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978-0-521-29629-8 - Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Volume 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd

J. L. Styan

Excerpt

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1 *The symbolic in drama*

When Quince, the amateur producer in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, assembles his actors in the palace wood for their first rehearsal of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', he finds that there are 'two hard things' for the play to get across to its audience. One is the moonlight and the other is a wall – elements of time and place, both essentials of dramatic illusion. The choice is apparently simple: shall these elements be real or symbolic? Bottom's idea is to take the obvious way and make use of the real moon by leaving open the casement window. But Quince realizes that the success of this plan depends entirely upon his power to reproduce and control the real world. The moon must rise and the clouds must clear at the right time. Nor can they readily build a wall in the great chamber and pull it down again. His more sophisticated thinking follows: somebody must represent the moon, and somebody else pretend to be a wall. In this way, day and night can be conjured at will according to the needs of the play, and the location changed as quickly as the actor can make his exit. Quince runs into some of the absurdities of dramatic symbolism when he places too much faith in it, but at least he seems to have temporarily solved the problem.

The stage has often been a great deal more than a mirror reflecting life and nature. Symbolism is never far away whenever an actor mounts his platform to imitate the world about him, since the act of putting life on exhibition is an act of reformulating reality: indeed, the existence of drama itself suggests there is an abiding need for symbolic representation. Symbolism in the theatre can therefore exist alongside realism, or it can eliminate realistic illusion entirely. It is not hard to see how the drama, which is always trying to find ways of breaking out of the temporal and spatial restrictions of its medium, moves easily from realism to symbolism, and it is significant that each of the great nineteenth-century naturalists, Ibsen,

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Strindberg, Hauptmann and Chekhov, chose a more symbolic expression at the very time when he had apparently succeeded in being rigorously realistic. A symbolic stage can pass easily into surrealism and the absurd, and both the ancient and the modern theatres have shown that when the creative impulse touches the deepest feelings we all share, drama can ignore realism entirely and move into ritual.

As a technical and critical term, 'symbolism' came into specialized use with reference to poetry, and it was first employed by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98) and the French symbolist movement after its manifesto was published in *Figaro* in 1886. The poet's task is to find the right words to convey human feelings and ideas, and in poetic practice a verbal symbol is intended to evoke feelings and ideas greater than those the words usually stand for, suggesting a meaning beyond its immediate and concrete reality. In particular, verbal symbolism grew to be an elaborate poetic device to 'clothe thought with a sensory form'.

The style has since been associated with the work of many other French poets writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, notably Baudelaire (1821–67), Verlaine (1844–96), Rimbaud (1854–91) and Valéry (1871–1945). These poets aimed to discover the 'secret' of poetry as if it were some philosopher's stone, and they built their ideas upon a latter-day romantic theory of the mystical and the occult, the irrational and the world of fantasy and dream. A theory of symbolism seemed to sanctify the idea of art as a law unto itself, and the artist as a creature apart. Baudelaire and Rimbaud deliberately adopted a Bohemian way of life, one of drugs and debauchery, to exemplify their beliefs, expand their sensory perceptions and experience every mood to the full. In particular, they developed a theory of 'synaesthesia' in their writing, by which one sense could represent another by association (for example, a bright colour to suggest a loud sound, and vice versa). Poetry was not to obey the laws of logic, but of hallucination and the surreal, so that it should stay 'pure' and free from social relevance.

All these notions could readily be applied to the drama, but of these poets, only the less flamboyant Mallarmé went so far as to think of dramatic symbolism, and he envisaged a ritualistic form of theatre, idealized and mystical in its simplicity and impressionism. Symbolic theatre would combine all the arts and return to the simple

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elements of drama. Although it never reached the stage, Mallarmé conceived his poem *Hérodiade* (published in 1898) as a play.

The application of symbolism to stagecraft is straightforward, and symbols on the stage are not new. In the theatre an object or a situation can immediately suggest an idea or a feeling that is greater than itself. A storm in a play, for example, has always symbolized displeasure in heaven and the anger of the gods, and whether in high tragedy or popular melodrama, the sight and sound of thunder and lightning speak ominously to an audience anywhere. A crown is a powerful symbolic property in Shakespeare, and held between the King and Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, it unmistakably points to the disputed authority over the kingdom. Such symbols have the virtue of being unshakably traditional and almost universal in impact, like red for danger or a voyage for life itself.

A symbol can also be strong, even if personal to the poet or playwright, if its meaning and function is carefully brought out and made intelligible. In T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, a hyacinth is made to suggest the fertility of spring, although in Strindberg's play *The Ghost Sonata* it is made to stand for the loss of the will, beautiful but suffocating and debilitating. In each case, the context settles the meaning and allows communication to proceed. But the invitation to the symbolist poet to slide into woolly, private symbolism is equally open to the playwright, and where symbolic vagueness in poetry may be suspect in the eyes of the solitary reader, in the public theatre it is irresponsible and unforgivable. At the turn of the century, some writers advanced the philosophy of 'art for art's sake' as a reason for eliminating social and political matters from their work. Even in the field of the novel, Virginia Woolf could write her damning essay 'Modern Fiction' and attack Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy as 'materialists' who could never aspire to aesthetic truth because they were concerned 'not with the spirit but with the body': 'They write of unimportant things; . . . they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.' However, there is a necessary balance to be struck between the abstract and the concrete, the true and the trivial, if the seductive perils of cloudy private symbolism are to be avoided.

At the same time, symbolism that is too specific may destroy one of its great virtues, its power to extend itself and multiply its

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references. A strong, resonant symbol like Chekhov's cherry orchard symbolizes in a tangle of sentiments both the family's happy past and the ugly days of serfdom; by the end of the play it has grown to mean something different to each of the characters, and it has also embraced immense social and economic changes about to take place in the future. This kind of suggestiveness can affect the whole mode of a play, which could be written and produced in a totally symbolic manner designed to persuade its audience to apprehend the action on the stage at the level chosen by the playwright. A new danger presents itself here, that of losing the audience in a forest of associations, just when the intention is for the play to be more expressive.

A recent theory of the symbolic, that of the literary critic Kenneth Burke, is associated with his idea of 'dramatism'. Burke holds that man tries to control and humanize his world by means of symbolism. Symbols and symbolic structures in art are not only typically human, he finds, but all forms of symbolism, even metaphor, must derive ultimately from the senses. Burke's realm of 'symbolicity' is one in which man finds himself in a middle area of sensory images somewhere between the purely physical and the purely abstract. Such symbolism, he maintains, is distinguished by its power to create its own language and idiom, and to express and 'discuss' itself, just as drama can determine its own poetics, and by a variety of metatheatrical liberties, seem self-consciously to dramatize the very business of conceiving and putting on a play – one thinks of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* as prime examples of a dramatic structure in which the stage brilliantly explores, while it ironically smiles at, its own mode of imaginative activity.

Watching a play, therefore, may be a fundamentally symbolic act in itself, and in discussing symbolism in drama we are dealing with an elusive subject, fraught with problems yet rich in possibilities. It can be a powerful, unpredictable and explosive mode of playwriting, and it is not surprising that, at the time when naturalism was at its peak in Europe, the theatre was urgently seeking a justification in myth and ritual at another level for the visionary quality it had missed in realism.

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2 *Theoretical beginnings: Wagner and Nietzsche*

It is impossible to pin-point the origin of the modern notion of symbolic drama, since it was a residue from an older, romantic philosophy. One outstanding source which directly influenced the modern theatre, however, was the aesthetic theory of the composer Richard Wagner (1813–83). Wagner's parallel interests in both music and drama resulted not only in the major operas *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868) and the epic tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (the whole work finally produced in 1876), for which he wrote both music and libretto, but also in an elaborate and obscure theory of the form and nature of 'music-drama' which he based on Schopenhauer and German metaphysics. Wagner believed music-drama to be the performing art of the future, one in which language could be extended by sound to create a fuller emotional statement. In his essay, 'The Ideas of Richard Wagner', Arthur Symons observed in 1907 that the composer's theoretical writing was especially valuable because 'it is wholly the personal expression of an artist engaged in creative work, finding out theories by the way, as he comes upon obstacles, or aids in the nature of things'. As it turned out, in Wagner's theories lay the seeds of a new romanticism, based upon the idea that 'myth' was the source of man's greatest powers as an artist.

Wagner's first great influential book, *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849), argued that art was the vital expression of instinctive life. By dance, 'tone' and poetry, man originally created a form of art in which he was himself the subject and in which he was his own agent – the work was about himself and he made it. By 'tone', Wagner meant a kind of half-speech and half-song imagined from some pre-rational time when both dance and poetry had their beginning; he believed that this tone was something like Greek choric verse, which contrived to control and bring together the

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movement of the body and the sound of the voice. Wagner believed that this element would once again bring dance and poetry together, and with its help man the singer and man the actor would perfect a form of ideal lyric drama, in which dance and poetry would reveal their true essence in rhythm and melody. He argued this hypothesis another way also. Music, he considered, was the most pure and sensuous form of art; Beethoven had taken music to the supreme point where only speech should follow, and Shakespeare had taken poetry to the point where only music should follow; in the art of the future, therefore, music and poetry should be combined to create the perfect drama.

In his next book, *Opera and Drama* (1851), to whose 'stubbornness of style' Wagner himself confessed, he began to write about myth as the creation of the instinctive imagination, and here defined it as 'the poem of a life-view in common'. It was inexhaustible and true for all time, and it was the dramatic poet's task to express it in action. But this book is notable for its series of loosely related propositions suggesting the theoretical connections between music and drama. For example:

1. Wagner believed that the fundamental error in opera was that 'a means of expression (music) has been made the end, while the end of expression (drama) has been made a means' (translated E. L. Burlingame).

2. He also claimed that in drama the final appeal was directly to the senses, and had meaning only when it was justified by emotional necessity: in drama, we learn and know through feeling. However, the deepest human feeling could be fully realized only in 'tone-speech' expressed by full chorus and orchestra – i.e., in a form of music.

3. The human voice was 'the oldest, truest, most beautiful organ of music', and the orchestra had 'the faculty of uttering the unspeakable'; therefore the poet's aim and the musician's expression must be indistinguishably blended.

It was this blending that led to Wagner's famous conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total art-work', which he believed had not existed since the arts had been unified in ancient Greek tragedy.

Wagner continued to work over these fundamental ideas all

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his life, and in *The Purpose of the Opera* (1871) pulled many of them together. The dramatic poet, he said, naturally could not play his own characters, but only outline the material upon which his actor could *improvise* – just as the composer of opera composed for an instrumentalist, who then improvised upon the music. He thought of Shakespeare's drama as an organized histrionic improvisation, the poet's initial conception magically resulting in a living art. In writing a play, the poet assumed the *possibility* of conveying his thoughts and feelings in drama, and it was in music-drama that the possibility could be realized. If the inexplicable, inspirational element in Shakespeare were perfectly complemented by the same element in Beethoven, it would produce an ideal form of expression. Just as the faculties of reason and feeling combine to make the whole man, so the media of poetry and music would join to complete the 'emotionalizing of the intellect', and create a drama richer and more perfect than either could manage alone. To Wagner's way of thinking, a musically-arranged and musically-executed histrionic performance was 'the one, indivisible, supreme creation of the mind of man', 'the most perfect art-work'.

Nothing was said directly of symbolism, but Wagner's vision of purity and idealism in art led him well away from the realism of the later nineteenth-century stage. And as he reiterated and explored the same ideas from book to book, he moved steadily towards a drama built upon archetype and myth, and upon dream and the the supernatural, mystical elements which were to dominate the symbolic drama of the twentieth century.

Wagner also explored his theories in his operatic composition, and his scores included the acting cues he wanted. Then in 1876 he built the playhouse he wanted, so that he himself could produce his music-drama in his own meticulous way. This was to become the famous Festspielhaus about a mile outside Bayreuth, a small town near Nuremberg in Bavaria. Wagner had approved of the modified apron stage of Goethe's theatre at Weimar, with its effect of bringing the audience closer to the action, but for opera he felt the stage should be more remote to accommodate a more artificial form and to increase the illusion. So at Bayreuth he set the orchestra beneath the level of the stage, and instead of the usual Victorian balconies had wedge-shaped rows of seats rising steadily from the orchestra

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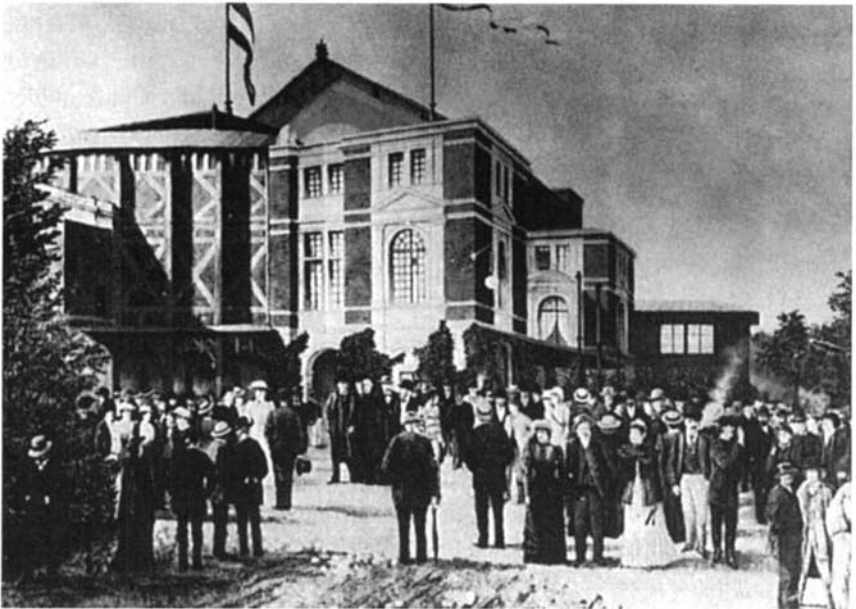
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to a gallery at the back of the house. The Festspielhaus thus became an amphitheatre. A hood covered the musicians, who were thereby rendered invisible, and a gap in its top allowed the music to be heard. One proscenium frame surrounded a second, inner proscenium, so that while the audience was unusually distanced, it was also forced to focus exclusively on a single *theatron* or looking-room. In this, Wagner's ideal world could be shown, separated from the real world of the audience. He called it his 'Mystischer Abgrund', his 'mystic abyss'.

Unfortunately, Wagner's Bayreuth reproduced the literal and pictorial kind of scene that was all too common in Victorian times: he had not matched his musical and poetic aesthetic with a visual one. When in 1951 Bayreuth reopened after the disruption of the war years, the artistic directors, Richard Wagner's grandsons Wieland and Wolfgang, wisely took advantage of all the modern theatre had learned about abstract and symbolic setting and décor. Their production policy seemed heretical to some devotees of Wagner, but to others it was appropriately flexible and imaginative.



1. Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 1876, during the interval.

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For all Wagner's far-reaching vision of a transcendental theatre, he failed to realize his notion of a perfect conjunction of the mind and the senses. It fell to others, in the beginning especially to the designers Appia and Craig, to attempt the ideal unification of the elements of theatre to achieve the overwhelming experience Wagner sought. Nevertheless, the desire to present a full emotional and spiritual experience on the stage advanced an idea of symbolism more profound, more embracing and more tremendous than anything the French lyric poets had achieved or conceived. From *The Ring* onwards, Wagner shook off the restrictions of opera's conventional arias, duets, choruses and recitatives, with their open invitation to mere individual virtuosity and showmanship, in order to design the scheme for a whole movement in which every bar, he said, would be related to a total conception, and the 'myth' at the root of the art-work could control the whole drama.

Wagner's ideas about music-drama inspired a host of theatre theorists and artists in the years that followed. One man in particular, and a fellow German, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), was inspired to try to justify them in an ingenious, quasi-historical account of the origins of Greek tragedy, generally taken to be the beginning of western drama. If Nietzsche could account for tragedy, he would therefore have accounted for all of drama that mattered. In 1872 he published *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, an argument in anthropology and aesthetic theory which has become a landmark in modern western thought.

Nietzsche believed that tragedy arose from the ritual celebration of Dionysus and was expressed in the song and dance of the dithyramb, by which man 'projected himself outside himself' as if he were a dramatic character. Dionysus represented all that was emotional and irrational in man. Meanwhile the embodiment of the dance imposed a form upon it, and this was Apollonian in its lucidity, reasonableness and harmony. Strangely anticipating Freud's theories of the id and the ego, Nietzsche argued that it was this duality and tension between the instinctive and the rational, between Dionysus and Apollo, which produced great drama.

Much of this was some way from Wagner's theory of music-drama, but Nietzsche also conveniently advanced the idea that music was Dionysiac, while the 'plastic' arts, like drama, were

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Apollonian. These two forces remained in opposition until they were married in great tragedy. Like Wagner's, Nietzsche's goal was to describe a drama which expressed our 'inmost being', and justify the necessity of a dream-world. He made the point by quoting Hans Sachs, the shoemaker, in *Die Meistersinger*, III.1:

All poems that the world has known
are nought but truths our dreams have shown.
(translated Frederick Jameson)

The theory in *The Birth of Tragedy*, however, was far too abstract to have much direct effect upon the practice of the modern stage, but it was clearly symptomatic of the growing impulse towards a more symbolic drama.

3 *Symbolic theatre: Appia and lighting design*

Tristan und Isolde (1899 and 1923)

The French-Swiss artist Adolphe François Appia (1862–1928) also took his inspiration from Wagner and conceived his ideal theatre in terms of 'musical' form; like Walter Pater, he believed that music was the condition to which the other arts aspired. Appia at first worked in the theatre in Dresden and Vienna to study the problems of three-level scenery and lighting, but he did no work at Bayreuth. Having seen Wagner's *Parsifal* there in 1882, then *Tristan und Isolde* in 1886 and *Die Meistersinger* in 1888, he found the mode of presentation far too literal in its pictorial realism for his taste. Against the three-dimensional actor, in Appia's view, two-dimensional painted scenery looked false. In its place he envisaged with extraordinary foresight a 'musical' stage design which would lift the theatre out of the Victorian age, and carry it into a mode of visual symbolism which would express the inner qualities of a play. The old immobile footlights, wing and border lights with shadows painted on the canvas had to go; in their place must come a free system of lighting