

THEATRICAL MODERNISM: A PROBLEMATIC

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It has been a characteristic of the encyclopedia article, the general survey, or the textbook that it displays a great deal of confidence in the idea of modern drama, the modern stage, or modern theatre. Much of this is innocent, indicative only of a sense of periodicity, but it becomes a little comical with time. That modern drama might begin with Ibsen, yet somehow antedates the motor car, the aeroplane, and the telephone is more than a little perverse in terms of an effective nomenclature, but the tradition persists, even into the hyper-reality of a new millennium. So we find the theatre critic Michael Billington, from the left-leaning *Guardian* in Britain, introducing in February 2003 the playwrights Ibsen and Strindberg "as violent, necessary opposites, who between them laid the foundations for modern drama", and as "the two indispensable props of modern drama". Appropriating the phrase the critic Jan Kott applied to Shakespeare, Billington asserts that "Ibsen is still our contemporary", and he writes with firm conviction of "Strindberg's modernity" and even more passionately of "Ibsen's raging modernity" (Billington [2003], 17).

Yet in contexts other than the feature articles of newspapers, perceptions of theatre and performance have evolved immensely during the extensive period evoked by this humanist certainty, and it is undeniable that the critical terms applied to theatre need to be sifted, questioned, and reformulated accordingly. So it is that the concept of modernism itself, in relation to theatre, must be re-examined if it is to retain its full value in an historical understanding of theatre. To confine theatrical modernism, by analogy with the written arts, merely to an aspect of the history of drama in the twentieth century is now unacceptable, because theatre is no longer perceived to be the enactment of written dramas, but a complex activity critically embraced by the term performance.

Modernism and theatre: two large questions

There are two large, over-arching questions that should affect the study of theatre in relation to the concept of modernism, and both of them concern mapping. Firstly, where should we expect to locate modernism within the complexity of theatre practice? Secondly, is it right to expect to ascribe the major achievements and developments of the theatre in the last century to modernism?

The production of theatre involves a combination of various arts, collocating elements such as the human body and voice, material objects, visual and technological illusion, the physical space of performance, and the relationship of the audience or spectators with all of these. What we call a dramatic script may well aim to coordinate all elements of production, but the degree to which it does so will depend on the contingencies of its implementation, and on issues such as authority in theatrical production. There will also be a significant difference between the production of older scripts, particularly those which cannot exercise the claims of copyright, and contemporary scripts. Older scripts will have been conceived for theatrical conditions that may no longer prevail, while contemporary scripts may aim to create specific entailments on the resources of modern production.

Where, then, should we expect to locate a phenomenon or artistic intention such as modernism within this complexity of theatrical production? Much of the emphasis to be observed in the standard assumptions indicated above lies on the concept of drama, an apparently composite phenomenon firmly associated with the writings (scripts) of a named author. In this form of critical history, the artform of theatre is subject to the influence and control of the writer who seemingly addresses the audience (or even society) directly, apparently in an unmediated way, without the intervention or involvement of the theatrical apparatus. Yet we are obliged to confront this form of critical assumption with at least two phenomena which conflict almost totally with it.

It is quite apparent, in any reasonable review of the theatre in the twentieth century, that the role and impact of the figure known as the director have been

paramount in the achievements of theatrical production. It is also apparent that an increasing impact of technology has immensely enhanced the function of original design in theatrical production. The result of these two factors has been that informed criticism since 1945 has been prepared to write and speak of director's theatre and designer's theatre quite as much as of playwright's theatre. In these circumstances, how should we define the phenomenon of modernism in relation to theatre? Would it be located merely in some characteristics of the script, on analogy with modernist achievements in other literary forms? Or in visual or material connections between elements of theatrical design and identifiable traits of modernism in the visual or plastic arts? Or in a conception of human performance in some manner capable of being closely identified as modernist, but without real analogy in the other written or fine arts?

In this last respect there must clearly be some relationship with dance, and fortunately dance has its own relatively indicative history in the twentieth century with regard to terms such as modern and postmodern, in contrast to other terms such as classical (ballet), popular or folk (Banes [1980]). But dance is a significantly controlled form of theatre, with the elimination or extreme subordination of voice in favour of physical movement, and the coordinating concept of choreography presides over its production. There is no such presiding concept in spoken theatre, but there is a body of theory about human performance, which presents itself as an outstanding feature of the period in question. I shall consider it seriously below, as a necessary constituent of a more satisfactory definition of theatrical modernism.

The second large question that I introduced can be addressed from many different positions, but it may be most helpful to consider it very briefly in relation to dramaturgy, which I do in the final section of this essay. Is it possible to achieve a definition of a modernist dramaturgy, and if so is it the case that modernism is a major feature of dramaturgy in the period in question, or in the twentieth century as a whole? Can dramaturgy by itself, the authorship of scripts for performance, entail the creation of a theatrical modernism? Here again, we are not so much speaking of an ability to identify reliable instances of theatrical modernism, or to achieve a full list of theatrical

modernists, but to provide indications of the degree to which the concept of modernism might contribute to an understanding of the theatrical practice of an extended era.

So in this contribution I can hope to do three things which may be helpful, after posing these initial questions. The first will be to consider the terminology of modernism as it has been tentatively applied to drama and theatre in some of the most influential works of critical theory; the second will be, by contrast with that tradition, to suggest what an appropriate definition of theatrical modernism might expect to embrace, in the period to which modernism in the other arts is normally ascribed; and the third will be to consider a minimal context of dramaturgy in and over that period in relation to this general problematic of modernism and theatre. What will emerge is not a complete history, but an attempt at a reasoned reorientation of our approach to modernism and theatre.

Modernism and theatre: critical reflections

Bradbury and McFarlane's collection of closely coordinated essays on the subject of *Modernism: 1890-1930*, published in 1976, was one title in a series which had already included *The Continental Renaissance* and *The Age of Realism*. The central problem of the collection was not one of a lack of seriousness or conviction, but of the absence of any convincing analytical definition of the phenomenon in question, in either the opening essay or the collection as a whole. In its absence, each contributor substituted a different, phenomenal description of some interest which tentatively defined by analogy and exclusion: so modernism was seen to partake of classicism and romanticism in different degrees in different phases, but was clearly not either. Similarly realism and naturalism were "themselves modern but not quite Modernist movements", and "it is precisely in the breaking up of the naturalistic surface and its spirit of positivism that one senses the growth of Modernism" (Bradbury and McFarlane [1976], 43 and 44).

A different kind of uncertainty occurred in relation to the concept of style, and to the plurality of movements united, as aspects of the phenomenon, in their diversity. So

"in the difference between (say) Symbolism and Surrealism" the editors suggested that it was possible to "distinguish... two Modernisms". But the danger in this was that the conceptual unity of Modernism might fall into question, and this prompted a more sophisticated kind of negative description: "Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense; and indeed the style of one work is no guarantee for the next." (Bradbury and McFarlane [1976], 29).

The alternative to an elusive diversity had to be that of combination, a resolution of apparent contradictions: "In short, Modernism was in most countries an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old régimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expressions of these things." (Bradbury and McFarlane [1976], 46). Cast in these terms, modernism would at least be not hard to find.

In fact, the mixture of evasion and certainty, of partial definition and the broad sweep of inclusiveness continued throughout the volume. "Modernism is a particularly urban art", Bradbury later insisted, yet equally "there has always been a close association between literature and cities" (Bradbury and McFarlane [1976], 96-97). So the cultural chaos of the populous city was not an exclusively modernist phenomenon: "The art of Modernism was not the first art to reach this. These awarenesses are in realism and naturalism; one might argue that the unutterable contingency of the modern city has much to do with the rise of that most realistic, loose and pragmatic of literary forms, the novel." (Bradbury and McFarlane [1976], 99).

Nevertheless, Bradbury and McFarlane did settle on some specifics, not the least of which was the urban experience; internationalism, in some form, was regularly asserted (but contrasted with a fervent nationalism in some manifestations), and "emigration or exile" were noted as characteristics of many writers and artists. Whether

these were the topics of a "Modernist art", or the conditions affecting its practitioners along with others, was never particularly clear, and the national-geographic surveys of the stated period contained few common denominators.

Even with these reservations about editorial grasp, one might still hope that such an overtly confident study as this would have had some exacting and incisive guidelines to offer us on modernism in drama and theatre. But the prefatory statement to "Modernist Drama" despaired of any major "groupings", while the most satisfactory designation of much modern drama for Fletcher and McFarlane, in their introductory essay, would seem to be the Renaissance composite tragicomedy. How this was to be aligned with the subject of the culminating chapter, the bizarrely labelled and linked "neo-modernist drama" of Yeats and Pirandello, remained unclear.

In composing their collection Bradbury and McFarlane had been able to rely not just on their own determinations, but on a widespread display of interest in the subject and problem of modernism that had been made during the first half of the previous decade of the 1960s. Modernism in general had been an explicit topic for major English-language critics such as Kermode, Trilling, and Levin in literary studies, and for Greenberg in art criticism, while the poet Spender had published a retrospective study of the modern. In this context, and with regard to theatre in particular, it would seem obvious that the problems of modernism and what is modern could not be detached from phrases such as modern drama, modern theatre, the modern stage, modern tragedy, or modern theories of performance.

Yet the problems of defining a convincing field in theatre were only casually noticed or unapologetically ignored. Even an event of such disciplinary excitement as the death of tragedy could not provoke more than a passing confusion on these issues, an almost incidental awkwardness on the part of the critic who assumed the role of a Job's comforter to our culture. George Steiner's book was published at just that time of growing concern for the description or definition of modernism in the early 1960s which gave rise to Bradbury and McFarlane, and ironically it appeared from the publishing house that had been founded by T.S.Eliot. Towards the close of his extended and

historical lament, Steiner was quite content to write of "modern fiction" and the "modern novel", "modern poetry", "the modern artist" and "modern abstract art", of "modern literary drama" and "modern poetic drama", of "the modern temper", of "the modern world", and even of "modern suffering" (Steiner [1961], 303-50). It is not that there was a lack of appropriate seriousness; on the contrary, there was more than enough to satisfy even the most hardy cultural pessimist. But Steiner was completely untroubled by his own fascination with the morbid fate of the "modern", so much so that he was willing to apply the term to Dryden (Steiner [1961], 38-39).

A concept of the modern has, of course, been essential to the gradual formation of a modern canon of dramatists and theatrical practitioners, but later in the 1960s Eric Bentley proved incapable of little more than wonder: "A person like myself who has even lived a good part of his life with 'the thing', and with all the phrases use to describe 'it', such as 'theory of the modern stage', is all the more apt to suppose, first, that the thing is very much *there* and, second, that he very certainly knows what it is. Yet, when the moment comes, one wonders." (Bentley [1968], 10). In referring to his title, Bentley did ask "What *is*... modern?" on behalf of the reader, as he also asked "What (in the book) is theory?" and "what, the stage?". Bentley himself may have been uncertain, but he was in little doubt about the general consensus: "With the word 'modern' I had alternatives: the kind of drama we all call modern can be traced back, and often has been, to the middle of the eighteenth century, but generally we are thinking of Ibsen and after. For reasons of space I certainly had to think as we generally do, though I am glad to say that there is a good deal of referring back to the eighteenth century by the authors I have selected." (Bentley [1968], 9).

Elsewhere Bentley wrote of "the right chronological span - the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth". The phrase "Ibsen and after" is a curious shorthand, which partly conceals the problem of whether it is "the kind of drama" and the "stage" which are (or need to be determined as) "modern", or whether it is "theory" itself. By and large Bentley seemed content with what might be termed a two-stage modernism or modernity: one in which the right of a "mid-nineteenth-century to... mid-twentieth-

century" theory to be "referring back" to the drama or stage of the eighteenth was a suitable compensation for the absence of an earlier modern theory stemming from the eighteenth century itself.

It may be that, for Bentley, the drama of the eighteenth century was modern, and that the theory was not. Perhaps the drama was modern in so far as it furnished the precursors to a categorically modern theatre of "Ibsen and after", and so participated in that aura. The kind of theoretical construct Bentley seemed to have in mind was that of Lukács, who had no difficulty in 1909 with his definition, which was that modern drama was bourgeois drama (Lukács [1968]). For Lukács, any two of these four terms - modern drama, bourgeois drama, German drama, and the drama of individualism - might be formed into an equation because all were seemingly equivalent.

But Lukács himself had very little specific interest in Ibsen, and even less in "and after", and his sense of continuity from Lenz to Hauptmann (and not beyond) was evidently discarded in what Bentley regarded as the general consensus. In writing of the mid-nineteenth century as a convenient or significant point of departure for that consensus, and the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth as the "right chronological span", Bentley had other models available, determined by his own generation. In the first edition of his study of modern drama, Raymond Williams dated the modern renaissance to Ibsen's *Catilina* of 1850: "When *Catilina* appeared, the drama, in most European countries other than France, was at perhaps its lowest ebb in six centuries. In England, no writer of importance was even attempting to write plays for the theatre..." (Williams [1964], 13). For Williams, drama was a writerly medium, and, indeed, Williams's use of "the drama" prescribed for a major literary form its enduring cultural duties. First writing his book just after 1950, Williams had a century at his disposal from *Catilina*, and it mattered little that *Catilina* was predictive or representative of nothing in particular. Indeed, Williams referred without concern to "modern naturalist drama" and "the contemporary theatre", and to the concept of "a complete history of the modern drama", which his book did not aim to be (Williams

[1964], 15 and 21).

This first edition of this book, entitled *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, was followed by *Modern Tragedy*, in which Williams began with the liberal tragedy of Ibsen and Miller, and concluded with the rejection of tragedy by Brecht (Williams [1966]). Larger explanations of his sense of period came only with the Introduction and Conclusion to the revised edition of his earlier book, which was published as *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Williams [1968]). Here Williams began with Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov: "it is in the substance and range of their work that modern drama, essentially, came into existence." (Williams [1968], 21). The problem for Williams was that of reconciling an insistence not only on a period, but also on an essence of modern drama, with evident diversity: "The most persistent difficulty, in the analysis of structures of feeling, is the complexity of historical change and in particular, as is very evident in modern drama, the coexistence, even within a period and a society, of alternative structures." (Williams [1968], 20).

Williams was also prepared to acknowledge "successive periods" alongside "a period", but the principal means to a resolution lay in an appeal to history as fact: "It is a fact that there is a general historical development, from Ibsen to Brecht, from dramatic naturalism to dramatic expressionism." (ibid.). The real tenor of the explanation by reference to history became apparent in the conclusion. There are historical contradictions in the "lines of development" displayed by modern drama: "Within and across the lines of development, there are continuities, recurrences, new breaks to an already realized position. It is this double character of the history that defines the nature of the movements: there is a historical succession of naturalism, private expressionism, social expressionism, the theatre of illusion and of the absurd; but there is also a continual coexistence, in authentic work, of each one of these tendencies, in the struggle for a common form." (Williams [1968], 342-43).

Peter Nicholls has provided the latest, broad accompaniment to the critical and theoretical discussion of modernism, towards the close of the modernist century itself, and it is significant that theatre occupies a thoroughly subsidiary role in his developing

thesis. *Modernisms* has as its subtitle "a literary guide", and it begins, conventionally enough, with an emphasis on poetry in Baudelaire and Mallarmé, extending its critical embrace decisively to the novel and, intermittently, to painting. These are the resolute constituents of a critical modernism, to which theatrical initiatives make only sporadic contributions. The principal connection, notably developed for expressionism, dada and Artaudian surrealism, is what Nicholls terms "the anti-Oedipal thrust of avant-garde theatre" (Nicholls [1995], 293), and figures such as Meyerhold and Tairov make no appearance in his thesis. It is as if (an admittedly "early") modernism at times intervenes in theatre, but that theatre and drama are not to be considered as potentially modernist continuities, in the manner that poetry, painting (but not the fine arts in general, one notes) and the novel may be.

The effect is to imply that theatre and dramaturgy are marginal to modernism, and this leaves us with one of two possible conclusions: either modernism in the theatre must be assessed in a radically different manner, or we must acknowledge that the critical theory of modernism does not provide us with a sufficient account of radical initiative and innovation in the theatre and dramaturgy of the modern period. Either one of these conclusions might be acceptable; but "neither" is not, if our concern lies sincerely with the major cultural phenomenon that theatre has been in the twentieth century.

Theories of human performance, and the nature of a theatrical modernism

Spoken theatre and dance have recently shown an inclination to consider their human enactors conjointly as performers, but for much of the twentieth century the terminological distinction between actors and dancers applied, and it still regularly prevails, since it may mark quite distinctive skills. Traditionally, the theatre had contained dance, and Greek drama, the *noh* theatre of Japan, Elizabethan theatre in a limited way, and the theatre of Molière provide prominent examples. Singing was also, traditionally, a theatrical skill, but at the time when the terms modern and modernist are believed to become applicable to the arts the actor's skills were firmly identified with the

rendition of speech and the communication of character. This combination is firmly fixed for us in the teachings and practice of the most influential theorist of acting throughout the twentieth century, the Russian Stanislavski. In fact, the extraordinary feature of Stanislavski is the duration of his relatively narrow conception of the actor, and its evolution at a time when theories of a more total theatre were in the ascendant. I can do no more here than point to Wagner's vision of a music drama that went beyond traditional notions of opera, to Craig whose integral vision imposed a strict function on the actor as part of a spectacle, and to Artaud, who detested what he termed psychological theatre, looking for an event which impacted on the performers and audience in a transcendental manner that would subdue reality.

Stanislavski claimed to advance a system of training for the actor that would ensure an emotive conviction in the audience, and his methods and his philosophy of theatre were embraced not only by the official doctrine of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, and more widely in eastern Europe under Soviet influence, but also by the most influential tendencies in acting in the USA, in both film and theatre. To my knowledge, there is no satisfactory account of this vast and pervasive phenomenon, but a relevant analysis might suggest that it must in some way relate to the appearance of the avant garde and the emergence of the diverse phenomena in the performing arts that many would be willing to associate with the term modernism. Stanislavski was by background, temperament and position an authoritarian figure, who trained the actor partly in order to subordinate the actor's skills to directorial control, binding the actor's emotional experience of reality to that of the audience through the medium of character. The emotive conviction powerfully generated by these means might readily be allied to a normative enactment of reality, of whatever ideological tenor presiding authorities might feel was either firmly established or sufficiently enforced.

There can be no doubt that the Stanislavski system, and the prominence of actor training in general, were in the twentieth century and the period identified as the ground of the modern and modernism virtually required by the rise of the figure of the director. There have been many studies of this phenomenon (e.g. Braun [1982]), but

once again I do not know of any that have accounted for it satisfactorily. In the Greek era, the production was subject to the figure of the dramatist, who trained the chorus and directed the actors within relatively stable conditions of performance (Ley [1989]). In later eras, actors were relatively self-sufficient, taking scripts to themselves and their established skills for implementation. But the leading actor in companies and the actor-manager in relation to theatres may provide some explanation of the complex negotiating role that perhaps gave rise to the director. All that can be said with some certainty is that much of twentieth-century theatrical activity can be understood in a clear division of power between the director and the actor/performer, with companies that aim to reject this hierarchy conscious of standing apart from the main industrial practice, almost universally.

Theatrical theories of (human) performance assert and supposedly sustain the autonomy and integrity of theatre as an artform, matters which had been brought severely into question by the end of the nineteenth century. They also suggest the possibility of control of the producing apparatus, substantially by advancing the role of the director as a potential *auteur*, as a figure within the apparatus itself who may have continuity, exercise artistic initiative, and instigate radical changes in the relationship between apparatus and audience. This functional profile, both for theories of performance and for the director in particular, is notably comprehensible against the constant background of commercial or boulevard theatrical production, during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, a mass of activity in which the apparatus will be (predictably) constrained to serve rather than challenge the dictates of expectation and taste.

Understood in this manner, theories of human performance may carry substantial implications, not only in support of the role of the director, but also for a large number of the elements that compose theatrical production. A director who has a distinctive discipline for actors which is not derived from continuing performance tradition or the script may extend the possibilities of the *auteur* into those of the *metteur en scène*: may, in other words, attempt to be the instigator of a coordinated and

artistic, original version of all the significant elements of production. This description is probably true of Meyerhold, in his formative years a pupil of Stanislavski, but who developed his own form of actor training (bio-mechanics) and became a leading director before and after the Russian revolution. Bio-mechanics was partly related to a general accent on the physique of the human frame associated with ergonomics, but it consisted primarily in a series of exercises which concentrated on rhythm and the sequence of physical actions in a kind of mini-narrative - "throwing the stone" or "shooting the bow" are two of the titles. Actors were required through these exercises to absorb the consequences of any one movement in a sequence upon its successor, but the exercises were not designed to enter directly into performances.

Meyerhold is distinctive because he did succeed in extending his interests and attention to almost all elements of production, including space, the variety of relationships with the audience, lighting, design and script-work alongside an approach to actor-training (Leach [1989] and [1994]; Braun [1986]). He was also able to maintain a productive life over several decades until he was murdered by Stalinists. His choice of material for production was immensely varied, and included symbolist works, new political drama, revolutionary satire and Russian classics, and he employed designers who brought the influence of constructivism to bear on *mise en scène*. So it is arguable that if we do wish to entertain the possibility of a theatrical modernism, then Meyerhold may well be a strong contender. He is certainly a figure who placed all the elements of production more or less at his disposal, and aimed at achieving a radical recomposition of them, which was as much in dialogue with an impressive theatrical past and the theatre of other cultures as it was with the transformed audience of his own time.

Related achievements have also been attributed to Tairov by a number of commentators (Worrall [1989]), although Tairov lacks the clear emphasis on a specific theory of human performance that I have identified as an important criterion. But many of the features that are found in Meyerhold's profile are also to be found in that of Brecht, whose ideology and biography have unfortunately occupied far more critical attention than his theatricality, his involvement with and deployment of the theatrical

apparatus. Indeed, a curious example of this division is apparent in two works by the same scholar, Fuegi (Fuegi [1987] and [1994]). Brecht was characteristically a dramaturg, and his ability to create scripts on his own or in collaboration to different purposes and for different circumstances lends even greater strength to his autonomy as a theatre artist. He too concentrated firmly on a theory of human performance, which permitted the separation of character from actor in a radical break from almost all mimetic assumptions, encouraging the performer to present rather than represent the thoughts, feelings and decisive actions of people to those who might question them in forming their own conclusions, namely to the audience of a revolutionary era. Brecht was explicit in believing that there was a need to create a new theatre for the new, modern, scientific age, and his involvement with composers and designers was consistent with that belief, in that production as a whole ranged from the playfully subversive to stark challenges to conventional assumptions, aesthetic, moral, or political. There is every reason to consider Brecht a theatrical modernist in the senses that I have advanced, but his theoretical position is intimately related to his understanding of Marxism. He is also, more formidably, a pedagogic humanist, and it is doubtful whether critical analysis would have much success in compiling a list of possible modernists who were both of these in addition, although the director Piscator, often considered a major influence on Brecht, might be a significant contender (Willett [1978]).

Of those who have aspired to transform the theatrical apparatus, Meyerhold and Brecht stand out as successful, perhaps extending the identifying marks of modernism - critically established for artforms other than the theatre - into a theatrical version, which might then hope to encompass some of the most significant qualities of theatrical achievement in the twentieth century. Were this the case, it might be useful to extend the consideration past 1939-45 to Grotowski, whose activities at least during the 1960s were in some respects analogous. There is, with Grotowski, the presence of a strong theory of human performance (with a strict code of actor-training), which counteracts all ease on the part of actor or spectator, and the assertion of a principle of

intensely controlled if scenically spare production (Kumiega [1985]; Schechner and Wolford [1997]). Grotowski's grip on the theatrical apparatus was sufficiently comprehensive to have an abrupt and lasting impact on most serious theatrework in Europe and the USA. The conviction conveyed and accepted was one of the theatre's total integrity and autonomy - its holiness, purity and essence - in an uncompromised disjunction from the simulations and malformations masquerading, commercially or otherwise, in the name of theatre. If it was modernism, then it was a modernism which surfaced at a highly suitable moment for recognition of its key attributes, in the critical era that had just begun to mourn the passing of the glorydays.

Dramaturgy and modernism

Histories of modern drama are numerous, although few pay close attention to the conceptual problems of the modern or of modernism in dramaturgy, as the review I gave above of relatively forthright writers will have indicated. I cannot hope to do justice here to the nuances and vast diversity of dramaturgical achievement in the last century, still less to present even a moderately representative history. But what I can offer instead is a set of observations on dramaturgy in relation to the central problem, which might be seen to be that of locating modernism in the modern, as the twentieth century has been inclined to see itself.

1. I have already suggested the leading question which should be put in relation to the possibilities of a modernist dramaturgy: is it possible for a script, by itself, to constitute an act of modernism in the theatre? To put this another way, can a script so construe itself as to determine modernist acts of theatre, or will modernism be implicitly opposed to the theatrical script? I can see no resolutely confident answer to that question, but it is worth noting that the verdict of Artaud here was negative in general, and that verdict has been regularly accepted by the broad tendency that is usually characterized as the avant-garde. In *The Theatre and Its Double* Artaud placed a veto on "a purely descriptive theatre, which narrates, and narrates psychology". Artaud found the social

concerns of much contemporary French drama disgustingly banal, but "psychological theatre" was a tendency which Artaud traced even as far back as Shakespeare, who blunted his evocation of the unknown by returning our concerns back to man, "that is to say, psychology" (Artaud [1964], 118-20).¹ The dramatic text in this stridently metaphysical analysis was an excuse for a division between art and life, and when life itself was deemed to be in crisis then the distraction posed by art must be a dissipation of a necessary energy.

During the last century of performance, the search for an alternative theatrical language to the literary text has taken two extreme forms, one rooted in the body and one in a conceptual alternative to ordinary speech. Artaud's advocacy of cruelty became an inspiration for practitioners such as Grotowski, who drove the performer's body to the limits of expressive feeling, to which speech was an adjunct; while Artaud's hostility to ordinary language led Peter Brook, in conjunction with the poet Ted Hughes, to attempt to create a new spoken language for performance in *Orghast* (Smith [1972]). An additional extreme form of alternative would be that constituted by silence, which indeed has a large place in twentieth-century theatre, but most dramaturgy has continued to insist on varieties of coherence. This in itself constitutes a resistance to one of the possible visions of modernism in theatre, represented by Artaud's demand for an overwhelming theatricality of multiple components celebrating the absence of conventional speech.

2. Of the likely candidates for dramaturgical modernism, symbolism - in general, a self-aware movement in writerly terms - has been favoured by the standard critical tradition. Symbolism has the advantage of a clear intention to depart from standard conventions in the given artform while retaining a clear relationship to those conventions. It is also international, not only in its point of origin, but also in its deployment, a feature which has been seen as a characteristic of modernism. So, for example, what are regarded as the symbolist plays of Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Ibsen, Blok and O'Neill were all produced outside their own national cultures relatively quickly,

and undoubtedly stimulated specific forms of production and adjusted aesthetic principles in a wide range of theatres.

Theatrical symbolism also facilitates an argument by analogy in favour of modernism: if symbolism in the novel and poetry is taken as a sign of modernism in those two genres, then symbolism will indicate the presence and activity of modernism in the theatre as well.

3. Pirandello's dramaturgy is extremely varied, with much of it exploiting relatively standard conventions towards thematically teasing ends. His work provides a good example (Ibsen is plainly another) of how a dramatist with a substantial modern reputation may engage with modernism only exceptionally. This would have to be argued for Ibsen through symbolism, and it would be argued for Pirandello substantially through *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. But the form/construction of Pirandello's play is overtly conventional, even if the theme of it is not, and it is questionable whether *Six Characters* gives rise to a modernist act of theatre. The theme of the inadequacy of the theatrical apparatus is strikingly modernist, as is the contrasting authenticity which the characters claim for themselves.

4. Expressionism is unquestionably modern, overtly and intentionally modern. Part of its assumption of modernity is the apparent transformation of conventional drama by the inclusion of taboo subjects (Wedekind) or revolutionary political commitment (Toller). How far such scripts actually demand a re-ordering of the theatrical apparatus, or are concerned to effect a transformation of theatrical practice as such, must be questionable. If the Marxist accusation of subjectivism - the projection of personal experience on to objective reality, in such a manner as to distort our understanding of it - levelled against expressionism suggests a valid critical estimate of this kind of dramaturgy, then it might also associate it more closely with modernism.

I myself am not convinced that it is particularly helpful, critically or theoretically, to dissociate dramaturgical expressionism from dramaturgical naturalism. One might

argue, facetiously, that a modern linear play of relatively conventional illusion is called realist when it depicts bourgeois adults, and naturalist when it depicts anyone else. I have severe doubts whether there is any real value (or validity) in ascribing either to modernism, since the type has a genealogy that far exceeds any plausible boundaries determined for modernism in other arts.

It would seem to be the case that the dramaturgy that is called expressionism may give rise to modernism when adopted as working material for another artform, unless Berg's *Lulu* and *Wozzeck* are removed from the modernist litany, which would be rash. There again, the same might be said to be true of the Old Testament (Schonberg's *Moses and Aaron*) and Greek tragedy (Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*).

5. It would be a matter for sharp debate whether Lorca's acknowledged pre-eminence in modern Spanish drama(turgy) owes anything (of significance) to modernism. In some of the lesser known works, we find a clear allegiance to traditional forms, with attention to the puppet theatre and to *entremeses*, and the major plays betray a similar desire to reconstitute traditional form in a manner that pays homage to enduring social structures, to the kind of oppression which naturalism had embraced. Tragedy may be the term for which most would reach, but the lineage of the *comedia* in its vast scope may well dwarf the relevance of that concept, and the pronounced and intentionally symbolic qualities of the scripts may owe far more to the symbolism with which the *comedia* was imbued than to the more recent, symbolist dramaturgy.

6. There can be no doubt that Witkiewicz would be generally welcomed as a modernist were his work more widely known. His advocacy of a pure form for the discrete arts and for theatre, his conviction that a certain kind of madness was essential, and his insistence on a metaphysical vision of human existence places him so close to many modernist icons, and notably to Artaud, that if the term is to be used it should be used of Witkacy. Whether his scripts are capable of stimulating a full transformation of the theatrical apparatus is another matter, but Artaud similarly failed to achieve what might

be called the production values of modernism, despite a succession of attempts. Both Witkiewicz and Artaud are writers of manifestos, which have an unpleasant habit of substituting for the longeurs of fulfilled practice, not just in the theatre. Nonetheless, this inclination confirms the impulse towards a fundamental transformation of theatre in performance. The manifesto provides a clear demonstration of dissatisfaction and an insistence, implied or explicit, that a declaration of intent is essential if existing preconceptions are not to suffocate initiative. So it could be argued that Witkacy's limited achievement during his lifetime with his scripts might be taken as confirmation of the radical nature of his theatrical modernism, which required more than an innovative dramaturgy for its full realization.

7. The most decisive claim to dramaturgical modernism comes, of course, with modern French dramaturgy, from Jarry and Apollinaire, Vitrac and Cocteau, through to Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett (who has been, diversely, claimed for postmodernism), a broad movement which has gained massive recognition over an extended period. A central position here is occupied by the resources associated with surrealism and the primacy of Paris as a centre for artistic innovation, although the attitude of surrealism to theatre was always equivocal and ultimately hostile, alienating the devout theatricalism of Artaud in particular. There are, however, several issues that need to be considered in relation to this modernism: I mention only the most striking of these.

Theatrically, the directors Fort and Lugné-Poe were instrumental in providing early realizations of symbolism and of Jarry, who was the Rabelais of the unconventional initiatives in late nineteenth-century dramaturgy. But a (more) decisive role in modern theatre practice was also held by Antoine. If Antoine is claimed for modernism, then so must be the realism which he championed, and by implication the farthest reaches of realist dramaturgy. If he is not claimed, then the theatre of the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century has a dynamic major history that cannot be seen to be affected by or dependent on modernism.

French dramaturgy also has a history in the same era that is detached and

independent from this modernist tradition, but which was (and perhaps still is) thought to be decisively modern (in a clear contradiction to the values of the boulevard), if not always critically esteemed: this history would certainly include the work of Giraudoux and Anouilh.

Beckett was a disciple of Joyce; his modernist credentials are overtly impeccable. But it is remarkable that a dramaturgy that can be claimed for modernism relies for its fundamental impact so thoroughly on the reintroduction of the classical unities of time, place and action (*Waiting for Godot*) to an apparently astounded critical reception. One wonders what earlier members of that modernist canon that has been established by criticism (Jarry, Apollinaire, the surrealists) might have made of this.

Contrastingly, Beckett is also interesting because of the prescriptive nature of his dramaturgic theatre, which controls *mise-en-scène* to a degree that is virtually absolute. In that respect, he provides an example of how the script and dramaturgy may attempt to provide a complete aesthetic for the theatre, to control the theatrical apparatus, and that might make him a modernist *auteur* rather than an author. By assertions of the stringencies of copyright, it may be that the Beckett estate is effectively contriving to preserve a distinctive dramaturgical modernism, in a manner that is normally thought to be impossible for an ephemeral artform such as theatre.

8. Both Futurism and dada played with theatrical interventions, but neither had a high value for theatre. They were, however, less antagonistic to theatre than surrealism, a movement with which Artaud was closely associated until his theatrical convictions caused a breach. It is abundantly plain that, despite this breach, Artaud shares many aesthetic values with surrealism, not least in his emphasis on the dream.

9. It is arguable that the shape of British dramaturgy in the twentieth century was more fundamentally altered or affected by the abolition of pre-censorship of theatrical scripts in the late 1960s than by any other factor. British and Irish theatre may be regarded as divorced from a mainstream of influence, but both continue to be acknowledged well

beyond their own immediate region. In this connection, if we take Beckett to represent one kind of modernism - a dramaturgical modernism - then the British playwright notoriously most influenced by him, Harold Pinter, has plainly naturalized or domesticized the modernist impulse, while retaining some degree of stylistic imprint. In fact, the largest legacy of Beckett in British and Irish dramaturgy lies in a modernizing of realism, notably in forms of language or dialogic exchange. The abolition of pre-censorship, by releasing constraints on the expression of sexuality and of political conviction or critique, transformed both the subject matter, appeal, and generic characteristics of script- and theatre-making, but not in modes that have any manifest connection with modernism.

However, this should not be seen as a qualification that is confined to modernism. Whether British theatrical practice, or the theatrical apparatus in general, has ever been substantially affected by anything resembling a major artistic movement in the twentieth century is open to question.

Concluding summary

In this essay, I have drawn attention to the frailty of critical and theoretical attention to theatrical modernism, in the general context of the antiquity of the modern. I have suggested that we should expect a more robust and holistic account of theatrical modernism, which does not depend exclusively on analogies with literary or artistic modernism, but which includes within it recognition of a theory of human performance. I have also questioned the degree to which we may associate modernism with the dramaturgy of the twentieth century, by acknowledging the general limitations of the verbal script in imposing a modernist vision on the complexities of the theatrical apparatus.

¹ 'un théâtre purement descriptif et qui raconte, qui raconte de la psychologie'; 'c'est à dire, de la psychologie'; 'le theatre psychologique' (Artaud [1964], 118-20).

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