problem. Though it is true that in most tragedies the action consisted of the clash at some point of someone's maximum attainment with what lay outside him, and the existing order of things refused to let a figure rise to the peak of his possibilities without destroying him, yet this was never associated, consciously at least, with the blunt concept of maximized attainment. The arrangement of the situation was never such that the tragedy had necessarily to result, as it were, from the bare fact of willing, the mere realization of personality. In summary: where the tragedy was previously brought on by the particular *direction* taken by will, the mere *act* of willing suffices to induce it in the new tragedy. Once again Hebbel offers the most precise definition. He stated that it did not matter for the purposes of drama whether the hero's fall was caused by good or bad actions.

The realization and maintenance of personality has become on the one hand a conscious problem of living; the longing to make the personality prevail grows increasingly pressing and urgent. On the other hand, external circumstances, which rule out this possibility from the first, gain ever greater weight. It is in this way that survival as an individual, the integrity of individuality, becomes the vital centre of drama. Indeed the bare fact of being begins to turn tragic. In view of the augmented force of external circumstance, the least disturbance or incapacity to adjust is enough to induce dissonances which cannot be resolved. Just so, the aesthetic of Romanticism regarded tragedy – with a metaphysical rationale and explanation, to be sure – as a consequence of mere being, and the necessary inevitable consequence and natural correlate of individuation. Thus, the contention of these mutually opposed forces is emphasized with increasing sharpness. The sense of being constrained grows, as does its dramatic expression; likewise

the longing grows for a man to shatter the bonds which bind men, even though the price he pays is his downfall.

Both these tendencies already had become conscious by the time of *Sturm und Drang* drama, but – in theory at least – they were considered as complementary elements serving to differentiate the genres of art. Lenz saw here the distinction between comedy and tragedy. For him, comedy portrayed society, the men rooted in it, and relationships against which they were incapable of successful struggle; whereas tragedy presented great personalities, who challenged relationships and struggled though it might mean ruin. As early as Goethe's tragedy *Götz* and the first dramas of Schiller, however, relationships are nearly as emphasized as in Lenz's comedies; moreover, what prevents Lenz's comedies from qualifying as real tragedies is not to be found in his idea of what distinguishes the genres (here he was influenced by [Denis] Diderot and [Louis Sébastien] Mercier).

Thus we can say that the drama of individualism (and historicism) is as well the drama of milieu. For only this much-heightened sense of the significance of milieu enables it to function as a dramatic element; only this could render individualism truly problematic, and so engender the drama of individualism. This drama signals the collapse of eighteenth-century doctrinaire individualism. What then was treated as a formal contention between ideologies and life, now becomes a portion of content, an integral part of the historicist drama. Modern life liberates man from many old constraints and it causes him to feel each bond between men (since these are no longer organic) as a bondage. But in turn, man comes to be enclasp'd by an entire chain of abstract bondages, which are yet more complicated. He feels, whether or not he is conscious of it, that every bond whatsoever is bad and so every bond between men must be resisted as an imposition upon human dignity. In every case, however, the bondage will prove stronger than the resistance. In this perspective Schiller's first play is one typical commencement of the new drama, just as Goethe's play was in another perspective.

Artistically this all implies, in the first place, a paradox in the dramatic representation of character. For in the new drama, compared to the old, character becomes much more important and at the same time much less important. Our perspective alone determines whether we count its formal significance as everything or as nothing. Even as the philosophies of Stirner and Marx are basically drawn from the same source, Fichte, so every modern drama embodies this duality of origin, this dialectic out of the life that gives it birth. (We perhaps see this conflict most clearly in the historical dramas of Grabbe.) Character becomes everything, since the conflict is entirely for the sake of character's vital centre; for it alone and for nothing peripheral, because the force disposed of by this vital centre alone determines the dialectic, that is, the dramatic, quality of drama. Conversely, character becomes nothing, since the conflict is merely *around* and *about* the vital centre, solely for the *principle* of individuality. Since the great question becomes one of to what degree the individual will find community possible, the direction of the will, its strength, and other specifics which might render it individual in fact, must remain unconsidered. Thus – and the essence of the stylistic problem is here – character is led back to more rational causes than ever before, and becomes at the same time ever more hopelessly irrational. The old drama was founded in a universal sensibility, unifying and meta-rational, which circumscribed as well as permeated its composition and psychology. The old drama's religious origins thus afforded man what was virtually an unconscious and

naïve mode of expression. Indeed, to the extent that this drama grew conscious of its tendency, efforts were made to eliminate it. (Euripides is perhaps the best example here.) By contrast, the foundations of the new drama are rational: from its origins it lacks the quality of mystical religious emotion. Only when this emotion once again appears in life does a real drama again appear; to be sure, it reemerges at first as an exclusively artistic demand, but later it seeks to serve as the unifying foundation of life and art. And yet this meta-rational, indissoluble sensibility could never again escape the mark of consciousness, of being *a posteriori*; never could it be once more the unifying, enveloping atmosphere of all things. Both character and destiny had acquired a paradoxical duality, had become at once mystically irrational and geometrically constructed. The expression of the meta-rational becomes in this way more mysterious in psychology than it was earlier, but also, in its technique, more rational and conceptual. The drama comes to be built upon mathematics, a complicated web of abstractions, and in this perspective character achieves significance merely as an intersection; it becomes, as Hofmannsthal once remarked, equivalent to a contrapuntal necessity. And yet, no such systemization can contain the real sum of what humanity makes out of a human being (and drama without human beings is inconceivable). Therefore the dramatic and the characteristic aspects of modern man do not coincide. That which is truly human in the human being must remain to a degree outside the drama. Seen in the perspective of a single life, the personality turns inward, becomes spiritualized, whereas the outward data in turn become abstract and uniform, until a true connection between the two is impossible. The data, actions manifested in the external world, fail to account for the whole man, who in turn is not able to arrive at an action revelatory of his entire self. (Here lies the most profound stylistic contradiction of the intimate drama: as drama increasingly becomes an affair of the spirit, it increasingly misses the vital centre of personality.) This – in context with that indissoluble irrationality whereby man is represented – explains the heavy burden of theory encumbering much of the new drama. Since the vital centre of character and the intersecting point of man and his destiny do not necessarily coincide, supplemental theory is brought in to contrive a dramatic linkage of the two. One could indeed say that the maintenance of personality is threatened by the totality of external data. The data perhaps cannot drain the personality dry – but personality can, by a process of internalization, seek to flee the individual data, avoiding them, keeping out of contact with them.

In sum, life as the subject of poetry has grown more epic, or to be precise, more novelistic than ever (we refer, of course, to the psychological rather than the primitive form of the novel). The transposition of life into the drama is achieved only by the symptomatic rendering of the life data. For the significance of life's external particulars has declined, if we regard them with the task in mind of rendering man dramatic. Thus, the threat to personality becomes almost of necessity the subject of theoretical discussion. Only if the problem is presented abstractly, dialectically, can we succeed in turning the particular event, which is the basic stuff of drama, into an event touching upon, and expressive of, dramatic man's inner essence. The personage must be consciously aware that in the given case directly involving him, the perpetuation of his personality is at stake. The new drama is on this account the drama of individualism: a drama of demands upon personality made conscious. For this reason men's convictions, their ideologies, are of the highest artistic importance, for they alone can lend a symptomatic significance to the naked data. Only they can bring the vital centers of drama and of character into

adjustment. However, this adjustment will always remain problematic; it will never be more than a “solution,” an almost miraculous coherence of mutually antagonistic forces, for the ideology threatens in turn to reduce character to a “contrapuntal necessity.”

Thus heroism in the new drama is quite different from what it was in the old; and the French *tragédie classique* relates most intimately to the old in this regard. Heroism is now more passive, requires less of outward splendour, success, and victory (here again we refer to Hebbel's theory of suffering and action); but on the other hand it is more conscious, judicious and, in expression, more pathetic and rhetorical than was the old. Perhaps we will be somewhat dubious about this last assertion, in view of the sparse simplicity of language in many modern dramas; even so, the essence of the question here concerns not so much rhetoric or its absence in direct expression, but rather the underlying tone in the pathetic scenes, and how much or relatively little this approaches expression. When Hebbel's Clara, Ibsen's Hedda, or even Hauptmann's Henschel dies (to name but the least obtrusively pathetic denouements) the death partakes of the very same tone as did the emotions of heroes in Corneille and Racine. In the face of death, the heroes of Greek and Shakespearean drama were composed; their pathos consists of bravely looking death in the eye, of proudly bearing what is not to be averted. The heroes of the new drama always partake of the ecstatic; they seem to have become conscious of a sense that death can vouchsafe them the transcendence, greatness, and illumination which life withheld (e.g., the *Antigone* of Sophocles compared with that of [Vittorio] Alfieri), and together with this a sense that death will fulfill and perfect their personalities. This sense arose only among the spectators in the old drama. That is why Schopenhauer valued the modern tragedy more highly than the ancient; he called the tone resignation, and regarded it as the essence of tragedy. With this the outer event becomes wholly inward – that is, at the moment when the two vital centres coincide most exactly – and form has in a sense become content. We might well say that the ancients regarded tragedy naïvely. The tragedy is *a posteriori* to the viewpoint of the acting personages and the stylistic means. Thus it is not so important that the problem be thought through to its end. By contrast, in the new tragedies the tragedy is asserted as primary; the various particular phenomena of man, life, and the events of drama are all regarded as tragic; here the tragedy is *a priori* to life.

A dramatic problem exists in this antimony of an individualism which relates to the external world within a reduced scope of expressive significations. It is not the only problem. As we have seen, one of the important new forms of our life results from the slackening and loosening of constraints in the realm of the particular and the immediate, while the abstract constraints correspondingly grow and assume augmented force. The individual's sense of autonomy in his relations with others is ever-increasing, he tolerates less and less any purely personal bond between men, which by its nature will demand more of personality than do those bonds which are purely abstract. Simmel provides an interesting case of this transformation on sensibility. At the beginning of the modern epoch, he states, should an impoverished Spanish nobleman enter the personal service of a rich man (i.e., work as a servant or lackey), he would not lose his title of nobility, whereas he would should he turn to trade. In contrast, a young American woman today is not ashamed to work in a factory, but she does feel shame if she takes up housework in another's employ. Thus relations among men have grown much more complex. For if the realization of personality is not to become a hollow ideology, somebody must achieve it. But since this someone will feel his personal autonomy to be sacred, he will tolerate

intrusion upon it no more than will those who aspire to be his master. In this way new conflicts result from the new patterning and sensibility, and this at precisely the juncture where, in the old order of society, the relation of higher to lower rank (master to servant, husband to wife, parents to children, etc.) found stability, the point where a tradition which dated back countless centuries had the energy to confirm and perpetuate tendencies through which the lives of men mingled in the most intimate manner. And so again, and in yet another perspective, the new drama emerges as the drama of individualism. For one of individualism's greatest antinomies becomes its foremost theme: the fact that realization of personality will be achieved only at the price of suppressing the personalities of others (which, in turn, requires for their realization the ruin of the personalities of others).

As a formal relationship, this adds a new development to human relations in drama. Behind a belief that man's full personality is realized in his relationships with others, lies an emotion, a sensibility that suffers all of life. When the emotion vanishes or diminishes, characters whose spirit functions chiefly on the basis of that emotion (the servant, confidante, etc.), will vanish from drama. As the emotion ceases to be universal they become no more than hollow, illusion-disrupting technical properties. This is an evident fact of the French and Spanish drama, and we might better mention that Kent's whole personality is fulfilled in the relationship to Lear, as is Horatio's in his relationship to Hamlet. By contrast, in Goethe's first play, and in Schiller's, we find the theme of a servant at the crucial moment turning against his master (Weislingen – Franz; Franz Moor – Herman), thus ceasing to exist merely in relationship to the master. Here the means elude the one who proposes to use them, they take on new life, become an end. As in many other realms we see here, too, how purely decorative relationships are shattered by the new life; relations become more complex, and where once only gestures made contact, psychological bonds and complex reciprocal effects that are barely expressible are now produced.

The stylistic problem is defined under these conditions, that is, by displacements in the relations among men as caused by the new life (the dramatic material) and by the new ways men have of regarding and evaluating their relationships (the dramatic *principium stilisationis*). Limitations set by these possibilities become the limits of the new drama's expressive potential; and both types of limitation produce the questions which can set the stylistic problem. Perhaps we may briefly formulate these questions: what kind of man does this life produce, and how can he be depicted dramatically? What is his destiny, what typical events will reveal it, how can these events be given adequate dramatic expression?

How does man in the new life relate to the men in the world about him? We must phrase the question thus, if we wish to arrive at a man suitable for drama. Man in isolation is not suited to the drama; no literary art can result from an isolation of human existence which would correspond to the art of portraiture. Literature shows man only in the succession of his feelings and thoughts, which means it cannot entirely exclude the causes of the feelings and thoughts; at most it will somewhat conceal a portion of these causes, that is, the external world, which is their immediate origin. Every other literary form can if it wishes, however, present causes as though sprung straight from the soul of man, as though impressions were drawn but from the soul. They can, in other words, depict arbitrarily the relation of man to his external world, showing it as something other than a web of complex interactions. The dramatic form forbids such an approach, and it moreover focuses relations to the external world in relations to other men. Thus investigation of a man suited for drama coincides with an investigation of the problem of man's relation

to other men. (Elsewhere we have discussed, and will discuss again, this relation in its totality, i.e., so-called destiny, the unity that symbolizes this totality.) How do men make contact with one another? Or better, what is their maximum potential for approaching one another, and what is the maximum distance they can place between themselves? Better yet, to what extent is man isolated in modern drama, to what degree is he alone?

Doubtless the old drama offers numerous examples of incomprehension between men. They can be of social origin, resulting because men of low origins and temperament must always see an eternal riddle in all refinement. However, this kind of incomprehension is not an aspect of the problem, for it depends merely upon social distinctions. Other instances are of a moral origin, inasmuch as a refined spirit (Claudius says of Hamlet), "being remiss, most generous, and free from all contriving," just cannot imagine that other men are otherwise. This is the blindness of noble soul, confronted by a calculating evil which sees quite through it. Incomprehension such as this always has a rational basis, either in the qualities of particular men, or in the consequences of certain specific circumstances. It is part of the dramatic groundplan, built in from the first as a "given." As some men will understand one another, others will not, and the one relationship is as absolute and constant as the other. Yet the continued viability of the confidante should be a sign that the potential of absolute understanding among men was never in doubt. Confidantes are almost eliminated in the modern drama, and where they remain, they are felt to function as a disruptive technical device. Now gone out of life is that universal emotion for which alone they could function as symbol, which lifted them above their merely technical function so they might appear as the stylization of a palpable something in reality, rather than a mere convention. The emotion for which they stood could only have been one of the absolute possibility of understanding. If we consider the most complex of these relationships, the one closest to our own emotion, we will see the functioning of Horatio vis-à-vis Hamlet only confirms that no discord of spirits did or could exist between them; all Hamlet's actions and all his motives are rightly regarded and valued by Horatio, in their original sense. [...]

A new element is correspondingly introduced into the dialogue – or rather, a new style problem confronts dialogue. . . . What is said becomes ever more peripheral to what is not expressed. The melody in dialogue is ever more submerged in the accompaniment, the openly spoken in the allusion, in silence, in effects achieved by pauses, change in tempo, etc. For the process which proceeds exclusively within, which will not even seek for words, which *can* not, is better expressed by word groupings than by their sense, and better by their associative power rather than compressive energy. The mere lonely men in drama become (and development is ever more in this direction, or at least toward an awareness of it), the more the dialogue will become fragmented, allusive, impressionistic in form rather than specific and forthright. As a form, monologue is not capable of fulfilling this task. . . . A monologue is in fact the compression of a situation, or else a commentary in programmatic form upon what will come later. In a monologue the loneliness of a specific situation is compressed and expressed together with all that must remain unsaid because of the situation; and certain matters at most remain concealed: shame, for instance. But because the monologue always comes either at the start or the end of a dialogue, it cannot express the ever-shifting nuances of understanding and incomprehension which evade formulation and which we speak of here. The new dramatic man is not isolated because he must conceal certain matters for specific reasons, but because he strongly feels he wants, and is aware of wanting, to come together – and knows he is incapable of it. . . .

The only ideology which men will not feel to be an ideology is one which prevails absolutely and tolerates no opposition or doubt; only such a one ceases to be abstract and intellectual and is entirely transformed into feeling, so that it is received emotionally just as though no problem of value-judgment were ever involved (e.g., the medieval ideology of Revenge as still found in Shakespeare, or the dictates of Honour among the Spanish). Until the ideologies motivating men became relativized, a man was right or he was wrong. If right, he recognized no relative justification of his opponents whatsoever; nothing might justify them since they were wrong. Were one to suppose that demonic passions drove them to transgress norms which otherwise were absolutely binding, then the nature of the motivating forces was itself enough to forbid sympathy for the other's state of mind, especially with opponents. The final implication of a struggle between persons was such that one could scarcely see in the opponent anyone less than a mortal enemy, and this is precisely because the struggle was irrational. How different are conflicts where the individual is taken for the mere proxy of something external to him, something objective, conflicts where the pairing of particular opponents is virtually accidental, the result of intersected necessities. This is why the man of Shakespeare's time, ripping and tearing his opponent in the wild grip of unbridled passions, could hardly be thought to conceive a sense of community with those whom he destroyed and who destroyed him. . . .

In the main, this explains why intrigue has become superfluous and even disruptive. When every action can be "understood," man's wickedness (though its forms remain unchanged) can no longer be regarded as the ultimate cause of events (as, e.g., Shakespeare's Iago still was). The Count in Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* represents the first stage of this development; and, after the wild excesses of his initial dramas, Schiller comes to this point almost against his will, in the opinion of Philipp [reference to Schiller's *Don Carlos*]. Again it is Hebbel who grasps the situation in its theoretical purity, when he declares that a dramatist's worth is in inverse ratio to the number of scoundrels he requires. . . . In this way the tragic experience is elevated entirely into the realm of absolute necessity. Everything which is merely personal, merely empirical, disappears from it, even from its form as a phenomenon. Nothing remains but the bare tragic content, a perspective on life in the form of inevitably tragic conflicts. . . . In this way dramatic conflicts grow not merely more profound, but at either side of certain limits they vanish entirely. All becomes a matter of viewpoint. The subjective extreme descends from the acting personages, as it were, and into the very foundations of the play. Whether or not a matter is tragic becomes strictly a matter of viewpoint. The tragi-comedy appears, a genre of art essence is that an event played out before us is, at one and the same time, inseparably comic and tragic. The genre has little positive significance and it is simply impracticable in performance, since the simultaneous duality of vision cannot become spontaneous experience, and the tragic aspect in a comic situation, or the comic in a tragic situation, will only be felt subsequently and then for the most part intellectually. Thus, though this sort of effort may deepen comedy from the perspective of a *Weltanschauung*, it nevertheless disrupts the purity of style and keeps tragedy to the level of the banal and trivial, if indeed it is not distorted into grotesquery. . . .

The conflicts become ever more decisively and exclusively inward, they become so much an affair of man's spirit that they can scarcely be communicated to others; and no data, no actions may be conceived which might express the conflicts, leaving nothing in reserve. Thus does action become not merely superfluous (for the release of tragic emotions does not inherently require it), but it may be felt as positively disruptive.

Often enough action is no more than an accidental instigation of the real event, which occurs somewhere beyond its reach and independent of it. "Our life has become too inward," Hebbel laments, "and, barring a miracle, it will never again become external." Goethe too was aware of the immense advantages which Shakespeare had over him; for in his time the decisive conflicts might still occur in a form which worked strongly upon the senses. . . .

The new life lacks a mythology; what this means is that the thematic material of tragedies must be distanced from life artificially. For the aesthetic significance of mythology is twofold. In the first place it projects, in the concrete symbols of concrete fables, man's vital emotions concerning the most profound problems of his life. These fables are not so rigid that they cannot incorporate displacements of the general sensibility, should these occur. Should it happen, however, the retained elements will always outweigh the added elements; the perceptible event will amount to more than the new way of valuing it. The second aspect, and possibly the more important, is that the tragic situation so expressed is held at a constant natural distance from the public – a constant distance, since the event is projected into vast dark distances of time. A natural distance, since subject and content, and indeed form, have been moulded in the public's midst as something their own life partakes of, something passed along from their ancestors and without which life itself could scarcely be imagined. Whatever can be made into myth is by its nature poetic. This means, in the always paradoxical fashion of every poetic work, that it is both distant and near to life, and bears in itself, without conscious stylization, the real and unreal, the naïve and all-signifying, the spontaneous and symbolic, adornment and simple pathos. At its origins, or in the process of turning the past into myth (as, for instance, Shakespeare with the War of the Roses), everything that is accidental or superfluous or derives from the individual will, or depends for its effect upon the willfulness of individual taste – everything which, despite its "interestingness," renders the profound trivial – is torn from the subjects of poetry. . . .

The bourgeois drama is by nature problematic, as theory and practice both agree, and countless circumstantial and formal signs indicate. Apart from the general stylistic problems of any new drama, drama becomes problematic at its base as soon as its subject is a bourgeois destiny enacted among bourgeois personages. The thematic material of bourgeois drama is trivial, because it is all too near to us; the natural pathos of its living men is non-dramatic and its most subtle values are lost when heightened into drama; the fable is willfully invented and so cannot retain the natural and poetic resonance of an ancient tradition. In consequence, most modern dramas are historical, whether they are set in a definite epoch or the timeless past, and, in view of the foregoing, their historicity gains new meaning. History is meant as a substitute for mythology, creating artificial distances, producing monumentality, clearing away trivia and injecting a new pathos. However, the distance to be gained by projecting back in history is more conscious than formerly, and it is for this reason less spirited and forced to appeal more to the facts, forced, because more timid, to cling more strongly to empirical data. The essence of historical distancing is that it substitutes what happened long ago for what happens today. But always, one event takes the place of another; never does a symbol replace a reality. (Naturally I am not concerned here with trivial "historical truth." A modern fantasy drama is historical; it is less free of the facts than are Shakespeare's historical dramas.) . . .

Tragedy itself has become problematic. There are, that is, no longer any absolute, overriding, external, easily discerned criteria by which one judges whether a given man

and a given destiny are tragic. The tragic becomes strictly a matter of viewpoint, and – important as a problem of expression – strictly an inward, spiritual problem. Something becomes tragic only by the suggestive force of expression, and only spiritual intensities can lend the pathos of tragedy to it. . . . This is why the heroism of the new drama has grown more stylized, more rhetorical, than in the old: the heroism of the hero must be asserted consciously. On the one hand, this serves to hold his tragic experience at the distance of tragedy, as compared to the corresponding events of his life which will refuse to assume a tragic figuration. On the other hand, this affords the possibility of lending a certain force of pathos, of nay-saying significance, to this destiny within the drama, which otherwise lacks the means to render itself objectively conspicuous. What is essential in the hero, what involves him in tragedy, is in this fashion overtly stylized on the plan of a conscious heroism. Dramatic character depiction becomes artficed, hard, places distance between itself and life, whenever it endeavors to rise to tragedy. And the more it aspires to the true tragic peaks of life, or attains them, the more will it be gripped by an obstinate and cold majesty, which will in turn exclude more and more of life's richness and subtleties. . . .

The stylization, however, can no longer be simply the pathos of abstract and conscious heroism. It can be only the stylization of a single quality, exaggerated to a degree beyond any found in life, so that this single quality will be seen to rule the entire man and his destiny as well. To use the language of life, a pathology will be needed. For what does such extremism signify, if not a kind of illness, a pathological overgrowth of a certain specific into the whole life of a man? . . .

Pathology is a technical necessity and as such is related to the problems we have sketched – as even Schiller could sense, when he wrote of Goethe's *Iphigenie*: "On the whole, Orestes is the most self-aware among them; without the Furies he would not be Orestes, and yet, since the cause of his condition is not perceptible to the eye, but remains wholly in his spirit, his condition becomes an overly long and unrelieved torment without an object."

When a mythology is absent – which explains why this case is perhaps more striking than others – the basis on which everything must be justified is character. When the motivations are wholly based upon character, however, the wholly inward origin of this destiny will drive the character relentlessly to the limits of pathology. The non-pathological Orestes of Aeschylus was driven from without by what drives Goethe's from within; what once was destiny, becomes character for the modern poets. When we find a pathological trait in one or another personage of the ancient poets (Heracles, Ajax, Lear, Ophelia, etc.), then it is the destiny of that personage to so become and his tragedy is that this is what becomes of him; but his tragedy does not originate in his being so. Even where the tragedy is built upon a pathological situation, as in *Phaedra*, it is still projected entirely from without: the gods have inflicted it. Perhaps this seems only a technical problem; it may appear to matter little whether Orestes is pursued by the Furies or his own heated imagination, whether it is the witches' enticing words which bring Macbeth's stormy hunger for power to ripeness, or whether Holophernes seeks his own ruin. In practice, however, we will see that what comes from without, what is sent upon man by the gods, is universal; it is destiny. In the same way, to the same degree, it might happen to anyone, and in the final analysis becomes a destiny without reference to the composition of particular character – or at any rate, not solely with reference to it. But when all has become an inner event and can follow only from the character – if, indeed, all is not so infinitely far from the nature

of the concerned that they become incapable of dramatic action (as Oswald, Rank) – its intensity must be heightened into an illness if it is to be seen and heard. In pathology and in it alone lies the possibility of rendering undramatic men dramatic. Nothing else is capable of lending them that concentration of action, the intensity of the senses, which will make the act and the situation symbolic and raise the figures above the ordinary, above the everyday. Says [Alfred] Kerr, “in disease we find the permitted poetry of naturalism The figure is lent infinitely more dimensions than yet can be justified in reality.” . . .

We must therefore ask whether today pathology is to be avoided if the content and form of life are to be expressed in dramatic form. It is a tendency destructive of the true dramatic essence, since it relegates causation to the universal and becomes lost in a maze of psychological subtleties and imponderables. But can we see another possibility that remains open to the drama? . . .

As we see, it is a question transcending the realm of purely artistic or technical problems. To solve this technical task becomes a problem of life itself: it becomes a search for the vital centre of life. For the ancients and their drama, this question offered no problem; the vital centre was their point of departure and everything else grouped itself around it. . . . Now the vital centre is invented by the poet himself; no longer is it to be discovered, except as an inspiration or vision, as a profound philosophy or the intuition of genius; and even then, on an individual basis, as a particular, thus wholly accidental, insight. . . .

This is the crux of the paradox: the material of drama consists of the interrelatedness of ethical systems, and the dramatic structure which arises from this relationship is aesthetic-formal. From a different viewpoint, what is involved is an equilibrium of forces, of aesthetic interrelations, and this equilibrium can be achieved only in the medium of ethics. More simply, so long as tragedy did not become ethically problematic, either inwardly or outwardly, the pure aesthetics of structure functioned quite naturally: from a given beginning only a single given result can follow, since the ethical structure is a given precondition known to the poet and public alike. But when ethics cease to be a given, the ethical knotting within the drama – thus, its aesthetics – has to be created; whereupon ethics, as the cornerstone of the artistic composition, move necessarily into the vital centre of motivation. In this way the great and spontaneous unity of ethics and aesthetics, within the tragic experience, commences to be the problem.

Notes

- 1 G. Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, tr. R. Livingston (London: Verso, 1977), 33.
- 2 G. Lukács, *Realism in Our Time*, tr. J. and N. Mander (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 122.
- 3 Discussed in detail in a portion of the essay here omitted, which dealt with development of the stage as an institution. Lukács argues that truly bourgeois plays were first written by the Germans Lenz, Grabbe, Goethe, Schiller, and others who were the first dramatists to develop historical ideas. Emphasis upon reasoned argument, together with environmental determinism, is seen to distinguish bourgeois playwrights from their predecessors, who had enjoyed spontaneous communication with their audiences by virtue of shared religious sensibility. [...] – Translator’s note.
- 4 Anonymous Elizabethan tragedy ascribed to Thomas Kyd (1558–94). – Editor’s note.
- 5 *Herod and Marianne* by Friedrich Hebbel (1813–63). – Editor’s note.

Chapter 14

Emma Goldman (1869–1940)

Emma Goldman was an anarchist, pacifist, feminist, and socialist. Born in Russia, she emigrated to the United States where she fought for women’s emancipation, reproductive rights, and birth control. She returned to Russia after being deported from the United States in the early 1920s, but was soon disillusioned with Soviet communism. Goldman falls in line with other social realists in her effort to defend mimetic representation against the radical avant-garde and conservative critics. Her essay contributes to the ongoing debates of the time, adding a political message to the concerns of drama.

Foreword to *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (1917)

In order to understand the social and dynamic significance of modern dramatic art it is necessary, I believe, to ascertain the difference between the functions of art for art’s sake and art as the mirror of life.

Art for art’s sake presupposes an attitude of aloofness on the part of the artist toward the complex struggle of life: he must rise above the ebb and tide of life. He is to be merely an artistic *conjurer* of beautiful forms, a creator of pure fancy.

That is not the attitude of modern art, which is preeminently the reflex, the mirror of life. The artist being a part of life cannot detach himself from the events and occurrences that pass panorama-like before his eyes, impressing themselves upon his emotional and intellectual vision.

The modern artist is, in the words of August Strindberg, “a lay preacher popularizing the pressing questions of his time.” Not necessarily because his aim is to proselytize, but because he can best express himself by being true to life.

Emma Goldman, “Foreword,” in *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (1917, reprinted New York: Applause Books, 1987), 1–3.