

Chapter 1

Introduction

LADY: *What are you waiting for?*

STRANGER: *If I only knew.*

– August Strindberg, *To Damascus (Part I)*⁵

ESTRAGON: *Let's go.*

VLADIMIR: *We can't.*

ESTRAGON: *Why not?*

VLADIMIR: *We're waiting for Godot.*

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*⁶

Modern drama signifies the struggle for self-realization and freedom; the turn from declamatory speech in classical drama to the intimacies of interpersonal exchange (called the fourth wall) which include silence, pauses, and inarticulateness; and the exploration of anxiety and alienation, a feeling of waiting for something inscrutable expressed in the Strindberg and Beckett epigrams above. Yet these themes, however accurate, merely begin a complicated task of defining “modern drama.” Martin Puchner reminds us that while it is “relatively easy to come to an agreement about the beginning and end of modern drama, it is much more difficult to specify what exactly modern drama was,” and “what was specifically modern about modern drama.”⁷ The difficulty is partly owing to the fact that “modernists were giants,” Lawrence Rainey contends, “monsters of nature who loomed so large that contemporaries could only gape at them in awe”;⁸ partly owing to modern drama’s insistence on up-to-dateness, what Terry Eagleton calls the “rebellious adolescence” of modernism, “defined by a definitive rupture with its parentage” and implying that “renewal” must always

be present and evolving;⁹ and partly because defining modernism has been an academic obsession creating myriad descriptions and explanations.¹⁰

To make sense of its features, I want to propose several strands of modernism in modern drama. It would be foolhardy to suggest that *all* dramatists from 1880 to 1960 shared the same ideas; even where a school of thought derives from a single figure (Strindberg, for example, as the founder of expressionism), there is no reason to imply one defining feature or phalanstery on which all members agree. We do better to utilize Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" describing "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of details." The various threads running from Strindberg to Beckett might resemble one another without sharing identical features; this clustering, Wittgenstein argues, does not mean it is mistaken to call them by a unifying name, nor is it necessary to pinpoint exactly where one critical mass ends and another begins. Instead, Wittgenstein's "threads" composed of many overlapping filaments serve our purpose because "the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through the whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers."¹¹ If there is, throughout this book, an implicit attempt to aggregate the various "fibers" into a whole, this should be understood as my effort at fusing various elements.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines modernism as a "usage, mode of expression, or particularity of style or workmanship characteristic of modern times." The term derives from the Latin *modernus*, which means "now time."¹² Time and place overlap in modern drama because modern dramatists were deeply influenced by how we think of both in a social and personal context. The thrust of the modern age, Stephen Kern asserts, "was to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible." Owing to socio-economic changes and the clustering of people in the cities, "the wireless, telephone, and railroad timetables necessitated a universal time system to coordinate life in the modern world."¹³ The dislocation of a universal time into a private, subjective, and personal time managed against public (social) demands, as well as the balance between change and stasis, is described by Charles Baudelaire's oft-quoted definition of modernism: "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable."¹⁴ Space, too, encroached on characters in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and onward throughout twentieth-century modernism, typifying what Raymond Williams calls "a repeated search for some means of defining the humanity that cannot be lived in these well-ordered rooms – the forces outside, the white horses or the seagull, the tower of the cherry orchard, which have meaning because there are forces inside these people in these rooms, which cannot be

realized in any available life.” The rebellious nature of modern dramatic characters is illustrated by “an individual who is breaking away from what is offered as general truth: a uniquely representative figure (representative of ‘humanity,’ of ‘Man’) who is in revolt against the representative environment other men have made. The world of action, characteristically, is then the action of others; the world of consciousness is one’s own. Out of this separation, and out of its terrible tensions, these men trapped in their rooms make their only possible, their exceptionally powerful, drama.”¹⁵

“Modernity” is the overarching cultural and political phenomena beginning with the Enlightenment era (c. late eighteenth century) that is still largely with us, and “modernism” is an aesthetic period (1880 to 1960) stressing what Daniel Schwarz calls “a lack of coherent identity” and “techniques to express this idea.”¹⁶ In art and literature artistic techniques were largely reactions against realism. Realism was deemed too literal to convey the fragmentary and disjointed modern world. Modernism, Fredric Jameson contends, is a “narrative category” that “cancels and surcharges” realism. If, as Jameson posits, “realism is grasped as the expression of some commonsense experience of a recognizable real world, then empirical examination of any work we care to categorize as ‘modernist’ will reveal a starting point in that conventional real world, a realistic core as it were, which the various telltale modernist deformations and ‘unrealistic distortions,’ sublimations or gross characterizations, take as their pretext and their raw material, and without which their alleged ‘obscurity’ and ‘incomprehensibility’ would not be possible.”¹⁷ Modern drama, however, incorporates the obscure and surreal along with the realism of Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and others largely because the human presence onstage cannot be thoroughly deformed, distorted, or rendered incomprehensible. Literature and art can explore other-worldly genres and non-corporeal venues, but drama is tethered to the human form – the “real world” of the human body. Dramatists certainly characterized modern drama as “experimental,” often creating distorted images, gross characterizations, masks, and narrative obfuscations; still, unless performers are puppets (as the actor and designer Gordon Craig tried to represent), or presentations are designed without the human body (radio drama, for instance), the “real” presence of bodies onstage yokes drama into a realism of sorts. Therefore modern drama, as opposed to other art forms, sublimates realism and avant gardism under its rubric because the human form is an irrefutable and consistent link between them.

Modernism was the condition in which tradition was found to be lacking and the task of making sense of ourselves and the world could no longer depend on prior authority, religion, or antiquity.¹⁸ It represented massive social, economic, philosophical, and artistic changes brought about by a rejection of Classical formalism (seventeenth century) and Enlightenment rationalism (eighteenth century), and was influenced by two revolutions: the nineteenth-century industrial

revolution, where widespread technological advances occurred, and the French Revolution (1789), where the monarchy were overthrown and replaced temporarily by democratic egalitarianism. It signified a turn from deities and moral certainty and towards self-conscious individualism and ambiguity in judgment, values, and interpersonal relations. In *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Peter Szondi writes that the “drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance,” resulting from “a bold intellectual effort by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone.”¹⁹ I concur but suggest that the interpersonal relationships did not fully materialize until dramatists wrote plays in which the artifice of the “fourth wall,” actors speaking to each other interpersonally and not declamatorily to the audience, took root. When the actors turned inward, addressing each other onstage and establishing, once and for all, the realistic person-to-person interchange that replaced the classical style of direct address to the audience (even as an aside), modern drama and theatre arose. This transition did not occur overnight; even plays deemed “modern” still employed the occasional address to the audience. Nevertheless, by the early nineteenth century, Frederick Hegel says, “our age is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of men has broken with the old order of things.”²⁰

Peter Gay describes modernism as “a call to authenticity” that “detested formulas and prized originality. Whether a Realist, Symbolist, Expressionist, Vorticist, or proponent of any of the other isms crowding one another early in the twentieth century, each modernist liked to see himself defying stifling rules and deadening traditions, to stand as a nemesis to the tyranny of academicism.” Modernism, he asserts, “was a crusade in behalf of sincerity, in behalf of an expressive freedom that no establishment could command or, in the long run, frustrate.”²¹ This call to authenticity resulted in autonomy – the individual discovering itself as the source of value and comprehension – rather than depending on uniformity or non-reflexive authority such as God’s external judgment and feudal hierarchy. Bert Cardullo contends that in modern drama, “the patriarchal relationship between God and the individual soul has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between a person and his or her own psychology, the will to comprehend the self, even as the patriarchal relationship between ruler and subject has been replaced by the adversarial relationship between the individual and society, in the form of society’s drive to marginalize all those it cannot or will not homogenize.”²² Art itself broke apart as a unifying experience, sowing the seeds of revolutionary intent. The idea of art’s autonomy, Matei Calinescu observes, “was by no means a novelty in the 1830s, when the battle cry of Art for Art’s Sake became popular in France among circles of young Bohemian poets and painters.” Still, it was a rallying point for

modernists “who had become empty of romantic humanitarianism and felt the need to express their hatred of bourgeois merchantilism and vulgar utilitarianism.”²³ The self-conscious attack on bourgeois mores is characterized by the romantic poet Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote that the “first task of the man who wants to be a poet is to study his own awareness of himself, in its entirety; he seeks out his soul, he inspects it, he tests it, he learns it. As soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it!” In the process, “A poet makes himself a visionary through long, boundless, and systematized *disorganization of all the senses*. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts within himself all poisons, and preserves their quintessences.”²⁴ Or, as the romantic essayist Herder put it even more bluntly, “The artist is become the creator God.”²⁵

Sociologically life underwent enormous transitions. Technological advances increased the speed of everyday life; living shifted from rural to urban, demanding accommodation to a new congestion and proximity; rising industrialization created new forms of wage earnings; and people coped with new social networking and family bonds. Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies wrote in 1887 that modernism is situated around the transition from *Gemeinschaft* (rural and stable community) to *Gesellschaft* (urban and unstable society): “everyone who praises rural life has pointed to the fact that people there have a stronger and livelier sense of Community. Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artifact.”²⁶ Transportation sped from animal to machine; health improved; photography and film altered vision; and telegraph and telephones accelerated communication. The conception of time changed by dint of “timetables,” what Tony Judt calls “the ubiquitous station clock” at every railway stop, where “prominent, specially constructed towers at all major stations, inside every booking hall, on platforms and (in the pocket form) in the possession of railway employees” yielded “the establishment of nationally and internationally agreed upon time zones; factory time clocks; the ubiquity of the wristwatch; time schedules for buses, ferries, and planes; for radio and television programs; school timetables; and much else.”²⁷ Modernism meant the appearance of an emerging middle class demanding higher education, free speech, democracy, pluralism, consumerism, objective judiciary in courts of law, and a new spirit of improvement and openness. These paradigm shifts took place internally and externally; people became aware of a new era whose features informed pace, structure, and relationships. To be modern was to live under the rubric of “modernization,” what Paul Greenhalgh calls the collective response to “a state of being that exists in a tense, intertwined relationship with modernization.”²⁸

The Modern-Classic “Quarrel”

The rejection of Classicism – with its enforced conformity and decorum – is referred to as the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, a seventeenth-century debate over neoclassical strictures and modern release from conventional expectations. The French neoclassicists of the late seventeenth century borrowed from the earlier Italian Renaissance the notion of “rules” in drama; the argument went that by asserting rules – thought to carry the imprimatur of antiquity – dramaturgical construction would transcend medieval drama. The plays of the middle ages were often sprawling, month-long affairs, concerned less with plot and more with didactic Bible lessons. By serving as custodians of Aristotelian ideas, the French neoclassicists imposed formal rules: tightly constructed plots, occurring at one time and place, tamping down the turgidity of medieval drama and thereby sharpening focus. Though many Italian Renaissance and French neo-classicists believed that the rules they imposed – dramatic narratives containing one time, place, and action – derived directly from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, those who held this belief were largely incorrect: the number of neo-classic ideas on dramatic theory drawn unadulterated from the *Poetics* were exiguous. Still, for centuries the neo-classic opinion prevailed. Romanticism, beginning in the late eighteenth century and flourishing during the first half of the nineteenth, objected to classicism’s unities of time, place, and action known as the *trios unités* (something Aristotle never actually said), replacing them with individual self-consciousness. Playwrights were to be guided not by logic and rules but by imagination and inspiration; the poet was now the seer, possessor of an inexplicable muse stimulated by nature – the poet was even construed as “nature” itself. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) influenced the romantics and the modernists when he stated that we do not understand beauty by means of cognition, “but rather relate it by means of imagination (perhaps combined with understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground *cannot be other than subjective*.”²⁹ The romantic “genius” made him or herself the nodal point of the art work instead of reproducing eternal verities. Subjectivity – the autonomous artist creating imaginatively – was the gateway to spontaneity and reflected a modern world that put stock in individualism over collective or received certainties.

Modern drama epitomizes individualistic self-expression, revealing its nascent beginnings (though not yet fully formed) in the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century.³⁰ According to M. H. Abrams, the romantic quest turns “on a metaphor which, like ‘overflow,’ signifies the internal made external. The most frequent of these terms was ‘expression,’ used in contexts

indicating a revival of the root meaning *ex-ressus*, from *ex-premere*, ‘to press out.’”³¹ Romanticism rejected the Enlightenment’s “mirror” in art – the need to reflect reality – substituting instead an inner “lamp” or self-reflective glow. Self-expression permeates every fabric of modern drama, from characters expressing their identity, to the individual’s search within his or her consciousness in an effort to uncover personal experiences or values. Henrik Ibsen’s “joy of life,” Anton Chekhov’s “ennui,” Bertolt Brecht’s “estrangement effect,” Arthur Miller’s “attention must be paid,” and many other themes stem, in one way or another, from the soul-searching quest for self-illumination.

The desire to express oneself is nowhere better exemplified than in the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. For him, Kant’s idea of the “thing-in-itself” – the incomprehensibility of things and objects beyond surfaces – is made comprehensible through art. The poet, he contends, “grasps the Idea, the essence of humanity, beyond all relations, beyond all time, the adequate observation of the thing in itself in its highest level.” Comprehending this “essence,” he says, is superior in the poet than the historian, because what the poet can present “is by far more accurately and distinctly to be found in poetry than in history; to the former, therefore, as paradoxical as it sounds, much more real, genuine, inner truth to be attributed than to the latter.” The historian (here Schopenhauer echoes Aristotle) can only “follow individual events exactly according to life.” The poet, “by contrast, has apprehended the Idea of humanity from precisely the particular side from which it is to be displayed, it is the essence of his own self that is objectified for him in it” and “his paradigm [the art work] stands before his spirit firm, distant, brightly illuminated, [which] cannot abandon him.”³²

There is an aesthetic and social fault line between modern drama and what preceded it. For the classicists, subject matter and its treatment were divided along three stratas: the high tragic and sublime; the mid domestic (pleasing and inoffensive); and the low comic and grotesque. With modernism, these hierarchies dissolved. According to Erich Auerbach, “What the nineteenth century accomplished – and the twentieth has carried the process still further – was to change the basis of correlation: it became possible to take subjects seriously that had hitherto belonged to the low or middle category, and to treat them tragically.”³³ Prior to the nineteenth century, ordinary people lived their lives by and large *vertically*, referencing heaven above and hell below, and bowing to authority along a top-to-bottom grid. People knew their place; the verticality created tension and dramatic conflict, but it was generally known who was in what hierarchal station. In modernism, people lived their lives *horizontally*, jostling for social positions in flatter planes and more porous and uncertain relationships. Such ambiguity fostered alienation, a sense of waiting for something that will never occur either from heaven above or amongst others below. Individuals are responsible for their own actions; humanity is

empowered by this new autonomy yet diminished by human limitations and shortcomings. Friedrich Hebbel's play *Maria Magdalena* (1844), which influenced Ibsen and other modern dramatists, demonstrates this fault line. The protagonist, Master Anton, is a cabinet maker and a man of consistent beliefs in society's hierarchy and conventions. He is deeply offended by the accusation that his son is a thief, and is overwhelmed by his daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The thought of her bearing a child as an unwed mother shakes the very foundation of his belief-system. The daughter Klara, however, does not share his view; she defies his authority and refuses to acknowledge her actions as transgressive. He disowns her, which provokes her suicide. At the play's conclusion, his Secretary confronts his stubborn adherence to convention: "When you suspected her all you thought about was the tongues that would hiss, but not about the worthless snakes they belonged to." Her accusation reveals the divide between the father's social standing and conformity on the one hand, and Klara's rebellion and individuality on the other. Anton ends the play saying "I don't understand the world anymore!"³⁴ The breakdown of comprehension illustrates the social divide, as old world rigidity transformed into new world liberation; or, as Joseph Wood Krutch put it, "The important thing is the sense of a discontinuity between the worlds in which the father and the daughter live, of the impossibility of communication across the chasm which separates the past from the future."³⁵ What emerged was a crisis of "freedom" and disruption from continuity.

Freedom became a modernist shibboleth.³⁶ Robert Pippin asserts that Rousseau and many modernists to follow were "aware of the great depth and often sheer contingency of modern socialization" and did not settle for simplistic notions of freedom. For Pippin, modernists "realized that they lived in very different sorts of societies, societies that were themselves, for the first time, so powerfully influential and formative that any talk of the strictly natural requirements of man, the nature of our sympathies, the predictability of our passions would be dangerously simplistic. From now on, it was clear that if we were to be consistently free, we must be autonomous, directing life in a way wholly self-imposed and self-regulated."³⁷ But how, then, are we to communicate if each of us exists freely and independently? The condition necessitated a more vivid and heightened sense of communication. New dramatic structures and topics were required, necessitating a new vitality in language and action. Marshall Berman called "modernism" a "mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils." This modern environment cut "across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology" that "unites all mankind." Berman cautions, however, that modernism "is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of

ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air.’”³⁸

The “Trauma” of Alienation

Modernism amplifies the notion that the truest art surfaces from the margins – from misunderstood geniuses, the bowels of society, and the outsider who mocks the status quo. The tremendous changes created a “trauma of alienation” – a feeling that the past is unmoored, the future uncertain, and the present an unstable relation of people and things. The complexity of modernism, writes John McGowan, “stems from its containing both the spiritualistic, religious impulses of high romanticism and the scientific, rationalistic impulses of realism while at the same time bringing to the center stage the issue of art’s autonomy. Modernism can never decide if it wants to occupy the fully secular and political world of modernity that realism attempts to master or if it wants to escape into some separate aesthetic realm that is more free and more pure than the world of ordinary human making.” Modern artists not only split focus between realistic secularism and romantic spiritualism, they were hardly sanguine about art’s ability to improve the world; like the romantics, according to McGowan, the modernists “harbor hopes of transforming the world of modernity, but with much less belief than nineteenth century artists/intellectuals that such acts of transformation are within their power.”³⁹ Doubt and skepticism – of religion, society, politics, ethics, and art itself – emerged as an underlining motif, leaving modern dramatic characters existentially bereft and unhinged. One of the consequences of dethroning God and morality meant, in Art Berman’s words, “that neither God nor human can do anything about time.”⁴⁰ Temporal uncertainty – what will happen next? – exerted a tremendous influence on modern dramatists.

Modern drama highlighted disillusionment, where displacement and *ennui* personify modern existence. According to Michael Goldman, “Characters in modern drama are typically haunted by a feeling of being cut off from the joy of life, or indeed from life itself, as feeling of being dead.” This alienation, Goldman explains, motivated “a particular notion of where the fulfillment lies, of how the self defines itself and how the job of life is recognized.” Rather than outward fulfillment (heaven, kingdoms, or the conquest of other external spaces), modernism is marked by “the drive to conquer inner space, to possess internally a transcendent quality of being.” This quest, he notes, “is validated by an expansion, possession, or transfiguration of the self.”⁴¹ Transfiguration and alienation were known prior to modernism, but the ways and means of experiencing them differed. For example, Shakespeare’s protagonist, Richard III, exemplifies a pre-modern perception of alienation. When he is surrounded by

his foes at the play's conclusion, he cries out "My kingdom for a horse." The exchange of a kingdom for a horse (his vehicle of escape) would have resonated with Elizabethans; kingdoms (and their expansive spaces) are what humans aspire to, so an exchange would carry symbolic value. The irony is that for a mere horse Richard was offering something of enormous value, at least in the minds of Elizabethans. But to the moderns, kingdoms are abstractions derived from royalty and rendered virtually meaningless. Inner self-possession and fulfillment, rather than outward appreciations and possession, define modernism's value. Kingdoms atavistically handed down are replaced by modernism's individuality and, more importantly, the accumulation of wealth. According to Karl Marx, the power of liquidity is a modernist turning point; it replaced the surfeit of kingdoms because money can now purchase "inner kingdoms." Money for Marx is the triggering mechanism of transfiguration, the force for good and evil, and the means of changing reality's permutations:

That which exists for me through the medium of money, that which I can pay for, i.e., which money can buy, that *am* I, the possessor of money. The stronger the power of money, the stronger am I. The properties of money are my, the possessor's, properties and essential powers. Therefore what I *am* and what I can do is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy the *most beautiful* woman. Which means to say that I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*, its most repelling power, is destroyed by money. As an individual, I am *lame*, but money procures my twenty-four legs. Consequently, I am not lame. I am a wicked, dishonest, unscrupulous and stupid individual, but money is respected, and so also is its owner. Money is the highest good, and consequently its owner is also good.⁴²

Ibsen takes this idea of transformation and inner fulfillment further. When Ibsen's protagonist Nora at the conclusion of his play *A Doll's House* prepares to leave the security of her home, husband, three children – and *money*, for her husband is a banker with a stellar reputation to uphold – she explains her reasons for leaving: she is not up to the task of mother and wife. A modernist influenced by romantic notions of inner fulfillment, Nora has waited for the notion of "the miracle," as she calls it, to occur – the miracle of her husband's sacrifice. When she finds him woefully falling short of her ideals, she realizes that she, too, must look selfishly inward. Torvald says that "Before all else, you're a wife and a mother," but Nora replies:

I don't believe in that anymore. I believe that, before all else, I'm a human being, no less than you – or anyway, I ought to try to become one. I know the majority thinks you're right, Torvald, and plenty of books agree with you, too. But I can't go on believing what the majority says, or what's written in books. I have to think over these things myself and try to understand them.⁴³

Ibsen's protagonist defines the key feature of modern interiority. Social rules and obligations become mere external hand-me-down artifacts no longer applicable to the modern world. Torvald's kingdom – *a doll house* – is exchanged by Nora for inner freedom. Instead of convention and certainty, with its routine and subjugating conditions, Ibsen's Nora transforms, leaving behind home, family, security and all prior investments held dear to a pre-modern existence. She leaves the stage space, with its comforts and familiarity, transgressing, indeed challenging the very ideals of matrimony and motherhood. It is deliberately vague where she is going, because metaphorically she is following Baudelaire's directive to become a modernist "idler," which means "dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen in the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits."⁴⁴

Three Modernisms: Romanticism, Realism, and Avant Garde

Modern dramas were primarily the intersection of three major aesthetic movements: romantic idealism of the early to mid nineteenth century, realism of the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and avant-gardism of the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth century. All three shared much in common and – ironically – all worked diligently to reject any suggestion of mutuality. Yet, in retrospect, what is at stake is not so much disagreements between them (although disagreements occurred vehemently), as the different levels and emphases they characteristically employed. All three aesthetic movements were influenced by *history* – concerns with the past and how it folds into the present – and three key philosophers of modernism: Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer.

Romanticism, realism, and the avant garde come into being with the advent of *historicism* – the emphasis on documenting and verifying the past. The Enlightenment and earlier periods were concerned with history, but they generally viewed people as largely consistent throughout most ages and the aims of their historical inquiries into the past were to secure and construct an aesthetic simultaneity with the present. The pre-modern period "championed the concept of *continuity* in all areas," observes Henri Lefebvre, whereas with "the new period comes an upsurge of *discontinuity*."⁴⁵ Continuity helped promote symmetry in the arts: if everything in the past, present, and assumed future is similar then the structure of the arts could remain consistent. This is why "rules" were stressed and why Voltaire, for instance, introduced the "philosophy

of history” in order to break free of the supernatural (myths and legends) and illustrate what he called the “four blessed ages” where the “arts” flourished. The value of history for him and other Enlightenment philosophers was to identify exemplary eras in order to stimulate their contemporaries.⁴⁶ During early-nineteenth-century Romanticism, however, this view radically changed. Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* began a process of periodization that demonstrated stages in human development accentuating differences rather than similarities. Hegel’s study ushered in what he called the “painful struggles of history,” pitting differing views in a dialectical conflict of “world-historical” spirit.⁴⁷ This movement brought about a revolt against similarities with the past and raised, in Isaiah Berlin’s words, an “historicism” where “you can understand other human beings only in terms of an environment very dissimilar to your own.”⁴⁸ Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Auguste Comte, among others, advanced the modern idea that, as Karl Löwith put it, “no phenomenon can be understood philosophically unless it is understood historically, through a demonstration of its temporal derivation and destination, its function, significance, and relative right in the whole course of history.”⁴⁹

Modernism in drama sets itself as an antithesis to Romantic idealism. Toril Moi’s study of Ibsen raises this point when she says that the “true aesthetic antithesis of modernism is not realism, but idealism,”⁵⁰ which is why (with the exception of Georg Büchner) I begin with Ibsen. This antithesis, however, makes modernism beholden to romanticism because modernism is in revolt against the German romantic ideas of *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and human nature. German romantic idealism puts its stock in the “ideal” world – Schelling’s “spirit of nature” and Schiller’s reestablishing “the unity of human nature,” for instance – and modernism rebels by exposing idealism’s false claims of unity in nature.⁵¹ This view is similar to Robert Brustein’s observation of modern drama as a revolt that “rides in on the second wave of Romanticism – not the cheerful optimism of Rousseau, with his emphasis on institutional reform, but rather the dark fury of Nietzsche, with his radical demand for a total transformation of man’s spiritual life.” While I would add Hegel and Schopenhauer as principal philosophers of modern drama, I agree with Brustein that “Nietzsche remains the most seminal philosophical influence on the theatre of revolt, the intellect against which almost every modern dramatist must measure his own.”⁵²

It was from Schopenhauer that Nietzsche considered the world in terms of volition conceived not, Jerrold Seigel informs us, “as a faculty of individuals, but as the cosmic power at the center of the universe, and the motive force of all experience and history.”⁵³ Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), written amidst the ferment and heady days of the Franco-Prussia War, lays the foundation of modern drama perhaps more than any seminal text. It challenged, among other things, the philistine materialism, optimism, and decadence of

bourgeois culture; the conventional wisdom of Greek tragedy as pristine and the Greek chorus as the “rational-ideal” spectator; and the effect of tragedy that, as Nietzsche insists, “never rested on epic suspense, on teasing people and making them uncertain about what will happen now or later.” Instead, Greek tragedy relied on “those great rhetorical and lyrical scenes in which the passion and dialectic of the protagonist swelled into a broad and mighty stream. Everything was in preparation for pathos, not for action; and anything that was not a preparation for pathos was held to be objectionable.”⁵⁴ Nietzsche’s book revolved around the twin axis of “Apollonian” and “Dionysian.” Apollo, the god of reason and light, facilitated sober judgment and dream-like assurances. Apollo stood for what Nietzsche, borrowing from Schopenhauer, called the *principium individuationis*, the ordinance of nature that promoted the individual’s purity and uniqueness. Dionysus, the god of intoxication and music, reigned over impulsive nature and the flow of energy that contradicted Apollonian stable boundaries between individuals, objects, and the certainty of existence. The Dionysiac cosmos, with its reliance on music to animate life, characterizes Nietzsche’s counterbalance against the superficial notion of Greek serenity and austerity, as well as the positivism of technological advancement and the philosophy of Hegel, where actions advance history and humanity. “Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet,” Nietzsche says: “both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal existence of things, they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action.”⁵⁵ This thinking is romantic idealism shorn of hope, or the illusion of the individual as a source of renewal.

Romantic idealism was a philosophic and artistic outlook that believed in the mind’s ability to overcome reality; the quotidian could be transcended if only one’s intellect and passions rose above life’s inadequacies. For romantic idealists the only thing real is feelings emanating from the mind; all material and temporal existence takes as its start and end point individual mental consciousness. With the fall of aristocracy resulting from the French Revolution, and the collapse of religious faith, European intellectual thought stressed the individual, specifically individual feeling as the ideal aesthetic. Romanticism, writes Baudelaire in “The Salon of 1846,” lies “neither in the subject an artist chooses nor in his exact copying of truth, but in the way he feels.” Where artists were outward-looking prior to modernism, the modern artists looks “inward, as the only way to find it.”⁵⁶ It, for Baudelaire, is the search for beauty and the divine, and this search, writes one of the founders of idealism, the playwright-philosopher Frederick Schiller, is “the sphere of unfettered contemplation and reflection; beauty conducts us into the world of ideas, without however taking us from the world of sense.” Beauty is thus “a process of abstraction from

everything material and accidental, a pure object free from every subjective barrier, a pure state of self-activity without any admixture of passive sensations.”⁵⁷ Beauty was perfection for the romantic idealists, an absolute state within art, literature, music, and drama that served the most immediate conduit to truth and freedom. This ideal was not, as the Enlightenment rationalists thought, a timeless and eternal form, but rather a product of sensualist subjectivism. In order to achieve individualism the subject demanded freedom; the romantics put tremendous stock in “freedom” because without it the individual remained bound by custom and law. The idea of “*Bildung*,” the German literary term defining educational development and maturation, is inextricably linked to free choice. Frederick Beiser writes that the “romantics insist that *Bildung* must arise from the free choice of the individual, that it must reflect his own decisions. The self realizes itself only through specific decisions and choices, and not by complying with general cultural norms and traditions.”⁵⁸ Romanticism (following Kant) stressed the individual genius, encouraging artists to follow their own inspiration. For romantic idealism art, more than anything, helped humanity achieve a state of absolutism – a purity beyond the materially mundane and idealized as a mental frame of mind. This artistic inspiration, however, comes at great cost; Frank Kermode reminds us that for Baudelaire and the romantics, isolated in the modern city, “the poet is a ‘seer’” and the poet’s supreme image, “for all its concretion, precision, and oneness, is desperately difficult to communicate, and has for that reason alone much to do with the alienation of the seer as the necessary of his existing in the midst of a hostile society.”⁵⁹

Romanticism begins with the French Revolution in 1789, transpiring throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, and manifesting in the multiple European Revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871, as well as the American Civil War of 1861–65. These upheavals accentuated the internecine conflicts of class, race, region, religion, nationalism, and the desire for human equality and freedom that were the cause and consequence in France in 1789. They were exhilarating times that also left the world, Henri Lefebvre notes, with a feeling of fragmentation and alienation, “slow but overpowering, influencing knowledge, behaviour, and consciousness itself.”⁶⁰ The revolutions inspired the dramatic mode known as melodrama, because revolutions, Peter Brooks writes in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, marked “the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society.” For Brooks, “Melodrama does not simply represent a ‘fall from tragedy,’ but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the

promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.”⁶¹

By the mid nineteenth century artists and social critics questioned romanticism’s emphasis on interiority and abstract mental concepts. The military conflicts between emerging nations and the rising industrial revolution brought suffering to a degree unknown before. Urban squalor, massive poverty, nationalist jingoism, war’s carnage, and the newly exploited class of workers known as the proletariat opened romanticism up to the charges of evading social reality. This criticism set the stage in the 1840s for a group in Germany and throughout Europe known as the Young Hegelians. These radical social thinkers (Marx among them) borrowed Hegel’s dialectics – the clash of ideas eventuating in reconciliation and synthesis – but viewed conflicts as material rather than mental, concrete rather than abstract, and in the flesh rather than in rationality and the mind. According to Jürgen Habermas, “Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is, they freed the idea of a critique nourished on the spirit of modernity from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason.”⁶² The realists observed the massive effects of revolution, industrialization, and a rootless public alienated from social institutions. Realism surfaced as an artistic expression of objectivity: the world is a sordid place and it is the job of the realists to depict this world, warts and all. Toril Moi contends that “Realists face the truth of the human condition, idealists demand that people sacrifice themselves in the name of chimerical ideals.”⁶³ Here, then, is the point at which modern drama surfaces.

Philosophically realism is concerned with the world as it is without the mind or the individual’s influence. Realist playwrights wanted to convey a deeper veracity of life than mere subjectivity; not an exactitude of photographic representation but shaping plays that reflect cultural complexity. Realism, Astradur Eysteinnsson contends, “portrays social reality as a ‘whole’ and ultimately as a ‘common ground,’” which “holds true even when the relationship between the individuals and society is predominantly characterized by conflict.”⁶⁴ Realism puts its stock and trade in the conflict of individual versus society, with the individual as a “stand-in” for everyone. While this surrogation opens up realism to the critique of “universality” – a protagonist, however beleaguered, cannot represent everybody – the struggle of the individual against institutions became a dominating theme in realistic drama and a successful weapon against institutional oppression. The rise of Darwin’s evolutionism, Freud’s psychology, and Marx’s socialism altered perceptions that informed realistic dramas, tilting towards a rejection of introversion and highly subjective art of romanticism in favor of societal conflicts and psychological analysis. Human beings in society replaced the introversion of the mind; history replaced myth; ordinary people replaced royalty as the subject matter; scientific observation replaced religion; and necessity and motivation replaced fate and chance. A work of

realism in art and literature was not meant to elevate humanity but rather expose the underlying objective social condition and emphasize the quotidian over the poetic. In realism surfaces are stripped away, revealing causal networks functioning beneath appearances. Feminist social activist Emma Goldman wrote that in Gerhart Hauptmann's play about the working class, *The Weavers*, "There is nothing in literature to equal the cruel reality of the scene in the office" when "the weavers bring the finished cloth. For hours they are kept waiting in the stuffy place, waiting the pleasure of the rich employer after they had walked miles on an empty stomach and little sleep."⁶⁵ Modern realism explicates the specific conditions of technological social relations and the manner in which they impinge upon the individual's freedom. The painter Courbet led the way in the 1850s and 1860s with his stark depictions of ordinary life; with Courbet, writes Charles Morazé, "painting had embarked on a new mission; it was no longer concerned with historical and anecdotal erudition, but with helping men to see, and to see themselves as they were."⁶⁶ History of the ordinary – from the bottom up – became the rallying cry of realists who sought to inculcate psychological and sociological approaches depicting relationships, actions, and consequences. The goal politically was to expose aspects of reality obfuscated by power relations; ugliness was no longer off limits. Realists rejected all subject matter that could not be witnessed as physically existing, depicting rawness and steely-eyed observations as the core ingredient in the recreation of social perfidy. Realism is selective, demonstrating what the French call *une tranche de vie* – "a slice of life." Whereas the romantic idealists depicted something that might replace the grim façades of life, the realists sought to rip the façades down, even if this meant stripping all possibility of hope. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov carried the banner of realism to its ascendancy, probing the falsehoods of bourgeois hegemony and drawing away the circumambience of deceit that permeated the middle class's arrogant self-perception.

The social struggles personified by the failure of the European Revolution of 1848 sparked the end of idealism as a progressive tool, giving way to realism's icy, unsentimental observations. The breakthrough of realism, in fact, can be said to occur precisely during 1848, when the reality of the revolution's demise provided the means for the dramas we associate with realism. The European Revolution of 1848, writes Mike Rapport, "were seen subsequently as failures, but one should not be too pessimistic. The events of 1848 gave millions of Europeans their first sense of politics, workers and peasants voted in elections and even stood for and entered parliament. The civil liberties that flourished all too briefly in that year also provided Europeans with the free space in which they – including women – were politicized, through participation in political clubs and workers' organizations."⁶⁷ Although the proletariat was defeated and the social forces of the revolution were decisively crushed, the outcome was

hardly dire. What emerged was what Lewis Namier called the ascending “middle classes led by intellectuals, and their modern ideology with which they confronted the old established powers and interests.”⁶⁸ Foremost among this ideology was the demand for political power sharing, national sovereignty, women’s rights, end of slavery, and freedom from aristocratic rule, all of which found its way into modern realistic dramas.

Avant-gardism typified a rejection of realism. Even where the framework of realism took critical account of social conflicts, the experience of realism and its offshoot naturalism, it was believed, failed to break free of conventional social reality. Instead of a mimetic reflection of reality, the avant garde focused on formal concerns of drama: multiple narratives, stream of consciousness, non-linear representation of time and space, heightened poetics, reliance on myths and symbols, dreamscape, fictive abstraction, fragmentation, abruptness, stridency, lyricism, disintegration of the familiar, and aggression against its own medium. These iconoclastic innovations were attempts to break through appearances in order to discover “deeper” meanings behind a common sense “realistic” framework of representations. According to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, it is “a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form.”⁶⁹ However, unlike art, where abstraction comes naturally, theatre and drama still had to contend with real human bodies onstage; as Günter Berghaus observes, modernist avant-garde works “were still ‘realistic,’ but in a manner that transcended mere imitation. Modernist art modified the categories of representation and enriched them with new techniques that went beyond the traditional ‘art holding the mirror up to nature’ concept of Realism.” The formal elements of avant-garde modernism, “such as the use of incongruous and contradictory ingredients, collage of components taken from a variety of contexts, simultaneity and fragmentation of elements,” yielded “in the reader/viewer a heightened awareness of reality.”⁷⁰ The avant-garde modernists were concerned with a probative recovery of the “truer” self than realism could ever achieve by uncovering the instinctual and spiritual foundations beneath the surface façade. For them, the self was dispersed, contradictory, and disingenuously portrayed within the structural framework of a unified “representation.” The avant-garde modernists, Marjorie Perloff notes, urged “collage and its cognates (montage, assemblage, construction)” constituting their “central artistic invention,” and that modernist practices “call into question the representability of the sign” – the cohesion and juxtaposition of sign and reality so endemic to realism.⁷¹ Realism, it was believed, relied too heavily on showing experience confidently and uniformly; Peter Bürger asserts that the fragmentary nature of the avant garde “renounces shaping a whole,” providing the artwork instead with “a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic

work of art.”⁷² What was needed was less focus on representation and totality, and more exposure of theatrical convention. The very features of theatre were foregrounded, stressing the theatrical apparatus; for example, being-in-a-theatre (I’m watching a play and I’m aware of this fact), it was argued, is the truer reality than pretending a fourth wall.

The avant-garde modernists celebrated the esoteric. With the exception of the Futurist F. T. Marinetti, the avant garde was unconcerned with popularity, catering to a limited circle of devotees. The avant-gardists often flouted mysteriousness, disinterested in clarifying reality and flaunting the obtuse, which they believed the common ruck could never comprehend anyway. The intrinsic lucidity of realism makes the work accessible in a way the avant garde – with its subjectivism, formal difficulty, and purposeful obscurantism – could not. The avant garde, writes Richard Murphy, opposes “realism’s characteristic gesture of pretending to offer a comprehensive survey and rational explanation of the world,” challenging instead “the narrative structures and conventional rationalist constructions through which reality is interpreted, in order that they can make the inherited realist models of the world less self-evident or ‘natural.’”⁷³ The world is not (following Hegel) linear but rather (following Nietzsche) circular, inconsistent, and lacking in Aristotelian formulas of beginning, middle, and end. August Strindberg, whose plays epitomized both realism and naturalism as well as avant-garde expressionism, wrote in his Preface to *A Dream Play* that modern characters and situations are not one-dimensional cardboard cut-outs but rather “Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins and weaves new patterns into a blend of memories experiences, free fantasies, absurdities and improvisations.” For Strindberg, “characters are split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble.”⁷⁴ For the avant-gardists realism was too concerned with bourgeois convention and trite moral issues pertaining to crass middle-class commercialism. Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades were, according to Peter Bürger, provocation that “not only unmask[s] the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”⁷⁵ The notion of the individual and his or her volition is deemed solipsistic by avant-gardists; such valuing puts stock in the vainglorious bourgeois individual as an autonomous being. “The hostility toward other value systems, the need to *épater le bourgeois*,” Frederick Karl writes, “is a matter of redefining human behavior within an alternate system. The artist must annihilate others’ taste to justify its milieu. The avant-garde thrives on such annihilation, Nietzsche’s death of gods carried to all forms of behavior.”⁷⁶

Einstein’s physics inspired the avant garde because his theory disrupted the comfort of space and time – any objective view of it that marked realism’s

causality. Einstein maintained that comprehending space and time varies according to the relativity of motion. His ideas had a profound impact on aesthetics, undermining agreed upon judgment because simultaneity – two people observing the same thing at the same time – has no absolute certainty of consensus. According to Einstein, “Two events which, viewed from a system of coordinates, are simultaneous, can no longer be looked upon as simultaneous when envisioned from a system which is in motion relatively to that system.”⁷⁷ In art, then, time and space were shredded and reconfigured from new angles and perspectives. Cubism exemplifies this disorientation. Jose Ortega y Gasset noted that Einstein’s theoretical discoveries asserted that there is “no absolute space because there is no absolute perspective.” Without absolute certainty, actual space cannot be determined by a realistic totality and finality, but rather incorporates fragments that collide, disperse, and amalgamate again. As a result, Gasset contends, Einstein’s theory “is a marvelous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points of view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way.”⁷⁸

Relativity opened up drama to a plethora of modern inventiveness and originality, casting aside rigid morality and philosophical *idée fixe*. Walter Benjamin said that ideas cannot be fleshed out through the given elements of phenomena; the realists have it wrong when they present art as merely a photo-reproduction to be analyzed objectively even if they analyze it from every angle. Instead, ideas are an amalgam of atoms or stars, colliding, moving apart, circling around. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars,” he remarks, and ideas “do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena,” but rather “are timeless constellations,” where things are understood only relative to other things.⁷⁹ For the avant garde, what we observe as real, John Peter writes, “is not really real; that there are things which are more real than the things our perceptions report to us about; that beyond the things we perceive in ordinary life there is another reality, and we can somehow apprehend what it is; that this hidden reality – and this is an important jump – may not be clearly and rationally expressible; but that – an even more important jump – it is more significant than the one we are used to.” As a result, avant-gardists “were not interested simply in reality as they saw it: they wanted to grasp what made reality seem real, and they wanted to show us this insight in their pictures.”⁸⁰

Somewhat like romantic idealism, the avant garde sought a subjective view of the world, but unlike the romantics, who took art seriously, they added sarcasm, wit, and doubt about the individual’s power to shape the world. Influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the avant garde viewed human will as ridiculous and hardly worth emulating. “Eternal becoming, endless flux,” writes the aporetic Schopenhauer, “belongs to the revelation of the essence of will. The same thing shows itself finally in human endeavor and desires as well, which always mask their fulfillment in the guise of ultimate goal

of willing, but which, as soon as they are achieved, no longer look the same and are thus soon forgotten, antiquated, and really always, even if without admission, set aside as vanished deceptions.”⁸¹ For Schopenhauer, the will’s ever-striving need reaches an aporia, a deadening languor, that is displayed in a life-congealing boredom. There is no “progress” in the Hegelian sense, only the odious condition of a feckless will which no action can tame. Human endeavors and desires merely sustain us with the vainglorious hope that their fulfillment will be volition’s final goal, with the irony being that once the goal is achieved, another takes its place. Avant-gardism stands for an image of the future that breaks decisively with human continuity. It is contemptuous of progress and the durability of civilization, situating instead the inchoate, serendipitous, and non-linear at the center of creation. Susan Sontag sums up this negation of art’s pedagogic purpose: “As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknown beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the ‘subject’ (‘the object,’ the ‘image’), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.”⁸²

Many modern movements occurring in this period were really short-lived breakthroughs appearing abruptly and disappearing hastily; their influences were absorbed quickly into the large maw of modernism’s endless cycle of newness. Modernism adores the new, but quickly discards it when the gloss fades. Experimentation is one of the key constituents of modernism because it values “newness.” To experiment in the theatre, Tom Driver notes, “has usually meant to break with whatever is the reigning style and method, and in the 1890’s breaks were made in many directions. There was a veritable eruption of that modern spirit that insists on rejecting the ‘given.’”⁸³ Still, idealism, realism, and the avant garde absorbed most shorter-lived movements into their categories, creating the triumvirate of modern drama.

Georg Büchner and Total War

Georg Büchner (1813–1837) was an anomaly and chronological oddity. He wrote during the period of late Romanticism, yet he rejected all that Romanticism epitomized; his work was unproduced and unrecognized until the 1870s, yet when he was discovered he served as a figurehead of modern drama; and his plays ironically spearhead both the dawn of realism as well as the nodal point of vanguard modernism’s rejection of realism. His belated discovery and retrospective influence credits him for the violent breaks and ruptures that earmark the history of modern drama. One of the reasons he illuminates modern drama so succinctly is the way Büchner grasped the failure of romantic idealism’s faith in progress and redemptive myths celebrating the creative

aesthetics of the future, ushering in instead the skepticism so endemic to modernism. He worked within the Romantic notion of historicism – his two major works deal with historically specific events – but he viewed history not, as Hegel or Comte would have it, as a positive progress towards rationalism and historical ascendancy. Instead, he raised the specter of revolt against positivism. In an 1834 letter to his bride, Büchner wrote: “I have been studying the history of the [French] Revolution. I have felt myself as if crushed beneath the fatalism of history. I find in human nature a terrifying uniformity, in human relationships an inexorable force, shared by everyone and no one. The individual is merely foam on a wave, greatness mere chance, the mastery of genius a puppet play, a ridiculous struggle against a rigid law. I will no longer bow down to the bigwigs and bystanders of history. My eyes have grown accustomed to blood.” He concludes: “What is it in us that lies, murders, steals?”⁸⁴

It is impossible to overstate the influence of Georg Büchner’s intense albeit brief life and work. He was a philosopher, scientist, radical socialist, political agitator, playwright – and dead at the age of twenty-three. His nascent socialism pre-dates Marx by more than a decade; his essays set the ground for realism’s rejection of romanticism; his episodic style of playwriting anticipates Brecht; his plays are precursors for expressionism, naturalism, theatre of the grotesque, and theatre of the absurd; and his scientific research in anatomy earned him a lectureship at the University of Zurich, one of the leading European centers of higher education – all before his twenty-third birthday. Tom Driver maintains that he is the “first of the modern dramatists to engage in a ruthless stripping away of post-Renaissance idealization.”⁸⁵ George Steiner notes that “Büchner’s instantaneous ripeness staggers belief. The mastery is there from the outset.”⁸⁶ Richard Mueller remarks that the eponymous Büchner “is the seemingly inexhaustible source of modern drama and has been universally extolled by the leaders of the aforementioned movements.”⁸⁷ Adding to the encomium is Richard Gilman: “Büchner sees into existence and finds it perverse, unfathomably misconstrued, a mockery of our self-proclaimed dignity.”⁸⁸ He authored three plays during the mid-1830s, two of which, *Danton’s Death* (*Dantons Tod*, 1835) and *Woyzeck* (found in fragments decades after his death), are touchstones for critical thinking and writing on modern drama. “In Western drama,” Steiner contends, “there is a time prior to *Woyzeck* and one after – as there is before and after *Waiting for Godot*.”⁸⁹ Before moving on to the three giants of modern drama – Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov – it behooves us to consider the importance of Büchner as an arbiter of things to come.

Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* and *Woyzeck* dwell in the realm of the philosophical, historical, epic, and tragic. They are theatrical spectacles that address a nexus of ideas, combining violence and splintering sharp comedy, portraying explosive conflict and theatricality, language conveying enthralling lyricism and grotesque behavior, inaugurating a new form of tragic melodrama, and the topics of the

plays are linked to the consequences of the French Revolution and its aftermath. The French Revolution created an enormous crisis of belief through a series of horrifyingly violent and disconcerting events that touched virtually every aspect of daily life. Rather than a specific moment that came and went, the Revolution triggered the Napoleonic Wars, social upheaval, and the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, to name just a few social conflicts. At each conflict was the belief that the end point of turmoil had arrived; as each event passed, new conflicts arose that created even more terrifying consequences, mocking the very idealism of an end point in violence. The notion of excess – the overload of modern society's information stream – informed the rise of melodrama. Melodrama was the dramaturgical form that responded to the spillage and terrifying collapse of authority and the subsequent void created by war, famine, poverty, and desolation of the social structures that had propped up European society for centuries. This collapse affected not merely the fracturing of kinship systems and the rituals of religious society – it engendered a widespread skepticism of the very efficacy of language itself as an instrument of truth. Disillusionment was everywhere, leading to trauma in every aspect of life.

Büchner's historical melodrama *Danton's Death* concerns the political and personal disillusionment amongst those involved in the French Revolution and its Reign of Terror. The play's episodic structure swings from interior spaces to street scenes, public debates to intimate encounters. It was as if Büchner needed to get as close to the chaos and violence as he could, letting it speak through his incendiary style, roiling from one dramatic episode to the next. The play's sensation of being dragged along through history's slippery path, rapidly shifting from interior to exterior space, pausing to observe briefly unstoppable and darkening events, resonates with the spirit of being steamrolled by bloodshed. The author set out to write a vividly imagined living history (some of the speeches by the revolutionaries are incorporated verbatim into the play) with a dramatic structure suited to the unfolding pace of changing events.

The play takes place in 1793 under Robespierre's dictatorship. The central figures are Robespierre, the ruthless idealist, and Danton, the cynical-realist whose disdain for the revolution riles Robespierre. Robespierre seeks to weed out dissent, while Danton, who at first supported Revolutionary aims, now sees only bloodbath. Danton has cryptically turned his back on his revolutionary comrades, disgusted by the excrescent brutality and the mere replacement of one horrific regime with another. Robespierre and his acolyte St. Just maintain the belief that the end justifies the means; Danton, witnessing bloodshed of staggering proportions, overthrows his revolutionary ideals and embraces a Schopenhauerian pessimism. Büchner's Danton pre-dates Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit because he does nothing but merely wait for Robespierre to drag him into court as a counter-revolutionary. When Nietzsche says that "knowledge kills action" or when Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* fail

to leave the stage, Danton also waits inactively, Hamlet-like (Büchner was influenced by Shakespeare's play), for the inevitable guillotine. In Robespierre's eyes Danton's betrayal of revolutionary principles is not traitorous because Danton is aligning with the overthrown monarchy; rather, Danton is doing something far worse: he doubts the whole enterprise of revolution.

In a startling opening gambit, Büchner situates his anti-hero, Danton, in a brothel room where card players, gaming aficionados, and prostitutes loll about. The opening provides insights into Kantian knowledge and appearances: how do we know the thing-in-itself, Danton seems to be asking. Who are we and who are the people around us? His dialogue brings modern alienation front and center:

- JULIE: Danton, do you believe in me?
 DANTON: How should I know! We know little enough about one another. We're thick-skinned creatures who reach out our hands toward one another, but it means nothing – leather rubbing against leather – we're very lonely.
 JULIE: But you know me, Danton.
 DANTON: Yes, that's what they call it. You have dark eyes and curly hair and a delicate complexion and you always call me: dear Georges! But (*Touche her forehead and eyelids*) what about here, and here? What goes on behind here? No there's nothing delicate about our senses. Know one another? We'd have to crack open our skulls and drag each other's thoughts out by the tails.⁹⁰

Büchner anticipates the most radical development of modern drama's emphasis on history, covering his large canvas with the confusion and chaos of the French Revolution. In this play the shocking headlines of history become the substance of modern drama; in the play's epic-Shakespearean style, the expression of horror emerges. Danton's sickening sense of the revolution's futility and violence begins the play; it is as if Danton cannot explain his own response to this brutal state of violence, expressing an inchoate condition that accurately reflects the situation itself. Danton struggles to peer into our open skulls, only to find blood and brain-matter but no soul or deepened knowledge. Danton's words are pell-mell, scraping and random yet always preserving the poetry of his cynicism: "I'm disgusted with it all; why must men fight one another? [...] I think there was a mistake in the creation of us; there's something missing in us that I haven't a name for – but we'll never find it by burrowing in one another's entrails, so why break open our bodies? We're a miserable lot of alchemists!" (27).

The orchestration of the Revolution and its bloody aftermath helped Büchner formulate his rejection of idealism, replaced by a deeply felt, Schopenhauerian fatalism. Robespierre is a perfect foil to Danton (who speaks for the playwright): he is Machiavellian – the end justifies the means – yet his repressed hostility is barely hidden from the surface. He possesses a highly sophisticated

understanding of Revolutionary violence, harnessing it towards Jacobin ends. Büchner captures Robespierre's brilliance as a politician and his sophisticated manipulation of revolutionary violence, demonstrating an impressive skill at diplomacy and orchestrating human behavior. But even he ultimately fails to gauge the full extent of what this violence has unleashed; the backlash against him as his fellow revolutionaries took the supreme moment of revolution in 1789 down the slippery slope of murderous abyss during the Reign of Terror (July 1793 to July 1794). The political culture of absolutism and its end were in fact not an end at all but merely a shift from one authoritarian regime to another. Robespierre's Republic of Virtue disguised a murderous utopia, an ideology with a long European pedigree of repressive utopian visions. Büchner understood perhaps as well as anyone what occurred: the metaphysical form of centralized government from royalty to revolutionary was nothing more than the replacement of one absolute ruler with another.

Why did the great ideas of the French Revolution descend into the Terror marked by the guillotine? This question, which the play raises, cuts to the core of the dilemma – the origin and justification of Revolutionary violence. Why did 1789, the period of supreme liberation from tyranny and autocracy, slide so quickly and disastrously into murderous chasm only a few years later? Büchner could see nothing constructive or beneficial in the Revolution from the outset; the creed of domination and violence anticipates George Orwell's *Animal Farm* over a century later. The play suggests that the perversion of the Revolutionary intent was written into the genetic DNA of Revolutionary violence; like the animals in Orwell's satire, the urge to totalitarianism is hard wired into our psyche. The architects of the Revolution were a product of absolutism; having lived through monarchy, the Revolutionaries sought to create a matching institution that claimed to have the general interests of the people at heart but was, as *Animal Farm* contends, merely switching one absolutism for another, replicating the very domination they had sought to overthrow. Büchner anticipates the observations of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who contend that the "revolution of European modernity ran into its Thermidor." Although it was impossible to go back to absolutism, "it was nonetheless possible to reestablish ideologies of command and authority, and thus deploy a new transcendental power by playing on the anxiety and fear of the masses, their desire to reduce uncertainty of life and increase security."⁹¹ Robespierre, the intellectual force of the Revolution, was utterly selfless and supremely ambitious, a mixture of optimism (the cause will endure) with a Hobbesian sense of bleakness (human desire is corrupt), a skilled political operator filled with ideological fervor, inspirational but reclusive, a dictator who despised power yet succumbed to power's intoxication for the sake of stability and reducing anxiety in the citizens.

While Robespierre was a talented diplomat (at least until his execution), Danton is the opposite, a man inspired with ideological fervor until he is beset by the folly of such idealism. He combined all the impulses of the revolution and all the despair that followed in its wake. Danton is, in Büchner's play, overwhelmed by the horrible fatalism of history: he is stymied, abjures action, suffers from acedia, and is plagued by what would become known in modern drama as existential angst and inertia. Büchner's thinking, like Nietzsche's to come, was an inversion of Hegel's; Büchner was deeply pessimistic about the power of reason to influence history or the course of human events. According to Schopenhauer, we are imprisoned by our will; the world is what Kant said it was – a realm of appearances, of phenomena, of things-in-themselves that we can never get our head around. But for Schopenhauer it is folly to encounter the world as representation, as a place of objects governed by cause and effect; rather we ought to accept the world as intimately infused by feelings, desires, impulses, and interests. John Peter's explanation of Schopenhauer's rejection of volition as a guiding light towards reason explains Danton's fatalism; "Schopenhauer's way out of the circular hell," Peter says, "is to put an end to the striving which is its essence. It is a turning away, an obliteration, a denial: and it is all-inclusive. He admits that to abolish the Will means to abolish the world which is its objectification and mirror. It is thus inevitably the end of all effort; of all forms, or all time and space."⁹² Such surrender is expressed by Danton's torpor alone in an open field:

I'll go no farther. Why should I disturb this silence with the rustling of my footsteps and the sound of my breath. (*He sits down; after a pause.*) I was told once of a sickness that wipes out our memory. Death must be something like that. And then at times I hope that perhaps death is even more powerful and wipes away everything. If only it were true! – I'd run like a Christian then to rescue my enemy – no memory, that is. – This place should be safe; for my memory is not for me; but the grave should give me safety, at least it will make me forget. The grave kills memory (34).

To be modern as Danton (and Woyzeck, as we will shortly see) is to be cognizant of the alienation from authority and to understand the powerlessness it creates. Romantic idealists hoped that by overthrowing the past a vastly improved future would emerge; but modernists knew better. The whole edifice of reason argued for by the Enlightenment, and the whole foundation of lyricism and aesthetic beauty as the antidote to the modern world argued for by Schiller and the Romantics, are challenged – indeed overthrown and refuted by Büchner's skepticism and vision of revolutionary horror.

Danton's Death and *Woyzeck* are dramas deeply pessimistic about the power of reason to impart direction to the world. Our faculties for logic and coherence

imprison us into believing that we have power when in fact we are mere specks of dust blown sideways. The “will” as Schopenhauer remarks and Büchner equally shows lies outside representation because it is that which cannot be reached or grasped by way of separate, independent objects defined by association and causal analysis. The world of appearances is what Kant said: it is all we can fathom; and for Schopenhauer and Büchner the life urgings prompted by the will (desire) are nothing more than urges towards preservation and consumption. The use of things and their possession, as in the case of politics and love in *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck* respectively, fail because we cannot truly know what they mean or what they are except as mere possession – mere phenomena that eventually disappoint. Desire is illusory; we are nothing more than riding a wave. Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer when he says, “Just as the boatman sits in his little boat, trusting to his fragile craft in a stormy sea which, boundless in every direction, rises and falls in howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering the individual man calmly sits, supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis*.”⁹³ There can hardly be a better description of Büchner's *Danton*. In 1835 he wrote:

The dramatic poet is, in my view, nothing but a writer of history. [...] His greatest task is to come as close as possible to history as it actually was. [...] I can scarcely be expected to make virtuous heroes out of Danton and the bandits of the Revolution! If I was to depict their dissoluteness then I had to make them dissolute; if I was to show them as Godless then I had to let them speak like atheists. [...] The poet is no teacher of morals; he invents and creates characters, he brings the past back to life, and from the people may learn as though from the study of history itself and the observation of it, what happens in human life around him. [...] As regards to those so-called Idealist poets, I find that they have given us nothing more than marionettes with sky-blue noses and affected pathos, but not human beings of flesh and blood.⁹⁴

Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836) is also an historical play, but unlike *Danton's Death*, it concerns the lower class. The narrative is based on a soldier executed for murdering his prostitute lover. The trial of the actual Woyzeck was one of the first clinical case studies of insanity. In several scenes in the play *Woyzeck*, a common soldier, is horribly abused and unable to cope. The passive title character is brutalized in a series of encounters with the people he depends on to subsist, primarily a doctor who pays him to participate in scientific experiments and the sneering captain of his regiment. He is tortured, too, by his beloved Marie, who takes a liking to the Drum Major. These actions inflame Woyzeck's haunted visions, adding to his already disoriented imbalance.

In one scene after another he is forced to eat only peas, required to hold his urine until told to release it, and humiliated by his lover's public betrayal. Given to superstition, hearing voices, and hallucinating toadstools, Woyzeck is

treated hardly above the circus animals he views. He observes his live-in lover, Marie, have an affair with the Drum Major, and the affair is made public in a dance hall. Humiliated, he follows them, watches them dance, tries to defy the stronger and more athletic Drum Major, and ends up taking a terrific beating in public. He murders Marie in a fit of jealous rage. Despite his incapacities, he struggles to make sense of his life, is prone to expressing philosophic ideas, and in this way he can be seen as an alienated precursor to Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, and the Young Woman in Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* (in the last case we also have, like *Woyzeck*, a murderer and an effort to evoke sympathy for the protagonist). Everything that happens to *Woyzeck* is the result of an oppressive environment, but Büchner avoids sentimentality. The characters that hound *Woyzeck* are sometimes depicted as macabre, comic caricatures (with the exception of Marie); this creates a kind of absurd, almost comic depiction, what would later be called theatre of the "grotesque" (a term used in the play). We also observe *Woyzeck*'s Faustian quest for comprehension; his words and actions appeal to nature to be able to see the Kantian "thing-in-itself." Influenced by Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Woyzeck* cries out for proof of Marie's infidelity. But it is more than the appearance of a handkerchief, Iago's prop as proof for *Othello*, or earrings *Woyzeck* discovers on Marie; likewise *Othello*, *Woyzeck* wants to "see" the sin itself, to turn the intangible into the material, to take hold of something abstract and turn it into concrete reality. For Kant, and for *Woyzeck*, our experience shows us that there are two modes of appearances: that which is phenomena, a visual and sensual recognition of cause and effect, and "noumena," Kant's term for what lies beneath and behind the realm of surface appearances. For *Woyzeck*, the phenomena and their modes of perception have no purchase, have failed to reveal to him the essence of life by being cut off from "things in themselves" – we can never really "know" any "thing" beyond the surface manifestations of its physical appearance and common sense analysis and intelligibility of it.

WOYZECK: (*looks fixedly at her and shakes his head*). Hm! I don't see it! I don't see it! My God, why can't I see it, why can't I take it in my fists!

MARIE: (*frightened*). Franz, what is it? – You're raving, Franz.

WOYZECK: A sin so swollen and big – it stinks to smoke the angels out of Heaven!

You have a red mouth, Marie! No blisters on it? Marie, you're beautiful as sin. How can mortal sin be so beautiful?

MARIE: Franz, it's your fever making your talk this way! (122)

Two remarkable facets of this play are its epochal arrangement of scenes and its recognition of war as an historical overview. In the first case, we know little about the author's plan; four (some fragmentary) versions of the play were

discovered by the author's brother decades after Büchner's death. What is fascinating about the scenes, slightly over two dozen if one adds all the versions, is that they can be arranged in any sequence and the narrative would remain intact. *Woyzeck's* modernism, Henry Schmidt writes, lies in the fact that the "many brief scenes do not form a unified architectural whole, as in classical drama, but they present instead snapshots of reality, slices-of-life, linked less to each other than to the central theme: Woyzeck and his environment."⁹⁵ The play's architectonics could be sequenced as a flashback or linearly; either way the story's coherence remains. Comparing Büchner to Shakespeare, Herbert Lindenberger writes that Büchner's dramaturgical power does "not emerge through the temporal sequence of events, but through the atmosphere of corruption and decay suggested by songs, jokes, recurring words and images, and incidents seemingly irrelevant to the play's 'main line' of action."⁹⁶ In *Woyzeck* theatricality is maximized, supplying music, spectacle, folk songs, dancing, marching, violence, intimacy, intensity, and physical activities (shaving, etc.). Interior and exterior scenes follow one another depending on the way a director wishes to arrange them. But no matter the arrangement, the spirit of the play coheres.

Equally impressive is the way Büchner incorporates the impact of war on ordinary people. Woyzeck is a conscript, a "lifer" in the army serving for nothing more than a paycheck, bed, and consistent meal. He agrees to serve as a guinea pig in scientific experimentation for additional pay, his body and mind no more than a cell under a microscope. His duties in the service include shaving officers as well as other menial tasks. Most importantly, Woyzeck is poor and at the disposal of warring heads-of-state, a pawn to the newly conceived notion of modern warfare. According to David Bell, Napoleon introduced the concept of "total war," changing forever the idea of warfare. Prior wars were fought chivalrously – elite knights and a few peasants engaging in combat away from civilians. Monarchs were generally afraid of arming too many civilians, thereby keeping war for the most part a private affair. Bell, quoting Clausewitz, says that before the French Revolution, "war was waged in a way that a pair of duellists carried out their pedantic struggles. One battled with moderation and consideration, according to conventional properties." In contrast, Napoleon created "war of all against all. It is not the King who wars on a king, not an army which wars on an army, but a people which wars on another, and the king and the army are contained in the people."⁹⁷ Napoleon raised massive armies, establishing military service as (hopefully, though often not the case) an honorable insignia for the common folk. This led to a surge in nationalism: loyalty to a nation rather than a monarchy. This also resulted in conscription of itinerates; those unable to secure comfortable wages were recruited into military service. Thus, between the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1870–1 Franco-Prussian War, European armies were understood to be

made up of desperate men who couldn't find a better job and incompetent officers who couldn't inherit a better place; though a useful tool for empire building, the army became a patchwork institution employing thousands and creating its own infrastructure. Total war can be linked directly to technical innovation and the conscript army, both of which swept up Woyzeck.

Once drafted into service, Woyzeck was essentially enslaved, his free will eviscerated and his autonomy annulled. Woyzeck's position as a soldier was part of this larger historical condition for the working class; he joined the military because little else was available. The mass mobilization of the Napoleonic era grew out of a Western cultural and technological development: war was now brutal, fought with new technology, pitched battles using conscripted soldiers as cannon fodder. David Bell contends that during this post-Napoleonic period "the 'military' came enduringly to be defined as a separate sphere of society, largely distinct from the 'civilian' one."⁹⁸ Poor, uneducated, and socially disenfranchised, Woyzeck is at the mercy of the military. His pain is inexpressible; he is, George Steiner notes, stripped of words: "Woyzeck's powers of speech fall drastically short of the depth of his anguish," where his "agonized spirit hammers in vain on the doors of language."⁹⁹ The magnitude of his helplessness undermines any attempt to explain his condition; yet Steiner is not entirely correct: Woyzeck occasionally expresses his anguish with pellucid clarity.

Woyzeck is the first drama of the underclass and his inarticulateness (and self-awareness of this fact) is expressed with razor-sharp insight. Despite his downtrodden condition, lack of education, and the awkwardness of his language (the stuttering and stammering), Woyzeck is aware of the futility of his circumstances. Like Danton, Büchner has created a character cognizant of his hopelessness. In a scene where Woyzeck is shaving and cutting the Captain's hair, the sanctimonious Captain berates Woyzeck for having a child out of wedlock with the prostitute Marie. Woyzeck replies:

WOYZECK: Captain, sir, the good Lord's not going to look at a poor worm just because they said Amen over it before they went at it. The Lord said: "Suffer little children to come unto me."

CAPTAIN: What's that you said? What kind of strange answer's that? You're confusing me with your answers! (110).

Strange answer indeed, yet Woyzeck understands the irony of his plight. The hypocrisy of marriage and the sanctioning of the state's religion mean little amidst poverty. In remarks anticipating Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and twentieth-century social dramas, Woyzeck expresses conditions that are perhaps the most lyrical and profound on behalf of the working class ever written.

It's us poor people that ... You see, Captain, sir ... Money, money! Whoever hasn't got money ... Well, who's got morals when he's bringing something like

me into the world? We're flesh and blood, too. Our kind is miserable only once: in this world and in the next. I think if we ever got to Heaven we'd have to help with the thunder (110).

This speech is remarkable for several reasons. First is Woyzeck's prescient understanding of money. Not just cash, but what money means socially, politically, and ethically; as Marx noted (see quote above), money has the power to change reality and ethics. Second is his keen, self-effacing irony about his proletarian condition: even God partakes in the joke at his expense. He is a proletarian not only for life but into the "after" life. Büchner, the socialist critic Georg Lukács observes, "portrays Woyzeck's physical and ideological helplessness in the face of his oppressors and exploiters; in other words, real social helplessness, depicted from the viewpoint of existence, the essence of which Woyzeck at least senses, even if he does not clearly perceive it."¹⁰⁰ It is not merely Woyzeck's obsession with money that matters, but a modern concept of money in which possession preempts and renders unnecessary all pre-monetary forms of social relationships: reciprocity, redistribution, kinship, ritual, family, and morality. Money allows one to fulfill several needs, avoid moral turpitude, and reflect on philosophical conditions. For Büchner money provides the power to enlarge one's knowledge, assist in reflection, and override others' judgment.

Amongst artists and thinkers in Germany during the 1830's there arose interest in the "social question." Social observers, journalists, and intellectuals grew increasingly concerned with the pitiable plight of the lower classes. What was a steady condition of misery for peasants grew into mass impoverishment and homelessness. The lower classes of the 1830s suffered from the combination of rapid population growth and sluggish industrialization; the lagging economy in the towns and cities of Germany was the result of a transition from agrarian to industrial society. The countryside witnessed a mounting population experiencing the emancipation of peasant serfdom; this newfound freedom was a relief from the burden of serf-slavery, but it left the serfs with few options. Cast into the cities these landless and penniless people became a new class of urban workers (the proletariat) without connection to the old guard, laboring in inadequate factories, and bereft of sufficient income. The pre-modern peasant was deemed a part of the lower order of society, existing in a relatively static and stable context; the innate poverty of this class was the consequence of their supposed original sinful condition. But at least they were cared for by feudal structure and organization. By contrast, the new proletariat was conceived of as a social class produced by economic forces of labor and wage relationships. The roots of this transition enabled a sense of economic dislocation, the rise of competitiveness, and the demise of earlier forms of social sympathy and solidarity. Capitalism's demand for individualism swept away the old order of

feudal unity; the new class of poor was completely cast adrift. By the 1830s the topic of pauperism and the new laboring poor was not only exclusive of Germany, it impacted the debates globally. Poverty was not new, but the context and source of poverty was, and this new proletariat experienced nothing less than a traumatic condition.

Büchner condemns this modernized world for its alienation and de-humanization. Writing about the anti-heroism of the play, Victor Brombert notes that the tragic dimension of *Woyzeck* surfaces in “the passion of the protagonist – both in the etymological sense of suffering and the more ordinary sense of violent emotion – that retrieves tragedy in the antiheroic sense.” For Brombert, “the most telling moment is doubtless the instant of revelation of raw sexuality as Woyzeck, standing outside the open window of the inn, watches Marie and the Drum Major dance by in a symbolic embrace to the accompaniment of Marie’s repeated goading: ‘On and on. On and on.’”¹⁰¹ Woyzeck experiences trauma by leading a uniquely modern solitary existence. Büchner, writes Julian Hilton, “is not showing us a naturalistic, step-by-step alienation of a social misfit, but initiating us into what it feels like to be in alienating situations, the images and behaviour those situations induce.”¹⁰² Woyzeck’s inexorably solitary existence demarcates his modernism: disconnected from human commerce, except when those eager to exploit their own needs use him as a guinea pig, he represents a traumatic change of dramatic depictions – the isolated protagonist cast adrift – and modern artists sought to identify these traumatic moments of alienation.

