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## EMILE ZOLA

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**Emile ZOLA (1840-1902)** was, in the words of his mentors, the Goncourt brothers, "at once sturdy and puny," with a sickly, hypersensitive constitution and a melancholy state of mind. "It is strange what a whiner that fat, pot-bellied young fellow is," they exclaimed.

Zola was the subject of a huge variety of portraits and caricatures by painters, engravers, illustrators, and photographers. As a young man, he had coarse dark hair that fell over his forehead and a fringe of a beard running from ear to ear around a mournful little face with soft soulful eyes. Gloomy, haggard, and worried, he looked ten years older than he actually was.

The middle-aged writer became a paunchy, barrel-chested entrepreneur, with a cannonball head, brush cut, full beard and moustache, pouting lips, and a high, heavily lined forehead. By his fifties, Zola was prematurely aged, appearing as the grandfather to his children, with a grizzled beard and moustache, thinning hair receding up a domed forehead, and eyes that had a pensive, visionary look.

Since adolescence Zola had been extremely near-sighted. At first he refused to wear glasses and even later did not wish to be depicted wearing his lorgnette, although in his last years he appeared with pince-nez. As compensation, he was endowed with a highly developed sense of smell and could evoke places through a precise description of their odors. His expressive nose was cleft at the tip and highly mobile like the muzzle of a retriever.

André Antoine, director of the Théâtre Libre, was struck by Zola's "delicate, mobile, astonishingly expressive hands" and the ceaseless animation of his fingers. Plebeian in appearance, he had a "charming voice with the resonance of a silver bell," but was a gauche conversationalist, feeling nervous and constrained in society. A prey to hypochondria and phobias, he was terrified of thunderstorms and could not tolerate constricting clothing. His hands trembled, his heart raced, and, like Rousseau, he felt a compulsive need to urinate, especially when writing, and kept a chamber pot near the desk.

Zola loved and hated the nineteenth-century French theatre. Throughout his career he attempted to write for the stage and hoped to

achieve fame as a playwright. The obsession began at the small theatre in Aix-en-Provence, where he spent his childhood with classmate Paul Cézanne. Zola would skip dinner so as to be first at the door before the box office opened. Over a period of five or six years he saw the entire Parisian repertory and mastered the intricate code of boulevard theatre: how characters must enter and exist, the technique of dramatic *coups*, the need for sympathetic roles, and the "various ways of cheating truth."

Zola deplored the education he received at that "accursed little theatre." As a theorist, he denounced this artificial language of theatrical convention and insisted that the drama should speak in the same natural tongue as the novel, but as a playwright, he never could unlearn the tricks of the trade and even remained convinced they were necessary for success.

First as an art critic Zola attacked the dictatorship of established authority and championed his friend Manet and the Impressionists whose aesthetics of faithfully observed everyday life he endorsed. Then as a theatre critic Zola struck out at well-made playwrights like Dumas fils and Sardou whom he accused of catering to the stupidity and hypocrisy of the audience. Initially Zola attended performances four times a week, but once he acquired a house in the suburbs, a friend attended for him and sent him elaborate notes upon which he based his reviews. Thanks to Turgenev, Zola wrote about the Parisian stage for *The European Herald*, a liberal Russian journal in St Petersburg, where *Naturalism in the Theatre* (1881) appeared before its publication in France.

After Antoine staged an adaptation of his story, *Jacques Dammour*, Zola became a supporter of the Théâtre Libre, attending regularly every month. He advised Antoine to stage Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and corresponded with Strindberg about *The Father*, which he admired, despite reservations about the dramatic foreshortening and abstract characters.

Still under the spell of the glamorous Parisian stage, Zola planned to adapt his best-selling novels and accomplish the "great popular revolution" in the theatre he had long dreamed of. Rejecting offers to adapt *L'Assommoir* from famous writers like Sardou, he selected William Busnach, a Jewish stockbroker turned Boulevard playwright, as his collaborative mask. Zola secretly insisted that the adaptation be made into a profitable melodrama, while publicly pretending that Busnach was the sole author to avoid losing face as the aggressive proponent of naturalism in the theatre. The stage version of *L'Assommoir* was a tremendous success, running for 300 performances; two separate touring companies played it in the provinces to packed houses. Zola, who participated in all aspects of production, attending rehearsals, going to premieres, battling critics, and advising directors, became rich from the adaptations of his novels. But "the great popular revolution" never came about.

## PREFACE TO *THERÈSE RAQUIN* (1873)

It is always dangerous, in my opinion, to make a play from a novel. One of them will inevitably be inferior to the other and the result is often detrimental to both. The world of the theatre differs so widely from that of the novel that, in order to fit his intentions into another mold, the author finds himself forced to distort his intentions, to coarsen and disfigure them and in the process possibly to reveal diffuseness or omissions. It is the bed of Procrustes, the bed of torture, and the result is a mutilated monster. Then, too, an artist must show some consideration for the maidenly feelings of his beloved daughters, no matter whether they be ugly or beautiful and when he has projected them into the world he no longer has the right to subject them to the hazards of another birth.

In bringing *Thérèse Raquin* into the theatre, therefore, I am acting against my own creed. Indeed, I hesitated for a long time and if, at long last, I yielded it was because of a certain state of affairs which will at least serve as attenuating circumstances. To begin with, the critics were extremely severe to the novel when it appeared and they challenged me to make a play from it. They regarded the book as utter filth. They dragged it gaily through the gutter and declared that if such vileness were to be paraded on the stage, the hiss- es of the audience would extinguish the footlights. I am, by nature, extremely curious. I have no dislike of a good scrap and from that moment I promised myself a fine one. The provocation was there. It would have been childish to yield to this desire merely for the chance of giving the lie to the critics; I had a higher motive. It seemed to me that *Thérèse Raquin* offered a dramatic subject for a project of which I had often dreamed. In it I found a collection of people such as I had been seeking, characters who completely satisfied me, in short the components I required and all ready to be used. That decided me.

I certainly do not wish to boast about my play; it has great faults and no one can be severer to them than myself. If I were the critic, the only thing that would be left standing would be its definite purpose of helping in the theatre the broad movement of truth and experimental knowledge which in the last century has been growing and spreading throughout the whole field of

human intelligence. The impulse has been given by the new scientific methods. Because of them, naturalism has had an effect on criticism and history by submitting man and his works to an exact analysis, taking into account circumstances, environment and physical attributes. Then, too, art and literature have, in their turn, been influenced by this mighty current. Painting has become altogether realistic and our landscape school has killed the historical school. The novel, with its study of groups and individuals, with its flexible form, has gradually absorbed all the various branches of literature as classified by the rhetoricians of old and now covers their whole field. These are facts no one can deny. In the endless progression of new ideas to which mankind has given birth there is now revealed the newborn babe of truth. And that alone is the driving force of the century. Everything progresses and he who wants to go backwards or to escape will be smothered under the dust of all those who are marching forward. That is why I am absolutely convinced that we shall soon see the naturalist movement forced upon the theatre, bringing with it the power of reality, the new life of modern art.

Any innovation in the theatre is an extremely delicate matter and literary revolutions are slow to make themselves felt. The theatre will most probably be the last citadel which truth will have to besiege. The public in the mass do not like to have their customs interfered with and their judgments are as brutal as the death sentence. But there comes a time when the public themselves unconsciously become the accomplices of the innovators. That time is when, weary with the old ways and touched by the new inspiration, they feel the imperious need for freshness and originality.

It is possible that I may be mistaken but it seems to me that the public have now arrived at that point. Historical drama is at its last gasp; only a blood transfusion can save it. It is said that operetta and fairy plays have killed historical drama. That is not true. It is dying a natural death; it is dying of magniloquence, of unreality, of platitudes. If comedy still manages to survive in the midst of this general collapse, it is because it has kept closer to real life and truth. I defy the romantics to put on a cloak and dagger drama; the medieval clanking of old iron, the secret doors, poisoned wines, and the rest of it would convince nobody. Melodrama, that middle-class offspring of the romantic drama, is even more dead and no one wants it any more. Its false sentimentality, its complications of stolen children, recovered documents, its brazen improbabilities, have all brought it into such scorn that any attempt to revive it would be met with laughter. The great works of 1830 will remain as struggles, as literary dates and as colossal attempts to overthrow the old classical traditions. But now it is all thrown overboard and the cloaks and the daggers have had their day. The time has come to produce plays of reality. To replace the classical tradition by the romantic tradition would be refusing to profit by the liberty gained for us by our elders. There must no longer be a school, a formula or a high priest of any kind. There is only life, an immense

field where each can study and create in his own way.

I am not merely making out an argument for my own cause. It is my profound conviction—and I insist on this point—that the experimental and scientific spirit of the age is going to reach the theatre and that it is from this direction only that regeneration of our stage can come.

Let the critics look around and tell me any other source from which we can expect a reviving breath of life. The past, indeed, is dead. We must look to the future and the future is the human problem studied within the bounds of reality; it is the abandonment of all legendary tales; it is the living drama of characters and the environments, purged of all nursery tales, historical rag bags, magniloquence, trivialities, and conventional heroics. The rotten framework of the drama of yesterday has brought about its own downfall. There must be a clean sweep. The well-known tricks for introducing and unraveling a plot have been worked to death; what is needed now is a broad and simple portrayal of men and affairs—the kind of drama Molière might have written. Apart from certain conventions which are theatrically necessary, what is today called theatrical technique is nothing but a collection of meaningless little tricks, a sort of narrow tradition which brings the stage into contempt and a code of conventional language which no original mind would stoop to employ.

Furthermore, naturalism is already making its hesitant voice heard in the theatre. I do not want to mention any one work but among plays produced in recent years there are some which contain the germ of the movement of which I have been speaking. Leaving aside for the moment the younger writers, I am speaking especially of certain plays by dramatic authors who have grown old in their profession and who are clever enough to have some idea of the literary transformation which is taking place. Either the drama will die or it will become modern and realistic.

It is under the influence of these ideas that I have made a play of *Thérèse Raquin*. As I have said, the novel contained a subject, characters, and an environment and I considered that these provided first-class elements for my project. I could make a purely human study free of all irrelevancies and going straight to the target. The action lies not in some story or other but in the inner conflicts of the characters. It was not a matter of portraying facts but of working out feelings and attitudes of mind. The ending became the mathematical solution of a set problem. So I followed the novel step by step. I made the one damp, dark room the setting for the play so that nothing should detract from its atmosphere and sense of fate. I chose ordinary, colorless, subsidiary characters to show the banality of everyday life behind the excruciating agonies of my chief protagonists. In constructing the play I have tried to stress the ordinary occupations of my characters so that they shall not appear to be “acting” but “living” before the public. I was, I confess, counting—and with some reason—on the poignancy of the drama to make the audience accept this absence of plot and this minute attention to detail. The attempt has

succeeded and it has made me even happier for my future plays than for *Thérèse Raquin*, for I am publishing this with a vague regret—with a foolish desire to change whole scenes.

There has been stormy criticism and my play has been the subject of violent discussion. I do not complain and I am even grateful for it. I have had my reward in hearing praise of the novel from which it was taken—that novel which, when it appeared, was treated so harshly. Today the novel is good; it is the play that is worthless. It is to be hoped that I can write something else which will be condemned and then perhaps the play will be acclaimed. Now in the matter of criticism one must know how to read between the lines. How, for instance, would it be possible for those old champions of the 1830 drama to be kind to *Thérèse Raquin*? All very well if my haberdasher heroine were a queen and if my murderer wore an apricot-colored jerkin! At the end, too, Thérèse and Laurent should have drunk the poison from a golden cup filled with the wine of Syracuse! Down with this shop-parlor stuff! Down with these common people who permit themselves to be the center of a drama round their oilcloth-covered table! Even if they had discovered some merit in my work, the old romantics would certainly have denied it with the noble injustice of literary passion. Then there are the critics whose beliefs are opposed to mine. These have tried quite honestly to prove me mistaken in following a path which was not theirs. I have read them carefully and I will try to profit by the fair comments which especially struck me. Finally, I have to thank those critics who were altogether sympathetic, those of my own age and with similar aspirations—for sad to relate, one rarely finds support among one's elders. We must grow up each with his own generation, impelled forward by those coming after us and finally emerging with the views and methods of our own time. And here is the final balance sheet of the criticism of *Thérèse Raquin*. Both Shakespeare and Paul de Kock have been mentioned; between these two there is room for me to dwell at ease.

It rests for me to express publicly all my gratitude to M. Hippolyte Hostein who has been so good as to give his whole artistic hospitality to my play. I found in him not merely a play producer but a friend, a colleague with a broad and original mind. But for him *Thérèse Raquin* would have remained long at the back of a drawer. To rescue it, it took an unhopd-for meeting with a manager who believed as I did in the necessity for reviving the drama by looking to the realities of the modern world. While an operetta was making one of his neighbors rich, it was magnificent to see M. Hippolyte Hostein in the height of summer, wanting to lose money with my drama. He has my eternal gratitude.

As for the artists who interpreted the play, they achieved one of the most outstanding successes ever experienced in the theatre. It gave me the greatest joy both to see what I had imagined come to life so fully and also to have given them the opportunity of employing all their wonderful resources.

Mme Marie Laurent in very truth created the part of Mime Raquin. I claim very little credit for it. It was she who discovered all that there was in that amazing character in Act IV, that towering figure of punishment, mute and relentless, those two living eyes fastened on the guilty pair, never ceasing to watch them even in the throes of death. Her simple good nature in Act I, her Mother's grief in Act II, the terrifying climax of Act III, in all she gave a magnificent performance and this part will remain as one of her most amazing creations. Mlle Dica-Petit was a Thérèse such as I had never hoped to find. She showed herself possessed of unexpected talent. Even her admirers were surprised at her interpretation of this complex character, this type of passionate woman, a whole world in herself, who goes from frantic love to fierce hatred passing through moods of hypocrisy, disgust, and terror, all the shades of passion and of normal human feelings. The reality of her screams lifted her audience from their seats. From now on, she is in the first rank of great creative actresses. Still another tremendous part to play is that of Laurent and M. Maurice Desrieux carried it off incomparably. He was in turn that great idle, cautious fellow who loves Thérèse "because she costs him nothing," then the lover whose mistress drives him so mad with love that she makes him a murderer, and then the poor creature refined by suffering and grown cowardly, his mind deranged to the point of hallucination who drifts towards a second crime which is to wipe out the first. Particular mention should be made of his ghostly stupefaction in Acts III and IV, his wild beast moans and all the signs of incipient madness hammering at a man's brain. And it was not only this terrible trio, the mother and the two murderers, who gave good performances. The production was such that the minor roles stood out as I never dared to hope. M. Grivot played the part of Camille, that sickly, spoilt, obstinate creature, with rare intelligence, bringing out the bourgeois miserliness and the sickly health remarkably well. M. Montrouge made an unforgettable type of comic reality of the old clerk Grivet, without ever overstepping the mark and with a tact and finesse just short of caricature, giving evidence of a really cultured mind for which I am infinitely grateful. M. Reykers really got into the skin of the retired police superintendent with the head, walk, and voice, even the mannerisms and the rough good humor of the profession. Finally, Mlle Blanche Dunoyer was the roguish smile of this dark drama, the music of the sixteen-year-old alternating with the solo of *Thérèse*, and her telling of the Blue Prince story was exquisite.

I say what a captain should say to his men the day after the battle. My thanks to all these great artists; it is to them alone I owe the victory.

seems quite natural. The action takes place nowhere in particular, the characters are symbols on display, and not complex personalities who live and breathe. I am not questioning the classical model here; I am simply stating that the reasoning, the character analyses, the dialogue examining the passions, which took place before the prompter's box without the environment ever playing any role, stood out all the more strongly because the background was minimized.

What we must accept as a proven truth is that the seventeenth century was indifferent to the truthfulness of the setting because natural surroundings, environments, were not then perceived as a force capable of having any influence whatsoever on the action or the characters. In the literature of that time, nature counted for little. Man alone was noble, and what is more, man stripped of his humanity, abstract man, studied for the way he functioned as a rational being and creature of passions. What was a landscape in the theatre? Real landscapes, like the open stretches we see before us in rain or shine, were never shown. Why create a fully appointed salon, with life warming it and giving it an existence of its own? The characters weren't made of flesh-and-blood, they didn't live there, they were only passing through to declaim their lines.

This is the formula from which our theatre set out. I cannot give a chronological account of the phases it has undergone. But it is easy to see that a slow but continuous movement has taken place lending more importance each day to the influence of the environment. Moreover, the evolution of literature over the past two centuries is entirely due to this invasion of nature. Man has ceased to be alone; the countryside, towns, and contrasting skies have become accepted as worthy of study and of serving as a vast framework for humankind. This was taken even further; it was maintained that it was impossible to know man well unless he was analyzed along with his clothing, his home, his native region. From that point on, abstract characters disappeared. Individual people were now presented living contemporary lives.

It was inevitable that this evolution should infiltrate the theatre. I know that certain critics see the theatre as something immutable, a sacred art that must remain inviolate. But that's simply laughable and the facts belie it every day. The setting already played a part in the tragedies of Voltaire; then came the fantastic sets and incredible scenic effects of the romantic dramas; Scribe gave us balls danced in the recesses of the salon; and finally we have seen a real cherry tree in *L'Ami Fritz*, an impressionist painter's studio in *La Cigale*, and the amazingly accurate clubhouse atmosphere in *Le Club*. Were one to undertake a thorough study, one would see all the transitional phases and become convinced that the results confronting us today were prepared for and gradually brought about by the evolution of our literature.

Let me repeat myself, the better to make myself understood. The problem, as I've said, is that the critics want to isolate the theatre, to see it as

## NATURALISM IN THE THEATRE (1881)

### *The Sets and Props*

I wish to discuss the naturalist movement that is taking place in the theatre solely with regard to the sets and props. As we know, there are two quite opposite opinions on this issue: one holds that the stage should be kept bare, as in the classical set, the other insists on an exact reproduction of the environment, however complicated it may be. I obviously hold the latter opinion; but I need to explain why.

Let us explore the question by reviewing the history of our nation's theatre. The ancient fairground *parade*, the mystery acted out on wooden stages, all those scenes spoken in the open air which gave rise to the perfect, harmonious tragedies and comedies of the seventeenth century, were performed between three scraps of material hanging from poles. The imagination of the public supplied the missing set. Later, with Corneille, Molière and Racine, each theatre had a public square, a salon, a forest, a temple; the forest was hardly ever used, I believe. The unity of place, which was a strictly observed rule, accounted for the lack of variety. Only one set was needed for each play; and since, in addition, all the characters had to encounter one another in that set, the authors inevitably kept using the same neutral environment, so that the same salon, the same road, the same temple kept on being adapted for every conceivable kind of action.

I emphasize this because here we are dealing with the well-spring of our tradition. We must not presume that this uniformity, this elimination of the set was due to the primitive conditions of the period or to the art of scene painting still being in its infancy. The sumptuous use of painted scenery and extraordinarily complicated machinery in the productions of certain operas and court plays of the time is proof to the contrary. Rather it was the aesthetic of the period that dictated a neutral role for the set.

One need only attend any of our own contemporary productions of a classical tragedy or comedy to realize that the set never has any effect on the development of the play. Servants sometimes bring on seats or a table and occasionally even place them right in the middle of a street. The other furniture, the mantelpieces, and all the rest, is painted on the backdrop, and it all

a completely separate entity. Certainly, it has its own perspective. But does it not always conform to the spirit of the times? Today, accuracy of setting is a consequence of our obsessive need for reality. The theatre was bound to submit to this impetus, once the novel had become nothing but an all-embracing inquest, a detailed report drawn up about each fact of life. Our modern, individualized characters, acting under the sway of environmental influences, living our lives on stage, would look perfectly ridiculous in a seventeenth-century setting. They sit down, so they need chairs; they write, so they need tables; they go to bed, they get dressed, they eat, they warm themselves, and they need all the furnishings. In addition, we investigate all possible worlds; our plays take us into every imaginable place; a great variety of tableaux must necessarily pass before the footlights. That is what our present-day dramatic model demands.

The theory of those critics who are irritated by such meticulous reproduction is that it is destructive of audience attention when the play is performed. I confess I do not understand. They maintain the thesis that only the furniture or objects used as props should be real; the rest should be painted on the scenery. Then, when the spectator sees an armchair, he murmurs: "Ah! ha! the character is going to sit down;" or else, when he sees a *carafe* on a piece of furniture: "Look! the character is going to get thirsty;" or else, if there is an embroidery basket in the foreground: "All right! the heroine is going to embroider while she listens to someone's declaration of love." I am not making any of this up; it seems some people find these childish guessing games very amusing. When the salon is completely furnished, when it is full of knickknacks, it disconcerts them, and they are tempted to cry out: "It's not theatre!"

Indeed, it is not theatre, if one persists in regarding theatre as the triumph of convention. We are told: "No matter what you do, there are conventions that are timeless." True, but that does not prevent a convention from disappearing once its hour has come. Unity of place has been put to rest once and for all; there is nothing astonishing about the fact that we are about to complete the process by making the scenery as accurate as possible. It is a continuation of the same course of evolution. The conventions that endure have nothing in common with those that disappear. One less is always a good thing.

How can one not sense the excitement that accurate scenery brings to the action? Accurate scenery, a drawing-room for example with its furniture, its flower stands, its knickknacks, immediately establishes a situation, tells us what world we are in, reveals the characters' habits. And since the actors feel at home there, how convincingly they live the life they have to live! It's a private place, a charming and natural nook. I know that, to appreciate this, one must love seeing actors live the play, instead of seeing them play it. This is a totally new model. Scribe, for example, does not need real surroundings, because his characters are cardboard cut-outs. I am only talking about accu-

rate settings for plays with flesh-and-blood characters who bring with them the air that they breathe.

A critic very wisely said: "In the old days, real characters used to move around in sham settings; today, it is sham characters who move around in real settings." That is right, except that the types in classical tragedy and comedy are true, without being real. They possess a general truth, the great human traits summed up in beautiful verse; but they do not possess an individual truth, living and acting, as we understand it today. As I have tried to prove, the scenery of the seventeenth century was admirably suited to the characters of the theatre of the time; both lacked the particular; the scenery was of large dimensions, kept to a minimum, quite appropriate for the development of rhetoric and the depiction of superhuman heroes. Thus I think it is nonsense to restage the tragedies of Racine, for example, with a lavish display of costumes and sets.

But the critic is absolutely right when he says that today sham characters are acting in real sets. In each of my essays, I make no other complaint. The naturalist evolution in the theatre inevitably began with the material aspect, with the exact reproduction of the environment. That, really, was the most accessible approach. The audience could easily be won over. Furthermore, the evolutionary process had been at work for a long time. But sham characters are less easy to transform than wings and backdrops, because it means finding a man of genius. Although the set painters and machinists have sufficed for part of the task, the dramatic authors have yet to do anything more than grope in the dark. And it is amazing that a precisely reproduced setting has sometimes been enough to create a smash hit.

In conclusion, is this not a truly characteristic sign? One would have to be blind not to grasp where we are going. The critics who complain about this concern for accuracy in sets and props were only seeing one side of the issue. It is much more vast, it embraces the literary movement of the entire century, it is part of the irresistible current that is sweeping us all towards naturalism. M. Sardou, in *Les Merveilleuses*, wanted to use Directoire cups; Mssrs. Erkmann-Chatrain insisted on a fountain with real running water in *L'Ami Fritz*; M. Gondinet, in *Le Club*, demanded all the authentic props of a clubhouse. People may smile, shrug their shoulders, and say that it does not make the work any better. But, behind the obsessions of these meticulous authors, there runs more or less haphazardly the great idea of an art of method and analysis, advancing side by side with science. A writer will undoubtedly come who will at last put on the stage real characters in real settings, and then people will understand.

### Costumes

II. [...] In fact, the great evolution of naturalism, which has occurred from the fifteenth century to our own, correlates totally with the gradual sub-

stitution of psychological man for metaphysical man. In tragedy, metaphysical man, man of dogma and logic, held absolute sway. Since the body did not count for anything, since the soul was viewed as the only interesting part of the human machine, every drama took place in the abstract, in the mind alone. Consequently, of what use was the tangible world? Why be concerned about the place where the action happened? Why be astonished at a strange costume, at a false declamatory style? Why notice that queen Dido was a boy whose sprouting beard obliged him to wear a mask? All of that was unimportant, one did not descend to such trifles, one listened to the play as if it were a school essay on a given topic. It was happening above man, in the realm of ideas, so distant from real man that any reality in a production would have been irritating.

The point of departure was a religious one in the mysteries, a philosophical one later on in tragedy. And from the beginning natural man, suffocated by rhetoric and dogma, thrashed about silently, wanted to get free, struggled long and futilely to do so, and finally established himself limb by limb. The entire history of our theatre lies in this victory of physiological man who, each century, came more into view from behind the mannequin of religious and philosophical idealism. Corneille, Molière, Racine, Voltaire, Beaumarchais, and in our time, Victor Hugo, Emile Augier, Alexandre Dumas *filz*, even Sardou, had only one goal, even though they did not clearly understand it themselves: to heighten the reality of the dramatic work, to make advances into truth, to liberate natural man more and more and bring him into the public eye. And, inevitably, this evolution will not stop with them, it will continue forever. Mankind is very young. [...]

III. Now I will deal with the present era, and respond to those critics who are amazed at our war on conventions. For them, truth has been pushed to its absolute limit on the stage; in short, everything has been done, our forebears have left us nothing to accomplish. I've already shown, I think, that the naturalist movement that has been carrying us along since the very beginning of our nation's theatre will not be able to stop for a minute; it is necessary and continuous, reflecting the very essence of our nature. But that doesn't suffice, one must always look at the facts, if one wants to be clear and conclusive.

I readily concede that we have achieved great accuracy in historical costumes. Today, when one stages a play of some importance set in France or abroad, during more or less distant times, one copies the costumes from the documents of the period, one makes a point of doing everything to obtain absolute authenticity. I am skipping over the little ways of cheating, the sloppiness methods hidden behind an excessive show of zeal. There's also the issue of women's vanity; actresses still often shrink from wearing strange and uncomfortable clothes which make them look ugly; so they solve the problem by using a bit of imagination, they change the cut, add jewelry, invent a hairdo.

Despite that, the ensemble still passes muster; proof that an irresistible movement has taken place in the theatre, one determined by the past fifty years of historical research. Once researchers unearthed engravings and texts of all sorts, and once this expansion of knowledge made bygone ages more widely familiar, it was natural for the public to demand an exact reconstruction of past times on the stage. Hence, this is not just a whim or a passing fad, but the result of a logical intellectual journey.

So, if tradition still preserves some bizarre anachronisms, inexplicable flights of fancy in plays that were acted thirty years ago, it is rare today, when one produces an historical play, not to be concerned with the accuracy of the costumes. The movement will be even more focussed, and the truth complete, once the women are induced not make an historical play the excuse for wearing resplendent attire while sitting by the fireside and even when traveling; because, beyond accuracy of costume, there is appropriateness of costume, which brings me to the question of dress in our modern plays.

Here, for the men it is simple as can be. They dress like you and me. Some, such as comic actors, overdo the eccentric side, which makes them lose grasp of the character. One must see how effective an accurate costume can be in order to understand how much life it adds to the character. But the major issue is still the one regarding the women. In plays where the roles demand great simplicity of dress, achieving that simplicity is almost impossible; one runs up against willful vanity, which is all the more pervasive because here the women do not have the picturesqueness of historical or foreign costumes to cheat with. You may be able to get an actress to drape a beggar's rags over her shoulders, but you will never persuade her to dress as a simple working-class girl, if she has lost the first bloom of her beauty and knows that cheap clothes make her look ugly. For her, it is sometimes a vital question, because beside the actress there stands the woman who often experiences the need to be beautiful.

And here we have the reason why costuming in our contemporary plays is almost always false: a fear of simplicity, a refusal to accept the characters' social status when those characters tend toward the repulsive or ridiculous in dress. Moreover, there is also the mania for beautiful clothes evident even in the general public's taste. For example, during the last years of the Empire exhibitions of the designs of the great *couturiers* were seen at the Vaudeville and the Gymnase theatres and these shows continue today. A play cannot take place in a wealthy milieu without the actresses immediately vying over who has the most expensive outfit. In a pinch, these lavish costumes can be justified; but what is unfortunate is the importance they assume. Once that happens, since the public finds the clothes more exciting than the dialogue, authors are reduced to turning out plays solely as vehicles for ostentatious display of the latest fashions; and the aim becomes to increase the play's chances for success by deliberately selecting a setting which calls for a show of wealth.

The day after an opening, the press is as interested in the clothes as in the play; all Paris talks about them, a large number of male spectators and especially of the female spectators come to the theatre to look at so-and-so's blue dress or so-and-so's new hat.

No great harm is done it will be said. But, I'm sorry, great harm is done! Beneath a hypocritical pretense at reality, success is sought by means of something extraneous to the works themselves. Moreover, these stunning costumes are unreal in their stately uniformity. No one dresses like that every hour of the day, people do not continuously pose like fashion plates. And this exorbitant taste for costly attire is disastrous because it compels authors to depict an artificial world, one of conventional elegance. Who would dare risk having a play take place among the drab bourgeois, or among petty merchants, or among the common folk, when the public insists on dresses costing five or six thousand francs! So the note is forced, provincial bourgeois ladies are dressed like duchesses, or a woman of loose morals is brought on so that there's at least one eye-catching flourish of silk and velvet. Three acts or five acts of nothing but woolen dresses would seem insane; ask a clever craftsman if he would risk five acts without the obligatory *grande toilette* or formal dress.

And so truth in the theatre continues to suffer. There is as much reluctance in choosing costumes that are too cheap as in introducing a bold innovation in staging. Not a single play by Missrs. Augier, Dumas and Sardou has dared to pass up fashionable dress, not a single one portrays the humble who wear materials costing 18 sous per meter; so that a whole social class, the vast majority of human beings, finds itself virtually excluded from the theatre. Until now, the well-to-do bourgeoisie has been the outer limit. If the lower classes, workers and petty functionaries earning 1200 francs, have appeared in the theatre, it has been in utterly false melodramas, peopled by dukes and marquesses, lacking any literary merit or serious analysis of society. And you may be sure that the question of costume plays a large part in the exclusion of these people from the stage.

Our modern clothes, it's true, make for a poor spectacle. As soon as we leave the confines of bourgeois tragedy, circumscribed by four walls, as soon as we try to use the breadth of large stages and show crowd scenes, we find ourselves quite at a loss, put off by the monotony and uniform gloom of the extras. I think that, under the circumstances, we should make use of the variety offered by the mixture of classes and professions. Thus, to make myself clear, I can imagine an author setting one act in the square of the central market district, *Les Halles*, in Paris. The setting would be wonderful, teeming with life and bold in arrangement. Yes, surely, in this vast setting, it would be possible to create a very picturesque whole, showing the market porters with their huge hats, the tradeswomen with their white aprons and brightly colored scarves, the shoppers in silk and wool and printed calico, ranging from the ladies accompanied by their maids to the roving beggar women scrounging for

peelings. Moreover, all one need do is go to *Les Halles* and look. There is nothing more colorful or interesting. All Paris would like to see this setting, if it were reproduced with the right degree of accuracy and scope.

And how many other settings for popular dramas there are for the taking! The interior of a factory, inside a mine, a gingerbread fair, a railway station, a flower market, a racetrack, etc. All the sites of modern life can be put on stage. It will be objected that these settings have already been attempted. Of course, in the fairy-tale spectacles we have seen factories and railway stations; but they were fairy-tale factories and stations, in other words, settings hastily thrown together to produce a more or less complete illusion. What would be needed is meticulous reproduction. And that would inevitably mean costumes suited to the different professions, not lavish costumes, but costumes that would serve the truth of the tableaux and make them interesting. Since everyone laments the death of the drama, our dramatic authors should really attempt this genre of popular and contemporary drama. They could fulfill both the need for spectacle which the public experiences and the requirements of exact research which becomes more essential every day. But one would hope that the playwrights show us the real common man and not those sniveling workers who play such strange roles in boulevard melodramas.

Moreover, I shall never tire of repeating after M. Adolphe Jullien that everything is interdependent in the theatre. Truth in costuming requires truth in setting, in diction, in the plays themselves. Everything walks in step down the path of naturalism. When the costumes become more exact, it's because the settings are that way too, because the actors are freeing themselves from bombastic declamation, and finally because the plays study reality more closely and put on stage people who are more real. I could also make the same observations about settings that I've just made about costume. Here too, while we seem to have reached the total sum of truth possible, we still have great strides to make. The essential point is to increase illusion by reproducing environments more for their dramatic usefulness than for their picturesqueness. The environment should determine the character. Once a setting is studied from this point of view, so that it gives the impression of a description by Balzac come to life; once, at the curtain's rise, we get our first idea about the people in the play, about their character traits and their habits, merely by looking at the place where they live, we will perhaps understand how important an accurate setting can be. That's where we're heading, clearly; environments, the study of which has transformed the sciences and humanities, must inevitably assume an important place in the theatre; and I return here to the issue of metaphysical man, of abstract man who was satisfied with three walls in tragedy, while the physiological man of our modern works insists more and more imperiously on being determined by the setting and environment of which he is the product. One can see then that the road to progress is still



long, as much for stage design as for costuming. We are onto the truth, but we are barely able to stammer it.

Another very important point is diction. Of course, we have gone beyond monotonous recitative chant and seventeenth-century plain-song. But we still use a theatrical voice, a false mode of recitation which is very obvious and very disagreeable. The trouble stems from the fact that most of the critics turn traditions into an immutable code; they found the theatre in a certain state, and instead of looking to the future, and making judgments about developments that are happening and will happen based on past developments, they stubbornly defend what remains of the old conventions, swearing that these relics are absolutely necessary. Ask them why, show them the road already traveled, they will give no logical response, they will reply with assertions based only on the state of things that is on the verge of disappearing.

As for diction, the trouble lies in the claim these critics make that the theatre has a language of its own. Their theory is that one should not speak on stage as one actually does in everyday life; and to support this point of view, they draw their examples from tradition, from what has been the case in the past and what is still the case today, without taking into account the naturalist movement, the phases of which M. Jullien established for us in his book. Please understand that there is absolutely no such thing as a language of the theatre; once there was a rhetorical style which has become progressively weaker and which is about to die out, those are the facts. If for a moment you compare the declamatory style of actors in the age of Louis XIV with Lekain's, and if you then compare Lekain's declamation with the style of artists today, you will clearly establish the phases of tragic song ultimately leading to our quest for the right tone, the natural tone, the ring of truth. Since then, the language of the theatre, that more resonant kind of language, has been disappearing. We are moving toward simplicity, toward the exact word, spoken without bombast, quite naturally. I could give endless examples if I had the space! Consider Geoffroy's power over the public, all his talent lies in his naturalness; he captivates his public because he speaks on stage as he speaks at home. When a phrase does not have the ring of everyday speech, he cannot say it, the author must find another.

There you have a sweeping condemnation of the supposed language of the theatre. Moreover, listen to the delivery of a talented actor, and watch the audience: the applause begins, the house gets excited, when a truthful inflection gives the spoken words the exact value they should have. All the great stage triumphs are victories over convention.

Alas! yes, there is a language of the theatre: it consists of those clichés, those resounding platitudes, those hollow words that roll around like empty barrels, all that unbearable rhetoric in our farces and our dramas that is beginning to make us smile. It would be interesting to study the question of style in such talented writers as Augier, Dumas and Sardou; I would have much to criticize, especially in the last two, who use a language of convention, a lan-

guage of their own which they put in the mouths of all their characters, whether men, women, children, or old people, regardless of their sex or age. That seems wrong to me, because each character has his own way of talking, and if one wants to create living beings, one must present them to the public, not only in accurate costumes and in environments that determine their lives, but also with their own personal ways of thinking and of expressing themselves. I repeat that this is the clear goal toward which our theatre is moving. There is no language of the theatre regulated by a code as cadenced phrasing and as sonority; there is simply more and more accurate dialogue, which follows or rather leads the progress of sets and costumes down the path of naturalism. When plays grow more truthful, the actors' diction will inevitably gain in simplicity and naturalness.

To conclude, I will repeat that the war on conventions is far from being won and that it will probably always be with us. Today we are beginning to see clearly where we are going, but we are still wading through deep waters as rhetoric and metaphysics finally thaw.