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(1840-1902)

Naturalism on the Stage¹ (1881)

THE IMPULSE of the century is toward naturalism. Today this force, racing toward us, is being emphasized more and more, and everything must obey it. This force has abducted the novel and the drama. The development of the naturalistic force has progressed more quickly in the novel to the point of triumph; on the stage it is just beginning to appear. This was bound to be. The theatre has always been a stronghold of convention for many reasons which I want to explain later. I would like to come simply to this point: the naturalistic formula, however complete and defined in the novel, is far from being well stated in the theatre, and I conclude that the formula must be realized and that it will take on a strictness of form emanating from its scientific nature, or else the drama will become blunted and more and more inferior.

Some people are very angry with me, and they shout, "But what do you want? What further development do you need? Is this evolution not already an accomplished fact? Have not Émile Augier, Dumas *filis*, and Victorien Sardou pushed as far as possible the observation and the painting of our society? Let us stop at this point—we are already too concerned with the realities of this world." First of all, these people are naïve to want to stop this naturalistic development; nothing is stable in society, everything is carried along by sustained motion. People go, nevertheless, where they ought to go. The naturalistic evolution, I contend, far from being an accomplished fact, has hardly begun. Up to now we have experienced only the first attempts. We should wait until certain ideas have made their mark, and until the public becomes accustomed to these ideas and until their force destroys the obstacles one by one. I have attempted in looking over Sardou, Dumas *filis*, and Augier to explain for what reasons I consider them workmen who are clearing the ground of rubbish,

¹ Émile Zola, "Le Naturalisme au théâtre," *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: E. Fasquelle, 1902).

and not as creators, not geniuses who are building a monument. Moreover, after them, I am waiting for something else.

This something else which arouses indignation and calls forth so much jesting is, however, very simple. We have only to read Balzac, Flaubert, and the Goncourts again—in a word, the naturalistic novelists—to find out what it is. I am waiting for someone to put a man of flesh and bones on the stage, taken from reality, scientifically analyzed, and described without one lie. I am waiting for someone to rid us of fictitious characters, of these symbols of virtue and vice which have no worth as human data. I am waiting for environment to determine the characters and the characters to act according to the logic of facts combined with logic of their own disposition. I am waiting for the time when there is no prestidigitation of any kind, no more waving of the magic wand, changing persons and things from one minute to the next. I am waiting for the time when no one will tell us any more unbelievable stories, when no one will any longer spoil the effects of true observations by imposing romantic incidents, the result of which destroys even the good parts of a play.

I am waiting for everyone to throw out the tricks of the trade, the contrived formulas, the tears and superficial laughs. I am waiting for a dramatic work void of declamations, majestic speech, and noble sentiments, to have the unimpeachable morality of truth and to teach us the frightening lesson of sincere investigation. I am waiting, finally, until the development of naturalism already achieved in the novel takes over the stage, until the playwrights return to the source of science and modern arts, to the study of nature, to the anatomy of man, to the painting of life in an exact reproduction more original and powerful than anyone has so far dared to risk on the boards.

This is what I am waiting for. Some people shrug their shoulders, laugh, and reply that I shall wait forever. Their decisive argument is that I must not expect these things on the stage. The theatre is not the novel. The theatre has given us what it could give us. We must be content with the result. Now we are at the very center of the quarrel. I am trying to uproot the conditions of existence on the stage. If what I ask is impossible, then lies have a place on the boards: a play must have some romantic places,

revolve around certain situations, and end at the proper time. My detractors take a "professional" view of the theatre: first, any analysis is boring, the audience demands facts, always facts; then there is the convention of the stage—an action must be played in three hours no matter what its length in time; then the characters are given a certain value which necessitates a fictional setting. I will not quote all the arguments. Now I come to the audience's intervention, which is considerable; the audience wishes this, the audience does not want that; it prefers four sympathetic puppets to one real character drawn from life. In a word, the stage is the domain of conventionality; everything is conventional from the decorations to the footlights which illuminate the actors who are led by a string. Truth can be shown only in small unnoticed doses. Some people even go so far as to swear that the theatre will die the day that it ceases to be an entertaining lie, destined to console the spectators in the evening for the sad realities of the day.

I am acquainted with all this reasoning, and I shall try to respond to it presently, when I reach my conclusion. Each genre of literature has its own conditions of existence. A novel, read alone in the comfort of one's own room, is not a play which is acted before two thousand spectators. The novelist has time and space before him. All kinds of liberties are permitted him; he can use one hundred pages, if he wishes, to analyze at his leisure a certain character; he can describe his surroundings as much as he pleases; he can cut his story short, can retrace his steps, changing scenes twenty times—in a word, he is absolute master of his medium. The dramatist, on the contrary, is enclosed in a rigid frame; he must obey all kinds of necessities. He moves only in the milieu of obstacles. Finally, there is the question of the isolated reader and the audience as a group; the solitary reader tolerates everything, goes where he is led, even when he is annoyed, whereas the audience as a whole is filled with prudishness, fright, and sensibilities which the author must recognize and unfortunately deal with. Since all this is true, it is precisely for this reason that the stage is the last citadel of conventionality as I stated earlier. If the naturalistic movement had not encountered in the theatre such difficult ground, covered with obstacles, naturalism would have taken root on the stage with the intensity and success it

has had in the novel. The theatre, under its conditions of existence, must be the last, most labored and disputed conquest of the spirit of truth. . . .

Let us admit for a moment that the critics are right when they assert that naturalism is impossible in the theatre. Here is what these critics believe. Conventionalism is a hard and fast rule on the stage; the lie will always have its place there. We are condemned to a continuance of Sardou's juggling, to the theories and witticisms of Dumas *filis*, and to the nice characters of Emile Augier. We will not create anything greater than the genius of these authors; we must accept them as the glory of our time on the stage. They are what they are because our theatre wishes them to be such. If they have not gone further in the drama, if they have not obeyed more perfectly the important wave of truth which is carrying us forward, it is the theatre which forbids them to be influenced by the truth. So in the theatre there is a barrier which blocks the road even to the strongest. Very well, then! But it is the theatre which you condemn; it is to the stage that you have given the mortal blow. You crush the theatre under the novel, you assign it an inferior place, you make it contemptible and useless in the eyes of generations to come. What do you wish us to do with the stage, we who are followers of the truth, anatomists, analysts, explorers of life, compilers of human data, if you prove to us that in the theatre we cannot use our methods or tools? Really! The theatre lives only on conventionalities; it must lie; it refuses to accept our experimental literature! Oh, well, then, the century will put the theatre aside, abandon it to the hands of the public entertainers, and will perform its great and superb work elsewhere. You pronounce the verdict, and you kill the stage. It is very evident that the naturalistic evolution will extend itself more and more because it is the very intelligence of the century. While the novelists are digging always further toward the truth, producing newer and more exact human documents, the theatre will flounder more every day in the center of its romantic fictions, worn-out plots, and skillfulness of construction. The situation will become more annoying because the public will certainly acquire a taste for reality in reading novels. The naturalistic movement is making itself forcibly felt. There will come a time when the public will shrug its shoulders and demand an innovation in the

theatre. Either the stage will be naturalistic, or it will not exist at all; such is the formal conclusion.

I have the strongest faith in the future of our theatre. I no longer admit that the critics are right in saying that naturalism is impossible on the stage, and I am going to explain under what conditions the movement will, without any doubt, be brought about.

No, it is not true that the stage must remain stationary; it is not true that its actual conventionalities are the fundamental conditions of its existence. Everything goes on, I repeat; everything goes forward. The authors of today will be overruled; they cannot have the presumption to decide dramatic literature forever. What these authors have stammered about the opposition will clearly affirm; but the stage will not be shaken up because of the disagreement; it will enter, on the contrary, into a wider and straighter path. People have always resisted the march forward; they have denied to the newcomers the power and the right to accomplish what has not been performed by their elders. But the older generation will remain angry and blind in vain. The social and literary evolutions have an irresistible force; they can cross with one leap enormous obstacles which were said to be impassable. The theatre has been in vain what it is today; it will be tomorrow what it should be. And when the event takes place, everybody will think it perfectly natural.

Here I enter into mere probabilities, and I am no longer pretending to have the same scientific exactitude. As long as I have reasoned on facts, I have proved the truth of my position. Now I am content to foretell the future. The evolution will take place; that is certain. But will it pass to the left? Will it pass to the right? I do not really know. One can reason about it, nothing more.

Moreover, it is certain that the conditions existing on the stage will always be different. The novel, thanks to its free form, will remain perhaps the perfect tool of the century, while the stage will follow it and complete its action. The marvelous powers of the theatre must not be forgotten nor must its immediate effect upon the audience. No better instrument for propaganda exists. If the novel, then, is read by the fireside, in several instances, with a patience tolerating the longest details, the naturalistic drama should proclaim above all that it has no relation to this isolated

reader, but to a crowd who demand clearness and conciseness. I do not see that the naturalistic formula is antagonistic to this conciseness and clearness. The novel analyzes at length with a minuteness of detail which overlooks nothing; the stage can analyze as briefly as it wishes by actions and words. In Balzac's work a word or a cry is often sufficient to describe the entire character. This cry belongs essentially to the theatre. As to the acts, they are consistent with analysis in action, the most striking form of action one can make. When we have gotten rid of the child's play of a plot, the infantile game of tying up complicated threads in order to have the pleasure of untying them again; when a play shall be only a real and logical story, we shall have perfect analysis; we shall analyze forcibly the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters. This idea is what has led me to say so often that the naturalistic formula carries us back to the source itself of our national stage with its classical formula. In Corneille's tragedies and Molière's comedies, we find this continuous analysis of character which I find necessary; plot takes a secondary place, and the work is a long dissertation in dialogue on man. Only instead of an abstract man, I would substitute a natural man, put him in his proper surroundings, and analyze all the physical and social causes which make him what he is. To me, in a word, the classical formula is a good one, on condition that the scientific method is employed in the study of society itself, in the same way that the science of chemistry is the study of compounds and their properties.

As to the long descriptions used in the novel, they cannot be used on the stage; that is evident. The naturalistic novelists describe at length, not for the pleasure of describing as they have been reproached for doing, but because description is part of their formula to put down full details about the character, and to make him complete by means of his environment. Such a novelist no longer looks on man as an intellectual abstraction as he was looked upon in the seventeenth century; he is a thinking animal, who forms part of nature, and who is subject to the multiple influences of the soil in which he grows and where he lives. That is why a climate, a country, a horizon, are often decisively important. The novelist no longer separates his character from the air he breathes; he does not describe him because of any rhetorical need, as the

didactic poets did, as Delille does, for example; he simply makes a note of the material conditions in which he finds his characters at every hour, and in which the facts are produced, in order to be absolutely thorough, and so that his inquiry may belong to the world's comprehensive view and reproduce reality in its entirety. Descriptions need not be transplanted to the stage; they are found there naturally. Is not the stage set a continual description more exact and startling than the descriptions in a novel? A set is only painted cardboard, some people say; indeed, but in a novel it is still less than painted cardboard—it is blackened paper despite which the illusion is created. After the scenery, set off so strikingly, and so surprisingly true, that we have recently seen in our theatres, no one can any longer deny the possibility of producing the reality of environment on the stage. It is up to dramatic authors now to utilize this reality; they will furnish the characters and the facts; the set designers, under the author's direction, will furnish the descriptions, as exact as shall be necessary. It is up to the dramatic author to make use of environments as novelists do, since the novelists know how to introduce and make such environments real.

I will add that, since the theatre is a material reproduction of life, external surroundings have always been a necessity there. In the seventeenth century, however, nature was not considered important, and, as man was looked upon only as a purely intellectual being, the scenery was vague—a peristyle of a temple, any kind of a room or public place would do. Today the naturalistic movement has brought about a more and more perfect exactness in stage scenery. Such fidelity was produced inevitably, little by little. I even find in this exactness proof of the unheralded task that naturalism has accomplished in the theatre since the beginning of the century. I cannot study thoroughly this question of scenery and accessories; I must content myself by stating that description is not only possible on the stage, but it is, moreover, a necessity which is imposed on the theatre as an essential condition of its existence.

I do not have to talk about the change of place. The unity of place has not been observed for a long time. The playwrights do not hesitate to depict an entire existence, to take the audience to both ends of the earth. Here con-

ventionality remains mistress as she is also in the novel. The same idea applies to the question of time—but one must cheat a little here. A plot which calls for fifteen days, for example, must be played in the three hours which we set apart for reading a novel or seeing it played at the theatre. We are not the creative force which governs the world; we are only second-rate creators who analyze, summarize by trial and error, who are happy and acclaimed as geniuses when we can disengage one ray of the truth.

I come now to the language. My detractors say that there is a special style for the stage. They want it to be a style completely different from that of daily conversation, more sonorous, more sensitive, written in a higher key, cut in facets, no doubt to make the theatre's chandeliers sparkle. In our time, for example, Dumas *filis* has the reputation of being a great playwright. His witticisms are celebrated. They are shot off like skyrocket, falling in showers to the audience's applause. Besides, all his characters speak the same language, the language of witty Paris, spinning with paradoxes, always aiming for a good hit, sharp and hard. I do not deny the sparkle of this language—but it is a superficial sparkle which contains no truth. Nothing is more fatiguing than these continual mocking sentences. I would prefer greater flexibility and naturalness. These sentences are at once too well and not well enough written. The true stylists of our age are the novelists—you must look to Gustave Flaubert and to the Goncourts to find impeccable, living, and original style. When you compare Dumas' style to that of these great prose authors you find it does not stand up in correctness, color, or emotion. What I want to hear in the theatre is spoken language. If we are not able to reproduce on the stage a conversation with its repetitions, its length, and its useful words, the emotion and tone of the conversation could be kept; the individual turn of mind of each speaker, the reality, in a word, reproduced to the necessary extent. The Goncourts have made a curious attempt at this style in *Henriette Maréchal*, that play which no one wanted to listen to and which no one knows anything about. The Greek actors spoke through a brass tube; during the time of Louis XIV the comedians sang their roles in a singsong tone to give them more pomp; today we are content to say there is a language of the theatre which is more sonorous and explosive. You can see

from these examples what progress we have made. One day the public will perceive that the best style in the theatre is that which best sets forth the spoken conversation, which puts the exact word in its proper place, giving it its just value. The naturalistic novelists have already written excellent models of dialogue, reduced to strictly useful words. The question of sentimental characters now remains. I do not disguise the fact that such a question is of capital importance. The public remains cold when its passion for an ideal character of loyalty and honor is not satisfied. A play which presents the audience with living characters taken from real life looks black and austere to it, when the play does not completely exasperate the public. It is on this point especially that the battle of naturalism is fought. We must learn to be patient. At the present time a secret change is taking place in the public's feeling; people are coming little by little, encouraged by the spirit of the century, to agree to a bold interpretation of real life and are even beginning to acquire a taste for it. When audiences can no longer stand certain lies, we shall have very nearly gained our point. Already the novelists' work is preparing the ground for our audiences. A time will come when a master playwright can reveal his ideas on the stage, finding there a public enthusiastically in favor of the truth. It will be a question of tact and strength. Such audiences will see then that the greatest and most useful lessons will be taught by depicting life as it is, and not by repeated generalities nor by speeches of bravado which are spoken merely to please our ears.

The two formulas are before us: the naturalistic formula which makes the stage a study and picture of real life; and the conventional formula which makes the stage an amusement for the mind, an intellectual guessing game, an art of adjustment and symmetry regulated after a certain code. In fact, everything depends on the idea one has of literature and of the drama in particular. If we admit that literature is an inquiry about things and human beings made by original minds, we are naturalists. If we pretend that literature is a framework superimposed upon the truth, that a writer must make use of observation merely in order to exhibit his power of invention and arrangement, we are idealists and proclaim the necessity of conventionality. . . .

And I add that we shall have life on the stage as we already have it in the novel. This would-be logic of actual

plays, this equality and symmetry obtained by processes of reasoning, which come from ancient metaphysics, will collapse before the natural logic of facts and human beings such as reality gives us. In place of a theatre of fabrication, we shall have a stage of observation. How will the evolution be brought about? Tomorrow will give us the answer. I have tried to forecast the future, but leave to genius its realization. I have already stated my conclusion: our stage will be naturalistic, or it will cease to be.

Now that I have attempted to put my ideas together, may I hope people will no longer put words into my mouth which I have never spoken? Will they continue to see, in my critical judgment, I do not know what ludicrous inflations of vanity or repulsive retaliations? I am only the most sincere soldier of truth. If I am mistaken, my opinions are here in print; and fifty years from now I shall be judged, in my turn; I may be accused of injustice, blindness, and useless violence. I accept the verdict of the future.

Translated by Samuel Draper