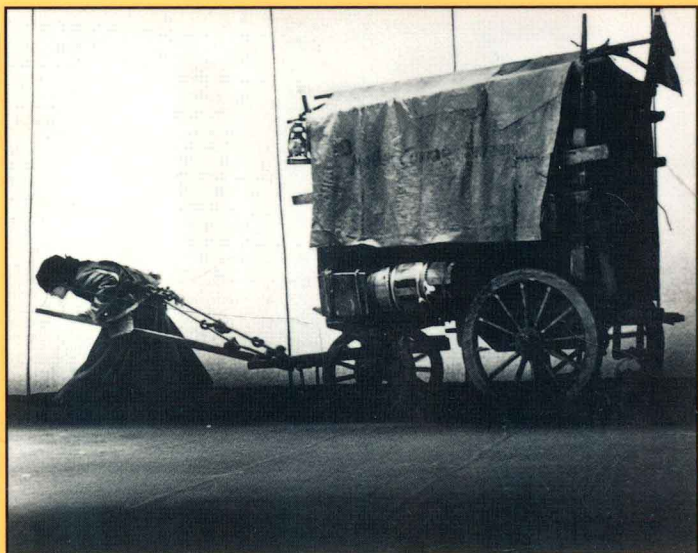


# EIGHT MODERN PLAYS

THE WILD DUCK • THREE SISTERS  
CANDIDA • THE GHOST SONATA  
SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR  
LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT  
MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN  
HAPPY DAYS



EDITED BY ANTHONY CAPUTI

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS OF

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BACKGROUNDS AND CRITICISM  
SECOND EDITION

*Edited by*

ANTHONY CAPUTI

CORNELL UNIVERSITY



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# Foreword

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Modern drama, as any list of recent publications will tell you, is an anthologist's heaven. Its wealth of playwrights and plays, its great variety of modes and styles, and its lack of hierarchical categories and time-sanctioned judgments permit excesses of ingenuity and whimsy unknown in other periods of dramatic history. That this should be so is understandable. Even after a full century what continues to be called modern drama is still too much with us for any anthologist to be absolutely certain that this play is not important while that one is, or that this playwright is an innovator of the order of Sophocles while that one is distinctly a third-rate hack. Because it is all so relevant to *us*, and because it is still a living drama whose meaning is obscure because its story is incomplete, we cannot view it as we do, rightly or wrongly, the ages of Pericles or Elizabeth I. With few reliable guidelines and a superabundance of playwrights, critics, theater historians, and amateur experts all hotly disputing the major and minor classifications, we continue to look and to read and to attempt discriminations, conscious that, though our efforts may be tentative, we have no choice but to make them.

Yet a hundred years of study and criticism have not been in vain; they have furnished a number of distinctions and discriminations about the broad movement of modern drama and about the playwrights who have set the outlines of that movement. Slowly but steadily a body of opinion has emerged, which, though it scarcely tells all and predicts almost nothing, has provided a matrix for inquiry and understanding that most scholars and critics accept without protest. The trick for them, and perhaps even more notably for teachers of drama, is to accept and use this way of describing modern drama so that its provisional orderliness illuminates the richness of the subject but does not blind readers and students to its complexity.

It has been my purpose in this collection to do just that: to represent the broad outline of modern drama in the work of those playwrights who, critics and scholars agree, best define it. For each playwright I have tried to choose a play both distinguished in its own right and exemplary of the special contribution made by the playwright on playwriting as he found it. In each case, moreover, I have chosen plays that in my personal experience have proven themselves both accessible and of deep and enduring interest to students. The supporting materials by

the playwrights and the essays by diverse hands comprise a mixture of well-known pieces, little-known pieces, and new work; they have been selected to assist, to provoke, to extend, and to enrich the reading of the plays.

Certain of the essays, in fact, declare more explicitly than the plays themselves what has been the second, though no less important principle governing this book. Since no collection of modern plays can avoid being an anthology of documents illustrative of what social critics solemnly call the modern condition, I have deliberately attempted here to present plays and supporting writings that supply material for that study even as they establish the facts of literary and dramatic history. In my opinion, modern drama embodies the peculiar tension, discord, hilarity, and hysteria of the twentieth century with an integrity, or call it all-at-onceness, impossible in its sister genres, for in the unusual fullness of the dramatic image we approach the special quality of contemporary life with a rare immediacy. Certainly among the playwrights represented here several have regularly been accorded major roles in the forging of modern sensibility. It is hoped, in any case, that instructors and students will find in these materials the wherewithal to illuminate both the literary and the cultural achievements of modern drama.

ANTHONY CAPUTI

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# On Reading Modern Plays

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Reading modern plays shares with the reading of plays from any historical period the problem of texts not primarily created to be read. Plays are not, after all, poems or novels: they do not communicate initially and essentially by words, but by actions, by way of actors doing and saying things, a synthesis of visual and auditory resources of which the words are only one. Reading the plays of any period, then, is inevitably a highly creative process by which the reader tries to construct from the verbal text as much as possible of the imagery of actors moving and speaking within a particular theatrical space. Reading modern plays differs from this general activity only to the extent that modern drama works through the languages of dramatic action peculiar to our time.

Of the psychological process by which readers transvalue the words on the page into scenes and series of scenes in the theaters of the mind we know very little. We read, and with the help of imagination and knowledge the images form, breathe, and develop the power to move us. Criticism can be useful to us because it can guide the imagination and supply the knowledge necessary to it, but criticism does not so much explain the creative process of reading as it stimulates it. It is always partial and imperfect because it imposes a critical activity on a creative one; it is valuable to the extent that it assists the reader, by this in some respects false imposition, to a heightened and enriched order of reading.

In reading plays, then, we begin by accepting the premises of criticism: that a play is an ordered whole, a thing constructed to move a beholder in a reasonably circumscribed way. Moreover, the parts of that whole function together, dovetailing into it according to principles that are susceptible to rational analysis. Now these premises are useful, even when accompanied by an awareness that playwrights undoubtedly often work by methods other than rational ones, because only by accepting them can the reader assemble or reassemble the structure of a dramatic action with some assurance that it is a structure and not a chaos. Only in this way can the reader bring to his or her reading a structure and system that will open new avenues of illumination and insight. Having accepted these premises, in any case, the reader is then in a position to read the play as a complex of mutually illuminating artistic decisions, a structure of choices made by the playwright for the purpose of fashioning a particular dramatic action. By moving back and forth from the

words or facts of the text to this gradually widening structure of decisions the reader will construct not merely an explanation for the facts, but a line of artistic reasoning that, theoretically, sharpens and enriches his or her perception of the dramatic action. It is futile to point out that the artistic reasoning devolved may have little to do with the actual process by which the playwright designed the work; it has served its purpose if it activates the play and causes it to release its power in a way consistent with the most honest and rigorous thought that the reader can bring to bear.

Reading plays, therefore, can be seen as a process by which the words or facts of the text are converted into animate images, which, in turn, are focused, related to each other, and organized as a totality governed by a pervasive artistic rationale. As a process it is emphatically exploratory: it never exhausts itself, and it always involves a back-and-forth movement between specific questions rooted in fact and controlling rationale. To a large extent it consists of asking proper questions. In *Oedipus Rex* why has Sophocles chosen to conclude his play, not with Oedipus' lamentation after he has gouged out his eyes, but with his scene with his daughters as he prepares to go into exile? In *Hamlet* why has Shakespeare decided to have Ophelia report Hamlet's visit to her bedroom rather than to have them play the scene? In *Long Day's Journey into Night* why has Eugene O'Neill carefully contrived a round robin of colloquies among the members of the Tyrone family? Each of these questions can be formulated in terms of perfectly obvious indications in the verbal text, yet each is at the same time a part of a whole battery of questions that, as they are answered, lead to a progressively fuller conception of what the peculiar nature of this or that dramatic action is.

In the interests of bringing some clarity and system to an activity that can never be pellucid we might identify three distinct kinds or orders of artistic decision in the making of plays. First there is that order of decision that concerns the material out of which the dramatic action is fashioned. Why, it is important to ask, has the playwright chosen to make an action out of this particular story? What is there in its outline, what is there about its characters, what is there about the relationships among its characters that make these materials suitable to his purposes? Why in *Oedipus Rex* the story of Oedipus and not Creon? Why in *Hamlet* the story of a prince who cannot carry out what he sees to be a just revenge? Why in *Three Sisters* the story of three sisters rather than brothers? These are not questions that can be answered in isolation, of course; they must be considered with others and must be related to others. Why does Ophelia have this particular character rather than another? Why in the *Three Sisters* has Chekhov given Andrey this particular combination of strengths and weaknesses and not another? Because these questions concern the basic materials of the play, the substance from which it is formed, the artistic decisions involved might usefully be called substantial decisions.

Somewhat less general and far-reaching is a second order of decision, which concerns the primary shaping of the play. In other words, once the materials or substance have been selected (and it bears repeating that we are constructing a temporal sequence that is useful to the critic-reader but that may have very little to do with the actual composition of the play), what decisions best explain the fundamental shape imposed on these materials? Why has Sophocles chosen to begin his play where he has rather than earlier or later in the story? Why has he represented this scene and reported that one? Why has Shakespeare chosen to treat the events of *Hamlet* in the particular scale and with these proportions? Why has so much time been given to Hamlet's internal debate and, relatively speaking, so little to his love affair with Ophelia? Why in *Henry IV* has Pirandello decided not to reveal Henry's "cure" to the audience until toward the end of act 2? Because these questions probe decisions that we assume conferred a primary shape on the play, because they determined what was to be represented, in what order the various events were to be represented, and in what scale and proportion they were to be represented, the decisions might be called representational decisions.

Finally, there is a third order of decision, which concerns the peculiar focus accorded to a dramatic action. Beyond the decisions that explain why these particular materials have been selected and why they have been shaped to present this basic dramatic image, there is a host of more limited decisions that sharpen particular qualities, highlight particular issues, embolden particular elements, in other words, that focus the action and its peculiar power. Why has Sophocles emphasized blindness in *Oedipus Rex*? Why has Shakespeare encouraged us to compare Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras by putting them in analogous positions? Why has Ibsen entitled his play *The Wild Duck*? This order of decision comprehends all those details of technique that, though they rarely do more than confer a peculiar finish on a play, usually proceed from its fundamental controlling intentions. For convenience they might be called focusing decisions, though the term scarcely does justice to their variety.

Taken together, these artistic decisions constitute a structure or system that criticism creates for the purpose of assisting readers in their creation, or more properly re-creation, of the artistic totality of the play. As they read, they probe to construct, isolate to combine, reason to use their imagination the more effectively. In reading plays their aim is to set on the imaginary stage of their minds the most authoritative, most complete version of the dramatic imagery of actors moving and speaking in a particular theatrical space that they can derive from the words on the page.

This way of reading plays, of course, is never quite the same for all plays, and it is notably different for plays from different traditions. Each of the decisions that goes into the making of a play is inevitably conditioned by the special theatrical bias, the special dramatic style, and



the special ambience of social, political, and religious values of the historical period in which the play was written. Sophocles could not write a Shakespearean play just as Shakespeare could not write a Sophoclean play: each approached the act of creating for the theater having been formed as a playwright by the physical theaters, the modes of presentation, the theatrical conventions, and the norms of dramatic composition of his time. If readers of plays are to deal fairly with the works of different historical periods, they must incorporate into the creative process of reading as much knowledge as they can recover of the cultural and dramatic history that they honestly feel contributed to the shaping of the play. Their re-creation of the play by way of this always tentative construction of the system of its governing artistic decisions must be filtered through and qualified by this knowledge. Needless to say, the task is always rendered more difficult by gaps in our knowledge: to the extent that we do not know everything about the physical stage in Shakespeare's age, about the style of playing practiced by his actor-colleagues, and about the specific cultural context in which his plays were written and produced—to that extent, it is probably fair to say, we can never know any Shakespearean play definitively. But we do the best we can with the knowledge that the effort is eminently worth making and that printed texts are as close as we are ever likely to come to many of the dramatic masterpieces of our tradition.

Reading modern plays is in many respects a vastly less complicated matter. Although the process of transvaluing the words on the page into the imagery of actors in motion is much the same, we do not have to read deeply in linguistic history to understand the words, in stage history to understand the modes of production, or in cultural history to understand the forces that drive our dramatists. Because the plays derive from our tradition, or from a tradition very close to our own, we come to them with a readiness that we must labor long to duplicate for great plays of the past.

Yet the advantages offered by modern plays must not be exaggerated, for their accessibility is deceptive. To begin with, modern drama embraces tremendous diversity. Unlike their predecessors, modern playwrights range freely over dramatic history, adapting the resources of diverse traditions to their purposes and experimenting with an abandon that makes for unparalleled variety. As readers and theater-goers, we are, unfortunately, ill-prepared for that variety. Typically, we have been introduced to drama by way of films, television plays, and a limited number of experiences in the theater, with the result that we have grown accustomed to plays in the realistic style of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* or Tennessee Williams's *Night of the Iguana*. Such works present us with relatively familiar actions and worlds and for the most part give little difficulty; moreover, because of them we have been prompted to think, mistakenly, that the realistic mode of presentation is the fundamental language of the theater. It is small wonder, then, that even the

most sophisticated readers are frequently bewildered and baffled by that extensive part of modern drama that is nonrealistic, by the radical departures from illusionism to be met in the Surrealists, Expressionists, the dramatists of the Theater of the Absurd, the Performance Theater of the 1960s and 1970s, and the various forms of so-called Post-Modernist theater now. The orientation toward theater that the deeply ingrained tradition of realism encourages us to, with some gains for us, surely, as far as realistic plays go, impedes in us a readiness to deal with that important part of modern drama written in nonrealistic modes.

Moreover, it is possible to argue that our familiarity with realism also entails disadvantages for reading and seeing plays of that kind. Because realism as a way of approaching experience, as a way of looking at the world and thinking about it, is so profoundly embedded in twentieth-century experience, we seldom stop to think that as a movement in art, letters, and, in general, in cultural history, it too was the result of a complicated historical process: it had its beginnings, it had its pioneers, and it underwent various modifications; it was part of that changing fabric of values that steadily conditioned playwrights to formulate new artistic intentions and to search for new solutions to their artistic problems. To see realism and the particular works that derive from it fairly, we must see it with a perspective that familiarity makes difficult for us.

Yet if the problems of reading realistic plays are more deceptive, they are no more difficult than those involved in reading other kinds of modern plays. With every modern play the reader must develop and maintain a perspective on the modern world, on everything that has prompted the playwright to formulate this rather than that artistic purpose, that has led him or her to this rather than that array of artistic decisions. Reading modern plays, accordingly, requires an awareness of the historical process by which our world became what it is, as well as of the manifold shifts in subject matter, forms, and intention by which modern drama became what it is. It requires, in other words, a study as extensive as possible of the history of modern sensibility, of, roughly, the hundred years of moral and psychological crises that have brought us to the last decade of the twentieth century.

Fortunately, modern drama provides abundant evidence for such a study, and, in fact, it is hoped that the plays and essays included in this collection will lend themselves to that purpose. Because of the complexity of the subject, however, no collection of the scope of this one could be adequately illustrative, just as no essay of the scope of the present one could be definitive in its analysis. The intention is to illustrate broadly the principal directions of modern drama and the principal conditions in the modern era that have prompted dramatists to take these directions.

Some time ago John Gassner provided a highly useful distinction for breaking down the multiplicity of forms to be met in modern drama in his *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre*, where he proposed that all roughly

contemporary dramatic practice can be generally comprehended under the headings "realism" and "theatricalism." By realism in the theater, of course, he meant that practice of creating or attempting to create illusions of real life on the stage. To understand this important stream in modern theatrical practice, however, we must first see that realism, more broadly considered, was a far-reaching movement in art, politics, religion, and literature that emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century to produce an essentially new, modern way of looking at the world. It might be said, very generally, that with the waning of the closed, orderly world that had been the basis of medieval and much of Renaissance civilization, realism provided a way of conceiving of a new one, more particularly a new way of apprehending and thinking about experience, of making sense of it or of trying to make sense of it.

This distinctive way of approaching the external world can be traced, of course, to many sources, but preeminent among its historical causes was the rise of science and of scientific habits of thought. In the work of Descartes and his fellow pioneers in the seventeenth century the foundations for modern science and for its distinctive approach to truth were laid. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637) is important not only for its emphasis on method, but also for its emphasis on material evidence and the importance of individual experience. After Descartes, again very broadly speaking, truth was to be derived from what was knowable in sensuous terms, both from what could be measured (the material world) and from what could be experienced (the individual life). The result was a new way of relating human beings to their physical surroundings and a new interest in the particular, material world, the consequences of which for traditional beliefs and material and technological developments are too commonplace to rehearse.

By the nineteenth century, of course, the world was quite different from that of Descartes: it was a world with an urban emphasis, with vastly improved technical and industrial means, and with the habit of formulating its problems and of contriving solutions for them in this new way. It is useful to remember that this was the century of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill, all men prone to look to material fact for their evidence. This was a century, moreover, dominated by that natural son of science, the idea of progress, the belief that physical nature and human nature could be mastered in man's best interests, a belief, it should be added, that at that time, as in our own, was supported by unprecedented changes and apparent improvements in all quarters of life.

The world of letters responded to this movement with most alacrity, not in the theater nor in poetry, but in that form that owes most to this way of approaching experience, the novel. In the theater the progress of realism was slow and discontinuous, and, indeed, the complete story of its emergence in the nineteenth century is too chaotic to tell here. We see signs of its emergence in the popularity of the Well-made Play,

an ingeniously designed dramatic structure that put a premium on probability of a rather superficial sort, and the sporadic attention to authentic backgrounds and costumes in scattered productions in England and France. But all this did little more than prepare the scene for Emile Zola and the vigorous efforts made toward the end of the century to produce a revolution in the theater. Zola, already known through his novels as a champion of that specialized form of realism called naturalism, is chiefly to be credited with articulating the theory of dramatic realism. In his "Preface" to *Thérèse Raquin* (1873) he claimed that "the experimental and scientific spirit of the century [would] enter the domain of the drama," that he had "invented a new formula, namely that there must be no more formulas." Once Zola had prepared the way, it was inevitable that an artist from the theater should come forward to take up his challenge, and one soon did in the improbable figure of an employee of the Paris Gas Co., André Antoine. With the opening on March 30, 1887, of Antoine's Théâtre Libre, as Mordecai Gorelik puts it, "the Baroque ideal of theatrical splendor [went] down forever, having outlived its usefulness"<sup>1</sup> and the tradition of dramatic realism was put on a secure footing. Although always a small, experimental theater, the Théâtre Libre brought realism to the fore and by way of its productions established its method, encouraged playwrights to practice it and introduced the work of some of them, and prompted the foundation of a number of similarly dedicated "free" theaters in other European capitals.

The importance of these theaters cannot be too greatly stressed. They meant the establishment of standards of play-writing and of play production that constitute the nucleus of the realistic tradition in the theater. At the center of this activity was the purpose to present an objective, analytic picture of the world, to present a slice of life that candidly exposed what were confidently taken to be the "facts" of experience. To carry out this aim, special techniques were devised. The tradition of elocutionary acting was quickly outmoded by an acting style that emphasized lifelike appearance and behavior, a style most clearly seen in the work of Constantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre and in his present-day American disciples, the "Method" actors. The convention of painted scenery and selected properties was replaced by the ideal of exact reproduction in stage settings: the stage set became an environment bearing a meaningful relation to the action it contained. On such a stage the stage curtain became a fourth wall, an entry to a magic world of illusion, and the ideal of illusionism—the aim to create and sustain the illusion that what is being seen is a segment of overseen reality—became supreme.

Since 1890 dramatic realism has provided the fundamental idiom for the theater in the West. We have seen it undergo many modifications, and we have seen it watered down in such a way that illusion has often

1. *New Theatres for Old* (New York, 1957) 79.

been contrived for illusion's sake and the exploratory and critical emphasis of its pioneers has been blurred in favor of a kind of superficial snapshot-taking, as if a snapshot were in itself explanatory. To do justice, then, to the fervor and dedication with which the movement was launched and to its important practitioners, we must keep firmly in view the seriousness of its basic aims and the passion with which its pioneers sought to lay surfaces bare so as to divest fact of its incrustations and penetrate to something on which solid structures could be built.

HENRIK IBSEN (1828–1906) has sometimes been called the Father of Modern Drama probably because he was the first important playwright to realize in practice the profound possibilities of dramatic realism. Yet, though a bias for social criticism is to be found in even his earliest work, it was not until Ibsen left Norway that he entered upon the period of social problem plays in which he perfected the realistic prose form for which he subsequently became famous. These are the plays in which he primarily focused on society and in which he usually found more solidity and honesty in a vigorous individual conscience than in society's rules. This work includes plays like *The League of Youth*, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People*, plays that have been called "dramas of retrospective analysis" because they begin in the midst of a crisis and move forward in time while looking back to reconstruct and reinterpret the past in terms of present conditions.

By easy stages this work led Ibsen to an increasing interest in the possibility that perhaps, after all, absolute truth could not be found anywhere, that all truth was relative; and to accommodate this more intricate and elusive subject, he modified the earlier formula to allow for elaborate character analysis. In his next plays, which include *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, and *Hedda Gabler*, he was prompted to an increasing use of metaphoric and symbolistic devices; with them he marked out new possibilities for realistic drama both in his combination of realistic and poetic technique and in the new subjects that he continuously explored. Yet despite his technical penchant toward the end of his career for symbol and metaphor, he remained in a very important sense a realist to the core. His approach to the human condition, his way of assembling evidence, and his assumptions about how it should be regarded and how conclusions should be derived from it, were essentially those of a scientific, critical temperament. He differed from and surpassed those of like temperament chiefly in the rigorous honesty that prompted him to admit that this approach to experience frequently enabled him to raise questions that he could not answer.

In Russia, meantime, ANTON CHEKHOV (1860–1904) was taking the resources of realism in another direction. A doctor by profession, Chekhov won quick success as a writer of short stories, but at first had considerable difficulty as a playwright. His early failures were chiefly the result of the elusive dramatic form he gradually perfected, a form that superficially resembles the work of Ibsen, but that was sufficiently dif-

ferent to require a special style of playing that no company in Russia could provide until the Moscow Art Theatre succeeded with the famous production of *The Sea Gull* in 1898.

Chekhov's plays are certainly nothing if not realistic: what could be truer to life than his depiction of households milling about aimlessly and talking about apparently nothing? But the usual charge that in his plays nothing happens is a misleading exaggeration. Characteristically, Chekhov designed actions in which very little in the way of outward incident is represented, but in which his characters are revealed between the big events of their lives, as they are waiting to go into dinner or while they are sitting around after dinner musing about the past and their wasted youths. Chekhov was difficult for his contemporaries because of this new emphasis: he typically chose to de-emphasize incident in the interests of tracing character and the motions of character through the ebb and flow of trivial conversation. In this way he was able in plays like *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* to animate profound strains of vitality in his characters and to throw into relief, not the usual linear development of the action from event to event, but a kind of spatial pattern, inward into the characters rooted in their situation and outward into the implications of the relatively unchanging situation. Moreover, he was able to manage through the imagery of characters doing very little and, though talking a great deal, saying very little a delicate stage-poetry of tremendous power. Although critics might say that in Chekhov's plays nothing happens, none, or at least few, would argue that they are about nothing: somehow he makes the "nothing" of his actions a nothing that has to do with everything.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1856–1950), meanwhile saw still other dramatic possibilities in the program of realism. Although profoundly influenced by Ibsen at the outset, Shaw quickly fashioned from the resources of realism a dramatic form that gave the fullest possible expression to his critical cast of mind and then continued to modify this form during a long life and career. In his early plays, among which are some of his best known, such as *Arms and the Man* and *Candida*, he characteristically devised an action that superficially resembled a conventional melodrama, or military romance, or domestic comedy, and then proceeded to undermine it from within in such a way as to upend the traditional assumptions on which the form was based and the traditional attitudes held by most of the characters contained by it. Shaw's aim was to call values into question, to challenge orthodoxies, to explode unexamined assumptions, and in this way to liberate society from obsolescence so that foundations for a new society could be laid. He was frankly didactic, with the artistic consequence that his plays are replete with witty and incisive discussions of issues of all kinds, discussions that gradually grew longer as Shaw grew older until he coined the phrase "the discussion play." But he was always, at bottom, a comic artist, one who saw the limitations of even his most intelligent, most Shavian

characters, and the inevitable comedy of the human mind applying itself to the intractable energy of life.

In the work of Shaw, Chekhov, and Ibsen, at any rate, the principal directions of realism were marked out and its principal structural formulae were set forth. Subsequent playwrights in this tradition were to combine, modify, and neglect these precedents in more ways than can be quickly summarized, but they were never—and still are not—entirely free of them. With the work of these pioneers the basic tradition of modern drama was established.

Yet even during the early, most zealous years of the realistic movement, the forces of reaction were already at work. From the beginning certain men of letters and men of the theater had challenged the realist program, and they struck at the very heart of its theory by arguing that the outer world of facts and things, the backgrounds so laboriously recreated, the environments so methodically analyzed, count for nothing. Reality, in their view, was not to be found by studying the material world, but by knowing the inner world, how we feel about the facts, the things and the backgrounds. Mordecai Gorelik has summarized their rebellion in a striking paragraph:

Do not bring on the stage your carcass of reality. . . . Do not exhibit your vanloads of bricabrac, your butcher shops with real meat, your restaurant walls of cement and tile, your streets paved with real cobblestones. These collections of materials do not tell us the nature of the world; rather they confess your inability to define the nature of the world. If you really wish to give us an illusion of life, you must seize upon the essence of life. Forget the body; give us the soul.<sup>2</sup>

This passage crystallizes the cry of a diverse group of dissenters that from the turn of the century to the present can usefully be gathered under the heading of "theatricalists." The theatricalist movement can be conveniently traced to the production at Paul Fort's Théâtre de l'Art in Paris in 1896 of Alfred Jarry's grotesque play *Ubu-roi*.

Theatricalism in all its historical manifestations, including, among others, Surrealism, Expressionism, and Performance Theater, insists on a radically different use of the theater from that of realism and derives from a vastly different set of assumptions. Its anti-illusionistic bias is tied firmly to the belief that the realists have betrayed the essence of theater by using it to create illusions. By banishing or attempting to banish stage conventions, those shared understandings between performers and spectators by which both accept that a play is a highly artificial and special kind of image of life, the realists have tried to make the theater like life. But the theater is not and should not be like life, the theatricalists insist; it has its own highly specialized and extravagantly colorful and dynamic

2. *New Theatres for Old* 197.

resources, which an exaggerated attention to the certainty of realistic surfaces nullifies.

Much of the initial impulse and fundamental theory for the theatricalists derived from the Symbolist movement in letters at the end of the nineteenth century. Very simply stated, the aim of the Symbolists was to produce in their work analogues to states of being, in poetry, for example, to create verbal analogues to highly complex states of mind and spirit, to use language as sound is used in music to represent a way of feeling about the world. In the theater a key figure in this movement was Richard Wagner (1813–83). Wagner's ambition was to synthesize the arts of poetry, drama, and music in his operas so that the result—the total imagery of music, words, and action—could move an audience to states of feeling and awareness inaccessible by mere reason. The total imagery of Wagner's theater, unified, as it was, by musical principles, was to communicate as only art in its highest reaches can. Translated into theatrical terms, this led to Jean Cocteau's famous distinction between poetry *of* the theater, that poetry which results from an imaginative use of theatrical resources, and poetry *in* the theater, mere verse in the theater.

It was probably inevitable that the leaders of this movement would be, particularly in the early years, scene designers and directors. Building on its premise that the imagery of the theater should make for a peculiar unity, a special language of expression, men like Gordon Craig, Georg Fuchs, and Adolph Appia produced a revolution in scene design, stage lighting, and theater esthetics. Different phases and aspects of the movement go by different names—"the New Stagecraft," "Presentational Staging," "Surrealism," "Expressionism," etc.—but essentially all were governed by the purpose of using theatrical imagery to represent inward conditions. With the theory, moreover, came a new group of theaters: Paul Fort's Théâtre de l'Art was established in 1891, the Munich Artists' Theatre in 1908, and Jacques Copeau's Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in 1913. Russia, where very important work in the realistic mode was being done at the Moscow Art Theatre, saw the most extreme theatricalist experimentation in the work of defectors from that theater.

But developments in theatrical technique alone do not provide a sufficient background for understanding theatricalism any more than they do for understanding realism. The leaders in both movements were deeply interested in the theater, it is true, but they were also interested in the world and in what was happening to the world and themselves. Both theatricalism and realism represent important responses or reactions to the world of the nineteenth century with which the leaders of these respective movements quite consciously saw themselves to be breaking. With the work of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, August Strindberg, and Jarry a new outlook was emerging, a new conception of man, a new idea of his powers and limitations, a new image of his world and of his relations to it.



Basic to this outlook was the profound sense that the past was discontinuous with the present, that an unbridgeable abyss separated modern man from his forbears. Although many of the developments in science and thought that are summoned to account for this abyss had emerged in the nineteenth century, the character and quality of life in that century seem not to have been deeply affected by them. Despite and, indeed, in part because of men like Darwin and Marx, a sovereign optimism was firmly imbedded in much nineteenth-century activity—public, private, and artistic. The Victorians, for example, grandly committed to their high mission in life, still felt that human character was a thing human beings could do something about and that it was the highest of human responsibilities to cultivate it. But as the evidence began to come in to suggest that the millennium was not going to appear as quickly as some had thought it would, as new ideas began to have implications for human beings that no one had foreseen, as institutions of all kinds began to teeter under the pressure of these ideas, as industrialization and urbanization began to produce a variety of inner and outer horrors that no one had predicted, and as society scrambled away from the world it had known and in directions that it realized it knew less and less about, a new insecurity was born. Conditioned in the twentieth century by two world wars, a great depression, and a general intensification of the malaise that has followed from the increasingly dehumanized mechanization of society, this insecurity has compounded until at its worst men have come to feel estranged from all but material values, to feel themselves involved in and even committed to a world they do not understand or want.

Joseph Wood Krutch has argued in *"Modernism" in the Modern Theatre* that the essential effect of all these developments was that man's fate was taken out of his hands. Darwin not only deprived man of his divine birthright; he also posited a view of development and change that made adaptation and not moral will the chief determinant in life. Marx insisted that not only man and other organisms were subject to laws that had nothing to do with man's highest ideals for himself, but institutions and societies as well were so governed—societies by a law of class warfare that was working itself out whatever men as individuals might wish. Add to this the accumulating findings of the new disciplines of anthropology and sociology, findings that made perfectly clear that men in other places had built societies in quite different ways from ours, and it becomes clear why man became such a diminished creature. Truth had become a relative thing, not an absolute and unchanging reality; at best it was a statement that satisfied an individual or a group at a certain time and in a certain place. Man had become a baffled creature, as Matthew Arnold puts it, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born."

Of the many convulsions in thought and feeling that led to what is called modernism, however, probably none has had more profound