

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

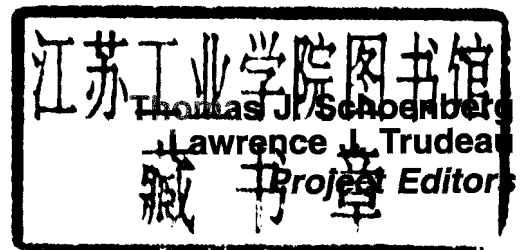
TCLC

189

Volume 189

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 189

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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Arthur Adamov

1908-1970

(Full name Arthur Sourenovitch Adamov) Russian-born French playwright, essayist, editor, and translator.

The following entry provides an overview of Adamov's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 4 and 25.

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Adamov is recognized as an important and influential figure in modern French drama. Along with Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, he helped shape the Theater of the Absurd movement in France during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the psychological themes that recur in Adamov's plays, such as human isolation, self-destruction, and the inevitability of death, have been connected with the playwright's own neuroses and obsessions. His dramatic works, characterized by a bleak and nightmarish atmosphere, were often difficult to produce because of their reliance on strong visual imagery and unusual physical objects on stage to communicate meaning to audiences. Although Adamov was considered a pioneer of Absurdist Theater, he eventually rejected his own early plays in favor of a more politically engaged drama, one that blended contemporary social concerns with the psychological and existential themes of his earlier work. Adamov's literary career was ultimately eclipsed by the more popular plays of Ionesco and Beckett, and as a result he never experienced sustained critical and popular acclaim during his lifetime. In recent years, however, scholars have praised him as an innovative and influential figure in the development of twentieth-century theater.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Adamov was born August 23, 1908, in Kislovodsk, Russia. At the beginning of World War I he moved with his parents, Helene Bagaturov Adamov and Sourene Adamov, a wealthy businessman, to Geneva, Switzerland. After the Russian revolution the Soviet Union confiscated the Adamov estate. This left the family impoverished and forced them to sell off their personal belongings to survive. In 1922 they moved to Wiesbaden, Germany, and Adamov began taking classes at the International French Lycée at Mainz. Two years later the family relocated to Paris, where Adamov attended high

school at the Lycée Lakanal and encountered several young artists and writers, including André Breton and Alberto Giacometti. Many of the artists he mingled with during the 1920s and 1930s had begun questioning traditional modes of expression and experimenting with new forms of art, such as Surrealism. Antonin Artaud, who emphasized the metaphysical significance of drama, was among the most influential of these artists. From an early age, Adamov suffered from anxiety and self-destructive tendencies. When he was twenty, he attempted suicide. His life was also filled with personal tragedy: his father committed suicide in 1933, and his mother died from tuberculosis in 1942. Although he was not actively involved with the French Resistance, Adamov was interned by the Nazis during World War II.

Although Adamov had experimented with poetry early in his literary career, his first publication was an autobiographical work titled *L'aveu* (1946; partially translated as *The Endless Humiliation*). In the late 1940s Adamov began writing plays, and in 1950 his first original dramas—*La grande et la petite manoeuvre* and *L'invasion* (*The Invasion*)—were produced in Paris. In 1952 *La parodie* was performed on stage at the Théâtre Lancry. With the production of these plays, Adamov emerged as one of the pioneers of Absurdist Theater in France. He produced several more Absurdist plays before writing *Le professeur Taranne* (1953; *Professor Taranne*), a transitional work that sent his literary career in a new direction. Influenced by the more politically engaged work of playwright Bertolt Brecht, Adamov became increasingly frustrated with his early plays and with Absurdist Theater in general. He turned his attentions to social issues in such later plays as *Le ping-pong* (1955), *Paolo Paoli* (1957), and *Le printemps 71* (1963; *Spring 71*). In the late 1960s Adamov began incorporating both political and psychological elements in his plays, a synthesis which many critics consider his greatest contribution to the theater. Such works as *Off Limits* (1969) and his last play, *Si l'été revenait* (1972), were representative of this period in his theatrical career. Adamov did not live to see his final play produced. On March 15, 1970, he committed suicide by ingesting an overdose of barbiturates.

MAJOR WORKS

Professor Taranne is considered the most significant of Adamov's early plays, and the first in which he began

moving away from the mechanical language and characterization of his purely Absurdist works. According to Adamov, the play was a direct transcription of one of his nightmares. The action begins when the police accuse the protagonist, Professor Taranne, of undressing in front of a group of children on the beach. He denies the accusations on the basis that he is a known and respected university professor. When no one can confirm his story, the professor's identity is called into question. Through the use of subtle set changes, the scene shifts, and Professor Taranne is once again questioned, this time in his hotel room. In addition to the dominant themes of self-destruction, fear, and the quest for identity, the play explores the issues of isolation, futility, and the nature of existence. The professor's repeated attempts to assert his identity and defend his reputation are thwarted by several characters; he even receives a letter from the university accusing him of plagiarism and posing as another scholar named Professor Menard. As with several of Adamov's other plays, *Professor Taranne* utilizes a failure of communication to create a nightmarish atmosphere and sense of hopelessness for the main character. The professor's attempts to assert his innocence are ineffectual and his isolation complete. The play ends ambiguously—in the final scene, the professor slowly undresses as the curtain falls. The image alludes to the initial accusation of exhibitionism raised against Taranne and casts doubt on his character. Scholars have noted that *Professor Taranne* is one of the first of Adamov's plays to employ a fully realized, three-dimensional main character.

Of Adamov's later plays, *Le ping-pong* is his best known and most commercially successful. The focal point of the play is a visual object, a pinball machine that is located in Madame Duranty's café. The machine not only occupies the visual focus of the stage but draws the attention and energies of the characters, as well. The lives of Arthur, an art student, and Victor, a medical student, along with several other characters, revolve around the pinball machine, and they dedicate their resources to its governing consortium. Arthur eventually takes over the consortium, while Victor continues his studies and becomes a physician. Many years later, Arthur and Victor meet again and play a game of ping-pong. The game progresses and becomes increasingly chaotic as the friends invent new rules. They stop using paddles and hit the ball with their hands. As the pace of the game quickens, Victor dies suddenly from the exertion. Many critics consider Adamov's characterization of the pinball consortium a harsh critique of capitalism. The degenerative power of materialism is another significant theme in *Le ping-pong*. The obsession that the characters exhibit for material objects, and their desire for monetary gain exist at the cost of authentic relationships. Indeed, the ping-pong game itself becomes Adamov's vision of a materialistic and corrupted society.

Adamov's final play, *Si l'été revenait*, is set in Stockholm and relates the dreams of four interconnected characters: Lars, the protagonist; his wife, Brit; his sister, Thea, with whom he is incestuously involved; and a hermaphrodite named Alma who first introduced Lars and Brit. The four dreams reveal the complex relationships between the characters and, in particular, the failings of Lars as a husband and brother. As each character dreams, the other characters act out hidden meanings of their subconscious visions. As in his other plays, Adamov uses a significant visual object on stage to convey meaning. A seesaw occupies part of the stage and symbolizes, according to some scholars, the instability and ambivalence of the relationships between the dreamers. Other critics have interpreted the image as connoting a desire for balance in human affairs. *Si l'été revenait* was completed just a few months before Adamov committed suicide and is often considered an expression of his despair and sense of failure as a playwright.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics often note the difficulty in assessing Adamov's place in French literature because his work, even in his more socially and politically engaged plays, is so closely linked to the personal obsessions and neuroses of the author himself. According to most commentators, it is nearly impossible to comprehend meaning in Adamov's plays without an understanding of the playwright's own psyche. For this reason, Adamov has been faulted for failing to transcend the subjective and translate the personal into truly universal literature. Critics have also disagreed over the ultimate success of Adamov's inventive use of the physical and visual elements of the stage to reflect theme and convey meaning. While some have complained that his interest in objects, gestures, and symbols overpower the role of dialogue and action in his plays, others, such as John J. McCann, have discerned a more unifying effect, claiming that this is perhaps Adamov's greatest contribution to the modern stage.

Although his contemporaries Beckett and Ionesco have eclipsed him as the major playwrights of the French Absurdist theater, critics today still regard Adamov as a significant and influential figure of the period. As many scholars note, in his greatest works, including *Professor Taranne*, *Le ping-pong* and *Si l'été revenait*, Adamov managed to restrain his hermeticism and present dramas of universal power. In these, as well as his more accomplished "social" plays, such as *Paolo Paoli*, *Spring 71*, and *Off Limits*, Adamov succeeded in depicting the complexity of reality and the existential, social, and political dilemmas of the human condition.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- **L'aveu* (autobiography) 1946
- La mort de Danton* [adaptor; from the play *Danton's Tod* by Georg Büchner] (play) 1948
- La grande et la petite manoeuvre* (play) 1950
- L'invasion* [*The Invasion*] (play) 1950
- La parodie* (play) 1952
- Le professeur Taranne* [*Professor Taranne*] (play) 1953
- Le sens de la marche* (play) 1953
- Théâtre I* (plays) 1953
- Tous contre tous* (play) 1953
- Comme nous avons été* (play) 1954
- Auguste Strindberg, dramaturge* [with Maurice Gravier] (criticism) 1955
- Le ping-pong* (play) 1955
- Théâtre II* (plays) 1955
- Paolo Paoli* [*Paolo Paoli: The Years of the Butterfly*] (play) 1957
- Les ames mortes* (play) 1960
- La politique des restes* [*Scavengers*] (play) 1963
- Le printemps 71* [*Spring 71*] (play) 1963
- Ici et maintenant* (autobiography) 1964
- Théâtre III* (plays) 1966
- L'homme et l'enfant* [*Man and Child*] (autobiography) 1968
- M. le Modéré* (play) 1968
- Théâtre IV* (plays) 1968
- Off Limits* (play) 1969
- Si l'été revenait* (play) 1972

*This work was partially translated into English as *The Endless Humiliation*.

CRITICISM

Martin Esslin (essay date 1961)

SOURCE: Esslin, Martin. "Arthur Adamov: The Curable and the Incurable." In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, pp. 92-127. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1961, Esslin discusses Adamov's existential vision of life—specifically his belief in "the futility of human endeavor"—and traces his development as a playwright.]

Arthur Adamov, the author of some of the most powerful plays in the Theatre of the Absurd, later rejected all his work that might be classified under that heading. The development that led him toward this type of drama, however, and the development that led him away from it again, are of particular interest to any inquiry into its nature. Adamov, who was not only a remarkable

dramatist but also a remarkable thinker, has provided us with a well-documented case history of the preoccupations and obsessions that made him write plays depicting a senseless and brutal nightmare world, the theoretical considerations that led him to formulate an aesthetic of the absurd, and, finally, the process by which he gradually returned to a theatre based on reality, the representation of social conditions, and a definite social purpose. How did it happen that a dramatist who in the late nineteen-forties so thoroughly rejected the naturalistic theatre that to use even the name of a town that could actually be found on a map would have appeared to him as 'unspeakably vulgar' could by 1960 be engaged in writing a full-scale historical drama firmly situated in place and time—the Paris Commune of 1871?

Arthur Adamov, born in Kislovodsk, in the Caucasus, in 1908, the son of a wealthy oil-well proprietor of Armenian origin, left Russia at the age of four. His parents could afford to travel, and, like the children of many well-to-do Russian families, Adamov was brought up in France, a fact that explains his mastery of French literary style. The first book he ever read was Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, at the age of seven. The outbreak of the First World War found Adamov's family at Freudensstadt, a resort in the Black Forest. It was only through the special intervention of the King of Württemberg, who was acquainted with Adamov's father, that the family escaped internment as enemy citizens, and were given special permission to leave for Switzerland, where they settled in Geneva.

Adamov received his early education in Switzerland and later in Germany (at Mainz). In 1924, at the age of sixteen, he went to Paris and was drawn into Surrealist circles. He wrote Surrealist poetry, edited an avant-garde periodical, *Discontinuité*, became a friend of Paul Eluard, and led the life of the Parisian literary nonconformists.

Gradually he stopped writing, or at least stopped publishing what he had written. He himself later described the severe spiritual and psychological crisis that he went through in a small book that must be among the most terrifying and ruthless documents of self-revelation in world literature, *L'Aveu* (*The Confession*). The earliest section of this Dostoevskian masterpiece, dated 'Paris, 1938', opens with a brilliant statement of the metaphysical anguish that forms the basis of Existentialist literature and of the Theatre of the Absurd:

What is there? I know first of all that I am. But who am I? All I know of myself is that I suffer. And if I suffer it is because at the origin of myself there is mutilation, separation.

I am separated. What I am separated from—I cannot name it. But I am separated.

In a footnote Adamov adds, 'Formerly it was called God. Today it no longer has any name.'¹

A deep sense of alienation, the feeling that time weighs on him 'with its enormous liquid mass, with all its dark power',² a deep feeling of passivity—these are some of the symptoms of his spiritual sickness.

Everything happens as though I were only one of the particular existences of some great incomprehensible and central being. . . . Sometimes this great totality of life appears to me so dramatically beautiful that it plunges me into ecstasy. But more often it seems like a monstrous beast that penetrates and surpasses me and which is everywhere, within me and outside me. . . . And terror grips and envelops me more powerfully from moment to moment. . . . My only way out is to write, to make others aware of it, so as not to have to feel all of it alone, to get rid of however small a portion of it.³

It is in dreams and in prayer that the writer of this haunting confession seeks escape—in dreams that are 'the great silent movement of the soul through the night'⁴; in prayer that is the 'desperate need of man, immersed in time, to seek refuge in the only entity that could save him, the projection outward from himself of that in him which partakes of eternity'.⁵ Yet what is there to pray to? 'The name of God should no longer come from the mouth of man. This word that has so long been degraded by usage no longer means anything. . . . To use the word God is more than sloth, it is a refusal to think, a kind of short cut, a hideous shorthand. . . .'⁶ Thus the crisis of faith is also a crisis of language. 'The words in our ageing vocabularies are like very sick people. Some may be able to survive, others are incurable.'⁷

In the next section of *L'Aveu*, dated 'Paris, 1939' (it has been published in English, under the title *The endless humiliation*)⁸ Adamov gives a ruthlessly frank description of his own sickness, his desire to be humiliated by the lowest of prostitutes, his 'incapacity to complete the act of carnal possession'.⁹ Fully aware of the nature of his neurosis—he was well versed in modern psychology and even translated one of Jung's works into French¹⁰—Adamov was also aware of the value of neurosis, which 'grants its victim a peracute lucidity, inaccessible to the so-called normal man',¹¹ and which may thus give him the vision that 'permits him, through the singularity of his sickness, to accede to the great general laws by which the loftiest comprehension of the world is expressed. And since the particular is always a symbolic expression of the universal, it follows that the universal is most effectively symbolized by the extreme of the particular, so that the neurosis which exaggerates a man's particularity of vision defines that much more completely his universal significance.'¹²

Having given a brutally detailed description, itself a symptom of masochism by the violence of its self-humiliation, of his neurosis, with its obsessions, rites,

and automatisms, Adamov returns to a diagnosis of our epoch in a section entitled 'Le temps de l'ignominie'. He defines ignominy as that which has no name, the *unnamable*, and the poet's task is not only to call each thing by its name but also to 'denounce . . . the degenerated concepts, the dried-up abstractions that have usurped . . . the dead remnants of the old sacred names'.¹³ The degradation of language in our time becomes the expression of its deepest sickness. What has been lost is the sense of the sacred, 'the unfathomable wisdom of the myths and rites of the dead old world'.¹⁴

The disappearance of meaning in the world is clearly linked to the degradation of language, and both, in turn, to the loss of faith, the disappearance of sacred rites and sacred myths. But perhaps this degradation and despair are necessary steps toward a renewal: 'Perhaps the sad and empty language that today's flabby humanity pours forth, will, in all its horror, in all its boundless absurdity, re-echo in the heart of a solitary man who is awake, and then perhaps that man, suddenly realizing that he does not understand, will begin to understand.'¹⁵ Therefore the only task left to man is to tear off all that dead skin until 'he finds himself in the hour of the great nakedness.'¹⁶

In this document of ruthless self-revelation, Adamov outlined a whole philosophy of the Theatre of the Absurd, long before he started to write his first play.

In the pages of *L'Aveu*, we can follow him through the war years—still in Paris in May and June 1940; in Cas-sis in July; in Marseille by August; then, between December 1940 and November 1941, at the internment camp of Agelès, months passed in a stupor of dejection; back in Marseille at the end of 1941; returning to Paris in the last month of 1942. The last section of *L'Aveu* and the preface are dated 1943.

In reading this astonishing book, we are witnessing a mind laying the foundations of its salvation through self-examination and a merciless recognition of its own predicament. In his contributions to the short-lived literary review *L'Heure Nouvelle*, of which he became editor shortly after the end of the war in Europe, Adamov returned to the same themes, but already in a spirit of detachment, in the posture of a thinker called upon, at a great turning point in history, to work out a programme of action for a new beginning in a new epoch.

It is a programme characterized by a complete absence of illusions and easy solutions: 'We are accused of pessimism, as though pessimism were but one among a number of possible attitudes, as if man were capable of choosing between two alternatives—optimism and pessimism.'¹⁷ Such a programme would of necessity be destructive in its rejection of all existing dogmatisms. It insists on the artist's duty to avoid selecting just one as-

pect of the world—'religious, psychological, scientific, social—but to evoke behind each of these the shadow of the whole in which they must merge.'¹⁸ And again this search for wholeness, for the reality underlying the bewildering multiplicity of appearances, is seen as a search for the sacred: 'the crisis of our time is essentially a religious crisis. It is a matter of life or death.'¹⁹ Yet the concept of God is dead. We are on the threshold of an era of impersonal aspects of the absolute, hence the revival of creeds like Taoism and Buddhism. This is the tragic impasse in which modern man finds himself: 'From whatever point he starts, whatever path he follows, modern man comes to the same conclusion: behind its visible appearances, life hides a meaning that is eternally inaccessible to penetration by the spirit that seeks for its discovery, caught in the dilemma of being aware that it is impossible to find it, and yet also impossible to renounce the hopeless quest.'²⁰ Adamov points out that this is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy of the absurd, because it still presupposes the conviction that the world *has* a meaning, although it is of necessity outside the reach of human consciousness. The awareness that there may be a meaning but that it will never be found is tragic. Any conviction that the world is wholly absurd would lack this tragic element.

In the social and political sphere, Adamov finds the solution in Communism. But his is a very personal form of support for the Communist cause. He finds in Communism no supernatural, sacred element. Its ideology confines itself to purely human terms, and for him it remains open to question 'whether anything that confines itself to the human sphere could ever attain anything but the subhuman.'²¹ If this is the case, why support Communism?

If we turn to Communism nevertheless, it is merely because one day, when it will seem quite close to the realization of its highest aim—the victory over all the contradictions that impede the exchange of goods among men—it will meet, inevitably, the great 'no' of the nature of things, which it thought it could ignore in its struggle. When the material obstacles are overcome, when man will no longer be able to deceive himself as to the nature of his unhappiness, then there will arise an anxiety all the more powerful, all the more fruitful for being stripped of anything that might have hindered its realization. It goes without saying that such a purely negative hope does not seem to us to entail an adherence that, to be complete, would have to manifest itself in action.²²

This was Adamov's position in 1946. Later, largely as a consequence of the emergence of General de Gaulle after the events of May 1958, he took a more active line in support of the extreme Left. Yet when asked in 1960 whether he had changed his attitude since 1946, Adamov confirmed that he still subscribed to what he had written fourteen years earlier.

It was towards the end of the Second World War that Adamov began to write for the theatre. He was reading Strindberg at the time, and under the influence of Strindberg's plays, notably *A Dream Play*, he began to discover the stuff of drama all around him, in 'the most ordinary everyday happenings, particularly street scenes. What struck me above all were the lines of passers-by, their loneliness in the crowd, the terrifying diversity of their utterance, of which I would please myself by hearing only snatches that, linked with other snatches of conversation, seemed to grow into a composite entity the very fragmentariness of which became a guarantee of its symbolic truth.'²³ One day he witnessed a scene that confronted him, in a sudden flash, with the dramatic reality he had wanted to express. A blind beggar passed by two pretty girls singing a refrain from some popular song: 'I had closed my eyes, it was wonderful!' This gave him the idea of showing 'on the stage, as crudely and as visibly as possible, the loneliness of man, the absence of communication'.²⁴

La Parodie, Adamov's first play, is the fruit of this idea. In a succession of rapidly sketched scenes, it shows two men infatuated with the same empty-headed, commonplace girl, Lili. One of them, the 'employee', is brisk, businesslike, and ever optimistic, while the other, 'N', is passive, helpless, and despondent. The employee, who, in a chance meeting, has gained the wholly erroneous impression that he has a date with Lili, never loses his hope and constantly turns up at imagined rendezvous. N, on the other hand, spends his time lying in the street, waiting for Lili to pass by chance. In the end the optimistic, buoyant attitude of the employee and the abject passivity of N lead to precisely the same result—nothing. Lili cannot even tell her two rival suitors apart. The employee lands in prison, where he goes on making plans for the future and still hopes to maintain his position, although he has gone blind. N is run over by a car and swept into the garbage by the street-cleaners. Lili is flanked by relatively successful men—a journalist with whom she seems in love and who keeps her waiting when they have a date, and the editor of his paper, who treats her as his kept mistress. The editor also takes the place, as and when the action requires it, of a number of other persons in authority—the manager of a restaurant, the director of a firm for which the employee works as a salesman, the receptionist of a hotel where he fails to get a room. While N and the employee are seen, as it were, from their own point of view, the journalist and the editor are seen wholly from the outside, as 'the other people', who, inexplicably, seem to be able to master the human situation, to whom nothing calamitous ever happens. Two identical and interchangeable couples act as a kind of chorus, the faceless crowd that surrounds us; they age as the action proceeds, but remain anonymous and interchangeable throughout.