Brecht's Tradition
Spalter, Max

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To Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is invariably extended the credit of speaking up for Shakespeare at a critical moment in German literary history, and there is no denying that he championed the English dramatist in an atmosphere of strong neoclassical allegiances. But his quite modern attitude toward drama as an art form free to develop its own internal logic and bound by no a priori body of rules was not so radical as to imply that Aristotle was out of date, or that Shakespeare's episodic development should serve as a dramaturgic alternative to the analytic structure. Lessing viewed Shakespeare as a writer whose plays Aristotle would not have disliked, and this speaks for itself. It meant that the task of discerning what was implied by the differences between Aristotelian and Shakespearian dramaturgy was left to others, a task soon enough undertaken by a number of critics who did not tread with Lessing's caution. Gerstenberg, for example, found the aim of Greek drama to be the excitement of passion, that of Shakespeare the representation of character, while Herder focused awareness on the individualized character of the two types of drama as historical phenomena and maintained that the unique proximity of Shakespeare to nature placed him in an entirely different world from a dramatist like Sophocles.

While it is true that after Lessing the literary apotheosis of Shakespeare became the rule rather than the exception, no German writer seems to have coupled his worship of Shakespeare with as decisive a rejection of neoclassical principles as Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz.


2 "Even to decide the matter by the example of the Ancients, Shakespeare is a much greater tragic author than Corneille; although Corneille knew the Ancients very well, and Shakespeare hardly at all, Corneille comes nearer to them in the externals of technique, and Shakespeare in the essentials." *Literaturbriefe*; quoted in W. H. Bruford's *Theatre, Drama and Audience in Goethe's Germany* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1950), p. 129.

3 In his emphasis on Shakespeare as a poet of passions, Gerstenberg anticipated Herder. In his emphasis on Shakespeare's characterization, Gerstenberg was himself anticipated by J. E. Schlegel, who as early as 1742 was at pains to distinguish between Aristotelian and Shakespearian dramaturgies. But Schlegel's essay "Vergleichung Shakespears und Andreas Gryphs" seems to have gone unheeded. See Roy Pascal, *Shakespeare in Germany* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1937), pp. 39-47, 55-71.
His Notes to the Theater (1774) may in some respects be derivative, but it is nonetheless a culturally significant polemic. In the same way that Hugo, Vigny, Hebbel, Zola, and Brecht, among others, were to argue for new aesthetic approaches as concomitants of changed human awareness, so Lenz insisted that his radical concept of episodic theater— influenced powerfully by Shakespeare—was required if drama was to keep pace with thought in general.

Lenz writes as one who is shocked at the quibbling attitudes that prompt some to question Shakespeare's importance. Violation of the three unities poses no problems. In Lenz's view, to postulate three such precepts is as logical as to postulate a hundred. It would still come down to the same thing: "Unity of language, unity of religion, unity of morals. . . . The poet and his public must experience the same unity, but they are under no compulsion to classify it."4

As for Aristotle, his rules are dismissed as "poetic horsemanship." His French imitators have shown themselves so eager to follow ancient authority as to make one wonder about their sanity. But it is all in vain. The future belongs not to the play that observes Aristotelian constraints but to the loose episodic play developed by Shakespeare: "Our practice is to have a series of actions which succeed one another like thunderclaps, each scene reinforcing the next and all of them coalescing in the character of the hero."5

Lenz's case for Shakespeare and against Aristotle crystallizes in his discussion of the dramatic structures associated with these two figures. For Lenz, a particular dramaturgy is organic to a particular Weltanschauung, and here he anticipates Hegel as well as Hebbel. The Greeks, asserts Lenz, were hardly concerned with man in terms of his concrete experience, his actual aliveness; they were obsessed with his abject dependence on an inscrutable, omnipotent fate. This outlook shows up in plays built around the arbitrary manipulations of a higher force that one is not to question, with the result that the behavior of a Greek tragic hero can never be explained in terms of his intrinsic motives. Such a concept of action Lenz holds to be outmoded; and out of date as well is the hermetic dramatic form that evolved in accommodation of the Greeks' fatalism.

Shakespeare is the quintessential modern because his plays reflect a natural, as distinguished from supernatural, conception of character. His characters are propelled from within; they do not have to be

5 Ibid.
shifted about by forces from above. Calling Shakespeare's plays *Charakterstücke*, Lenz remarks that in the case of the English dramatist "... the hero alone is the key to his fate." In Greek drama, on the other hand, the key is action. In view of this distinction, Lenz finds it quite natural that Shakespeare felt free to employ a sequence of actions, for his principle of unity resides in the very life of his protagonists, not in the tight schemas of artificial plots.

It is this principle of unity that Lenz is determined to establish as the cornerstone of a new drama. In the course of doing so, he collides again and again with his major target, Aristotle. Among other things, he challenges Aristotle's differentiation of the epic and dramatic, and here his reasoning has proved too advanced even for a critic of this century. Thus, one of his biographers asserts that Lenz was unable to distinguish between the epic and dramatic; otherwise, why would he seek to strengthen his case for episodic drama by mentioning the achievements of Dante and Klopstock? The truth of the matter is that Lenz anticipates the modern critic who emphasizes the dramatic elements of the *Inferno* as well as he anticipates what the Germans will later call the Episierung of modern drama.*

There are other cogent points in Lenz's essay, such as his view that genius penetrates instantaneously to the very essence of reality; that the artist should above all strive to divorce his own personality from the subjectivity of his creations; that the characteristic is preferable to the beautiful; that comedy is distinguished from tragedy by virtue of the fact that comedy is built around happenings, tragedy around individuals; and that French comedy deserves every bit as much contempt as French tragedy. There is also a comparison between Shakespeare's and Voltaire's handling of the Caesar story which confirms by example everything Lenz has been saying.

For our purposes the importance of Lenz's essay lies in his refusal to consider the Aristotelian structure expansive enough to encompass the psychological complexities of human nature and his conviction that Shakespeare's structure shows the way. Like Goethe, who admitted that from the moment he laid eyes on Shakespeare he was hypnotized, Lenz cannot quite take seriously any of the formal rules Shakespeare is supposed to have violated so egregiously. And like Goethe, he goes on to write drama in which Aristotelian prescriptions are thrown to the winds.

But Lenz attempted nothing comparable to *Götz von Berlichingen.*


* The tendency of modern drama to take on epic elements.
Goethe's contact with Shakespeare had encouraged him to write a German "history." Whatever its merits, the play manifests excesses which make us loath to call it Shakespearian. For here Shakespeare's art is reduced to those of its formal characteristics which the writers of the *Sturm und Drang* took to be its essence—multiplicity of plot and episode, sacrifice of plot to character, vividness of situation, and a general lack of aesthetic inhibition which suited the temperaments of young men up in arms against rationalistic doctrine. For Goethe, Shakespeare may well have been a salutary influence, for soon enough, with the help of Herder, he saw the limitations of the drama of tumult. The damage was done, however; the *Ritter und Räuber* dramas which proliferated upon the burgeoning German stage derived largely from Goethe's *Götz*. And in the case of these dramas, the power which makes even Goethe's sprawling history worth reading was all too often absent. The passage of time has done little to change the view that in theater, as well as in almost every other area of their activity, the writers of the *Sturm und Drang* were sorely lacking in self-discipline.

Lenz, who is appreciated more and more as a dramatist of genius far in advance of his time, can be held up also as an example of what was wrong with the *Sturm und Drang*; this admirer of Shakespeare wrote plays and parts of plays about which it is best to say little. At times he was unabashedly sentimental (*Die beiden Alten*); at times he manipulated his plots wantonly (*Die Freunde machen den Philosophen*); at times he is hardly distinguishable from the many worshipers of countrified simplicity who took their cue from Rousseau (*Die Kleinen*); at times the dramatist who has something to say seems able to do so only by means of the most factitious devices (*The New Menoza*); and at times the dramatist simply disappears and we are left with evidences of frightful pathology.

This is inescapably the feeling conveyed by *The Englishman*, a play in which a young man's obsessive love leads him to cut his throat. The young man is a variant of a type Lenz used often, the individual who is wholly incapable of coping with reality. But there the similarity with works like *The Tutor* and *The Soldiers* ends. For in *The Englishman* the social picture is all but blocked out as Lenz proceeds to invest his protagonist with highly abnormal emotions. Symptomatic of diseased psychology, artlessly pointing to what is plainly an incurable obsession, *The Englishman* is transparently a page from Lenz's unhappy life. It does not surprise us to learn that within two years of finishing it Lenz attempted suicide.
Of German origin, Lenz's family lived in Livonia, in the Baltic provinces, where Lenz was born in 1751. His father's severe religious orientation seems to have been the first strong determinant of Lenz's brooding nature. Goethe and other writers recognized his artistic potential but found him emotionally unstable. Lenz seems to have carried his neuroses into every sphere of social intercourse, harping as he did on his hopes of surpassing Goethe's literary achievements, and becoming a minor scandal thanks to his incurable habit of falling in love with Goethe's women. Much later Goethe would point to Lenz as a writer whose great talent was nullified by flaws of personality, but long before that the sage of Weimar had been alienated by Lenz's explicit treatment of sex in his second major work, *The Soldiers*. In all fairness to Lenz, it must be mentioned that he sometimes forgot he was in competition with Goethe and admitted outright that the latter dominated by sheer genius an age of literary pygmies.

Oddly enough *The Tutor* was attributed for a while to the young Goethe, but only for a while, as Goethe went on to outgrow most of what the *Sturm und Drang* stood for. Lenz, however, moved downhill fast, becoming for his contemporaries less palatable than ever. For the modern reader, his creative life after 1776 is uninteresting. In 1777 his friendship with Goethe was severed for good, his economic situation desperate, and his mind obviously diseased. The rest of his life was a hopeless struggle which ended when he died suddenly on a Moscow street at the age of forty-one.

The two plays which make Lenz more than another eccentric figure of German literary history are *The Tutor* (1774) and *The Soldiers* (1776); by virtue of these works he becomes one of the first German dramatists to succeed in doing something original and influential with the episodic structure of Shakespearian drama. Influenced strongly by the views of Diderot and Mercier, both of whom advocated a theater of social involvement, Lenz sets out to show just those conditions

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7 Denis Diderot (1713–84) is perhaps the man most responsible for the atmosphere which produced a dramatist like Lenz. Diderot advocated a realistic drama of great emotional intensity; the use of gestures and pantomime to communicate stage action; accuracy of psychological delineation; precise representation of milieu; and the replacement of scenic climaxes by a series of visually striking tableaux. These and other elements were to make of the new *drame bourgeois* the modern play, par excellence.

8 Sebastian Mercier (1740–1814) wrote plays which were bluntly aimed at validating the importance of the middle class. He was just as blunt in his contempt for neoclassical drama. Like Diderot, he argued for emotional realism, and for vivid characterization. Beyond Diderot, he believed comedy and tragedy could be fused. His *Du Théâtre, ou nouveau essai sur l'art dramatique* (1773), in which he argued for an enlargement of art so as to bring it
in his society which deserve exposure. By the time he gets through he has created a new kind of play, one which would later prove to be the beginning of a new tradition stretching from this hapless eighteenth-century figure to Bertolt Brecht.

The Tutor or Advantages of a Private Education reveals by its title that Lenz went along with Diderot, who urged dramatists to stress at every opportunity what their characters did for a living. But there is irony here of the kind Diderot never hinted at in his prescriptions for sentimental drama. Lenz's title is a joke, for not a single advantage of private education is brought out in the play itself. Such irony will prove to be symptomatic; Lenz was always torn between the resigned detachment of the cynic who sees through everything and the social passion of the reformer who must convince himself that the evil around him is correctible; he was never so fervent a special pleader that he could not discern the comic overtones of any human situation.

The organization of The Tutor bears out Lenz's conviction that dramatists can work as freely as composers of epics. The play has close to three dozen scenes, as well as three separable plots, and it is sometimes quite unclear how all the actions in progress interrelate, so arbitrarily does Lenz seem to shift around. The first six scenes, however, raise no special problems. We meet in the opening scene a jobless intellectual named Läuffer, and in succeeding scenes we meet the family into which he is taken as private tutor. This family consists of a Major, his wife and two children—a boy whom Läuffer finds it difficult to teach anything at all, and a young woman named Gustchen whose delicate nature the tutor is specifically ordered to take into consideration. Beyond such unpromising working conditions, it soon becomes clear that the simplest social exchange between the tutor and his employers partakes of unpleasantness. The Major and his wife blandly expect Läuffer to work for next to nothing, and they exploit every opportunity to cut his wage. To add insult to injury, they impress upon the tutor that no amount of learning can make up for his tainted class origin. Here, as elsewhere, Lenz underscores the extent to which personal relationships are social relationships and the degree to which social relationships rest on naked power.

An exhibitionist at heart, Läuffer cannot resist dramatizing his state close to everyday life, was translated into German by Heinrich Leopold Wagner (1776) and became a favorite of Lenz as well as of other Stürmer und Drängen.
of mind to the one person who does not armor herself with class consciousness. Gustchen may be too naïve to fathom why the tutor claims so stridently the world is against him, but she does what she can to be friendly. When her boy friend Fritz goes off to the university, the relationship intensifies. Its subsequent course deals a shocking blow to the Major, who had noticed for some time that his daughter was not well, but who had never imagined she would disgrace the family by taking as her lover a low born type like Läuffer:

**MAJOR'S WIFE:** Help, somebody! It's all over! The family! The family!

**PRIVY COUNCILOR:** God forbid, sister! What are you up to? You'll put your husband into a fit!

**MAJOR'S WIFE:** Let him go into a fit—the family—infamous—oh, I can't go on. (*She falls on a chair.*)

The infamy which the Major's Wife cannot bring herself to mention sends both Läuffer and Gustchen out of the house before the Major can get to them. It leads to all sorts of complications which Lenz resolves by having Gustchen return to the fold after a year of fugitive misery, and by having the tutor reach the bizarre conclusion that he lives in a world where unfortunates like him are better off castrated. For the decision to emasculate himself, he is eulogized by an eccentric schoolmaster named Wenzeslaus at whose place Läuffer obtained refuge during his flight from the Major's homicidal wrath. But Wenzeslaus soon realizes how foolish he had been to commend Läuffer upon his grand "spiritual" gesture, for the latter turns right around and marries a country girl who is quite aware of his condition. It does not stop her in the least; in fact, she views a sterile husband as a distinct blessing—how better to insure that there will be no additional mouths to feed.

Lenz presents all of this, plus much more, in five acts composed

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*Lenz, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 368.

**Specifically, two subplots which succeed only in distracting the reader. One deals with Fritz's university life and makes much of a student named Pä tus, whose economic problems and social immaturities may well remind some of Lenz's own difficulties. Pä tus is presented to us in a boarding house setting which allows Lenz to exhibit realities of German society not on display in an aristocratic home. Another subplot deals with the attempt at seduction of a musician's daughter by an amoral aristocrat named Vos Seiffenblase (sic), an attempt foiled by Fritz's father, the Councilor.*
of thirty-five scenes of varying length. His treatment of these scenes makes them appear least of all as links in a chain of complications, so consistently does he subordinate action to character exposure. To this extent, at least, he lives up to what he said about the importance of character in his Notes to the Theater. His concern with motivation is discernible from the synopses of typical scenes: thus, one episode is nothing more than a bringing to light of Läuffer's pathological sensitivity; another is essentially an exposure of the Major's irascibility and greed; and still another informs us that even the callous Major has his sentimentalities. In most of his scenes Lenz puts his characters into normal enough situations and then has them act and speak in such a way as to reveal the confluence of social and psychic forces which drives them on. Never are we unaware of a character's social status, and never are we permitted to forget for more than a moment that a character has something typical about him that is bound to come out no matter what the circumstances. Another way of putting this is to say that Lenz exhibits his characters with a view to demonstrating those traits which are most characteristic of their behavior as human beings suffering the stresses of a highly class-structured society.

As much as Lenz subordinates action to character, none of his characters ever gets close enough to us to elicit our identification. One reason for this distance is no doubt Lenz's tendency to drop one thread of action as casually as he picks up another. Another is that he goes out of his way to delineate character in such a way as to stress what is laughable about it. A conspicuous example of this is the play's most preposterous scene, in which Läuffer realizes that his self-multilation has by no means ended his chances with the opposite sex:

LISE: Why impossible, Sir? How impossible if I want to and he wants to, and my father wants it too? You see, my father always said to me, that if I was to marry an intellectual—

WENZESLAUS: But—can't you get it through your thick skull—he can't do anything! God forgive me, but you must listen!

LÄUFFER: Maybe the young lady has no such expectations. Lise, I'll never be able to sleep with you.

LISE: Well, at least he can stay up with me, even if we only spend the day together, laugh together, and kiss hands once in a while—For by God! I like this man! God knows, I do like him!
LAUFFER: You see, Mr. Wenzeslaus! It is only love she's after. Must a happy marriage cater to animal lust?

WENZESLAUS: Oh, come now—Connubium sine prole est quasi dies sine sole. . . . Be ye fruitful and multiply, that's God's word. Where there is marriage, there must children be too.

LISE: No, Mr. Schoolmaster, I swear to you, in my life I can do without children. Children, no less! As if I needed them. My father has ducks and chickens, and that's enough to feed day after day; to add children . . .

LAUFFER: (kissing her): Lise, you are a goddess!\(^{11}\)

Neither Lise nor Läuffer nor Wenzeslaus can escape our laughter here. Lise actually believes that a eunuch must be a spiritual man, and in her eyes the perfect marriage is the sexless marriage. Läuffer underrates Lise's sexuality to the point of believing she will never make any biological demands on him which he cannot satisfy. And Wenzeslaus adds to the comedy by trying to cover up his natural masculine outrage at what is going on in religious phraseology. When we recall that the Stürmer und Dränger believed above all in vital living, we can gauge the ironies at which Lenz was aiming.

Lenz, says Gundolf, was possessed of "monomaniac clarity."\(^{12}\) The phrase certainly applies to his treatment of character. He is forever making clear that a few basic forces determine all behavior. These forces are made evident by the content of a highly explicit type of dialogue as well as by the manner in which content is set off by linguistic and gestural style. Characters literally betray themselves with almost every word they utter, every motion they make or are compelled to make; and it is not long before we identify with them stereotyped reaction patterns of a kind which Brecht was later to associate with his characters. The very first monologue of the play, by the tutor Läuffer, will bear this out:

LAUFFER: My father says: I am not suited to be his assistant. In my opinion, the fault lies in his purse; he's not willing to pay anything. I am supposed to be too young for the priesthood, also too well built, too much the world traveler, and, of course, the Privy Councilor has

\(^{11}\) Lenz, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 414.

no room for me in the state school. So be it! For pedants of his type
the devil himself would not be learned enough. Just six months would
have sufficed for me to catch up on what I knew when I got out of
school, but then, of course, I would possess too much education for
a preceptor—but who am I to question the wise Privy Councilor? He's
always calling me Monsieur Läuffer, and when we talk about Leipzig,
he asks about Händel's pastry garden or Richter's coffee house—I
really don't know, is he trying to be comic—he can be serious enough
when he converses with the assistant headmaster. I guess in his eyes
I lack maturity—even now he approaches with the Major; I dread him
worse than the devil. Something in the man's face I find wholly unbear-
able. (He passes the Privy Councilor and the Major with obsequious
bows.)

Läuffer's grievance is that society has no place for him and excludes
him unjustly from positions he is qualified to fill. Even his own father
is in on the conspiracy to keep him down. Along comes a man, the
Councilor, and he too is in on the plot. It is easy enough to see
what Lenz is getting at here—the portrayal of a character who is
as passive as he is hostile and suspicious, who, to salve his frustrated
ego, has no qualms about attributing all his ills to a relentlessly hostile
world. This is conveyed as much by what Läuffer says as by how
he says it. The measured tones in which he enumerates his enemies,
the compulsive way in which he catalogs the insensitivities of others
to his quality, the almost dispassionate mechanical manner in which
he simply goes on and on—such stylistic features serve merely to
extinguish the very case he is at pains to make. The over-all impression
is of a man who does not mind vegetating as long as he can convince
himself it is all someone else's fault. Those who cannot see through
Läuffer's words will surely be enlightened by the gestures with which
he departs the scene. He bows and scrapes to the very people who
play villain in his private fantasy.

Läuffer invites contempt mixed with pity for his weaknesses. His
employers, for their part, invite simple contempt. The Major's Wife
exposes her character from the moment we meet her in the process
of hiring Läuffer as the family tutor. She wants his services as cheaply
as possible: his scholastic attainments excite no interest. Important
is his ability to dress well and strike acceptable social attitudes. A
measure of the Major's Wife's snobbishness is that she asks for
Läuffer's name only as an afterthought. Her moment of glory finally

13 Lenz, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 330.
comes when she discovers the new tutor speaks French, confident as she is that with a few Gallic locutions she proves herself a woman of the world. But all masks slip off a few moments later when she sends Läuffer out of the room for daring to speak freely in the company of his social superiors; and as he leaves she bemoans not having gotten something better for her money.

It takes even less to inflame the Major. Läuffer soon finds out that not only must he be careful not to give offense by how he speaks but he must also be most careful about how he sits on a chair:

Stay put, Mr. Läuffer, stay put. Just a few words with you, that's why I kicked out the young gentleman. Look, it's all right for you to remain seated, perfectly all right; but sit fully fully! For Christ's sake, you'll break the chair in two sitting on the edge. . . . What's the chair for anyway? To sit on! With all your traveling you don't know even that? Now just listen to me: I look upon you as a nice polite fellow, a God-fearing man quite willing to follow orders; otherwise, I never would do what I am doing for you. I promised you one hundred and forty ducats annually: which makes three—wait—three times one forty; how much does that make?"

For the most trivial of reasons the Major drops his civilized pose and lets Läuffer have it. He will explode in this fashion all through the play. Though it is small consolation to Läuffer, the Major can be just as unpleasant with members of his own class; in fact, he goes so far as to threaten his own wife and son with violence. If his wife strikes us as a puppet tied to the string of social convention, the Major appears the puppet of something far deeper: he is one of those types who, unable to cope with their aggressions, disperse them upon the nearest human target. For that matter, all of Lenz's characters are either social or instinctual marionettes. Läuffer, for example, exudes social servility while seething with hostility and sexual conflict. Gustchen is almost ruined by her sex drive which sends her into Läuffer's arms. The Major, as we have observed, maintains his social pose at best tenuously, and his wife is a poseuse of the first order. Away from this aristocratic milieu, the picture is no brighter. The schoolmaster Wenzeslaus, for example, is only too plainly a mental case, so much is he driven by inner forces that come out in his speech. Wenzeslaus may be a minor character, but the method employed

"Ibid., p. 336.
to make us aware of his disturbed mentality (so that he strikes us as being every bit as comic as he is mixed up) is highly pertinent to Lenz's portraiture in general. Lenz makes no attempt to tone down those caricatural elements which stimulate laughter; at the same time he manages to catch what is quite unamusing about the very thing he is caricaturing. Thus we laugh at the predictability of Wenzeslaus' eccentric mental processes, but we realize simultaneously there is nothing funny about a mentality so diseased:

But ... but ... but ... (tears the toothpick out of his mouth) just what is it we have here? Is it possible? A man of your stature should be so little concerned with what is good and bad for his body? Toothpicks are dangerous; as a matter of fact, it is sheer suicide playing with a toothpick, sheer suicide, the very destruction of Jerusalem, that's what toothpicking does to your teeth. All right, it happens, something happens to get stuck in your teeth (takes water and rinses his mouth out): that's the way to go about it, that's exactly the way to go about it; why, it does honor to God and neighbor to do it that way. Lose your teeth, and you wind up an old leash dog who can't keep his jaws straight; lose your teeth and your toothless mouth will fail to give birth to words: you'll have just your mouth and nose to rattle with. The conclusion follows: neither beast nor man will have the power to make you out.

It is odd that so many critics tracing influences on Büchner's vivid dialogue will mention Shakespeare and Goethe but not Lenz. Even this small excerpt should indicate how guilty they have been of the sin of omission. Wenzeslaus, like the hapless Woyzeck, communicates his mental state by the very rhythms of his speech and by linguistic idiosyncrasies. Wenzeslaus, like Woyzeck, has a need to repeat himself; like Woyzeck, he has so much to say at times that he falters over a single word; and though he is hardly as incoherent as Woyzeck, he too can discern in some innocent object a world of threats and anxieties. One may note here that neither Lenz nor Büchner availed himself of the rhetorical approach basic to classical drama. Both rejected symmetrical verse and cadenced utterance for the dissonances which characterize everyday speech, and to this end their diction excludes little on the grounds of decorum. Inasmuch as Lenz's dialogue is bound to be grotesque when the mental forces shaping speech act erratically, his eccentric characters make the most vivid impression. This is something which at least one critic finds aesthetically de-
plorable without realizing it follows quite logically from Lenz's basic approach.

As far back as Hebbel, a conflict between psychology and sociology in *The Tutor* attracted attention. Quite simply, what bothers critics is that Lenz is obviously writing a play in which his characters stand for certain values; at the same time he negates social allegory by virtue of his characters' peculiar motivations. A good example of this is Wenzeslaus. It has been pointed out that much of the philosophy of the *Sturm und Drang* comes out in his speeches; those in search of a character in *The Tutor* who stands for the Rousseauistic integrity Lenz and his contemporaries admired have not been averse to pointing in his direction. But it is surely strange that Lenz should have chosen a character as eccentric as Wenzeslaus to act as spokesman. By and large, Wenzeslaus seems suspect as the representative of anything but his own peculiar mentality, and if Lenz intended differently, something must have gone wrong.

The same difficulty seems to apply to Läuffer. Unquestionably his circumstances are bound up with what was generally wrong with the social structure of his day. But when all is said and done, Läuffer's fate is of little relevance to the tendentious play Lenz may have had in mind. Läuffer is not so much a social victim as a victim of himself: no change in external conditions would have much effect on the life style of such a man. The view that he embodies genuine human value smothered by social injustice is borne out neither by his opening speech, with its paranoiac overtones, nor by any subsequent action up to his castration and marriage. He never manifests any qualities to soften the portrait of a repellent weakling, anxious as he is to twist himself into the most reassuring servile postures for those who treat him like dirt. When he expatiates on the number of dancing teachers in his past and announces with pride that in Leipzig he took in every ball, he comes through as a sad parody of his aristocratic masters. Either he glows with happiness at some morsel thrown his way by the upper class, or he bristles with discontent at their undisguised negations of his importance. That he should allow himself to become involved in an affair with the daughter of the very people at whose every word he jumps only confirms one's impression of a spineless rationalizer shuttling between self-destructive impulses.

His castration comes as a distinct shock and may appear highly out of character to those who feel Lenz has given us throughout the play a tutor who can react in no such decisive fashion. Does
not self-mutilation presuppose a certain unsqueamish boldness which one would hardly imagine within Läufer's capabilities? Actually, there is nothing odd or illogical here in terms of the psychopathology of character Lenz has been indicating all along. By castrating himself, an individual torn by deep conflict is trying to make sure that he will never again be at the mercy of what he cannot consciously control. Läufer confirms the psychological mechanism by which he has always lived, directing against himself fierce aggressions which he dare not express to his tormentors. His action is quintessentially passive: it is designed not only to avert any clash with forces in the real world of social power, but it ensures quiescence in the one area where even the most innocuous man may act in spite of himself. The power Lenz imputes here to instinct is very much in line with modern attitudes. Lenz conceived of instinct as an explosive force posing a constant threat not only to personal sanity but to the very structure of society. In one of his less important plays, The New Menoza, he has a character argue for brothels on the grounds that sexual love is "fire." The image is apt, for Lenz demonstrates in both of his major plays that human sexuality is dangerous to ignite and impossible to control once started.

Only when we recognize the bedrock of pessimistic psychology beneath the social texture of Lenz's best plays do we appreciate his modernism. Aware as he is of the demonic springs of human behavior, he avoids the falsified psychologies which date so many eighteenth-century plays. In Lenz's important plays, characters do not come to a sudden awareness of untapped spiritual resources, are not momentously transformed into greater souls, and do not eventually glimpse the light that ennobles. Nor are characters in these plays prone to generalize on their circumstances in sentimental outbursts which today strike us as absurdly unreal. In Lenz's major plays, characters who are mixed up to start with remain so until they wind up quite ingloriously. Nothing in the action of these plays suggests the meliorist psychology so rampant at the time. As a matter of fact, Lenz is at the opposite pole, suggesting by his presentation of character that he is skeptical of man's ability to learn from experience.

This aspect of Lenz's plays has been overlooked by those intent upon stressing his place in the vanguard of class-conscious writers. Critics emphasize Lenz's importance as a social critic and note that whenever the German theater became an instrument of social criticism, Lenz proved a good model. Cases in point are the Büchner of Woyzeck.
as well as the naturalists and Bertolt Brecht. But it is a simplification to view Lenz primarily as a class-conscious opponent of the aristocracy. Even to the extent that he does work social criticism into his plays, it is by no means partisan. His target is not merely the aristocracy, much as he realized that class was frustrating those social groups which had their hopes raised most by the diffusion of rationalism. Lenz was quite aware that in a world of constant interaction the nature of the victimizer is only half the story; and his realization that the aristocracy was callous and stupid is matched by his realization that the middle class was passive and cowardly.

In *The Tutor* Läuffer typifies this class most vividly. Enough has been said about him to indicate that in his portrayal Lenz intended nothing complimentary. One may just add that in the course of being introduced to the Major’s Wife he cannot restrain an impulse to fawningly kiss this superficial woman’s hand, transfixing in an almost obscene image of action everything about him and his class that is repellent. Lenz has frequent recourse to such effective visual summaries.

However, the scene in which Lenz goes into most detail on his feelings about the middle class presents a discussion between Läuffer’s father, who is a pastor, and the Councilor. Though the apparent dramatic motivation here is Pastor Läuffer’s desire to arouse the Councilor over the shabby treatment his son is receiving from his aristocratic employers, the scene is actually pure commentary and anticipates the programmatic conclusion of *The Soldiers*. For a while Lenz forces the action into the background and shifts our attention to the larger significances of what is going on.

The Councilor is not moved in the least by the revelation that Läuffer’s salary is a mere fraction of what he had originally been promised. His view is that any man so lacking in backbone as to work at tutoring for the aristocracy deserves no better. Pastor Läuffer’s argument that “one must live” falls on deaf ears, while the Councilor argues forcefully that nothing compensates for the surrender of basic human rights. And tutors of the aristocracy surrender just those rights; they are not even free to perform their bodily functions naturally but must always strike artificial poses pleasing to their exploiters. The Councilor deplores the fact that young men with the capacity to make meaningful contributions to their society are content to serve as pets for the aristocracy.

Pastor Läuffer finds this unconvincing. He is concerned with the hard facts of a society in which one has no choice but to get along,
He points out that nothing in that society is untainted, and even public education, which the Councilor champions, is notably deficient in quality. But the Councilor will not be put off. He insists that if things are not the way they should be, it is the fault of those who are not dynamic enough to change them. Only when the middle class makes the aristocracy realize that it must change, only then will German society cease to stagnate.

The texture of German society simply reflects bourgeois tolerance of the status quo. But Lenz hardly spares the aristocracy by pointing a finger at the class it suppresses. It is precisely because the aristocracy is such a horror that the middle class must not be what it is. The frightening character of the aristocracy comes out in the caricatured representatives of that class which Lenz gives us. It comes out as well in a crisp exchange of dialogue between the Major and his brother, the Councilor, quite early in the play. Here we are informed in no uncertain terms that the German aristocracy of the time was determined to employ the intelligentsia on its own terms only. The Councilor asks his brother a legitimate enough question: What is the new tutor supposed to teach? The Major's reply speaks for itself:

Well, he should—whatever I—well, his job is to provide my son with intellectual and social—say, what are you after anyway with your questions? I'll make up my mind in due time, and the tutor will know just what I want.  

In succeeding scenes the Major and his wife reveal only too clearly what constitutes in their eyes the purpose of private education. But even at this point the indictment is quite explicit: "You wish, in other words, to be the tutor of your tutor. . . ."  

Walter Höllerer has remarked that in The Soldiers Lenz opened the way for a new relationship between dramatist and audience by combining elements of programmatic commentary with the loose structure of the open play.  

Actually, Lenz starts doing this in The Tutor, chiefly by way of the Councilor, who, in spite of some participation

18 Ibid., p. 331.
19 Ibid.
in the action, is actually the unimplicated bystander—perceptive enough to see what is going on and free enough to express himself. That Lenz should work this way is hardly surprising when we realize he is trying above all to communicate to his audience an awareness of the social forces behind the action depicted. It is for this reason, after all, that he gives us distortions and exaggerations of character as well as vivid dialogue rich with suggestions of gesture. The explicit formulations of the Councilor merely take Lenz’s art one step further on the road to maximal clarity. He does not believe for a moment that a dramatist is bound by inhibitory Aristotelian conventions. He rejects neoclassic formalism if only on the ground of its placing form ahead of the substance of what a dramatist wishes to say.

Nowhere is Lenz quite so unpredictable as at the close of his major plays. At first glance his endings seem made to order for those who would like to dismiss him as either too disturbed to know what he is doing or sorely lacking in a sense of proportion. But the castration of Läuffer, which Brecht was later to find quite symbolic, may, like the anticonventional ending of The Soldiers, stem from an attitude which we shall later find at work in the drama of those who followed up Lenz’s innovations, namely, a contempt for middle-class psychology so powerful that it must be discharged in images of shock value. Lenz’s ending of The Tutor could hardly be more glaringly designed to assault bourgeois sensibilities, for he makes castration the prelude to a marriage and illegitimacy the product of easily forgivable human weakness. One can well see Lenz initiating a tradition in which one purposely departs from standards of conventional taste in order to manifest derision of the Philistine mentality.

This aggressive rejection of conventionality in life is paralleled by Lenz’s rejection of conventionality in the theater. He rejects not only the more traditional concepts of tragedy and comedy, based on their mutual exclusiveness, but he rejects as well the homage to tradition implied by Diderot’s conceptions of intermediate dramatic forms. Diderot had never presumed it possible to unify the intensities of tragedy and comedy per se but had favored attenuated blendings of a new type. Lenz, however, felt that tragedy and comedy could coexist within the same play.

Whether Lenz achieved what one may call tragicomic integration is a subject in and of itself. One might say Läuffer is tragic because his blighting environment destroys whatever is intrinsically of value in his personality; he is comic as well because of his total ineffectuality.
But beyond this issue it is important to recognize that in Lenz we can discern already that peculiar awareness of life which hovers uneasily between uproarious derision and existential anguish, an awareness of life as at best a very bad joke at man's expense. Such tragicomic perception underlies Lenz's thinking on the mess German society became thanks to aristocratic parasitism and middle-class venality. Like Büchner, he seems to realize that at bottom life is by its very nature grotesque.

It has been said that by violating the Aristotelian unities Lenz was able to work into *The Tower* aspects of milieu which only an open structure can accommodate. While true, this is hardly the key to what is original about Lenz's dramaturgy. In fact, Lenz violated the Aristotelian unities with an abandon which is scarcely commendable. His abrupt transitions from the aristocratic environment of the Major's home to shabby environments of student life are highly distracting, and Lenz is definitely open to the criticism that he did not yet know how to keep an episodic play from becoming chaotic.

Lenz's originality lies, rather, in his use of the episodic structure as a vehicle for a set of specific attitudes, which he conveys not merely by what he puts into his scenes but by the order in which he arranges those scenes. Content and form interact to make a compelling indictment: episode after episode repeats essentially the same basic picture of a society which is economically and socially unviable, whose members are either strong and sadistic or weak and masochistic, and whose classes cannot begin to relate to one another humanely. Very much like Brecht, Lenz practices what may well be called episodic reinforcement. Whatever action fleshes out a scene, it will manifest either subtly or explicitly the operation of certain constants, especially the hunger of have-nots for what life has so far denied them. Lenz's plays are constructed of episodes designed to get across the truth that concrete human need can be evaded but never transcended. No conception of idealistic freedom is seen to have any relevance to the way things really are. For Lenz, as for Brecht, the real world is the world where one struggles for what one usually does not get because those who have it struggle just as hard to keep others down.

Lenz and Brecht share not only common attitudes toward social forces; they share as well an ambivalence that will be seen to run through the entire Lenz-Brecht tradition, in one form or another. Both manifest a cynicism which would seem to preclude the social
passion which undeniably motivated their writing. In essence, they strike us as too resigned to believe anything could be done about the hopeless amoral swamps they depict and, conversely, as men of too much social conscience to be all that cynical. Their plays take on a disturbing quality, hard to pin down, for they seem to have been written, weirdly enough, by idealistic cynics. Brustein said of Brecht that “he seems constitutionally incapable of creating a positive idea without somehow undermining it.” One could say the same about Lenz. For in The Tutor he demonstrates a world that is simply beyond help, even if on the last page he still attempts to prove that his main worry has been the dangers of private education. The reformer in Lenz may want to convince himself that the tragedy of Läuffer and others like him is avoidable: the cynical realist knows better.

A similar dissociation is at work in The Soldiers (1776). Once again Lenz is ostensibly writing as social reformer, and once again the social cure he puts forth seems hardly adequate for the disease. The cure is simply to train a corps of sexually compliant women who will accompany that male army which every state needs for its security, and by satisfying the erotic needs of the military, keep soldiers from preying sexually on the civilian populations with which they are thrown in contact. Those who find Lenz somewhat disturbed to start with have held up The Soldiers as a case in point. But in an age of sexual radicalism which pretends not to be shockable on such matters, the critical question in regard to Lenz’s proposal is merely whether or not it is worked persuasively into his play. Far too many prudish commentators have used The Soldiers to ventilate their own prejudices on a touchy subject.

In this play the main character is once again someone who is educated painfully on the importance of class distinctions. Marie Wesener is the daughter of a jeweler whose prudent mercantile instincts tell him Marie can do no better than to marry a draper named Stolzius; but Marie is very much alive to other possibilities, especially Baron Desportes. She goes out with this aristocrat often—until her father, too, catches sparks of social ambition. The protestations of her rejected bourgeois boy friend fail to change her course for she takes literally Desportes’s declaration that his love transcends class considerations. But soon enough Marie realizes she has made the wrong choice; Desportes deserts her upon deciding another affair has ended.

The fact that after enough stress individuals will unconsciously crave
an even greater measure of suffering seems to have obsessed Lenz in good plays as well as bad. Her lover’s desertion has just such an effect on Marie. She plummets into deep depression, but she cannot admit to herself that what is over is over for good, with the result that she ends up begging for bread in the streets she has haunted in search of Desportes. Though Lenz attaches to *The Soldiers* the kind of lachrymose family reunion that was commonplace with Diderot and other practitioners of sentimental bourgeois theater, he does not conclude matters as lightly as in *The Tutor*. Marie survives, but her lovers do not: Stolzius poisons Desportes and then dies by his own hand.

In the final scene of the play this unfortunate sequence of events is discussed by the Countess La Roche (for a while Marie’s protectress) and Colonel Graf von Spannheim, who, like Desportes, represents both the army and nobility. The Colonel cannot get over one of his men having been involved in so seamy a course of events and he blames it all on sheer villainous fate. The Countess does not agree; she ascribes it to the fact that soldiers cannot marry. Spannheim seems to realize she is right, but what can possibly be done? After all, did not Homer himself point out that good marriages make bad soldiers?—The Countess remarks that she has always looked upon the soldiery as a monster to whom an occasional innocent woman must be fed to insure public safety. It is then that the Colonel makes the proposal which has provoked so much comment.

A common view is that the proposal is of no relevance to the play. This seems too strong, for Lenz goes out of his way to indicate that soldiers deprived of legitimate sexual outlets will find satisfaction some other way, will in fact become that much more sex-preoccupied by virtue of the unnatural restraints imposed on them. An officer remarks that the situation is getting out of hand—everywhere soldiers are caressing women.

Actually, what makes the Colonel’s proposal suspect as an answer to the problems posed by *The Soldiers* brings us back to that clash of attitudes shared by Lenz and Brecht. Here again the social reformer offers inappropriate solutions; Lenz attempts to equate the darker forces of his world with unenlightened social practice. Last time his recipe was public education; this time it is public sex. But Lenz testifies to no such meliorist convictions when he has an old woman sing a ballad of despair while the stage resounds with the laughter of Desportes and Marie from another room:
When girls are young, they are like dice
Thrown out upon a table
Little Roesel from Hennegau
Will soon be on God's table
Why smile you so, my loving child
Your cross is only waiting
Until the word is out that Roesel
Will soon a man be taking
Oh, little girl, how much it hurts
To see the sparkle in your eye
When I cannot help but see as well
How often you will cry.\textsuperscript{38}

A close analysis of this ballad is hardly required. Lenz is using
song as commentary, and his intention is to let us know that the happy
mood of the moment is actually quite deceptive, is in fact quite ironic,
in view of what Marie will soon have to bear. Unlike the dramatist
whose patterns of suspense require him to make momentary surfaces
as impenetrable to the audience as they are to the characters on stage,
Lenz deliberately strips from the action before us any element of
fictional reassurance. He does not hesitate to neutralize the dominant
mood of a scene by hinting at what is to come. One could well
see here a remote anticipation of Brecht's concept of Verfremdung.

Lenz was at pains to link the tragedy of Marie Wesener's betrayal
to the enforced celibacy of the garrison from which Desportes emerged,
but he could not achieve the connection, if only because of his own
psychological acuity. No more than Läuffer does Marie strike us as
a mere victim of circumstance. Her affair with Desportes could have
been avoided quite easily; in fact, it was not avoided only because
of the social ambition of this vain and very average girl, who refused
to heed the cautionary advice of her father and to respect her obliga­
tions to Stolzius.

Marie Wesener comes through very much like a moth around a
flame, so obsessed is she with the desire to rise socially. In spite
of her girlish charm, she is basically a selfish, egoistic creature with
an eye for the main chance. She is perhaps Lenz's most successful
uneccentric character, and the dialogue he has given her illumines
the forces behind action with a subtle precision he was never to surpass.
To a great extent this dialogue is equivalent to a series of masks

\textsuperscript{38}Lenz, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 57–58.
suited to the social strategy of the moment. Thus, in the first scene of the play, where Marie can easily be herself inasmuch as no one but her sister Charlotte is present, she shows herself to be sensitive and volatile; she bursts out crying when Charlotte insists on pursuing a conversation about Stolzius. When we next see her she is talking to Desportes, and here she conveys an impression of incontestable humility: “My mother has told me time and again that I am not yet grown up; I am at the age when one is neither beautiful nor ugly.”

When Wesener steps into the room, Desportes requests permission to take Marie to the theater. For a moment Marie loses her poise, so badly does she want to go. Wesener is against the idea, but that does not stop Marie, who quickly arranges a rendezvous with the Baron behind her father’s back. As soon as Desportes leaves she tries to rationalize her maneuver by suggesting to Wesener that the aristocrat has good qualities. It is not long before she lets her whole family know what she is up to, giving away some of her tactics in bursts of uncontrollable emotion, releasing others with the exquisitely feigned innocence of the born schemer. The whole point is that she realizes her course of action places her up against extremely powerful social forces. Her origin is much too low to gain for her an easy acceptance into Desportes’s circles. At the same time, she must contend with those social inhibitions which make her behavior incomprehensible to her own class. In part the conflict is external, placing her in outright opposition to the rest of her family. But it is almost as much an inner conflict, and this comes out at the end of the first act when Marie is finally all alone:

**Marie** *(kissing her father’s hand)*: Good night, Pappuschka!—*(When he is gone, she sighs heavily and steps to the window while undressing.)*

My heart is so heavy I’m certain thunder is coming. Suppose it should strike— *(She looks up, pressing her hands upon her exposed breast.)*

God! What evil could I be guilty of? Stolzius—I do still love you—but if I can improve my luck—and Papa himself so advises me *(closing the curtains)*—well then if thunder strikes, let it; I would be only too happy to die. *(She puts out the light.)*

Just as Marie’s dialogue reflects tensions which in turn reflect upon certain social realities, so old Wesener’s dialogue operates as a kind

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of social psychograph. This is most apparent when he has to face someone of higher status:

WESENER: Well, look here now! Herr Baron, I am your loyal servant; to what do we owe the honor (embracing him)?

DESPORTES: I shall only be here a few weeks, visiting with some relatives from Brussels recently arrived.

WESENER: Forgive me for not having been home to receive you. My little Marie must surely have tried your patience. May I ask about your worthy parents—they've gotten the snuffboxes, I'm sure. . . .

The studious avoidance of informality, the overpolite phrasings, the attempt to communicate nothing so much as respect (which amounts to reverence)—all these features of Wesener's speech are instantaneously evoked by the appearance of an aristocrat like Desportes. Lenz makes the very syntax of Wesener's speech socially significant and succeeds in delineating the merchant in terms of values which he never questions. Dialogue thus becomes highly illustrative and helps to build the frame of reference for a full understanding of the play's social implications. To put it quite simply, the nature of dialogue clarifies the psychology of the speaker and the nature of the society in which he functions.

This applies to Desportes as well. Of all the dialogues in the play, his strikes the ear as most artificial. A sample will make this quite clear:

DESPORTES: I false? Can you believe such a thing of me, divine Made­moiselle? Is it false to have stolen away from my regiment, and, when I get back to it, to run the risk of prison for not having stayed with my family—is it false to have done this only for the bliss of seeing you, most perfect one?

Desportes, like Wesener, is highly conscious of the effect he is creating. What he says sounds forced and insincere, but to the inexperienced Marie it might strike just the right note of outraged nobility.

Ibid., p. 35.

Ibid., p. 34.
What exposes him more laughably, however, is the poem he dedicates to Marie:

You highest object of my purest drives  
I do adore you with eternal love  
Who with each morn that blossoms new  
Doth guarantee a love most radiant and true.²⁵

Lenz seems to have been convinced that any affectation of personality will come out in speech. His tendency in The Soldiers to make speech pregnant with idiosyncrasies was certainly observed by Büchner, and Woyzeck owes much to Lenz. There is one piece of dialogue (by a minor character) that we can be quite certain Büchner pondered over:

**PIRZEL (who has meanwhile seated himself now gets up hastily):**  
As I had the honor and pleasure to tell you, Herr Pastor! It is all because people don't do any thinking. Thinking, yes thinking about what makes a human being—that is what I am talking about. (*He seized his hand.*) If you will observe, that is your hand, but what is it? Skin, bone, earth (taps him on his pulse); there, there, there is where it stays fixed, that is only the scabbard, there is where the sword stays fixed, in the blood, in the blood. . . . ²¹

This excerpt foreshadows not only the pompous Philistinism of the Captain and Doctor who torment Woyzeck but also the circular mental processes of Woyzeck himself, who must cling to the resonances of words by ritualistic repetition. Lenz uses dialogue not only for the purpose of making us feel the social pressures of his characters; he has an ear as well for their metaphysical anxieties.

Lenz utilized gesture in The Tutor to underline traits of character in such a way that long after we have read the play we remember the scraping postures of Läuffer, the frenetic gesticulations of Wenzelaus, and the physical aggressiveness of the Major. In The Soldiers he uses gesture as well, but not so much to vivify satiric thrusts as to delineate psychic tensions. Thus, at the sudden appearance of

Desportes, Marie's attempt to stick into her pocket a letter from Stolzius, and her breaking into tears at the implications of the letter, define more precisely than anything she says the contradictory emotions she experiences in throwing over the draper for the aristocrat. These physical reactions expose the clash within Marie between her enormous fear of playing a losing game and the intoxicating social ambition which makes it impossible for her to stop playing that game.

She is again caught off guard a few scenes later. Here it is best to give the original stage directions and dialogue:

*Marie's room*

*(She sits upon her bed, has a pin in her hand and, lost in revery, stares at it intently. Her father comes in; she jumps up and tries to conceal the pin.)*

MARIE: Ach the Lord Jesus—

WESENER: No, let's not play the child. *(Walks up and down several times and then sits down next to her.)* Listen, Marie! You know I'm good to you, so be honest with me, it will be to your benefit. Tell me, has the Baron said anything to you about love?*

The similarity of Marie's actions to those of Büchner's Marie at a critical moment of surprise should be noted here. There seems to be little doubt Büchner realized how much of the powerful forces motivating character Lenz was able to convey through nonverbal theater.

In *The Tutor* the psychology of Lenz's characters was at bottom quite simple, a simplicity made to order for caricatural portraiture. In *The Soldiers* Lenz is still pinpointing with unmistakable clarity the forces which manipulate his characters, but here the shading is subtler, the distortion less self-evident, the action more faithful to the psychopathology of everyday life. Behavior is still a matter of putting on the appropriate social mask, but the masks are less obvious. Yet, the black-and-white exposure of the earlier play is at times here as well, especially in the scene where Desportes, in a monologue that is ingenuously informational, presents himself as totally without principles as far as his relationship to Marie is concerned. Lenz is still intent on stressing that beneath the varied surfaces of human behavior one finds a bedrock of reprehensible emotion.

*Ibid.,* p. 44.
As in *The Tutor*, the bourgeoisie is viewed as thirsting for some taste of the status and power monopolized by the aristocracy. And the aristocracy once again is pictured as a class whose representatives all too easily come to assume that those socially below them exist only for their sport. Lenz does not give expression in this play to anything like the call for radical action in *The Tutor*. In fact, he seems to have come to the rueful realization that such action is hardly likely on the part of a class every bit as obsessed with the superficies of status as the aristocracy. If he preaches any course of bourgeois action at all in *The Soldiers*, it is that of social segregation. Thus the enlightened Countess de la Roche tells a broken Marie that her mistake was to overlook the insuperable barriers which separate the aristocracy from the bourgeoisie, barriers which will be minimized only by those who do not know how the real world operates to penalize the socially ambitious.

Concrete depiction of milieu serves to reinforce this sense of absolute class division. Whether in the merchant’s home, or in the midst of a gathering of soldiers who do not know what to do with themselves, Lenz creates his scene with meticulous concern for authenticity. In the Wesener home, for example, we are made aware by any number of small details that this family must scratch for a mercantile living. At the same moment that Desportes and Marie are arranging their rendezvous, old Wesener enters with a large box of brooches: "As you can see, here we have them at all prices—these at one hundred thaler, these at fifty, and these at one hundred and fifty, as you wish." 26

As for the soldiers, Lenz’s attempt to delineate the way they actually live, in a sexless limbo which affords them no real outlet for their energies, makes him once again subordinate plot development to observation of social behavior. One scene, for example, gives a mere conversation about the moral value of theatrical entertainment on the part of some officers who, we sense, work themselves up over the issue simply because there is really nothing else to get worked up about. The boredom of the officers reaches the point that they turn their ingenuity to devising a prank for one of their more unpopular members, and Lenz does not hesitate once again to depict this in a seemingly unnecessary scene. For Lenz, of course, there is no irrelevance in anything which helps us to understand why men behave as they do; plot progression is of less importance than the illumination of an atmosphere with characteristic details which tell their own story.

26 Ibid., p. 37.
It should not go unnoticed that what Stolzius goes through with Marie is quite close to what Büchner's Woyzeck goes through with his Marie. Stolzius, like Woyzeck, loses the capacity to function when Marie betrays him. Stolzius, like Woyzeck, discovers through the sheer gratuitous nastiness of an unimplicated gossiper that the woman who means so much to him is up to something. Like Woyzeck, Stolzius suffers in silence while listening to the small talk of those to whom his emotional crisis means nothing. And like Woyzeck, he lets loose most emotionally when talking to himself, enjoying no peace of mind until he has committed murder. Both men are totally alone, no matter how completely life surrounds them.

As far as basic attitudes are concerned, Lenz and Büchner have much in common. Though Lenz may be more of a patient realist than Büchner, he is as aware as the latter that the larger forces directing human lives operate with an irrational sadism all their own. What happens to Marie, for example, may in part be blamed on an acutely class-conscious society and the traits of a particular personality; but when all is said and done, Marie still strikes us as the victim of more powerful forces which are not reducible to psychic and societal causations. Even the Countess de la Roche, with her total commitment to the social code which Marie has violated, hints at this in a speech which suggests how powerfully Lenz was aware that human beings are tormented simply for having human inclinations: "I wonder whether I can in good conscience deprive the girl of her romance. What charm does life hold, if we are not seized by our imaginations. Eating, drinking, hopeless preoccupations devoid of self-created satisfactions—these only make for a drawn-out death. . . . "

To students of expressionism the accelerated manner in which Lenz strings his scenes together in the fourth act of The Soldiers has always been of special formal interest. But it should not be overlooked that Lenz switches scenes as rapidly as he does primarily because it is the most economical manner of communicating basic information on his plot and of reinforcing the ironies he has been creating all along. Scene after scene is reduced to a bare minimum of action. In succession we witness Desportes in an Armentieres prison, extremely worried about being exposed to his family by a distraught Marie; Old Wesener close to hysteria upon learning his daughter has run away from home; Stolzius discovering the same thing and joining the search; and, ironically enough, Desportes's rifleman relishing the easy conquest awaiting

27 Ibid., p. 81.
him in the girl his superior has jilted. Lenz makes it perfectly clear that Marie is on the point of utter self-destruction and that it is entirely out of her hands whether or not that destruction is averted. The bleak atmosphere of these episodes is sustained through glimpses of Marie plodding along on the road to Armentières, by now crazed from hunger and frustration, and of Stolzius shivering in the rain outside the apothecary where he hopes to obtain poison.

All this misery goes unnoticed by Desportes. He wants only to forget that he ever laid eyes on Marie and he is not above viewing himself as the injured party. Marie, he tells himself, was "a whore from the start," and if she was nice to him, it was for cold, material reasons. In fact, if someone was to blame for his going into debt, it was that same whore, doubtless out to separate him from his last penny. With every line, Desportes twists reality to his own ends, going so far as to convince himself that by donating Marie to his rifleman he manifests real nobility. Nothing after this points up with as much directness the saddening incongruity at the heart of The Soldiers—the naïveté of a young woman in pursuit of a better life and the callousness of an aristocrat who would not hesitate to destroy her for his comfort.

In the final analysis Marie and Läuffer are indeed cut from the same cloth. Both are foolhardy enough to disregard the unwritten code whereby their aspiration level is to be dictated by their place on the social scale. Acting on impulse rather than social convention, they unleash forces far too strong for any individual to cope with. Marie, however, comes through far less laughably than Läuffer, and there is in general less comedy in The Soldiers, which Lenz called a Schauspiel. It is sheer anguish, the insurmountable frustrations of people for whom there is literally no second chance, that preoccupies Lenz in this play, to the point that he comes close to investing almost every scene with tragic resonances.

What has been said about the illustrative function of individual scenes in The Tutor applies as well to the later play. The action of a scene is by implication a bitter comment on the nature of a society in which such action is possible. Whether Marie is struggling for social status, or Wesener is aghast at her presumptions, or Desportes is trying to seduce her, the basic emphasis remains the same. Once again Lenz is not concerned with the passions and strategies of individuals for their own sake: he wishes to pinpoint decisive social and economic forces.
In this connection, *The Soldiers* constitutes an advance in technique, but nothing in the play is a radical departure from the form and content of *The Tutor*. In the later play, characterization is a more careful blending of dialogue and gesture; dialogue itself proves more revealing of the interrelationship between social posture and social pressures; scenes are more dynamically concatenated; the plot is more absorbing and unified; and society is depicted in far greater detail and with far more concern for documentary realism. But with all of these qualitative differences, the two plays are variants of a type. Lenz is saying the same thing, passing the same judgment, namely, that the ostensibly civilized life of his society camouflages a shocking core of parasitism and victimization. In both plays, individuals come to grief because they have been naïve enough to believe they have a right to enjoy life, or, more precisely, to enjoy it as much as those in power. In both plays, Lenz leaves his action diffuse enough to encompass as much social observation as he would like to insert. In both plays, he comments on the action in a variety of ways, going so far as to devote an entire scene to the explication of forces behind the action. In both plays, the unities are abandoned—all of which brings us to a most important area of our study, the way in which the episodic structure allows Lenz to communicate what he wishes to say more effectively than if he had employed the unified Aristotelian organization. Or, in what ways would he have been hampered by observing those unities of time, place, and action which he violates so blatantly? If Lenz is indeed the initiator of a significant theatrical form, then the above question must bear pertinently on the nature of his influence.

Aside from action, the number of unities Aristotle considered necessary is still arguable, but the fact remains that in the course of time his name became associated with the unities of time, place, and action, as well as the unity of tone which precludes the mixture of tragic and comic emotions. It is this concept of theater which Lenz rejected so violently—for various reasons.

He rejected unity of time, for example, because he wished to put upon the stage not merely the final phase of a development whose origins antedate the commencement of the play; his aim was to show the entire development of a situation, even if its initial phase took place months or years before the crisis. For Lenz, the last phase is merely the residuum of everything which has led up to it; hence it does not deserve to monopolize the substance of a serious play.
Thus, in both major plays Lenz does not restrict himself to the day
or week in which things finally come to a head but starts his action
at that point where the characters in question are about to make those
decisions which will in the end prove their undoing.

Since Lenz was intent on demonstrating the crucial relationship
of social forces to his characters' vicissitudes, he may well have thought
along the lines of Brecht, who wanted his plays to show not the
inevitability of tragic consequences but their avoidability. Such an un-
tragic point of view can only be conveyed by showing those events
prior to the moment of crisis which point up the causal factors re-
ponsible for the crisis. And, indeed, those events may go far into
the past. Thus, Läufer's decision to become a servile tutor of aristo-
crats, and Marie's decision to throw over the draper Stolzius for the
aristocrat Desportes are both in essence social decisions, and they are
decisions which precede by great intervals the bitter harvest they reap.
It is this relatively slow process whereby social decisions are transmuted
into personal catastrophes that Lenz makes the core of his plays.

The Aristotelian suspense play validates in most momentous fashion
the idea that life proceeds with inexorable logic toward climactic mo-
ments. The action commences quite close to these moments and ap-
proaches them by rapid accumulations of intensity. Life comes through
as having a preternatural, compacted excitement simply because time
and space are contracted in the interests of an overpowering unity
of impression. Exposition exists only to usher in complication, and
complication intensifies until it explodes into climax and recognition.

The world this kind of Aristotelian suspense plays suggests is not
Lenz's. For him the most decisive turns of life may well be the least
dramatic. He seems to have brooded upon the apparent innocence
of our most fatal moments. At any rate, his best plays are ironic
in a way that might have proved very difficult had he employed the
tight Aristotelian form. Unlike Sophocles', Lenz's irony is not plot
centered; it pervades every aspect of his dramaturgy. Such irony is
implicit in the assiduous efforts of his essentially helpless characters
to fabricate a world in which they have some importance—an irony
which juxtaposes the vitality of their bustlings with the futility of
their actions, an irony at play in the pompous rationalizations of
Läufer, the social simulations of Marie Wesener, and the bourgeois
pontifications of her father. All of this Lenz observes with such ironic
detachment that he makes it impossible for his audience to take his
serious reform proposals at face value.

Episodic structuring helps Lenz to illustrate the repetitious nature
of experience. As pointed out above, neither the psychology of his characters nor the situations into which they get themselves are subject to much change in the course of the play. The more things change, the more they are the same. Läuffer is always the impotent victim at the receiving end of someone else's aggressions; Marie is always the hypersensitive creature buffeted by emotions she cannot discipline. Nothing substantive is really decided in these plays. In fact, it is very likely that the action ends at another beginning, there being little to suggest that the past patterns of these characters will never recur. Again, the Aristotelian play tends to suggest the exact opposite, for things are resolved once and for all at the conclusion of the play.

Lenz disregards unity of place and action in a way that has proved irritably distracting. It sometimes seems that his erratic shifts from one locale to the next are in conformity with the general disposition of the Stürmer und Dränger to thumb their noses at Aristotle in the name of Shakespeare. Some of this censure is no doubt valid, but it is important to realize that unity of place, like unity of time, would hardly have facilitated the synthesis of social observation and dramatic action Lenz was out to make. As it is, his plays give us a variety of social types and a diversity of social relationships simply by shifting to locales where these types and relationships are normal. Examples of this from The Tutor are the landlady of the boarding house scenes, Wenzeslaus in the forest, the musician in the university town; from The Soldiers they are the Jew in his pawnshop, the Countess de la Roche at her home; the officers in their quarters. In each case, a character who is not crucial to the action of the play is presented to us in the surroundings where he or she ordinarily functions, with the result that a far richer social picture emerges because of the casualness with which Lenz violates unity of place.

As for unity of tone, Lenz would have rejected it above all for its falsity. Why exclude from serious drama vast areas of human experience simply because they imply emotional connotations not sanctioned by an ancient doctrine? In this case Lenz rejects Aristotle for the very reason he enjoyed Shakespeare's plays, which he found full of irresistible, pulsing life.

Lenz, himself, seems to have done a great deal of thinking on the relationship between general cultural conditions and the nature of drama. Conceiving of the distinction between comedy and tragedy as primarily social and not psychological, he insisted comedy could reach a far greater audience, that tragedy attracted only a serious-
minded minority. Lenz translated the fact that comedy was more popular into an aesthetic determinant: Inasmuch as comedy can reach the ordinary man, comedy should play an important cultural role by helping to create a greater audience for the tragic artist. And inasmuch as comedy is so intelligible to the average man, there is every reason to invest it with the seriousness one associates with tragedy. We are very close here to Brecht's aesthetics.

In conclusion, Lenz differs from his contemporaries far more than most casual literary historians are prone to reveal. No writer of his day matches him in pessimism, resignation, and irony. No one manifests his powerfully concrete social awareness which makes urgent the kind of problems easily attenuated into conversational abstractions. At the same time, this sense of urgency never prompted Lenz to sum up all that was wrong with his society in the indictment of a single villainous class. Just as he rejected the histrionic hero who is almost stock with the Sturm und Drang, so he rejected the histrionic class villain of the kind Lessing and Schiller did not hesitate to utilize.

Lenz exhibits the moral squalor of the aristocracy as well as the moral cowardice of the bourgeoisie. But his interests do not end here; his basic concern seems to have been that of the Sturm und Drang in general: the interrelationship of social organization and human instincts. It would not be wrong to say Lenz anticipates the Wedekind who dramatized the powerful destructive essence of the sexual impulse. It is no accident that in both major plays, individuals come to grief because of that impulse and that in The Soldiers the need for sex is viewed so threateningly. Lenz implies that all men have powerful instinctual needs, and to attribute to any class or individual an absence of such needs is to sin against reality.

Lenz begins in German drama a tradition in which the animality of man is not softened by optimism or idealism, a tradition which faces squarely up to stark facts without sentimental coatings. This tradition will emphasize again and again that European society is sick to the core, confirming forcefully the judgment of a character in The New Menoza that Europeans leaving their continent should be quarantined, so morally diseased is their nature.

Toward the last quarter of the eighteenth century the appearance of drama with some of the stylistic features present in The Tutor and The Soldiers might strike some as inevitable. After all, the Shakespearean episodic structure was being held up in German culture as the dramatic form of the future; the reign of Aristotelianism seemed to have ended for good; Diderot and Mercier had effectively made
a case for drama which would concern itself with the realities of
the average man; and last, but not least, the social situation in Germany
had become so blatantly inequitable that a dramatist was bound to
arise who would choose this society as his target.

Still, Lenz's emergence is surprising, more so than the fact that
in the plays of contemporaries like Schiller there are overtones of
his vision. Most remarkable about his work is the fact that in it several
contemporary approaches to theater coalesce. Lenz appeared at a time
when it was only natural to think of combining the social awareness
of a Diderot and Mercier with the formal structure of Shakespeare,
in order to rival Shakespeare's depth of characterization against a
social background highly relevant to contemporary experience. But
Lenz's peculiar achievement was that he synthesized the views of
Diderot and Mercier and the aesthetics implied by Shakespeare into
an entirely new species of play.

Lenz pioneers a tradition in which a realistic treatment of social
conditions goes hand in hand with a highly subjective outlook. This
tradition, from Lenz to Brecht, will put on stage the kind of ordinary
life and prosaic environment which it was beneath the dignity of
classical and idealistic dramatists to give more than their passing atten-
tion. The dramatists of the Lenz-Brecht tradition, like those naturalists
who took Zola's word for what the focus of drama should be, identify
the sordid and brutish with the true nature of reality, and, like the
Zolaesque Naturalists, they identify human psychology with the opera-
tion of basic instinctual forces. Stylistically, however, Lenz and com-
pany are a far cry from "objective" naturalism, if only because they
resort to a number of techniques which make quite clear that their
point of departure was sheer outrage. They make no secret of the
fact that the society in which they live leaves them viscerally antago-
nistic. And if not their society, then life itself.

Their approach is above all functional. Character, dialogue, episode,
scenery, gesture—almost anything that goes into the making of a play
is used to demonstrate vividly how unsavory a place is the world
implied by the play's action. Character is portrayed ironically, action
is developed didactically, dialogue is employed illustratively, and the
totality of the play's action implies very much the same value judgments
as its dramaturgic elements.

This kind of drama, which focuses at all times on what is behind
the action, as well as on the patterns which the action will invariably
assume, is hardly made for heroics. Lenz's characters could not possibly
rise to idealistic heights because they merely crystallize in a peculiar
way what is in general true of their society. Heroics imply a measure
of independence and individuality which these characters lack, not
only because of the way they are made, but also because of the way
the play they are in is made. The play is structured to deny them
heroic autonomy: it is structured to show the horrible nature of the
forces which control them, to make of these characters egregious ex­
amples of what is sadly inevitable, given certain conditions.

One need go no further than Lenz to sum up the distinctive character
of the drama that was to be written from Büchner to Brecht. Its
structure is episodic, its variety of episodes apparently combined in
an aimless enough fashion. Staple attributes of the well-made play
are not much in evidence; and critics will be as annoyed by the absence
of suspense and climax in Lenz as they have been by such omissions
in Büchner and Brecht. In general there are few exciting confronta­
tions in the drama here under discussion; one confronts only one’s
own helplessness. Formally, these unorthodox plays violate what are
supposedly elementary rules of playwriting; their authors blandly em­
ploy character as a vehicle for special pleading and they have no
compunctions about straight recourse to melodrama. By what right
do they call themselves realists? No less disconcerting are the attitudes
behind this drama—an unsettling blend of comic perception and tragic
feeling, of fierce moral outrage punctuated by ice-cold cynicism, or,
put another way, of unabashed nihilism grounded in the kind of
apocalyptic despair that is available only to confirmed moral idealists.
In a seemingly perverse refusal to define themselves, these writers
inveigh against a world crying out for change and then go on to
suggest that their moralizing will not make a bit of difference.

Lenz, himself, would very likely have rationalized the structure of
his two major plays by pointing out that it is ideal for a drama
of naturalistic character study. This would bring his practice into con­
formity with the views he had expressed in his Notes to the Theater
on the relative merits of Aristotle’s and Shakespeare’s aesthetics. The
odds are that he would not have argued for episodic structuring by
pinpointing those elements which strike us as most original today.
But the kind of play he wrote is not distinguished primarily for what
it tells us about human character. It is distinguished above all for
what it tells us about human character as a symptom—a symptom
not only of what is wrong with the nature of a particular society
but of what is irrevocably wrong with the very nature of the human
situation.