

Revolution and the Romantic Theater

by Brian Johnston

"Culture is to set man free and to help him to be equal to his concept." (Friedrich Schiller, *On the Sublime*: 1801)

I. Edmund Burke on the Histrionics of Revolution

In 1789, Edmund Burke, an enthusiast of the theater of David Garrick and Mrs. Siddons, observed with revulsion a new form of drama entering the world: the French Revolution and all that it foreboded. "What Spectators and what Actors" he wrote to Lord Charlemont. A century later (in 1889) the theater critics of London, led by Clement Scott, were to react with at least comparable horror to the appearance of *A Doll House* and, later, *Ghosts*, plays that rudely awakened the British theater from its long slumber. The two events though distanced by time, are thematically connected. Edmund Burke reverted to the metaphor of theater to describe the revolution in Paris while Ibsen's critics described the impact of his new dramaturgy in terms of social revolution. ("If any repetition of this outrage be attempted, the authorities will doubtless wake from their lethargy.") What occurred between those two dates was the evolution of a whole new supertextual structure of references that created the terms of Romantic and post Romantic drama and of its critical reception. By 'supertext' I mean a visual and verbal vocabulary and iconography by which ideas of reality are shaped, promulgated and sustained which then becomes a public domain of cultural discourse drawn upon, often unconsciously, by thinkers and artists.

For Burke, the French Revolution was an onslaught upon church, state, rank, property, law and order, in the name of a principle he repeatedly derided: "the rights of man." This latter was an "armed doctrine" against which censorship and repression at home and ruthless war abroad were fully justified. He published his most famous attack upon the revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 and it quickly was hailed as "the manifesto of the counter-revolution." *Reflections*, still a favored document of reaction, presents an example of all that the radical theater of Romanticism had to fight. Burke's frequent and vivid use of theatrical metaphors to berate the revolution, therefore, still is of interest to students of the modern theater. Much of the power of the *Reflections* comes from its (often florid) use of the *rhetoric* of the older literature and theater: a rhetoric that was to be displaced, in the intellectual world at least, by the rhetoric of Romanticism. In the *imagery* of Burke's attack on the revolution, and in that of Thomas Paine's reply, *The Rights of Man* (1791 one might see an 'Hegelian moment' of one theatrical vocabulary in intellectual decline and new one struggling to be born.

Unashamedly standing for the existing social order, its power-base and its privileges, the wealthy proprietor of Beaconsfield admonishes:

The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavor, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice. Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens industry, and strikes at the roots of all acquisition as of all conservation

Burke opposes "natural subordination" to "art" and so claims that revolutionary ideas, which the Romantics were to insist were rooted in those principles of 'Nature' present in every individual, were an artificial intrusion into the natural order of hierarchical society. Any disagreement with this divinely sanctioned social dispensation will be countered by force. "We have prisons strong as the Bastille, for those who dare to libel the queens of France." With brutal honesty Burke reveals conventional society's twin pillars of indoctrination and force which the rhetoric of its complaisant *theater* softened and glamorized.

But, reactionary though he was, Burke possessed a vision of society that profoundly was to become part of Romantic lore: that a nation is extended back *in time* and that much of its essential 'identity' inheres in institutions and traditions drawing upon loyalties that transcend critical reason. Burke repeatedly appealed to his readers' consciousness of this network of allegiances and traditions which the 'Cartesian' logic of the *philosophes* failed to understand. He wished to preserve for all time the hierarchical social structure of his own age, stopping the clock of social progress at the hour of his writing.

Romanticism was forcefully to reject this static concept of history and society, but it, too, became more and more aware that the existing social structure and its historically evolved institutions could not just immediately be dismantled. Writing in 1795 and after the Revolution had run much of its violent course, Friedrich Schiller, the first major dramatist of the new 'radical' theater, warned against risking the very theoretical (even if morally necessary) *idea* of society. "The great consideration is, therefore, that physical society in *time* may not cease for an instant while moral society is being formed in *idea*.... The living clockwork of the state must be repaired while it is in motion." Schiller was concerned not to endanger, (by theoretically erasing), that variegated human identity involved, however imperfectly, in existing social traditions and institutions: a concern reflected in his idea of the theater as well as in his political and aesthetic writings. An awareness of an ineradicable substratum to our *conscious* human identity, instinctual, irrational and often existing subconsciously, is an essential Romantic 'deepening' of Enlightenment rationalism. It is the keynote of its art and writing making the Romantic theater radically different from that which preceded it. Evolving from Schiller, through Kleist, to Ibsen and Strindberg, this invisible, but powerful 'underworld' to our conscious selves will, variously, provide a 'counterpoint' to the drama of rational consciousness.

Burke adulated the state in terms more extravagant than Hegel would utter: but Hegel, while remaining loyal to revolutionary and Romantic aspirations, was to incorporate much of Burke's concept into his own philosophy of the state. Hegel, however, saw states as *evolving* by acknowledging and overcoming, through dialectical conflict, their institutional contradictions and he commended both Goethe and Schiller for depicting in their historical dramas, such as *Egmont* and *Don Carlos*, just such actions at times of dialectical transition within states. In the history of the world, in Hegel's view, a succession of such conflicts, from ancient times to the present, constituted the evolution within the world of the concept (or consciousness) of freedom: a concept that found its extreme political expression in the French Revolution and its philosophical self-understanding in German Idealist philosophy. Consciousness of historical process, of human identity as the result of long cultural evolution, anticipated by Vico, came into its own in Germany at this time. It is no accident, then, that a dramatist within this culture, Schiller, was to inaugurate modern tragedy as a tragedy of historical consciousness, of individuals, such as the Marquis of Posa in *Don Carlos*, not only trapped in historically limiting circumstances, but lured, fatally, into the hubristic attempt to influence the historical process.

For Burke, a current generation is a temporary custodian, only, of a culture whose humanity extends back far into the past. "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors," he observed. Against Rousseau's concept of the 'social contract' as the expression of the general will at any moment of deliberation, Burke asserted:

As the ends of such partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaevial contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world...

The conflict between the 'dead' past and the 'living' present (with 'Nature' as the increasingly ambiguous arbiter between them) constitutes the major *argument* of Romanticism, creating a wholly new theatrical symbology. For various reasons, neither England nor France were intellectually to develop this argument to its fullest, so that its more consequential life within Romanticism will proceed in Germany and Scandinavia and will at the same time beget a much more radical idea of the place of the theater within a modern society. The quarrel between Burke and Paine presents this conflict between past and present in embryo, as it were, with all its potentialities unguessed at: but perhaps this allows us to see the conflict with greater clarity.

Even the *histrionics* of revolution in the actual world were offensive to conservative ideas of social propriety. Like a neoclassical critic confronted by 'Gothic' or *Sturm und Drang* drama, Burke finds the French revolution, in its

crass indifference to historical tradition, breaking all the rules of *dramatic* decorum:

The most wonderful things are brought about in many instances by means the most absurd and ridiculous; in the most ridiculous modes; and apparently, by the most contemptible instruments. Every thing seems out of nature in the strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror.

Absurd and indecorous, the innovative revolutionary 'dramaturgy' is the indication of deplorable new melodramatic tastes in the public:

Plots, massacres, assassinations, seem to some people a trivial price for obtaining a revolution. A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination, grown torpid with the lazy enjoyment of sixty years security....

The French Assembly itself (of which Paine was to become an actual, and Schiller an honorary, member) has become a troupe of low comedians, acting before the people "the farce of deliberation with as little decency as liberty. They act like the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience." As an example of the true old dramaturgy with which to reproach these deplorable new histrionics, Burke now wheels onto the stage his tragedy-queen in the famous set-piece on Marie Antoinette. Now, the point about this passage is that it is the debasement of a once-living theatrical rhetoric that did proceed from intense loyalty to traditional institutions: to the monarchy, the aristocracy, the Church and the forms and ceremonies that maintained these roles in power. The piece is too long to quote in full and a selection of phrases cannot do justice to the rhetoric of sentimentality that Burke sustains for two pages; but the following passage will provide an idea of Burke's procedure. The queen is one of those "beings made for suffering" and "surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision":

I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in - glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. Oh! What a revolution! and what an heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!....little did I dream that I

should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. - But the age of chivalry is gone - That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex... The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.

Thomas Paine was quick to see the Shakespearean origins of this rhetoric: "Mr. Burke... may continue his parody to the end, and finish with exclaiming: "*Othello's occupation's gone!*" The extent to which Burke 'reads' the revolutionary events as theater is truly remarkable, as a sample of his phraseology (on one page alone) reveals:

"When kings are hurled by the Supreme Director of this great drama...if such a spectacle were exhibited on the stage...with such a perverted mind I could never venture to shew my face at a tragedy...the tears which Garrick or that Siddons have exhorted from me... poets have to deal with audiences not yet graduated in the school of the rights of man... in the theater men follow their natural impulses..."

The principles of the French revolution would be rejected by a decent audience "on the modern, as they once did on the ancient stage... no theatric audience in Athens would bear what has been borne.... In the theatre, the first intuitive glance, without any elaborate process of reasoning..." would serve to reject the 'cold' principles of the revolution. And Burke positively rejoices that British audiences have not been infected by the new intellect and its "process of reasoning":

"We are not the converts of Rousseau; are not the disciples of Voltaire." Burke declares, sounding the familiar British note in intellectual matters. Burke's attitude represented what was to become, in the British theater, a political consensus amounting to self-censorship, abetted by the legal censorship of the Examiner of plays, and the patent (licensing) system. It not surprising, therefore, that serious drama - the drama of post-revolutionary consciousness - was to be absent from Britain for over a century after this was written, making the period, one of the most fertile in English *literature*, the most barren in serious *dramatic* output since the middle ages. As the reactionary theatrical consensus also sought the lucrative patronage of the great public ("giving the public what it wants") a native, serious modern drama could not emerge. For over a century both the popular and the fashionable theaters in London, while encouraging all the arts of the *theater* and of acting, fought against the evolution of a serious modern *dramatic* tradition. From economic considerations, theater-managers feared alienating any section of the heterogeneous "great public" by the infiltration of alarming 'ideas' (let alone a sustained dramatic argument) into the theater. A serious modern

drama in Britain could occur only if a dramatist emerged independent of the economic terms of fashionable London productions and intellectually capable of extending the limited terms of the Burke-Paine dialogue into the full Romantic-radical 'argument'. This inevitably meant it would have to be a dramatist from the continent who could be employed as a form of intellectual 'fifth column' against the establishment, and this goes a long way towards explaining the phenomenal success, among intellectuals in England, of Ibsen in the 1890's.

II. Thomas Paine on Burke's Histrionics

Even though, in his rejoinder *The Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine derided Burke's "theatrical exaggerations for facts", his assessment of the value of the theater *itself* as an institution in an age of radicalism was as fatal as Burke's to the British theater's significant modern development. Both his non-conformist and his Rousseauist allegiances would encourage Paine to hold the theater in contempt. He writes of Burke's essay:

I can not consider Mr. Burke's book in any other light than a dramatic performance; and he must, I think, have considered it in the same light himself, by the poetical liberties he has taken of omitting some facts, distorting others, and making the whole machinery bend to produce a stage effect.

It is not just Edmund Burke's, but theatre's practice in itself, that Paine holds in disesteem. The Playwright, as it were by definition, cannot be a thinker: a doctrine also held by the heirs of Burke in the popular theater of the nineteenth century and of today. And yet Paine himself not only resorts to a *rhetoric*, but also employs *metaphors* that were to be taken up and developed by the new Romantic and radical theaters on the continent, especially in Germany and Scandinavia.

One of Paine's most vehement objections is against Burke's profound sense that the life of the present is governed by the past. Paine objects:

Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself *in all cases* as the ages and generations that preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies... it is the living and not the dead, that are to be accommodated...I am contending for the rights of the living.. and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living.

Paine shares the Rousseauist conviction that there is a natural humanity which historical cultures distort and to which we should revert. "...there have been upstart Governments, thrusting themselves between and presumptuously working to *un-make* man." The "natural subordination" that Burke appealed to, therefore, had in itself no authority for Paine who cited La Fayette's injunction, "Call to mind the sentiments which Nature has engraved in the heart of every citizen, and which take a new force when they are solemnly recognized by all: for a Nation to love liberty, it is sufficient that she knows it; and to be free, it is

sufficient that she wills it." Nature and the general will, in this Rousseauist tradition, are alone adequate guides to the creation of an ideal society. Such a conviction practically erases the past from significant political consciousness. Paine seems to inhabit that innocent threshold to Romanticism when it still was possible, before the ghosts repossessed the modern mind, to proclaim, "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

It is an innocence that we might envy today. If, on the continent, the terms of the Burke-Paine dialogue were to undergo a tremendous deepening and extension, this extension was into sinister as well as exhilarating areas. Burke's sense of the 'irrational' continuity of a people's identity was to evolve into a 'cultural nationalism' of the right, in the lethal myths of 'blood, race, and soil' still plaguing our world, and in every way as disastrous as the abstract rationalist ideologies of the left that were to become its opponents on the cultural battlefield of Europe. It has been claimed that the second world war was fought between the left and right wings of Hegelian philosophy: which is to say that it was the quarrel between Burke and Paine taken to its limits.

Burke's belief in the binding power of tradition and Paine's rationalist rejection of it *both* were to develop into a far more profound *dialectic* in the hands of European dramatists and thinkers: in Schiller's, Kleist's and Hebbel's historical dramas, in Hegel's endeavor in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in *The Philosophy of History*, to recover the total past within the fabric of the present, in Ibsen's long struggle against the ghosts that haunt the life of the present, in Karl Marx's pronouncement in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "The tradition of all the dead nations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." This sense of the power of the past, for example, lies behind the action of Schiller's *Don Carlos* where the forces of renewal, of light and life and the future - Carlos, Elizabeth and Posa - are defeated by the forces of death and darkness, their symbolic opposites from the 'dead' past, of Alba, Philip and the blind Grand Inquisitor: a 'victory' for reaction that spells the spiritual death of Spain. Such a *dialectical* idea of reality, where, contrary to the Shakespearean vision, *disorder* is the healthy disquietude of the spirit, the condition of dynamic, evolving life, was to dictate the form, structure and content of Romantic and post-Romantic drama, leading to a new concept of tragedy. Instead of the 'closed' social, ethical and metaphysical structures with their punitive nemeses for the transgressor, within which Edmund Burke's vision was at home, Romanticism's tragic hero was the honorably restless transgressor whose rebellion called into question the entire structure of given reality and its sanctions. And not only was the structure of the present to be questioned and undermined: the past, too, could be seen as a subversive reservoir of values, tabooed by the present, whose resurrection could serve the cause of liberating our full humanity.

As incapable as Burke of developing this dialectic, Paine remains fixed to a facile rationalist rejection of the "musty records and mouldy parchments" of the past; as limiting, from its opposite perspective, as the massive complacency with which

Burke defended the world-view that sustained his landed estate, Beaconsfield. Paine is scathing in his deflation of the outmoded theatrical rhetoric of Burke's traditional idea of society:

When we see a man dramatically lamenting in a publication intended to be believed that, "*The age of chivalry is gone! That The glory of Europe is extinguished for ever! That the unbought grace of life if any one knows what it is, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone!*" And all this because the Quixotic age of chivalry nonsense is gone, what opinion can we form of his judgment, or what regard can we pay to his facts?

Deriding Burke's histrionics, Paine writes: "His hero or his heroine must be a tragedy-victim expiring in show, and not the real prisoner of misery, sliding into death in the silence of a dungeon." Paine, here, 'releases' one of the powerful emblems of Romantic-revolutionary art and dramaturgy: one of the many images of spiritual and mental incarceration. The dungeon-rescue melodramas of revolutionary France, (or, e.g. Beethoven's *Fidelio*) were to make this emblem a common-place of Romanticism. As the metaphor of the prison expanded, so it came to comprise all forms of 'imprisoning' reality, (viz. Blake's "mind forg'd manacles") including the past of Europe, that confined the aspiring Romantic-radical spirit. And Paine seems to be smuggling in a new radical histrionics when calls to mind the figure of the people's uprising - a radical image we can put beside Burke's reactionary set-piece on Marie Antoinette:

The mind can hardly picture to itself a more tremendous scene than what the city of Paris exhibited at the time of the taking the Bastille, and for two days before and after, nor conceive the possibility of its quieting so soon. At a distance this transaction has appeared only as an act of heroism standing on itself, and the close political connection it had with the Revolution is lost in the brilliancy of the achievement. But we are to consider it as the strength of the parties brought man to man, and contending for the issue. The downfall of it included the idea of the downfall of despotism and this compounded image was become as figuratively united as Bunyan's Doubting Castle and Giant Despair.

Paine is trying to get his readers to 'see' in terms of a wholly new form of revolutionary imagery. Following the 'close-up' image of the prisoner "sliding into death in the silence of the prison," there next is presented one of the most powerful counter-metaphors of the new dramaturgy, from Schiller to Eisenstein: the crowd storming the *symbol* of oppression. This already had become a central action of French radical melodrama, and had been imported onto the London stage in John Dent's *The Bastille* performed at the Royal Circus theater in 1789, before the reactionary authorities took alarm and banned all such 'Jacobinical' "repetitions of this outrage."

Jean Genet's ironic treatment of these contending symbologies in *The Balcony* (1956) contains, expands and sardonically *concludes* the whole Burke-Paine opposition: of the costumed *symbols* of endangered church, state, law and police, (the conventional roles of our socially sanctioned histrionics), rallying

round the beleaguered and beautiful queen against the revolutionary crowd which storms the palace/brothel. And this whole huge action is perhaps no more than a fantasy acted out by the brothel's patrons: a dream of the deluded historical/political consciousness 'psycho-analyzed' by the most Romantic but disenchanting of twentieth-century dramatists.

Paine's isolated prisoner is linked to the tremendous scene which is *communally* heroic and seen not to "stand on itself" but shown to have "a close political connection" with the larger issue of the Revolution. Action now embodies a radical idea by taking on symbolic figuration. Isolated situation and larger communal event can be connected in the way Eisenstein will juxtapose an isolated image, (e.g. the baby carriage tumbling down the Odessa steps), to the larger communal action heroically 'figured' in the Potemkin revolt. The parties are brought "man to man and contending for the issue" and there is great suspense as to which of the contesting parties in this *agon* would gain the "prize." The scene also is symbolic, for it includes "the idea of the downfall of despotism" or "a compounded image... as figuratively united as Bunyan's Doubting Castle and Giant Despair."

Paine's reply to Burke, therefore, inverts the conservative's use of the metaphor of the theater. Burke had derided and deplored the new 'revolutionary drama' or drama of the revolution, by calling to mind the form and content of the older theater and the social hierarchy it sustained. Paine in response invalidates, by deriding, the imagery of this older theater, (e.g. the tragedy-queen), and invokes images that were to be major weapons in the arsenal of the new revolutionary dramaturgy. From the beginning, there had been a theatrical quality behind the manner in which the French National Assembly sought to define and appropriate the revolution as neoclassical drama: whereby the classical gestures of David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) would be repeated in the sketches for the revolutionary *The Oath of the Tennis Court* (1791) And, as the riots attending conservative and radical productions on the Parisian stages demonstrate (including the struggle for the ideological control of the *Comédie Française*) the revolutionary battles often were to be fought within the theater buildings as well as on the streets. The revolution dramatized itself onstage as it proceeded.

III. Theater's New Radical Supertext

If heroism was now an egalitarian and not an hierarchical undertaking, it could be represented either by a crowd, (e.g. Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, the plays of Hauptmann and Gorky, and Eisenstein's films) or, later, by 'ordinary' men and women within the drawing rooms of Europe. If modern culture involved a struggle between such individuals and their relation to the past and present - which also metaphorically could be extended as a struggle between light and darkness, the living and the dead, nature and society, confinement and liberty, etc. - a whole new imagery gradually could be built up as a supertext for artists and writers to draw upon. In the 'radical' theater this imagery would rival and transform that of

conventional drama's imagery of the fearful disruption of hierarchical order with its attendant consequences of anarchy, madness, social destruction and natural disasters, where "chaos is come again" and where, as in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, restorative Order requires the destruction of the transgressive agents.

This transformation of rhetoric, imagery and metaphoric action, I believe, occurred between the time of Goethe and Schiller at the Romantic beginning of this modern tradition, and that of Ibsen and Strindberg near its Realist close. Realism itself, therefore, best is seen as an extension and subtilization of this Romantic supertext. Such a supertext could be extended and sustained, deepened and internalized, only for a limited period before it, too, would be exhausted or invalidated, and a new one would need to be found. This probably is what happens in earlier periods of the greatest extension of a dramatic supertext: e.g. the period between Aeschylus and Euripides or the period between Marlowe and John Ford. Such periods create what Roland Barthes has called "a second order semiotic system" or, in Erich Segal's term, a "megatext" of myth "whose sign-and-symbol systems are closely related with the central values of the culture, especially those values that express a supernatural validation, extension, or explanation of the cultural norms"

But what might be new in Romantic-realist literature is the way in which this sign-and-symbol system created what Michel Foucault termed a 'counter-discourse' to the cultural norms, not validating and explaining but *challenging* the conventional system. Foucault observes of this *subversive* 'counter-discourse':

And yet throughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day - from Hölderlin to Mallarmé and on to Antonin Artaud - literature achieved autonomous existence and separated itself from all other language with a deep scission, only by forming a sort of 'counter-discourse' ... In the modern age literature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language...

That is, the symbology of Romantic art sets itself up *in opposition* to traditional cultural norms: a feature of Romanticism and modernism with which we are familiar. This alternative system goes on the offensive, creating a militant and avant-garde art that opposes the presuppositions of the 'given' culture. As this avant-garde art (and thought) itself gains acceptance, it in turn becomes the traditional order that must be subverted, creating the endless dialectic of modern avant-gardism.

No doubt there was much that was subversive of traditional concepts in Greek and renaissance theater: Greek drama especially still can astonish us by its intellectual independence. But Romanticism, with the French Revolution as its central 'event', ("the master theme" of the age, as Shelley wrote to Byron) seems self-consciously to be setting up an alternative way of viewing human existence. As a "second order semiotic system", the Romantic supertext seems

subversively to perform the function that Roland Barthes claimed for the ancient Greek theater:

Associated with the "loosening" of work time, the theater installed another time, a time of myth and of consciousness, which could be experienced not as leisure but as another life. For this suspended time, by its very duration, became a saturated time."

In classical drama, it would seem, this "time of myth and of consciousness" existed side-by-side with and complemented the 'work time' of quotidian existence. Even the tragic reality revealed as underlying everyday experience could be reconciled, though toughly, with that experience. In Romanticism, on the other hand, this "saturated time" challenged and undermined, by revealing as deeply contradictory, the presuppositions (historical, ethical, philosophical) of our given world. The saturated time of Romantic myth hostilely opposed itself to the given world and evolved such militantly modern 'mythopoetic' forces and entities as Schiller's mytho-historic idealism, the idea of an "alienated" world; of subjective versus objective realities; the dialectic; the Weltgeist; the Zeitgeist; the struggle between past and present, darkness and light; the 'yearning' vertical natural scenography that Romantic drama shared with painting. Themes and concepts such as imprisonment and liberation; 'emperor and galilean'; the 'third empire of spirit' or Nietzsche's Übermensch, Dionysos and the Crucified One, and so on, all ideologically extended the rhetorical vocabulary of Romantic and realist literature and art. Edmund Wilson noted how 19th century German literature "retained and developed to an amazing degree the genius for creating myths."

The Romantic imagination, born out of the consciousness of history, can challenge the Greek in the fertility of its myth-making, clarifying for the artist the nature of his/her quarrel with the age and the counter-forces that needed to be summoned for combat. The new element in Romantic drama as in Romantic philosophy is that of a multilayered *ideological* conflict. The artists may differ radically from, and even oppose, each other, but they will share a mutual awareness of the battle that is being fought or the *malaise* that needs to be cured. Kleist's *The Prince Homburg*, in many aspects a 'corrective' to Romantic aspiration and subjectivity, at the same time is one of the most eloquent expressions of the Romantic temperament and its conflicts. It could have been written at no other time in European history.

And this Romantic dialectic was as apparent in political life, where the forces of reaction, avidly taking up Burke's *Reflections* as its manifesto, could form a 'Holy Alliance' against the 'pagan' forces of European revolution. Georg Brandes, in his *Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature*, portrayed all of significant modern European literature as nothing but variations upon the central ideological conflict of revolution versus reaction. This omnipresent *kulturkampf* provides a unity of metaphoric reference behind the diversity of such dramatists as Byron, Shelley, Schiller, Kleist, Büchner, Wagner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw and others.

By whatever different routes and approaches, they were led to the same arena of cultural conflict.

IV. Friedrich Schiller: The Concept of a Modern Theater

The consciousness of this conflict gave dramatists not only a new idea of the function of the theater in society (explicitly avowed by Schiller and Wagner) but also of their theater's subject matter, with its attendant rhetoric, mythology and imagery. And, of course, the dramatists inhabited a period in which such a supertext was sustained and extended by other cultural forces: by historical, social and scientific developments; by philosophy, poetry, the visual arts, music and the novel. Theater stood at the center - often a storm center - of this universe of discourse, reflecting its conflicts with particular vividness.

In the quarrel between Burke and Paine, therefore, we see the origins of a much wider and more involved dialectic. The function of theater which Burke espoused, of fortifying emotional support for the conventional values under attack from critical reason, was to continue and to flourish up to the popular theater and entertainment of today. In England, the Examiner (Censor) of plays soon made sure that revolutionary or 'inflammatory' plays were denied the stage. Under the Bourbon government of France, the censorship that discouraged the emergence of a serious drama encouraged the well-made-play, with its insistence that trivial chance, not ideology or critical reason determined historical events. Self-censoring Hollywood and Broadway today as effectively banish any serious (truly critical) presentation of reality. This is popular and fashionable entertainment's primary political function. On the other (left) hand Paine, following Rousseau, seemed to see no worthwhile function for the theater at all in the new society that the revolution augured. Even where the left has accepted a cultural function for drama, as in many socialist countries, it often has severely limited the theater's freedom of expression: which is only another form of the anti-theatrical prejudice. But in Germany writers following Schiller, who acknowledged Rousseau as a mentor, set about recreating an alternative, and liberating, theater of which even Rousseau and Paine might have approved. And, until Ibsen, it is only these German dramatists who allow us to see the potential in Romanticism for a major modern dramatic art.

The radical redefinition of the function of art is set out in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*. (1795) Sharing in the project of the French Revolution - the first revolution, according to Hegel, that had as its aim the re-creation of humanity - Schiller claims for art a central role in that process of re-creation. The aesthetic sense, or sense of beauty, proceeds from reason, yet, unlike analytical reason, does not sacrifice the sensuous. From his reason, aesthetic man understands the extent of his social and historical alienation. Man "comes to himself out of his sensuous slumber, recognizes himself as Man, looks around and finds himself - in the State. An unavoidable exigency had thrown him

there before he could freely choose his station; need ordained it through mere natural laws before he could do so by the laws of reason."

Awakened by reason (e.g. Kantian philosophy) such an individual could not accept Burke's bland injunction to consider the consolations of eternal justice a sufficient compensation for the loss of earthly justice. But neither could such a citizen consider the whole existing fabric of traditional society as merely a handful of mouldy parchments shackling freedom of action within the present. Rational justice, such as Paine's, was too prone to offer a simplified account of our humanity, an abstract 'natural man' which idealistically ignores much of our human nature. "It will therefore always argue a still defective education if the moral character can assert itself only through the sacrifice of what is natural; and a political constitution will still be very imperfect if it is able to produce unity only by suppressing variety." In this manner, the disciple of Rousseau implicitly reproaches his master. Rousseau, like another enemy of the theater, Plato, had adulated Sparta. In his fine political essay, *The Legislation of Lykurgus and Solon*, Schiller held up Athens, with its social and intellectual freedoms, as representing a superior model of a human community. And Athens, above all, had emphasized the primacy of an aesthetic education in which the theater held the most honored place. It was this idea of the theater that the Romantic dramatists sought to recreate in modern terms, as a means for recreating, also, human society.

To vastly simplify Schiller's subtle and closely argued program in *The Aesthetic Education*, extending over twenty seven 'letters', we find that art can perceive in the mode of 'beauty' and 'play' the nature of our true freedom, while retaining the full range of our sensuous nature and its conflicts. At the same time keeping its activity free of utilitarian ends, art is able, even in an unfree world, to maintain the *idea* of human freedom that must be attained in time. Art learns philosophy (Schiller was deep in the study of Kant while writing the Letters) and mediates between, on one side, the abstract ideas of truth and freedom which philosophy rigorously formulates and, on the other, the 'sensuous' world of men and women who can comprehend and enjoy the liberation offered by an aesthetic (pleasurable) expression of these ideas. Drama, above all, would be best placed for this function and Schiller consciously set about creating just such a new kind of drama, one which would lead audiences through palpable (sensuous) theatrical metaphors to a perception of the conflict or play of universal ideas (the ideological *argument*) that lay behind them. In such a concept of the new drama, the adequate modern playwright would necessarily, in Eric Bentley's formulation, be a thinker.

The Romantic artist's journey of self-exploration (the 'self' as a problematic potentiality, only: a call to 'self-determination') would simultaneously be an exploration of the 'world' which Romanticism saw as also awaiting its fulfillment. It was a conviction of Romanticism that the subjective conflict within the individual can find its extension in the objective worlds both of society and of 'nature',

making modern drama, from Schiller to Strindberg at the same time deeply *intensive* and ambitiously *extensive*. It is for this reason, and not for any predilection for the 'picturesque', that symbolic scenes and landscapes are so important to Romantic and realist drama.

This extension of the individual's inward drama into the cosmos is far more than the 'pathetic fallacy' that attributes to natural phenomena human emotions and volitions. In his essay *On the Sublime* Schiller argues that it is only from a contemplation of the sublime and terrifying aspects of Nature that an individual comes to suspect the 'demonic freedom' within him-or-herself:

...no sooner has free contemplation set him at a distance from the blind assault of natural forces - no sooner does he discover in the flood of appearances something abiding in his own being - then the savage bulk of nature about him begins to speak quite another language to his heart: and the relative grandeur outside him is the mirror in which he perceives the absolute grandeur within himself. Fearlessly and with a terrible delight he now approaches these ghastly visions of his imagination and deliberately deploys the whole force of this faculty in order to represent the sensuously infinite, so that even if it should fail in this attempt he will experience all the more vividly the superiority of his ideas over the highest of which sensuousness is capable. The sight of unlimited distances, and heights lost to view, the vaster ocean above him, pluck his spirit out of the narrow sphere of the actual and out of the oppressive bondage of physical life. A mightier measure of esteem is exemplified for him by the simple majesty of nature, and surrounded by her massive forms he can no longer tolerate pettiness in his mode of thought.

One thinks of the intense disorder of an Ellida Wangel set within the huge landscape, in *The Lady from the Sea*; the inner disorder finding its only adequate expression through the drama's extensions into sea depths and mountain heights. Romantic disorder is the necessary disquietude that impels consciousness through alienation towards more adequate concepts of liberation. This creative interplay between concept and metaphor, in which natural objects became the only adequate symbols, and to which each artist and thinker contributed, made Romantic drama's supertext one of the richest there has been. The dynamism of the Romantic supertext would encourage the development of a major dramatic tradition.

After Schiller, the concept of liberation was to undergo many modifications: but every avant-garde dramatist (or movement) has felt his or her idea of the theater to be a form of aesthetic *liberation* from forms of false consciousness: a form of secular salvation. For the disciples of Richard Wagner, devotional journeys to Bayreuth became the equivalent of medieval pilgrimages to a holy shrine, the aesthetically sanctified ground where only the work of the Master would be performed. Bernard Shaw proclaimed that the modern theater had taken the place once held by the Church in society, and that the line of modern dramatists resembled the line of prophets of the new revelation. Shaw, pleading for an Ibsen theater that would perform only the Master's works "like Wagner's ring, in cycles..." added, "I think Ibsen has proved the right of the drama to take scriptural

rank as one of the major prophets of the modern Bible." There has been no more ambitious idea of the theater since the drama of Athens. Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine would have been staggered by the claim.