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J. L. Styan

Excerpt

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1 *The naturalistic revolt*

'Realistic' is a slippery term in dramatic criticism. In 1909, after the best of the realistic plays had been written, Edward Gordon Craig observed in *On the Art of the Theatre* that the artificiality of the Kembles had been supplanted by the more natural Edmund Kean, who had been surpassed in being natural by Macready, who seemed stilted when Henry Irving arrived. In time Antoine made Irving look artificial, and in turn Antoine's acting 'became mere artifice by the side of the acting of Stanislavsky'. What then, asked Craig, did it mean to be 'natural'? He answered, 'I find them one and all to be mere examples of a new artificiality – the artificiality of naturalism' (p. 290). As it is with acting, so it is with playwriting: the old gives way to the new, which in turn grows old. It is axiomatic that each generation feels that its theatre is in some way more 'real' than the last – Euripides over Sophocles, Molière over the *commedia dell'arte*, Goldsmith over Steele, Ibsen over Schiller, Brecht over Ibsen. The claims seem to echo one another. It is, of course, the conception of dramatic reality which changes, and realism must finally be evaluated, not by the style of a play or a performance, but by the image of truth its audience perceives.

The age of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and the early Shaw thought of itself as realistic in the style as well as the content of its plays, but from our distance it is possible to see that what their actors achieved on the stage was in itself merely another convention. However, if the realistic movement was short-lived (its brief span of thirty years fell between Ibsen's first socially realistic play, *The Pillars of Society*, in 1877 and perhaps Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* in 1906), its impact was powerful. Arthur Miller acknowledged his debt to Ibsen, and Tennessee Williams to Chekhov, fifty years later, even though the mode of their plays had been considerably altered by other pressures.

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Yet it may be possible to isolate a characteristic realism, that which, amid a particular controversy, held the late nineteenth-century stage, and to claim that this was the ostensible beginning of the modern drama. This beginning coincided with the scientific revolution which undermined the intellectual optimism of the early years of the century. August Comte's early scientific view of society (*Système de philosophie positive*, 1824), Charles Darwin's biological theory of natural selection (*The Origin of Species*, 1859), the work of the literary historian Hippolyte Taine (*Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, 1864) and the physiologist Claude Bernard (*Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*, 1865) and Karl Marx's idea of economic man (*Das Kapital*, 1867) together reflect this revolution. The parallel literary movement in France, represented by such naturalistic novelists as Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, accordingly encouraged the emergence of a different kind of play and a different kind of performance to match it.

The new play and its mode of production were in conscious rebellion against the characteristically romantic form of drama popular at the time. The nineteenth century had begun in the full flush of the romantic movement, which affected virtually every form of artistic expression by its mood of radical idealism, spontaneity of feeling and faith in the visionary imagination. In the theatre, the movement was particularly associated with political dissent and unrest after the French Revolution, and it exulted in a new-found freedom of spirit and boldly challenged established values. In Germany especially, Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* had rejected the formality of the French classical model for tragedy, and the drama of *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) in the theatre of Goethe and Schiller swept the stage with plays of passionate nationalism which glorified figures of heroic proportions. The movement spread rapidly across Europe, and in the process of popularization became as mechanical as the classical tragedy it supplanted.

The romantic ideal for drama was enshrined in a famous manifesto of 1827, the Preface to *Cromwell* of Victor Hugo (1802–85). In elaborate terms, Hugo scorned the neoclassical laws of dramatic unity: the only laws should be those of 'nature'. Taking Shakespeare as its model, the stage should claim its natural freedom of time and

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place, and allow the sublime and the grotesque, tragedy and comedy, to meet and mingle as in life. In 1830 these new principles were applied by Hugo at the Théâtre Française in his romantic historical melodrama in verse, *Hernani*. This event has been claimed as the most important in nineteenth-century dramatic history. The production caused a riot, the champions of the old ways confronting in the theatre itself those of the new – this was the first of the many public rows which punctuate the story of the modern stage. Victor Hugo won his battle, and although his play was very far from representing real life on the stage, the way had been opened for the coming of modern realism.

At its most vulgar level, the romantic theatre produced a sensational drama of strong emotions and unequivocal moral sentiment. In Britain and America, domestic drama, or 'the melodrama', discovered a simple formula for success which continues to work well in the popular media even today. The leading characters of melodrama, persecuted by villainy and evil in the shape of obvious social injustice, wealth or power, might be expected to bear every torment, feel every moral temptation, sufficient to lend their audience the vicarious excitement of suffering with them. Yet the spectator could share every trembling emotion in the comforting knowledge that providence would eventually intervene and virtue would always triumph. Thus vice and virtue were at bottom a practical business, one in which the virtuous would be rewarded in proportion to their suffering. It was a neat conception for popular consumer art, and it developed the typical stock company of actors who repeated their stereotypes of moral black and white from play to play. The style of acting followed the given formula, with bold, confident gestures reinforced by an appropriately rhetorical speech strong with *sententiae*, and everything else on the stage down to the costume and make-up conveyed clear indications of the social and moral condition of the characters. As the mechanics of the theatre developed behind the proscenium arch, scenery became increasingly spectacular, but it too was required to signal a necessary quality of vice or virtue, peril or security, by the atmosphere of the set. This drama was essentially romantic, joyfully unreal, a concoction of trite situations and petty tricks which worked wonderfully well within the formula.

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Led by Eugène Scribe and his immediate successor Victorien Sardou, both men of immense theatrical skill, the romantic drama in Paris drew upon the popular formula, embellished it with over-emphatic speech, gave it a contemporary appeal with a touch of revolutionary sentiment, and specifically arranged the story to capture and hold the interest of a general audience. In translation, the plays of Scribe and Sardou also found enthusiastic audiences everywhere in Europe and America, and provided models for every second-rate playwright. The best plays of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Tom Taylor and T. W. Robertson in London owed their success to the Scribean pattern, and later playwrights who rebelled against the romantic drama, even Ibsen, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, nevertheless made use of the very devices they were attacking. Under Scribe's hand, the French style of play acquired the apt name of *la pièce bien faite*, 'the well-made play', and the term eventually became synonymous with any mechanical playwriting which placed too much emphasis upon an efficient plot and a satisfied box-office. Scribe's own total of 374 works for the theatre imply a particular efficiency in managing himself, his collaborators and his audience, as well as the ingredients of a play. The well-made plays of Émile Augier and Dumas *films* added a new dimension to this drama by using the formula to make a moral point. This was the beginning of the play of ideas, or *la pièce à thèse*. In the kind of social problem play Dumas wrote, an increasing show of interest in the social background of the characters could lend a moral point the force of realism, but every time mechanical plotting confounded a brave intention: the evidence always seemed to be rigged.

The formula for the well-made play was iron-clad. Coincidences in the form of misplaced documents, mistaken identities, lost letters, might be frequent, but the succession of events in a Scribean melodrama was up to a point logical and plausible. The focus of the stage was always on a leading character, the *hero* or *heroine* or both, with whom the audience was expected to *empathize* (I italicize the technical terms here). In the *exposition* of the hero's situation, the audience was told all it needed to know about what had happened in the past, before the curtain rose, as it were. With this information in mind, it could understand and accept the subsequent *complication* of the action, usually caused by the hero's rival, the villain, or some

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form of obstruction. Matters would grow worse, and tension would be built up as the hero's fortunes seemed destined for disaster. This *reversal* (roughly equivalent to the *peripeteia* of Greek tragedy) was designed specifically to create suspense, and would delay the *resolution* or *dénouement* of the play. However, the story usually turned upon some secret, of which the audience was aware, but of which the hero knew nothing until the truth was conveniently revealed at the critical moment (not unlike the Greek *anagnorisis* or *recognition*). In the judgment of the critic Francisque Sarcey, this was the *scène à faire*, or *obligatory scene*, and at this point the enemy would admit defeat and the hero could celebrate his triumph. The final curtain would then fall without much delay.

Although the well-made play might introduce some political satire, social criticism or even subtlety of character, any of this was subordinate to the contrivances of the plotting; indeed, in his preface to *La Haine* Sardou confessed that he invented the *scène à faire* first, and then worked out his plot backwards. It is little wonder that characters and situations looked much the same from play to play. Yet it was an immensely successful arrangement, and well into the twentieth century the aspiring playwright could still have found rules for writing a well-made play as laid down by William Archer in his *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (1912) or, in America, by George Pierce Baker, director of the famous workshop at Harvard, in his *Dramatic Technique* (1919).

The realistic rebellion, when it came, seemed to many people unpleasant, consciously shocking. In general, the realist of this time was in rebellion against romantic situations and characterization, and tried to put on the stage only what he could verify by observing ordinary life. In the nineteenth century this usually meant middle-class life, and even then the whole truth about ordinary life might suffer from distortion when he tried to surprise his audience into seeing what he wished it to. Like Ibsen, he tried to write dialogue which avoided poetic flights and excessive sentiment, but which corresponded to 'the genuine, plain language spoken in real life' (Ibsen's letter to Lucie Wolf, 25 May 1883), although the demands of a highly defined stage action and the rigid structure of a theatrical plot usually inhibited any accurate reproduction of actual speech.

Much stronger demands might force the realist to depart even

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farther from verisimilitude, and be even more selective in the material that made up his play. 'Naturalistic' is a critical term which is also slippery, but which may be applied rather more specifically to those playwrights of the so-called 'naturalistic movement', writers who were committed to presenting a specially angled view of real life, as we shall see. The scientific naturalist tried to show that powerful forces governed human lives, forces of which we might not be fully aware and over which we might have little control – the forces of heredity and environment. His play bore witness to the instinctive behaviour of men and women, and his characters and their situations had to seem representative of their class or age group, sex or economic group, with the consequent loss of that essential individuality we know to be also characteristic of life. The paradox grows greater when, in trying to teach their audience a social lesson, some writers lost the scientific objectivity which constituted their reason for writing a realistic play in the first place. Those who showed dramatic bias were legion.

2 *Early theory: Zola*

Thérèse Raquin (1873)

It was the novelist Émile Zola (1840–1902) who first outlined a theory of naturalism in literature. He regarded his novels, some of which he later turned into plays, as clinical laboratories in which he might scientifically explore the consequences upon his characters of their birth and background. Inevitably his creatures appeared to be the victims of society, and all his conclusions seemed pessimistic.

Zola took the opportunity to write challenging theoretical prefaces to his plays, and the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* is among the most famous of them. He also collected and expanded the dramatic criticism he wrote for the press in Paris under the titles *Le Naturalisme au théâtre* and *Nos auteurs dramatiques*; these books appeared

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as two of the six volumes of criticism he published in 1880 and 1881. A chapter on the theatre is also included in *Le Roman expérimental*, which was one of the six, and drew heavily upon the notion of scientific method as propounded by Claude Bernard. Although Zola's plays and the dramatic versions of his novels do not live up to his precepts, these critical writings had the effect of making him the champion of the naturalistic movement in his time.

Thérèse Raquin (1867) was widely regarded as the first milestone of the movement. It was a grim tale of sexual passion in a lower middle-class setting. It told of Thérèse's adulterous love, the murder by drowning of her sickly husband, and her subsequent guilt and final suicide in a pact with her lover, Laurent. In 1873 Zola turned the novel into a play in order to help the cause of naturalism in the theatre and to bring drama into line with parallel developments in fiction. The play was produced by Hippolyte Hostein and it was moderately successful (the 1879 adaptation of *L'Assommoir*, which ran for 300 performances, was his best success). *Thérèse Raquin* certainly exemplified Zola's recurrent theme, the pressure of character and the past on events, but it was hardly the realistic slice of life he aimed at. Its characteristic style has Thérèse muttering, for example, 'Assassin, assassin!', with the stage direction, 'Elle est prise de spasmes, chancelle jusqu'au lit, veut se retenir à un des rideaux qu'elle arrache, et reste un instant adossée un mur, haletante et terrible' (III. vi). ('Murderer, murderer!'... 'She is seized with spasms, staggers over to the bed and catches hold of the bed curtains, dragging them down. She leans for a moment against the wall breathing hard, a terrifying sight.')

However atmospheric the darkness of the set, however detailed the behaviour and activity of the characters, however closely observed their inner struggles, however inevitable the play's end, its mechanics conformed all too obtrusively with the pattern of the well-made play. Its elements of overstressed sensationalism and impending human disaster implicitly denied the naturalistic requirement of being dispassionate and scientific. Although it was only Zola's emphatic way of urging his cause, the characteristic tone of the play was all towards the sordid and the squalid. Zola's scientific claims no doubt permitted him to select an ugly subject, just as 'a doctor cannot be criticized for studying a revolting venereal disease',

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as René Wellek puts it in *A History of Modern Criticism* (vol. IV, p. 16), but in his novels and plays, as well as in his criticism, Zola conveyed the distinct impression that he liked to shock. None of this is as important as the thinking that prompted the play, however, and when it appeared *Thérèse Raquin* provoked violent discussion.

Zola's stated philosophy, both of the novel and the drama, was one of absolute objectivity, with setting, characterization and dialogue rendered so close to actual life that an audience would be convinced by the illusion of its reality. A playwright had only to reproduce man's environment, endow it with human life and show that one produced the other, and what had seemed small and insignificant could be important and urgent.

He was right in believing that the driving force behind the thought and literature of the age was that of naturalism, and although he was not in a position to identify its sources, he recognized the significance of the rise of the natural sciences in the previous century and that the nineteenth century was the age of the experimental method. He believed that naturalism had appeared in the novel first because the theatre was hidebound by conventions which were slow to change; he could not see, as Strindberg was to see later, that a smaller and less popular audience would permit a more rapid change. Zola's target was the established French theatre of the romantic drama and the boulevard melodrama, the theatre of Augier and Dumas *fiels* with their complaisant claims to being realistic. He particularly distrusted the vogue for historical drama because of its open invitation to spectacle and swagger; even today we know what he means from our contemporary examples of big costume films and pretentious period plays. Zola compared this colourful nonsense with the serious French novel of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and the brothers Goncourt, and what they had achieved in fine character detail and analysis.

The best novelists had rejected romantic characters, mere symbolic fictions representing virtue or vice, and had refused to invent grand romantic scenes in which any true observation of human conduct had to bow before the demands of sentiment. They had abandoned the sort of outworn plotting which seemed to Zola like 'a childish game of tying threads in order to enjoy untying them again'. With their new objectivity had disappeared any need for

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majestic speech and noble sentiments. Now it was time for the theatre not only to strip the stage of its artificial trappings, but also of its false content. But even Zola did not reckon with the inflexibility of the profession: the style of acting is inseparable from the way a play works, and he could not change the actors overnight. Indeed, the great realists, Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov and the rest, each in his own way, had to accommodate or do battle with the very actors upon whom they depended.

Zola recognized that the dramatist lacked the freedom of the novelist, and further encouraged the break with the restrictions of the neoclassical unities. The novelist could be prodigal with time and space, and had to woo only the solitary reader sitting by his fireside rather than a spectator sitting in a crowd. However, Zola would not admit the inferiority of the theatre as a vehicle, although he predicted its quick death if it did not bend with the times. He argued that in the history of the theatre, the drama had always managed to adapt itself, and would do so again, bringing its special strengths of immediacy and intensity to the naturalistic movement.

In all his dramatic criticism, Zola emphasized the importance of characterization as the best measure of a play's truthfulness. The characters of the romantic drama were too facile, too standardized. He pointed to the attention given to character in the French classical drama of Corneille, Racine and Molière, and found the heroes of their nineteenth-century successors to be wooden puppets, mere abstractions of duty, patriotism, superstition or maternal love. The new naturalistic drama would return to the analysis of character, except that now the characters would be ordinary people in their natural setting, and the play would examine the physical and social influences that made them what they were.

Stage scenery might be nothing but canvas and paint, but it was the theatre's equivalent of the element of description in the novel. Moreover, scenery on the stage remained vividly before the eyes for as long as the curtain was up, a background and environment for the characters which would be faithful to the author's conception. A factory, a mine, a market, a railway station or a race-track could supply all the colour and life any play could desire, even when the aim was not one of decoration, but of dramatic utility. In

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his thinking about realism, Zola believed that it was necessary for every play to have its appropriate setting; he could not conceive that an abstract or neutral background might heighten the detail and particularity of dialogue and behaviour. For him the rule was that a lifelike setting encouraged lifelike costumes, which encouraged lifelike dialogue.

Zola was more acute in his analysis of the romantic theatre when he recognized that the language of the play was the key to change. Nineteenth-century stage speech, itself a product of neo-classical tragedy, was associated with a special 'theatre voice' and a rich declamatory manner, although all the full-blooded passions, the romantic sentiment and bravado, the excess of cliché and platitude, were actually a direct result of thin-blooded, stock characters. If the moment was serious, the language was sonorous, balanced, rhetorical; if lighter in vein, it was perforce witty, paradoxical, scintillating. None of it had to do with the way people really spoke. Zola further recognized that, in spite of the range of characters in the plays of Dumas *fils*, for example, they all spoke the same stage language. Therefore, the new dialogue should be flexible and precise, and convey the tone and feeling of a character's individuality. This important suggestion would be followed up later, particularly by Ibsen.

All these principles supported Zola's essential requirement that the theatre should not *lie*; he claimed that he was 'the honest soldier of truth'. We may smile now at the notion that literature could ever become a science, because a fiction can never prove anything; but the 'experimental' approach of naturalism could strongly inform the creative imagination and provide a vital new impulse for art, as indeed it did. Zola believed that art and literature should serve the inquiring mind, investigating, analysing and reporting on man and society, seeking the facts and the logic behind human life. Nor need the new drama be deficient in 'poetry', for truth would encourage the poetry of humanity: reality had greatness in itself. So Zola awaited the arrival of a genius, a true innovator who would change a stage soaked with 'the grey rain of stale mediocrity', and speed the rebirth of the theatre.

This innovator was to be Ibsen, who, as it happened, greatly disliked being compared with Zola: 'Zola', he said, 'descends into