THE FIRST WORD

There are two urgent problems. One concerns theatre -- and the problem is the present debased state of English theatre. The other concerns drama -- what is it? That is, what does the playwright write into a play, and in performance what are the actor and the audience doing? Some of the causes of the first problem -- the debased state of theatre -- have origins outside theatre. The solution to the second problem lies in drama itself. Contemporary attempts to create drama produce only theatre because they are based on redundant philosophies of the nineteenth century and the decay of these philosophies into post-modernism. The philosophies are Freudism and reductive materialism. The first is pessimistic, the second optimistic. Both claimed to be sciences but both needed to supplement themselves in other ways. To put this baldly, Freudism concerned itself with the arts and materialism with politics. Examples of the latter are Darwin’s evolution spilling over into right-wing politics and Hegel’s combination of the subjectification of history with the denial of human purposive freewill. This confuses dialectical materialism. In prehistory the material produces and in history it may manufacture but it can never create. Creativity is a human prerogative. Only we create. Dialectical materialism is really dialectical humanness. This is the basis of drama and because it combines the human with the material we are the dramatic species. Drama is created on the boundary between the material and the self. This means that drama is firmly based in objective reality and can be precisely analysed and prescribed. This paper, however, is mainly about the first problem, the state of theatre.

After the second world war drama sought refuge from war’s horror. This led to the poetic drama of playwrights such as Christopher Fry. It was an ineffective nostalgia for the lost past -- the phoenix smelt of ashes. The alternative of the Absurd was more “modern,” it found life chaotic and meaningless but tried to hold onto its dignity, its power of human judgement, by the use of comic irony. But the clown slipping on the banana skin is not dignified. This is why Beckett’s pathos inevitably turned into his later bitterness -- the clown slips on the banana skin and tumbles into his grave.

The post-war became the cold war. Its difficult for those who did not live through it to imagine it. It was like being in an ancient city under perpetual siege. The city wall that protected you also kept the enemy always on your doorstep. The clouds drifting overhead were subliminal reminders of Hiroshima. The government’s strategic policy had the acronym MAD, mutually assured destruction -- the Oedipus saga of the polluted state ends with the mutual slaughter of Eteocles and Polyneices. After the war people were acutely aware that society was unjust -- in the war they were asked to kill for it and now in peace they were asked to be willing to die for it. Popular deference diminished. It led to the sixties “evenements” and to a new political theatre. A lot of it was agit-prop or derived from Brecht. Really it tried to resolve social injustice by treating as one problem the two problems I began with. Its effects are still with us and worsen our present confusion.

The new political theatre was part of a larger movement. Its best protagonists were over-optimistic. The worst were naive and dogmatic and believed the revolution was about to begin. But it had no popular support. The theatre that claimed to make the masses politically aware played only to the already politically aware. Its illusions have to be respected because they were based on real social injustice -- but all political illusions are dangerous. They are based on fictions -- and, it should be said here, so is contemporary docu-drama. Drama has nothing to do with fiction. It is concerned with the logic of imagination. Mistaking them led to the enduring damage caused by Brecht.

The political theatre promised Utopia in the future but devised no means of reaching it. In its place Thatcher-Regan economics promised Utopia now -- the market. The market is like setting fire to your house to make the rooms warm. This is now obvious but it wasnt then. To be accepted the market had to be shown to be effective in every part of society, from the running of prisons to the performing of plays. Theatre became part of the market -- it had to appear to be in the forefront of the contemporary, to be in and about the new society. But any unregulated market must make society more unjust. This again relates to the two problems with which I started. The market releases the power of the material world, its ability to manufacture, but divorces this from the human dynamic. People begin to manufacture their existence instead of creating it -- as if the human being itself was something to be manufactured. The “self” had no responsibility for itself. It answered only to its bank account and its only vision was the market. This denies the reality of “being human” -- and only drama, of the stage or its surrogates (but they are also corrupted by the market) can express and create that. At first myths were used to explain the complexities of reality. Slowly they have been replaced by the double understanding of the material world and ourselves. This was the course of civilizations. The capitalist market abruptly stops this process -- and science has now begun to create a mythological world. It does not resemble the ancient
mythical world because that tried to outgrow its myths. The Greeks turned myths into drama to release the human life that the myths preserved but imprisoned. The ancient world had begun to explicate humanness, strengthen it and make it more proteinic. This began the long history which is now climaxing under our feet. The scientific market myth-world reduces reality to the deadness of things that the ancient myths were created to overcome. Curiously in spite of its addiction to speed modern culture is static. Post-modernism exists outside time.

The modern stage is a jumble-sale -- heaps of discarded junk that no one wanted because no one needed. People rummage through it hoping to find a clue to who they are. It's a theatre of symptoms. In the mass market its a placebo that gives the illusion of existing. Some playwrights still seek to understand the human paroxysm and resolve its dilemma. But in their situation they become even more destructive than the crude exploiters. This is because they try to provide answers and the exploiters don't. But they cannot provide answers because the market-world has none. So seeking at least some sense of authenticity they replicate the agony of the problem and inherit this as if it were an answer to the problem. But because the cause of the agony isn't understood, the agony turns into a consumer joke -- the market knows how to exploit its enemies. Even if these playwrights had an answer they could not perform it. The destruction has penetrated deep into the means of drama, into acting and mise-en-scene -- and when actors can't bring the human presence on stage, but instead produce a manufactured style that apes it, then drama is impossible. The market destroys the source of the human presence.

This is the difference between theatre and drama. Theatre uses the apparatuses of drama but destroys (and doesn't just ignore) its purpose. What is its purpose and how can it be recovered? The answer would require understanding what drama is, why we are the dramatic species -- that is my second problem. But its first necessary to have a better understanding of the present situation. Every closed society has in it its "psyche of drama" -- the phrase is cumbersome so I'll call it the dramatic psyche, but its really the psyche of drama itself. You can compare it to a human psyche -- its where the whole of a person's body, mind, history, culture, abilities, passions, technological skills, possessions, relations -- where everything is present and has an effect. Its the dramatic psyche of that person's reality. Its part conscious and part unconscious and many of its elements are opposites and actively opposed. So the balancing of its elements is always incomplete. A society's collective dramatic psyche is its institutions, economy, culture and of course its members each of whom have their own dramatic psyche. The dramatic psyche is society's constant resolving of its tensions and in this way the present shapes the future.

If a person has cancer then everything in their dramatic psyche has it -- just as when someone dies everything in and of them dies. Cells without cancer create the body, its arms and legs. Cancer doesn't create -- it manufactures. It cannot manufacture an arm or a leg. It manufactures itself. The cancer in a person can be identified. It can't endlessly hide and it can't create health. It can be diagnosed because it is confined to a site, a body. When someone knows their body is cancerous then all the elements of the self that can resist it are organised to resist -- but all the other elements are also changed. Cancer enters into their functioning and the person's understanding of the world. This is done through the dramatic psyche. Out of cancer the psyche can create a clearer vision of reality, a profounder humanity. It has to be the humanity of the Tragic. Here words such as Tragic, comic, joy are re-dramatised. Their meaning is changed. But those who deny they have cancer are killed by it.

A society's dramatic psyche is more complicated. Existence is spread among the population and society itself has no physical disease. But what is adverse to that society, what endangers it, will be distributed through the whole of society and its culture by the dramatic psyche. This is so although no culture can accurately diagnose itself -- its ignorance is not conscious denial and so culture can incorporate whatever threatens it into itself. Historically overcoming threats and conflicts -- cultural "cancers" -- creates civilizations. It is as if they were created by way of cancer -- the forces that would ravage and ruin it become the source of construction and renewal and morality. This depends on ideology, which can be called a necessary disease. As if cancer could create a new more powerful subtle limb. This is the process of society's dramatic psyche. Its not a simple Manichaeanism, a negative force opposed by a positive force. Its more complex because the process is social -- in the society's institutions but also in its individual members. They remain distinct and can be joined only in the dramatic psyche, and there they are in tension. Cancer can be understood as a natural force, as materialism, and so it is subject to the laws of evolution and entropy. But human beings are creative. This defines them. We are human only because we are individually and collectively creative and create culture. So the dramatic psyche is collective and society is in the self in the way we understand instinct to be in it. But fundamentally
the dynamic in the dramatic psyche is the individual -- because the human being, the neonate, is born outside society. But it is not born as an amorphous neutral pre-self that society stamps its impress on. We are born with the imperative to be human. This is not an idealist supposition. The human self is not born with knowledge but with the innate capacity for knowledge and this capacity must specify what knowledge is for it and it must be vital and not arbitrary -- ultimately human emotions are also intellectual because they relate to meaning. This is at the centre of drama. I have explained this more fully elsewhere. From birth the mind has the imperative eventually to impose on the world the meaning of the Tragic and the comic. We are the dramatic species because we are not born into evolution but already in history. That is the human process. But it has now been changed. The market has changed it. Cancer of the self or society manufactures -- and whatever is manufactured goes on the market. We become products of the market.

It is not a “sleight of mind” to equate social malaise and a physical disease and call both “cancer.” The similarity between the two is that they are both destructive, the difference is in the way they are received, in their social effect. Culture is creative, the market is not. But why cant human creativity incorporate it into its own processes in the way that in the past it incorporated into itself whatever opposed it, whatever was destructive to it? -- after all, isn't that the process of history? It cant because the market is in evolution. It brings the laws of evolution into the structure of society, into humanness itself. Evolution is a human nihilism that creativity can't resist. In fact on a superficial level the market does still exploit human creativity but does it without the dynamic of humanness because the market’s energy is money -- and money is evolutionary, it multiplies itself. It is a parasite on humanness and like a successful parasite it infiltrates its host’s processes. That means that money is also a parasite on the market and so the market falls between evolution and creativity. It becomes precisely what theologians used to call diabolism. Mephistopheles buys Faust, who is a scientist. The present restructures the past because variables are constant. You can now see the point of what may appeared to have been a digression. Because the market is evolutionary it infests the structures of society. Then when societies “psyche of drama” seeks -- necessarily has to seek -- to incorporate evolution into its own processes, it must fail -- evolution is alien and can't be incorporated, and so drama can only reproduce what is destroying it -- and the playwright must do this with the illusion the play is doing the opposite. That's why I called it the theatre of symptoms. And as the forms of drama are creative and structured to produce solutions to the problems that the drama presents, the theatre of symptoms has to produce as a cure the disease that is killing it. This would not be possible when a disease is killing an individual. It is very possible in culture -- in culture it happens all the time. It is why there are left and right in politics. Its the absolute substance of drama. But now there is no drama, only theatre -- which is like a blind man cutting open his eyes so that he can see to cut them open.

The destruction of drama began in 1979. A hole was dug in the road and drama fell into it. Directors -- who hold the power in our theatres -- push playwrights and actors into the hole and then jump in after them. Naturally they land on the playwrights' backs. The scrabbling about at the bottom of the hole turns it into an abyss. The dramatists had to go abroad.

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This is the present problem of drama. How can it be resolved? The introductions to recent collected volumes of my plays, and my recent talk at Bochum, deal with this. Here I can summarise a few of the arguments and take a few a little further. Drama is usually misunderstood as dealing with fixed values in conventional situations. To make the situations theatrically interesting they are made novel. Yet they remain stubbornly conventional because they depend on the fixed values. Things are rearranged but nothing is changed. This is why the political plays of the sixties were theatre and not drama. Drama is events occurring on a site. The site is the scene of some particular human and social problem. The problem is specific but ultimately the site is the whole of society and human reality. It stretches from the kitchen table to the edge of the universe. The problem is caused by the practice of values. What happens on the drama site changes the values. But for values to change - - for there to be any values at all -- “value” must be permanent. There must be something that makes values valuable. By definition theft of anything (property, life, a right. . .) is wrong but drama changes the nature of both the theft and what is stolen. It redefines meanings. In one of my plays young men stone a baby to death. In the introduction to The Chair Plays I wrote “ . . the young men stone the baby in order to recover their self-respect . . they are motivated by the nostalgia to be human.” In “4.48 Psychosis” Sarah Kane wrote “No one who commits suicide wants to die.” These two paradoxes are humanly true but socially denied. The two dramas establish them as socially true. Drama changes the meaning of the total site and so the meaning of the value. It makes socially soiled values profoundly human. All human values derive from justice because that’s the
problem of the situations on the site. But drama cant change anything if it is not properly staged and acted. Theatre can no longer do that. Theatre itself is now part of the situation on the site that has to be changed if we are to recreate humanness and justice for our time. Contemporary theatre is a disease that presents itself as the cure. Theatre is like a game of cards. Different players win but what is on the cards doesn’t change. The cards are randomly shuffled and if skill is relevant its the ability to deceive the opponent -- to lie. A game of chance and lies perfectly describes our present society. Theatre shuffles the cards that never change. Drama changes what’s on the cards -- it changes with the moves in the game.

That happens because drama is created by the psyche of drama. The tensions in the psyche respond to everything in reality and finally articulate themselves in historically changing understanding-as-opinion and action. If the change were arbitrary or merely efficient we would be the product of materialism. Kant said that respect for the moral law -- justice -- was universal but he couldn’t say why: “...all human reason is totally incapable of explaining (it)... and all the effort and labour to seek such an explanation is waste.” Kant is wrong. The imperative to be human is also the imperative to create justice. It is immanent in the newborn child when its “site and its situation” are at their purest so that the kitchen table and the edge of the universe are one. King Lear and the child at birth howl -- drama has recreated in the adult king the human imperative he is given at birth but which society corrupts. The child doesn’t know the difference between the kitchen table and the universe, Lear howls because he does. The imperative to be just is a compulsion. It may be corrupted -- if it is, the corrupt man is compelled to parody himself, his life is deformed because he presents revenge as justice. Lear howls at the weight of the world.

Drama is not an event in reality. In any sense other than the purely abstract and meaningless -- which would be a sense available to an autistic God -- it creates reality. One pair of its parameters are the kitchen table and the edge of the universe, and lateral to that the other pair of parameters are the Tragic and the comic. Perhaps the comic gives drama its structures (the clown slips but picks himself up) -- and the Tragic seems to be the polarity of justice: existence and death are unjust. But without the Tragic we would not seek justice for other people, we would not care for them, we would not even care about them, there would be no dignity. And ultimately that is why the market is barren. Cancer is a catastrophe but, because it touches and changes everything, if it is acknowledged it may humanise its victim. If it is denied it confuses and kills. But the dramatic psyche of society, the collective dramatic psyche, can deny nothing, cant hide from itself any catastrophe or threat of catastrophe. It exists only because the human imperative exists. It follows that drama must know whatever it is that most burdens and threatens us.

We face three catastrophes. One is the ecological disaster created by the market. I can add nothing that is not already known about this. The second is nuclear weapons. They are manufactured in the way pots and pans are manufactured. They are “materialism” and accord to the laws of evolution. They could lie in their silos till they rot. Their use depends on other things. One of these things is the third catastrophe. Ive already spoken about it at Bochum. I write about it here because it threatens our existence and because it is the greatest offence to cultural sanity that society has ever faced. And we have forgotten it.

The last century was unprecedentedly violent. I need not list its horrors. I can sum them up in one event in one place -- one situation on the site. It derives from the gift the Enlightenment gave us -- the scientific revolution. It led to the industrial revolution and the technology of the modern world. This is understood as emancipating us, propelling us into democracy, freeing us from many of the ancient burdens of need, sickness and labour and, now, providing us with the market. The French revolution called for liberty or death. Suppose in the last century there had been no industrial revolution or that it had not developed beyond its eighteenth century beginning. How would the struggle for liberty have developed? -- the struggle that is the struggle for justice, which is the dramatic human imperative. Of course that question is impossible, but my real question is in the time between now and the French revolution would there have been an event called Auschwitz? The question is more useful than the answer.

It should be that the more we know about nature, and the more we make that knowledge concrete in technology, the more we should know about ourselves and be able to help ourselves. We don’t and cant. We know only more about ourselves as the technology of nature, and we misunderstand even that. I use Auschwitz as a generic name for the century’s horrors because it most clearly used the apparatus of modernity. It had the efficiency and expedition of a Ford production line. The raw materials received at one end were human beings, the finished product at the other end was ash. There is an easy Brueghel image for it -- the locations of the human mouth and anus reversed. But the deformity is more extreme than that. Auschwitz used the scientific
technology that should emancipate us -- yet it is the ultimate nihilism of humanness. Auschwitz is not a cancer that destroys, it is not even a disease that poses as a cure -- it has infiltrated and taken over the processes of life and made them death. It is not a conflict between right and wrong, creativity and destruction. Creativity has been made destructive. Freud said death is the longed-for end of natural life. He called it the natural instinct of Thanatos. Sarah Kane knew that it isn't so. Thanatos is not an instinct, it is a cultural telos. It can be understood as a cancer of human reality itself, which is the only reality we have. The resources of humanness that had been accumulated within culture resisted Auschwitz. But those resources have to be created and that can be done only by the psyche of drama. It is a matter of values and their meaning. When you enter a supermarket you enter the logic of Auschwitz. You don’t know that -- but the makers of Auschwitz did not know what Auschwitz was when they built it because the meaning on the site had changed. and so reality had changed. In the generic sense I give to the name, Auschwitz is the greatest burden in the psyche of drama. We have forgotten Auschwitz because we have theatre instead of drama. We have to go to Auschwitz if we are to live.

We are in the third of the crises in which a new form of consciousness must be created so that society can function and still be human. The earlier crises were the Greek and Jacobean. Both created a new drama -- Greek tragedy and democracy, Jacobean tragedy and the first modern self. The third crisis has prised the existing human consciousness away from society’s technology and administration. We cant humanly apprehend what we are doing on our site, we are sleepwalkers walking towards death and the world begins to creak like a coffin. The West had already created this problem for itself but it has become catastrophically urgent now that technology has assembled in one place all the world’s diverse cultures and different cultural times. And this precisely when governments and cultural institutions prevent the problem being solved. They squander the human reserve we have inherited from the past and the future is already living on lost time. Theatre prevents the creation of the Third Drama.

One more thing will help to make the situation clear. Its almost an open question if human imagination props up material reality or if its the other way round. But its certain that human reality is created by imagination. All cultures interpret reality through the extravagant use of imagination and this means that reality is imagined and so imaginary. That's a definition of madness but also of societies. All cultures have imagined gods and the enemies of gods, the supernatural, life after death. . .The imaginary provides the imagery of culture and we cant look even at a human face without seeing the mask of culture over it -- our state-culture becomes the human pathos. The sculptor has feet of clay and in a meaningless universe it is difficult for it to be otherwise. Societies depend on natural cause and effect but its astonishing how culture distorts the effects of cause. All cultures are psychotic -- reality is suspended in the psychotic. Its as dangerous as surviving in the cold war by the strategy of MAD. Drama itself is also a psychosis but it is culturally segregated by the Tragic. The human imperative dominates the psyche of drama so that the confounding of humanness, the confusion of natural and cultural cause and effect, may be unravelled by the Tragic extreme. Drama enters the structures of madness so that we may be sane -- that is the logic of imagination.

The third drama neednt be set in Auschwitz or even mention it. It must confront the logic of Auschwitz and it must set it in the streets, houses and shops of our cities. If it would give it the modern credence that would sell it to the people who run our theatres it could be called the A-effect. But among ourselves we know it as the Tragic that gives us our human dignity and makes us the guardians of the justice we share with all people.