

## CONVENTION AND REVOLT IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA<sup>1</sup>

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Classification, if nothing else, is a convenience: one means by convention that which is standardized: by revolt that which breaks away from standards. Now obviously all forms of art must contain something of both. In so far as an art must have certain essential qualities, must observe laws fundamental to itself, it is conventional. On the other hand, every example of an art must be to a certain extent different from every other example of that art, if it is to rise to the dignity of an individual creation. This is fundamental. Nevertheless, we may brush aside these connecting threads and draw a distinction between that piece of art which in general observes the rules of the game, and that which tries to create a new game. Broadly speaking then we can say that art is in convention or revolt, and since drama is one of the arts, indeed I think it is a combination of all the arts, it too can be described as conventional or rebellious.

Now we may make a distinction here for those arts which are imitative, between form and content. Music does not have to represent anything. We do not have to imagine the burning of Moscow to enjoy Tchaikowsky's 1812 Overture. Painting, however, usually does represent, and in painting we therefore may draw the distinction between content—what does the picture imitate?—and form—how is that imitation expressed? Suppose an artist who has been all his life painting landscapes desires to paint portraits. He is then in revolt against what has been for him the conventional in content. But suppose he decides to continue to paint landscapes, but to use for that purpose a technique—say impressionism—which is entirely different from the technique he has been in the habit of using. He is then in revolt against what has been for him the conventional in form. It is the same in the drama. We must distinguish in this matter of convention and revolt between what the playwright has to say, and how what he says is to be presented. And now I am ready to state what might be called my thesis: namely, that American drama before the twentieth century is in general conventional, but when it breaks with convention, it does so with respect to content alone: that on the other hand, much American drama of the present century, when it departs from con-

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture delivered before colleagues and students of the Faculty on March 11, 1955.

vention, does so not only with respect to content, but more significantly with respect to form.

Let us start with the first statement. Drama, as far as we know, began in America about 1700. The acting was by amateurs and most of the plays we can only guess at. Occasionally, *very* occasionally, some few English actors would come over but their performances are so scantily recorded as to make them of little use for our purpose. About the middle of the century, however, there arrived from England the first important organized and trained dramatic Company under the leadership of a man named Lewis Hallam. Later in the '50's, after this group was disbanded, it was reorganized by David Douglass, and under his aegis, its stay was fairly permanent. Now naturally the plays put on in America at this time were not American. The actors brought with them, and had sent to them, the old stand-bys of the English theatre, along with some few of the contemporary successes. And that remained the situation until the Revolution. Following the war, with its resultant national consciousness, came the first few straggling American playwrights. Royal Tyler, a Harvard graduate, wrote in 1787 a comedy, *The Contrast*, which was successfully produced. William Dunlap began to adapt and write his first few plays. But though Tyler first put the Yankee on the boards, his technique was that of the comedy of manners of Sheridan. Dunlap took his models from manners comedy, sentimental comedy, bourgeois tragedy, melodrama, etc., English, French, and German. In other words, though his plays are often American in plot and characters, the method is unoriginal. What drama we have in the 18th century is imitative; in so far as it departs from the conventional, it does so only in content, not in form.

The 19th century reveals the same phenomena. Real American playwriting talent comes to the fore right enough, but the method is derivative. Many names might be mentioned of some importance to the historian but few are worth remembering for their dramatic art. The American Quaker appears on the stage, the American negro. There are a number of patriotic spectacles. But the plays are dead, forgotten, unrevived. James Nelson Barker, for example, wrote plays on American themes, one on Pocahontas which eventually reached London, but the technique is derivative. John Howard Payne went frankly to European themes and the technique of French melodrama. He is remembered for a ballad called "Home, Sweet Home"; it is forgotten that that was the theme-song of one of his plays, *Clari, or The Maid of Milan*. Robert Montgomery Bird's plays are the result of the stimulus of French romantic drama. American type characters flood the stage, the frontier appears as a new subject, but they are American subjects, foreign-written. Around mid-century comes George Henry Boker, later ambassador from the United States to Turkey, and quite the best playwright who had yet appeared, but his plays are

not even American in theme, and he writes like an Elizabethan. Dion Boucicault, extraordinary man of the theatre as he was, wrote no plays in America which technically showed more than a prolific invention in devising new tricks, not a new method. Bronson Howard, with all his American topics and American contrasts and American psychology, and James A. Herne with a real flair for rural realism developed nothing native in form. And so it was with David Belasco, and Clyde Fitch, and Augustus Thomas and a host of others. They are influenced by the new realism, but it is realism in content. It is not a new technique; it is a development of an old.

Let me make myself perfectly clear on one point: I am not criticizing the American dramatists of the 18th and 19th centuries for having had a conventional technique. Shakespeare's technique was ready-made for him: he did not invent it; he merely used it better than one else. A development in technique is not necessarily an index to achievement. What I am trying to do is to point out a tendency, not to criticize. Both convention and revolt are necessary to drama though an overdose of either may bring about sterility. And that indeed was about what happened in American drama. But perhaps revolt was not necessary until the 20th century; what I am trying to do is to show that it came there, and had been largely absent theretofore.

Let us look at a few examples of the revolt in content continuing on into our day. The American dramatist searches for new material to make plays about. Obviously one way is to follow the trend of the times. As life changes, the dramatists attempt to show that change, to mirror that new life. Let us put ourselves in the dramatist's place. Mr. Montague Glass, for example, wrote a series of narratives about two Jews, Potash and Perlmutter, and pictured them in their relations to contemporary conditions. The books could not have been written a hundred years before because the conditions were not the same. They proved popular and were adapted to the stage (1913). (That by the way is the usual procedure; the drama almost always follows the other arts, because it is made up of many separate arts and must appeal to the mass of an audience, not merely to an individual). Potash and Perlmutter on the boards were human and amusing and became very popular, with the result that the modern Jew in his relations to contemporary business and to his fellow men also became theatrically popular. Here was a departure in content. But shortly after the New York Jew became popular on the stage, he became conventional for he was written and rewritten, acted and reacted. It is then up to some one, if the figure is to be kept, to show him in a new relationship, if we are to have another departure in content. And at that time there happened along an unusually astute business woman and a clever enough playwright by the name of Anne Nichols. Miss Nichols noticed what a good many

other people had noticed but thought theatrically unimportant, that a good proportion of the population of New York City was composed of the Jews and the Irish. She also noted that a good many of these Jews and and Irishmen frequented the theatre. It occurred to her to write both into a play which would be so constructed as to appeal to both, and she forthwith concocted *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922). The play has not much merit. Manager after manager turned it down until she finally had to produce it herself. The critics were practically unanimous in damning it. And yet, because Miss Nichols was successful in presenting a new development in content which would appeal to a large section of New York, the play broke every world's record for consecutive performance and brought her what was reported to be in the neighborhood of five million dollars.

Suppose we take another example. The Prohibition Amendment made certain changes in the life Americans led during its somewhat theoretical existence. I do not mean that it stopped drinking, or that it banished intoxication from the stage. But it made changes, nevertheless. For one thing, it created a rendez-vous of entertainment known as the nightclub,—and night was not spelled with an initial "K";,A good many people had observed the nightclub and been observed leaving the nightclub in various states of financial and physical disintegration before it occurred to a professional stage-manager, Philip Dunning, to write a play about it. George Abbott was called in to polish it a bit, and it finally saw light under the sponsorship of Jed Harris as *Broadway* (1926). It was extraordinarily popular. Now *Broadway* was a departure from the conventional in content, solely because the nightclub was created by Prohibition.

I could go on indefinitely presenting examples of the departure in content in modern American plays, a departure because of new elements in modern life. As a matter of fact, *Broadway* came close to establishing a certain class of plays which took some milieu and dramatized it. Thus we had *Five Star Final*, *The Front Page* and *Gentlemen of the Press* concerned with the newspaper, *The Royal Family* doing acting in the person of the Barrymores, *Chicago* interpreting Chicago scandal and politics, *June Moon* presenting Tin Pan Alley, *Once in a Lifetime* holding up Hollywood. We had prison presented through *The Last Mile*, Congress in *Both Your Houses*, and the Scottsboro Case in *They Shall Not Die*. Surely the departure in content has been sufficiently demonstrated. However, is there anything unusual, experimental in the form of these plays? Assuredly not. *Abie's Irish Rose* was in the farce-comedy technique of hoary antiquity; *Broadway* was merely a well presented melodrama; the other plays technically show no development and there is no reason why they should. The form was entirely competent to express the content. The departure from the conventional so far affects only the matter, not the manner.

Let us look now at the American theatre of revolt, revolt in manner as well as matter. Of late years playwrights have been finding fault with

certain elements in the American theatre. They have questioned what had been looked upon as established principles, of dramatic composition. In the first place was it necessary or good art to picture life realistically on the stage. Or was it sufficient merely to give the effect of life? Was it necessary for the audience watching a play to believe that what was going on on the stage was really happening. Would it enjoy the play if it were constantly called to the attention that it was *only* a play? More important still, could certain ideas be put on the stage properly with the technique in vogue, and if not, what could be substituted that would be more satisfactory? The answer to these questions created two forms of dramatic art, often found together, expressionism and the theatre theatrical. Both are the departures in form for which we have been searching, so far unsuccessfully, in the history of the American drama.

Before I attempt definition of these terms, there is a persistent question which I must answer. Neither of these techniques originated in America. One can trace them through Sweden, Germany, France, and Russia before there is a sign of them in the United States. And the question naturally arises, are not these new forms of art therefore conventional in America since we borrowed them from foreign countries? Logical as the question may seem, the answer is "No". The technique based on realism, to whatever degree, is the same in all nations. It implies the same principles for tragedy, comedy, farce, melodrama, or what not. The content may change but the form remains the same. Expressionism on the other hand is a principle, rather than any *one* method or form. It may be used in a number of different ways with none of the techniques being like any other. And consequently he who uses the idea and adapts it to what he wishes to say is inventing for each play a new technique. The principle behind realism is, whatever kind of play be in question: make it lifelike. The principle behind expressionism is: make it anything you like as long as it accomplishes what you want it to do. Expressionism therefore cannot but be unconventional.

Expressionism has been talked about more than it has been defined but definition is necessary. I use the term here as it has been used critically in America. I wish to emphasize that the term does not necessarily mean the same thing as it has in Europe, especially as applied to other forms of art, or to art movements. By it I mean the theory behind all those forms of art which substitute the formal expression of the artist's emotion for the representation of the object which may have aroused it, and without intervening reality between man and man. For example suppose that I as a painter wish to present artistically the emotion which I have felt at witnessing a certain scene or object. As an expressionist I do not need to draw that scene or object: all that I need to do is to express by line and color and significant form what effect that object has made on me. It is conceivable for example that if the object happened to be so mundane a thing

as a tomato that I might express that tomato artistically by various red strokes which did not however look anything like a tomato, but which would give an effect of curve and redness. The result would be an abstraction almost completely divorced from reality. Now I think it is obvious that complete and logical expressionism in the theatre is impossible for we are dealing there with a mass, not an individual, and cannot get entirely away from reality when we work with human beings as actors. And therefore we must frame a new and much simpler definition for the drama. Expressionistic drama therefore is that which subdues the appearance of the natural world to the inner reality of emotion or effect it wishes to make clear. And that is all I mean by the term. It includes therefore cubism, stylization, constructivism, and projectivism. Some of the playwrights I shall shortly discuss would not call themselves expressionists. The expressionistic movement, so called, is dead and they do not belong to that movement. I include them under the term, because though they are not of it, they received important impulses from it. Their chief principle like that of the adherents to the expressionistic movement is freedom and their methods are definitely anti-realistic. Not merely unrealistic, but anti-realistic, — opposed to realism as a principle.

The doctrine of the theatre theatrical or, as it has sometimes been called, anti-technique, is more simple to explain. Those who believe in this concept hold that it is bad art to make the audience believe that it is seeing real life, that drama is an art like the other arts and sufficient to itself. (When you look at a landscape in a picture gallery you do not pretend that it is a real landscape). Therefore the audience should not be allowed to forget that it is enjoying an art and not a transcript of real life; it should be reminded constantly that it is in the theatre. This concept too, like expressionism, is at the opposite pole from realism.

These anti-realistic methods have, I think, arisen in the theatre because by them certain things can be expressed more or less impossible by realistic means. Certain subjects which were felt to be the property of the novelist have been rescued for the stage. And the problem which has had most influence in bringing about these revolutionary ideas, the problem which many modern dramatists have been trying to solve is the riddle of personality.<sup>1</sup> In the 19th century, people were interested in the problems of heredity and environment. The question was, "How did I get to be what I am?" In the 20th, the question is, "Who or what am I?" Now this question cannot be as well treated realistically as it can be by the new methods. For example, what is one to do with the question of dual personality? It was treated by Robert Louis Stevenson in his fascinating story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It was inevitable that the tale should be put on the

<sup>1</sup> For this suggestion and certain phases of the ensuing discussion, I am indebted to the late Donald Clive Stuart of Princeton University.

stage, and it became a successful play. But, supposing in the first place that the story is true, note that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde do not exist at the same time. Therefore they could be played realistically, the same actor presenting both parts, and changing from one to the other when necessary. But, say the moderns, this has only outer truth, not inner truth, because though personality *is* made up of various elements, these elements all exist at one and the same time. And this became the dramatist's problem.

Let us look at examples of modern American plays which treat the problem of personality with the new anti-realistic methods.

In 1915 a play by Alice Gerstenberg called *Overtones* was produced in New York City. Among her characters are Maggie and Margaret, who converse not only with other people but also with each other. They are played by two actresses. But Maggie and Margaret are different aspects of the same person shown in varying relationships. Here you have a dramatist trying to present and in a measure to solve the riddle of personality by anti-realistic methods. Outer truth, that is, realism, has been thrown overboard in order to present inner truth through an effect on the audience of the conflict in the elements of personality, that is, by what I have here called expressionism.

Another play attacks the problem in a different way; there is less conflict and the expressionism is more direct. This is *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice produced by the Theatre Guild in 1923. Here the settings themselves are expressionistic, that is, instead of representing realistically, they show the world through the warped eyes of the principal character, Mr. Zero. Mr. Zero is a nonentity; he is a book-keeper who has been with the same company for twenty-five years. The opening scene shows his bedroom. The walls are papered with foolscap covered with figures, not because that is way the room is actually papered, but because that is the way it appears to the numeral-ridden mind of Mr. Zero. This system is followed throughout the play. In one of the principal scenes, Mr. Zero called in to see the boss and expecting promotion is dismissed instead. The whole scene is projected through Mr. Zero's mind. His indignant frustration is shown by a staccato dialogue, by a revolving stage on which the characters stand and which accelerates as the action proceeds, and by a confusion of off-stage sounds which increase to a deafening cacophony. There is a flash of red, and then a black-out.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the audience after witnessing this scene, feels the turmoil in Mr. Zero's mind, though it perhaps does not realize that the terrific clap of thunder at the end is what Mr. Zero hears when his pistol shot kills the boss. The expressionistic dramatist does not show you one man killing another; he attempts to show you a man's mind at the point of killing.

<sup>1</sup> *Seven Plays by Elmer Rice*, New York, 1950, Sc.2, pp. 75-76.

The theatre theatrical is in a sense implied in both these productions, for the audience cannot but be conscious that it is not witnessing a transcript of real life. Perhaps, however, a specific example of the concept will make it more clear. In *Machinal*, a play, by Sophie Treadwell which was first produced in 1928, the stage is double, the usual proscenium arch of the theatre forming the outer stage, a series of draperies and sets within that limit forming an inner stage. All the action of the play takes place on the inner stage. But,—when an actor makes his exit from the scene, the audience sees him leave the inner stage, appear out of character (light a cigarette, for example) in the outer stage, and saunter off into the wings. The result is that the audience has constantly kept before it the realization that it is witnessing a play in a theatre, and that the characters are impersonated and not real.

I have reserved Mr. Eugene O'Neill for more extended discussion, both because he is the most important American dramatist and because he shows strikingly the revolt in form which has been in part the subject of this lecture. For the second reason, we are not primarily concerned with O'Neill of the *S.S. Glencairn*, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, or *Ah Wilderness*, but rather with the man who created *The Great God Brown*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *Days Without End*. We have so far discovered two methods of solving the problem of personality: separate actors to personify elements in the personality; and the projection of a play through the principal character. In *The Great God Brown* (1926), Mr. O'Neill found a third means, the use of masks. Each of the leading characters in this play represents in effect two individualities; each carries, at some time or other during the play, if not all through it, a false face moulded in the likeness of the person he or she has become,—another self the world knows and accepts as the real person who is hidden back of it. The name of one of the characters, Dion Anthony, is in itself a hint of the conflict, Dionysus, "the creative pagan acceptance of life fighting eternal war with the...life-denying spirit ... of St. Anthony".<sup>1</sup>

In *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), O'Neill again uses masks, this time over three hundred of them. The symbolism, the masks, and the crowds are employed to help us experience and sense the message of Lazarus to the world: "Fear is no more! There is no death! There is only life! There is only laughter!"<sup>2</sup> I use the word "experience" advisedly; one does not always understand an expressionistic play, nor is one intended to. The dramatist wants us to *experience* it.

In *Strange Interlude* (1928) O'Neill uses still another method, and it comes closer to a satisfactory solution to the problem than any I have

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill in the New York *Evening Post*, February 13, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*, New York, 1941, Act I, sc. 2, p. 402.



seen. Along with the action of the plot itself, runs the drama of hidden selves and hidden motives revealed by asides or monologues. These express the thoughts of the characters, and when any one is thinking aloud in the play, somewhat in the fashion of the old 'aside', the other characters freeze into immobility and do not hear. The convention is easily accepted in the first few minutes, and from then on the play is absorbingly exciting. The dialogue makes the desired impression of external illusion; the thoughts are the inner reality of each character. One cannot but feel after having seen the play that he has penetrated deeply into the inner personality of these characters.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) the question of personality is also present, as when the daughter of the first play becomes the reincarnation of her mother in the third. And the whole trilogy, based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and transferring something of the spirit of Greek tragedy into the terms of modern life and the interpretation of modern life, tends to substitute for the earlier fatalism dominated by the desires and caprices of the Gods, a fatalism which springs from the traits of family and personal character in terms of Freudian psychology. Of course the very fact that O'Neill chose such a theme and such a method at all is illustrative of the rebellion of American drama from conventional standards. And in *Days Without End* (1934) we have a sort of modern Faust play where the leading character is shadowed by his materialistic other self. It differs from *Strange Interlude* in that other characters hear him say through the mouth of his Mephistopheles the things he does not mean or want to say. John and Loving are two aspects of one character, John Loving.

O'Neill of course is not the end. Other and still more recent playwrights have shown their rebellion against conventional form in different ways. Thornton Wilder, whose *Our Town* has recently been presented in Ankara, and whose *Skin of Our Teeth* achieved earlier performance here, has used with great success the anti-realistic and suggestive methods and the anti-technique I have been trying to describe. Our two best dramatists at the present time, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, are free to use whatever forms they wish to express dramatically their vision of life. That indeed has been the principal value of the revolt. A work of art is not great *because* it shatters a traditional form. But the aesthetic climate which produces art is one where the artist is free. Some of the plays I have mentioned now seem unnecessarily stilted and eccentric, but without the experimentation they represent, the modern American theatre would be a pale reflection of another age and other countries instead of what I believe it to be—ever changing, and vital, and a true artistic reflection of the American spirit.