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## On Gramsci's Theater Criticism

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**Robert S. Dombroski**

Anyone who has read Antonio Gramsci's early writings on culture will agree that they reflect a range of interests truly uncommon among his Marxist contemporaries, one which has generated a rich and extensive series of observations and critical commentary on practically every topic included under the denomination "culture," from problems of language and education to the more specific manifestations of literature and art. The present essay will focus largely on the drama reviews Gramsci wrote from 1916 to 1920 for the Piedmont edition of the socialist daily, *Avanti!*. Although these theater columns belong to the first stage of Gramsci's development, they deal with issues that will continue to interest him during the prison years. Where they differ from the more mature reflections contained in the *Notebooks* is in their journalistic style and in the spontaneity of response owed to the particular circumstances in which they were written.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, Gramsci's theater criticism reveals the convergence of a series of problems relative to the practice of literature in the context of revolutionary struggle: on what aspect of drama must a critic focus to determine its value as an art product, how are plays used, for whom are they written and what is the significance of their purported or disguised ideological functions—all questions to which Gramsci will return in the *Prison Notebooks*, but with greater detach-

ment and in more concrete historical terms. The main difficulty in assessing the value and importance of Gramsci's theater chronicles is that they cannot be read simply as reviews of specific performances, but rather as an integral part of his work as a political journalist. For to argue that his early drama criticism holds for today's readers relatively few valid judgments or that to its detriment suffers from the general influence of Crocean esthetics must not prevent one from appreciating its value as cultural criticism. In a way truly compatible with the more mature reflections of the *Notebooks*, Gramsci demonstrates in the *Chronicles* a full awareness of drama as a social form of art and of the power of the stage not only to manipulate minds by expressing the values of those who control society, but also, potentially, to challenge and subvert those values. The special significance of Gramsci's early writings on theater consists largely in the attempt to promote and develop a new critical attitude toward drama, one which views the stage as an arena for political struggle where the true workings of society are exposed, and to assign to criticism the function of creating a self-aware and fully conscious public. In terms of revolutionary strategy, Gramsci saw the theater—through its direct expression of the more advanced levels of bourgeois culture—as giving the proletariat the critical knowledge that is a precondition for its hegemony. His objective as a drama critic was to convey to a proletarian reading public the shortcomings of bourgeois ethical life and the backwardness and resistance to social progress that characterize the forms of cultural communication it promoted. In other words, since Gramsci considered the theatre a kind of privileged locus through which cultural consensus became diffused and thus hegemony perpetuated, his purpose was, simply, to mount an assault on its moral bankruptcy, stupidity and mental laziness, while at the same time placing before his readers an ongoing exposé of its degeneracy as an institution.

Most significant for the young Gramsci's approach to the theater are his passionate assertions in this period on the nature of culture, all of which express themes familiar to neo-idealist polemics against positivism. Culture must not be equated with the encyclopaedic accumulation and ordering of knowledge, for people—he writes in "Socialism and Culture"—are not "mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts which have to be filed in the brain as in the columns of a dictionary."<sup>12</sup> Such a concept of culture, he adds, is particularly harmful to the proletariat because it implies that intellectual value consists in the quantification of knowledge, thus creating "maladjusted people [ . . . ] who believe that they are superior to the rest of humanity because they have memorized a certain number of facts and dates" which they invariably use as a "barrier between themselves and others." By contrast, culture holds a very different meaning:

It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which

one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations. But none of this can come about through spontaneous evolution, through a series of actions and reactions which are independent of one's own will—as is the case in the animal and vegetable kingdoms where every unit is selected and specifies its own organs unconsciously, through a fatalistic natural law. Above all man is mind, *i.e.*, he is a product of history, not nature.

Gramsci strongly feels that the political battle he is waging on behalf of the proletariat cannot be won without the formation of class consciousness. To start the process whereby proletarian class consciousness may be achieved, cultural preparation was necessary. This meant rejecting categorically the determinism and narrow inductionism he saw as characteristic of the cultural politics of Giolittian Italy and particularly representative of the intellectual orientation of the reformist wing of the Socialist party. Class consciousness can derive only from self-awareness which is “a result of intelligent reflection, at first by just a few people and later by a whole class [ . . . ]” It follows therefore that Gramsci should appropriately call on thinkers such as Vico and Novalis for support, for in their works priority was given to self-awareness and introspection within a dialectic of social progress. The main point of “Socialism and Culture” is clear: culture, which Gramsci equates with criticism (emphasizing that it should not be understood simply as the “spontaneous and natural evolution” of ideas) is indispensable to revolutionary practice—as the Enlightenment by preparing the way to the French Revolution convincingly demonstrates. The critique of culture, *i.e.*, of the dominant, hegemonic culture, begins with a self-awareness which leads to class consciousness:

Consciousness of a self which is opposed to others, which is differentiated and, once having set itself a goal, can judge facts and events other than in themselves or for themselves but also in so far as they tend to drive history forward or backward. To know oneself means to be oneself, to free oneself from a state of chaos, to exist as an element of order—but of one's own discipline in striving for an ideal. And we cannot be successful in this unless we also know others, their history, the successive efforts they have made to be what they are, to create the civilization they have created and which we seek to replace with our own.

Gramsci's conception of the way of making the proletarian revolution specifies a process of both distinction and continuity: an absorption of the dominant culture in order to single out those elements

which are essential to replacing it. The fact that the question of concrete political mediation does not yet arise, although noteworthy, must not cause us to overemphasize the idealistic character of the young Gramsci's polemic. For the positing of self-awareness and culture as universally progressive values has in the last analysis a distinctly practical finality: the creation of a proletarian class consciousness, not as an abstract ideal, but as a concrete means to bring about an alliance between urban workers in the North and Southern peasant farmers which Giolittian and reformist Socialist policies will work successfully to impede. Socialist culture, in other words, had to embrace the romantic ideal of the primacy of the human will in bringing about historical change in order to create, on the one hand, an operative cultural ideology for the proletariat, and, on the other, to provide a framework for an alliance between workers and dissident bourgeois intellectuals: an alliance based not on the obliteration of class differences, but rather on the need for a common cultural front against Giolitti and reformism. Furthermore, when pointing out the idealism or concessions to idealism in the young Gramsci, we should not forget that polemic against encyclopaedic knowledge, evolutionism and inductionism is not polemic against the scientific way of knowing or of the scientific method of studying society. To state unequivocally, as Gramsci does, that "above all man is mind [ . . . ] a product of history, not nature" does not make his position incompatible with the philosophical positivism that has its origins in Hume and the Enlightenment and is essential to a Marxist science of society and that springs from the belief in the ultimate perfectibility of social life. The narrow minded evolutionism that Gramsci attacks throughout his writings has to do with the regressive development of Positivism at the end of the nineteenth century when "positive knowledge," equated with science, became the ideological tool of the bourgeois *status quo*. What is particularly important to understand is that Gramsci here is writing to revive the true spirit of Marxism which he felt had become contaminated and, thus, distorted by bourgeois determinism. If anything, the question of the young Gramsci's idealism should be posed in terms of the real effects of his strategy. Does Gramsci's pragmatic utilization of bourgeois culture signify a tacit acceptance of certain (bourgeois) values, perceived as universal, at the very same time those values are being appropriated into a "revolutionary" practice? And to what extent does the position contained in "Socialism and Culture" that, citing from Novalis, defines consciousness as "gaining possession of one's transcendental self," stand at odds with Gramsci's later conception of human awareness in largely socio-political terms as an understanding of the conditions of struggle: the relations of production which influence concretely the workers' individual lives and the logic which regulates such a system of relations? Is not the difference precisely one between self-awareness and class consciousness? A reading of the theater chronicles will help us comprehend better the forces at work in Gramsci's cultural politics, as well as the limits of his concessions to idealism.

It cannot be denied that Gramsci's discussion of theater

embodies the general attitude toward ethical and intellectual renewal prevalent in the more militant sectors of neo-idealism and particularly among the contributors to *La Voce*.<sup>3</sup> At base, it shares with the neo-idealists the De Sanctisian ideal of a culture and civil life bound together in a new ethical humanism, sensitive to social problems and, primarily, to the importance of education in the development of a modern Italian consciousness. In its general orientation, Gramsci's theater criticism attempts to carry out a project very similar to that which Giuseppe Prezzolini set forth as the principal objective of *La Voce*, namely, the rehabilitation of Italian intellectual life to be achieved by drawing the people closer to the more "genuine" and "responsible" sources of culture. ("*La Voce* deve agevolare al pubblico l'avvicinamento alle fonti più sincere e più serie di cultura. Il suo compito è quello del risanamento morale della vita intellettuale.")<sup>4</sup> And with *La Voce* Gramsci saw himself as part of an oppositional culture, dedicated to putting a stop—as Prezzolini would phrase it—to "la misera e l'angustia e il revoltante traffico che si fa delle cose dello spirito." ("The poverty, meanness and loathsome traffic to which the products of the human mind are made subject.") However, what is peculiar to Gramsci is not so much the expression of themes common to the militant idealism of his day as the conviction that ethical and moral revolution, heralded by the *Vocianti*, was inextricably linked to social and political revolution; that the *destinataire* of his criticism was not primarily the bourgeoisie, but rather the proletariat; and that the project of renewing culture, instead of obtaining for the intelligentsia a new prestige in society and underscoring its would-be autonomy as a social class, was a way of uniting dissident intellectuals with the popular masses in a common struggle for a new culture and a new hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

The denunciation of the theater contained in Gramsci's chronicles extends to all of its aspects (writers, actors, performance, public), but most of all it centers on the theater industry itself and on the way it selects and finances theater companies. Gramsci believed that one of the major causes of the esthetic degeneration of the theater in the Turin of his time was the monopolistic concentration of the industry by trusts which restricted competition and controlled the organization of theatrical production to the financial benefit of one firm. His polemic against the Turin theater industry begins with an article dated 21 August 1916 and entitled "Melanconie. . . ." Here, as throughout the chronicles, Gramsci gives a somewhat idealistic underpinning to his argument. Theater has degenerated into vaudeville ("un pullulare malsano di varietà e di canzonettisterie"). This makes it impossible for the workers to fulfill their human needs which, besides being practical, economic and cognitive, are also esthetic. The great social import of theater consists in its capacity to provide occasion for collective, intellectual re-creation; the lack thereof leads to moral decadence ("l'assenza di possibilità buone per la ricreazione intellettuale fa sfungare i ritrovi più o meno osceni, dove si logora una apprezzabilissima parte di noi stessi e si pervertisce il gusto").<sup>6</sup> These idealistic notions—it is worth repeating—are part of a common intellectual fare

which Gramsci shared with his contemporaries; here they are used simply to facilitate entry into the core of his argument which, more or less, falls within the boundaries of cultural politics, if not a sociology of cultural practices. There has never been a total lack of theater in Turin. At fault is the new, provincial government which, through incompetence, ignorance and—it is implied—corruption, has forfeited its right to safeguard the intellectual well-being of the community. When, Gramsci laments, the Carignano theater was still managed by the city, contracts were made with the best companies, but now theater art in Turin has become a “feudatory” of the corporate trust whose policies regarding what kind of theater will play are arbitrarily determined by the self-interest and nearsightedness of the industry. From this position, Gramsci levels several charges against the firm of Giovanni Chiarella. Thanks to Chiarella’s speculation, theater in Turin has literally turned into a circus: “Torino è diventata una fiera, Barnum è diventato il dio tutelare della attività estetica e del gusto dei torinesi” (*LVN*, 288). By competing with vaudeville, Chiarella and Co. have cut the city out of the mainstream of Italian theater art. Monopoly concentration has forced the major drama companies to play in the surrounding towns where the audience is notably smaller and consequently the pay less substantial, the result being a gradual breaking up of the companies themselves and the players turning to the cinema for work. On the other hand, since vaudeville actors are paid less, corporate profits are increased. Chiarella’s objections, referred to in subsequent articles, that Gramsci is misinformed about his operations have the effect of making Gramsci restate more forcefully his criticisms:

Monopoly concentration even leads to the destruction of economic values, and breeds perverted and harmful forms of speculation: harmful, of course, for the community, not for the capitalist, and for this reason harmful in the long run. The theater consortium trust has already excluded Ermete Zacconi from Turin’s playhouses; now Emma Grammatica has also been ostracized. Theater companies are slowly being dissolved because, if they want to survive, they must pass under the Caudine Forks of agreements, impediments and repertoires imposed on them by the consortium. Theater has a great social importance. We are concerned with its degeneration at the hands of the industrialists and want to react against this as best we can (*LVN*, 292).

Gramsci’s assault on the municipal theater and its transformation by the Chiarella monopoly into a commodity reveals both the originality and limitations of the arguments contained in the *Chronicles*. In presenting the degeneration of theater art as a result of economic pressures, he no doubt underscores an important aspect of the relationship between theater and society; in this regard his critique signals

a radical departure from the theater criticism of his time. But by posing the question solely in terms of the theater industry's zest for profits ("il signor Chiarella . . . è semplicemente un uomo d'affari, che trova nel monopolio il metodo più sicuro di raggiungere i suoi fini" [LVN, 291.]), Gramsci ends up giving absolute priority to one of several elements in a complex structure of exchange. His assessment of the issue, although not unfounded, does not suffice in explaining why the public actually enjoys and supports such novel forms of cultural entertainment as variety shows and movies, and why these forms have been successful in replacing the theater as the public's principal leisure-time diversion. To argue, as Gramsci then does, that tastes are changing because of the lack of competition caused by monopoly concentration may be to some degree true, but it still sidesteps the issue of "popular culture," one which he will confront head on in the *Prison Notebooks*.

An essential presupposition to the *Chronicles* that regards both Gramsci's denunciation of the theater industry as well as the largely negative assessment of the plays and performances he reviews, is an overriding belief in the existence of "universal artistic values" which satisfy the human need for "esthetic activity." In this sense, Chiarella and Co., by supporting and promoting that which is not "art," has deprived people of what is "naturally and rightfully" theirs. Gian Carlo Ferretti has remarked that, convinced as he is that art is the answer to everything and at the same time confronted with the public's preference, Gramsci appears confused. Is the blame to be placed squarely on the shoulders of the impresarios or does "Turin have the theater it deserves"? The difficulty in resolving the problem, according to Ferretti, stems from the fact that Gramsci has schematically opposed the spheres of the economic and the esthetic.<sup>7</sup> The point is no doubt well taken and explains the type of judgments, found mainly at the outset of the *Chronicles*, that reveal on Gramsci's part an elitist attitude of superiority toward the vulgarization of modern mass culture. Nevertheless, the apparent "contradiction" in perspective at the base of Gramsci's arguments, repeatedly underlined by Ferretti and others, requires a more detailed discussion of the issues than has hitherto been attempted. To write off Gramsci's early criticism as the product of an immature viewpoint that is at once estheticist and political avoids precisely the problem that Gramsci was grappling with: how to reconcile the value of great art with democracy and socialism. This problem will still exist for Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, except that alongside it a new dimension of inquiry into the nature of popular culture will arise and gradually take precedence over his early esthetic concerns. Gramsci, however, will never totally abandon the esthetic point of view, as his criticism of Pirandello in the *Notebooks* demonstrates, but rather shift his focus to the problematics of cultural and literary production. The reassessment of popular literature undertaken in the *Quaderni* does not in any way imply the opposition between high culture and socialism. What we see in the *Chronicles* as an elitist attitude toward mass culture—Crocean in origin as it may have been— was in effect the only means then possible to criticize the philistine element



in industrial civilization, while attempting to make available for the masses the culture Gramsci believed they had been denied.

Let us now consider the kind of critical attitude Gramsci is trying to develop in his readers. A comprehensive survey of his polemics will illustrate the categories of judgement prevailing in the *Chronicles*.

In his first review for *Avanti!* (13 January 1916), Gramsci describes Henry Bataille's *La Phalène* as a "monotonous" and "pretentious" work, incapable of creating characters that embody the complex psychological states intended for representation. The play's defects, in other words, are mostly esthetic; they consist in the absence of a significant formal realization of the playwright's ideas and therefore lead to mediocre acting performances (LVN, 225). In the same vein is Gramsci's harsh criticism of Luigi Ambrosini's *Paolo e Virginia* which he calls an offense to "good taste" and "common sense," artificial and cerebral, the product of an author incapable of "allowing his characters to live independently of his ideas (LVN, 226). Alfredo Testoni's *Il pomo della discordia*, on the other hand, fails because of defects in its organizational structure, being composed as it is of numerous unconnected and, therefore, "esthetically" insignificant events (LVN, 227). With Mario Leoni's *L'erbò d'la libertà* Gramsci pursues a tack common to the chronicles: the belittlement of what he judges to be shallow provincialism. Leoni's play in Piedmontese dialect reflects well the temperament of a third rate provincial literato, accustomed to writing weighty dime fiction, whose works are incapable of arousing strong emotions, but rather originate in a desire for "sweet accommodation" (*dolce accomodatismo*) as a commodity to be bought and sold. Leoni's play also provides Gramsci an opportunity to taunt the bourgeois public present at the performance with a taste for caricature and irony that recalls Carlo Emilio Gadda's masterful *Teatro*.<sup>8</sup>

A great civic event the other night at the Rossini. Present were the mayor and Engineer Sincero, the anti-pope; the aldermen and the more intellectual of the city council members, from Mr. Fino to Mr. Grassi. The old theater received them all with the serene good-heartedness of an old man, for whom another return to the good old days did not disturb his calm scepticism, the fruit of many alternating vicissitudes of glory and decadence. But it was a great night out for the family as well! For Turin is still a great provincial city, where everyone knows everyone else, and where, out of friendship, one hurries to attend and applaud the work of a colleague or acquaintance, grateful for an evening spent without either excessive amusement or boredom, in the relaxation of mind and emotions (LVN, 228).

In juxtaposing the *Prison Notebooks* to the *Theater Chronicles*, commentators have often misunderstood Gramsci's perspective on

popular culture. What in the drama reviews appears as elitist contempt or condescension *vis-a-vis* the popular, in the *Quaderni*, with Gramsci's extension of the notion of intellectual activity to the spheres of "common sense," "spontaneous philosophy" and folklore, is taken as an attempt to equate high and popular literature. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let it suffice to say that it was not Gramsci's objective as a militant journalist to foster among his proletarian readers an understanding of popular culture. Rather his purpose was to enlarge their cultural perspective by showing them how dramatic art elicits reflection on their own social and human condition. Gramsci attributes the important fact that the public approves and supports the kind of theater playwrights such as Leoni produce to its provincialism and its incapacity to consider drama as more than light entertainment, satisfying yet undemanding and unprovocative. On the other hand, the bitter scorn he expresses for Leoni's "plumbei romanzi di appendice" or his "superficiali drammi da stadera" stems from what he views as the exploitation of popular belief, trivialized and sold to an uncritical audience. From this point of view Leoni's dialect theater is totally reprehensible and the playwright deserving of nothing less than "tar and feathers."

Gramsci's criticism of Bataille, Ambrosini, Testoni and Leoni may be taken as just a sampling of his general polemic against the moral and esthetic defects of the then current bourgeois theater. His negative comments cover a large assortment of plays and playwrights, from the all but forgotten Oreste Poggio, Gioacchino Forzano and Gastone Costa to Luigi Capuana, Roberto Bracco and, in part, Luigi Pirandello. But the figure who emerges in the *Chronicles* as the standard bearer of bourgeois public taste and collective psychology is the Livornese playwright Dario Niccodemi. To him Gramsci devotes six reviews, remarking that his popularity stems from his ability to dramatize elements of popular ideology ("spunti e motivi legati all'ideologia popolare").<sup>9</sup> For Gramsci, Niccodemi's characters belong to the worst romance conventions of "good" and "evil" and his plots are leadened with a most varied stock of gimmicks that eloquently contribute to the exploitation of public sentiment. Gramsci sees Niccodemi as writing specifically for the petty bourgeoisie—the public which storms the theaters where his plays are being performed, thus making profitable his profession. Gramsci's critique of *La Nemica* is largely an attempt to understand how Niccodemi attains such great popularity. In his judgment, he re-creates a mythological world of aristocratic custom which he then compares to the degraded world of the petty-bourgeois, his immediate objective being to satisfy the emotional needs of a public quick to be moved to tears by sentimental adventures and the quasi-miraculous resolution of conflict.

Gramsci's perspective is, again, largely aestheticist, yet it does not ignore the process by which Niccodemi's plays, in their transfiguration of the world of everyday life, represent a kind of wish fulfillment, but rather targets the practical objectives at their base. Compared to Richard Wagner—Gramsci argues—Niccodemi fails, because while

Wagner turns to German medieval mythology “in order to give a maximum of realism to his [ . . . ] characters and to make his music more suggestive, transporting his audience into a supernatural world in which the musical expression becomes co-natural,” Niccodemi, by contrast, transforms ordinary reality into myth for the sole purpose of securing greater profits. What for Wagner is a quest for a greater “sincerity” of invention, for Niccodemi is at most the artful manipulation of desire and need (*LVN*, 255).

Following the militant culture of his time, Gramsci emphasizes negatively the categories of “provincialism” and “insincerity.” The latter epithet, which frequently recurs in the *Chronicles*, connotes qualities of inauthenticity, affectation, dissimulation, artifice and hypocrisy, all, indeed, characteristic of Niccodemi’s dramas. Although prominent, these concerns, however, are not distinct from other particularly sociological interests. In his review of *La Nemica*, for example, Gramsci centers his argument on how Niccodemi manages to control the emotions of his audience and—although in his summary of the play he does not formulate explicitly the relation between the work’s structure and the collective mind of the audience—he nonetheless reveals, with forceful irony, the mechanism of esthetic deception, which he sees as a psychological ploy to obtain the sought-after consensus. Implicit in Gramsci’s remarks is the point, to be developed later in the *Notebooks*, that the kind of romantic and sentimentalized subject matter typical of Niccodemi’s works reflects directly the emotional disposition and needs of the popular masses that are exploited through the social medium of the stage. Niccodemi—he will argue in a later review—is a second rate imitator of the French romantics of 1848 who converted the battle for the people’s legal rights, won by their revolutionary forebearers, into a struggle for the rights of human emotions. The following passage demands attention in connection with this important point:

Niccodemi is a late Georges Ohnet who had already been a follower of Eugene Sue, Victor Hugo and a score of other authors of serialized fiction. But the fact that the rights of the heart motif always succeeds in stirring the emotions is a sign that custom has not been altered and enriched emotionally and rationally with the same rhythm of the written law and technical progress. Class struggle is seen from the perspective of the tender heart. No distinction is made between social classes, but rather individuals become the caricatures of convention and are represented according to the moral and literary categories of good and evil, angels and satyrs. . . . Petty bourgeois mawkishness which would have made Octave Mirbeau vomit and brought an ironic smile to Maxim Gorki’s lips. . . . (*LVN*, 356).

It is evident that Gramsci’s militant journalism conjoins both

esthetic and sociological concerns. Niccodemi fails as an artist simply because he ignores the complexities of social reality and human passion. His great success is in part due to his ability to let the audience gratify its needs through facile moral solutions: *La Volata*'s deliberate appeal to the middle class public's desire to share the social and economic privileges of the nobility, Gramsci concludes, derives from a petty envy on the author's part, typical of the bourgeois who cannot forgive himself for admitting noble virtue. The result is pretentiousness and sentimentality, a dramatic work wholly dependent on literary convention ("grandi urti, situazioni piccanti, conflitti esasperati" [LVN, 356]).

The "provincialism" of the contemporary Italian stage, denounced in Niccodemi, is also seen confirmed by Gramsci—as Edo Bellingeri points out—in the continued popularity of the historical drama, a *genre* which, distant from its romantic origins, had exhausted its original social function. Second rate imitators, such as Domenico Tumiatei, Nino Berrini and Sem Benelli, fill the stage with grotesque caricatures of historical figures who act out cliché-ridden, grandiloquent tragedies. For these playwrights, history is nothing but the melodramatic tale of the good and the bad whose memorable pronouncements decide the fate of mankind. Thus, the petty-bourgeois, incapable of "making history" and forced, as it were, to remain on the fringes of society, vindicates his claim to power by sublimating his rebellious instinct in the creation of grandiose egos which, rather than of strength, are the sign of "precariousness and impotence" (LVN, 305-06).<sup>10</sup>

At least one other aspect of Gramsci's negative criticism must be considered briefly. It is the widespread use of the theater as propaganda. His reasoning is simple and straightforward. The most popular plays of his time, written and staged to satisfy the tastes of the middle class, functioned ideologically to preserve the *status quo* and produce consensus. In this respect, the Great War offered contemporary playwrights the opportunity to become ideologues who, confronting history directly, pretend to speak for the Nation's moral conscience. Building on inherited myths and literary tradition, the war generated new myths of virtue, sacrifice, duty and honor, which Gramsci saw as crucial political determinants largely supportive of the Nationalist cause. His tact in denouncing this trend is, again, to reveal the fundamental "insincerity" motivating the productions under review. Gramsci's comments on Niccodemi's *Il titano*, for example, accuse the playwright of vulgar speculation on the "national drama" of war. The play, which is a highly rhetorical denunciation of war profiteers, cleverly manipulates popular feeling, creating excitement and approval at the sacrifice of art. But where Gramsci shows up most the absurdity of the then fashionable sensational war literature is in his review of Henri Bernstein's *L'Élévation* which opened at Turin's Alfieri theater in November of 1917. Gramsci takes Bernstein to task for having created a totally artificial view of the world, which, to be successful, relies on an inexhaustible deposit of literary conventions. His remarks on *L'Élévation* are an attempt to diagnose the false consciousness to which he believed the playwrights

of his time, with the prospect of exploiting public taste for financial gain, were particularly subject. Like similar works, such as Testoni's *Pace in tempo di guerra* and Piero Mazzolotti's *L'ultimo nemico*, *L'Élévation* is based on the mistaken notion that the changing of human character is a simple, almost mechanical process and that all that is needed are the extraordinary circumstances of war to inspire great deeds and noble thoughts. The spiritual elevation which wounded and dying soldiers experience is nothing but an all too transparent rhetorical artifice which the critical mind cannot afford to ignore, even at exceptional moments when emotions are at their peak. It is Bernstein's good fortune—Gramsci ironically concludes—that his hero, “elevated through suffering,” will in fact die, because “it is easier to represent great dying men than modest living ones who show *their* elevation in the small things of ordinary life” (*LVN*, 306). In these plays, of which *L'Élévation* is in many ways a prototype, literary tradition and real life are at odds with each other and find no point at which to transect. They supply, as a result, an overtly ideological answer to the people's demand for spiritual uplift and transcendence from the real sufferings, daily misfortunes and hardships due to war.

In addition to the recurrent polemic against the theater industry and the way decadent taste has been exploited by skillful manipulators, Gramsci also devotes several important pages of his *Chronicles* to the question of acting. On this subject too the cultural logic of his time posed certain limits to his orientation, blocking off from his interests the technical aspect of acting and the concept of the critical creation of character and incidents essential to the modern theater. Gramsci viewed the actor essentially as an artist, whose fundamental task was to portray the author's creation (“L'attore [. . .] interprete ricreatore dell'opera d' arte”) and believed that the contact between audience and stage was to be made largely on the basis of empathy and that what made actors great was their ability to reproduce particular characters and their behavior (*LVN*, 257-58). Hence his repeated admiration for Emma Grammatica and Luigi Carini, as well as his scathing criticism of Giuseppe Sichel and Armando Falconi who, in the tradition of the *Commedia dell'arte*, wearing the same comic mask, ignore the wide diversity of texts and roles (*LVN*, 251-52). Ruggero Ruggeri—no doubt one of the most talented dramatic actors of the time—precisely because of his “great mimetic ability”—promotes what Gramsci terms “the esthetic perversion of the theater-going public,” through, for instance, his abusive misreadings of Shakespeare:

We must get used to thinking of Ruggeri's *Macbeth* and forget Shakespeare's [. . .]. To the extent that it is possible, Ruggeri has tried to appropriate the tragedy, modernizing it in a certain sense because his more successful portrayals are those of the single hero who like the tenor in a melodrama becomes the center of the universe. Shakespeare, on the other hand, is polyphonous: the actions of his heroes are resonant,

not mere factual occurrences, but well-formed acts [...]. Shakespearian tragedy lives autonomously within the boundaries of its language. The reality it expresses does not need to be concretely staged in order to draw us into its fatal grasp. On the contrary, every fierce collision with convention, artifice, violent constraints and adaptation to meet the demands of the moment produces painful lacerations [in the text] and the humiliating denial of its expressive potential. The director who arbitrarily cuts and reduces commits a sacrilege. The work must remain vibrant and palpitating with life, as it was conceived by the author's fantasy. Every utterance has a reason for being, every physical gesture and thought derive necessarily from a personality conceived in one particular way and in no other (LVN, 243-45).

Gramsci's philological concern that the author's intentions be respected are inextricably linked to the issue of the actor's cultural responsibilities which, as Bellingeri correctly remarks, become for Gramsci all the more important in light of the great influence exercised by the impresarios over theater companies and repertoires, the general superficiality of a large number of contemporary playwrights and the corrupted emotions and tastes of a public grown insensitive to true art. In this sense, the pages of the *Chronicles* devoted to Ruggeri and other popular actors were not written to illustrate abstract, universal principles, nor to oppose directly a different class perspective to bourgeois rule, but rather their aim was to penetrate a given system of performance "to capture the specific character of the link connecting player and public"<sup>11</sup> and to view that connection as a significant aspect of the socio-political crisis to which the Italian middle classes were subject. In a note on Angelo Musco and the Sicilian dialect theater, for instance, Gramsci develops the relationship between acting and politics. The contrast he describes is between two modes of representing human life and society. A robust and vital realism, which captures all the aspects of social life and presents characters in all their multiform being, is opposed to the literary stage: "academic," "false," "pretentious," devoid of insight and understanding. In the unaffected portrayal of the life of common people, which finds its best expression in Musco's acting, the theater returns to its origins and the actor truly becomes the "re-creator" of art: "The work is fused with his spirit; it is broken down into its primordial elements and recomposed in the synthesis of dance and of an elementary, well formed beauty" (LVN, 321-22). The work becomes, in other words, "integral expression," the artifice disappears in the re-creation of life, and the actor's physical presence, his every gesture and act, becomes significant language. In accounting for the existence of such a reserve of "dramatic authenticity," Gramsci attaches extreme importance to what he calls Sicily's "spiritual independence," which he sees so spontaneously manifested in the theater. For fifty years politi-

cians have been trying to create the appearance of a uniform Italian nation, integrally comprising the various regions:

But Sicily is the region which has most *actively* resisted this tampering with history and liberty. Sicily has often shown to have a life of national, more than regional, character all its own. When the history of the Risorgimento and of these last sixty years is accurately written—not with the objective of making people believe that what is desirable really exists—then many episodes of our national history will appear in a different light and the cause of real Italian unity will be furthered. The truth is that Sicily preserves its own spiritual independence which appears more spontaneous and vital than ever in the theater. It has become a major part of the national theater and has acquired popularity in the North as well as in the South, which indicates its vitality and adherence to a widespread and well-rooted custom. It is life, reality and language that captures all aspects of social existence, portraying characters in all the various facets of their personalities, sculpturing them dramatically or comically. It will have a notable influence on the literary theater; help it become suppler and contribute, by example, to doing away with this provisional production of the unthinking Italian mind (“del non ingegno italiano”) (LVN, 321-22).

In his discussion of Musco, Gramsci makes two important points about literature. The first of these, which he will develop in the *Notebooks*, has often been misunderstood. He is not saying that regional literature should become a model for national literature or that the touchstone of artistic expression is a mythic return to the “origins,” implying that the more “primitive” a culture is the more it is inherently esthetic. On the contrary: Gramsci recognizes that what makes Sicilian dramatic literature unique is precisely its historical difference which cannot be appropriated by the bourgeois literary stage. He, therefore, does not—neither here nor in the *Notebooks*—advocate a return to the “province” or the representation of the “simple life” of the populace as a prerequisite for art.<sup>12</sup> The second point which emerges from Gramsci’s observations is that real, effective Italian unity must incorporate and, at the same time, transcend “diversity.” This fact must be taken into account when considering the somewhat difficult concept of “national-popular” literature. For in order that a literary work be truly “national” and “popular” it must transform the variegated language of personal and social life into art; this does not mean subjecting historical fact to artistic elaboration, but rather, the realistic penetration into the core of any given national reality will automatically dispose the artist to the means (language) necessary for esthetic production.

The obviously important question of how the artist knows what constitutes the essence or spirit of any given social life is not posed. For Gramsci, such a query would cast doubt upon the knowability of history and shift the emphasis to literature as ideology, bound to a particular class or cause, and this would undermine his project of developing a proletarian esthetic conscience which is at once ethical and moral.

In all of Gramsci's theater criticism the primary theme is clear: the theater has a great potential for the education and political improvement of society. As we have seen, Gramsci viewed the bourgeois theater as having degenerated into a crass amusement hall, filled with a public coaxed into idiocy by spectacles, in his judgement, devoid of intent and meaning. At best, the plays he attended offered pleasurable entertainment, but at the expense of their didactic capacities. Gramsci believed, moreover, that the esthetic deterioration of the Italian theater was influenced by the hegemonic conditions produced by the ruling class which benefited politically from the inoperativeness of that very unique cultural medium by which an alternative hegemony could be promoted. The strategy of bourgeois cultural politics, in his view, was to decrease the potential for revolt by degrading culture itself, the result being the proletariat's loss of trust in the capacity of ideas to change society. Gramsci's principal aim was to vindicate the revolutionary possibilities inherent in the social and political re-formation of the public conscience of which the theater was deemed eminently capable.

Integrally connected to these presuppositions are Gramsci's ideas on drama which, significantly, he presents in his discussion of Ibsen, a playwright whose theater he sees as an open challenge to bourgeois society. In his review of *A Doll's House* (March 22, 1917), appropriately entitled "La morale e il costume," Gramsci writes:

So that drama be truly drama and not a pointless iridescence of words, it must have a moral content. It must represent a necessary conflict between two inner worlds, two conceptions of reality, two moral existences. Insofar as the collision is inevitable, the drama immediately grips the minds of the spectators who relive it in its entirety, from its most elementary motivations to those that are specifically historical. By reliving the drama's inner world, they experience its art: the artistic form that has given concrete life to that world, that that world has solidified in a vividly coherent portrayal of people who continually suffer, rejoice and struggle to go beyond themselves, to improve the moral temper of their real, historical personalities immersed in the life of the world (LVN, 279).

*A Doll's House* and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Leonid Andreev's *Anfisa* embody the social and educational functions of theater as Gramsci envisaged them. Gramsci's reading of *A Doll's House* provides, further-



more, the necessary background for an understanding of his extensive critique of Pirandello.

Why, Gramsci asks, have Ibsen's fortunes been so dismal in Italy? Why has he failed to capture the hearts and minds of the Italian public? Why are his Italian audiences deaf to Nora Helmar's profoundly moral act of leaving her husband and children to search out in solitude "the deep roots of her moral being"? Gramsci's answer is simply that *A Doll's House* represents an alternative to the moral life of the Italian bourgeoisie which is based on a custom of enslavement and subjection to physical and emotional needs. Ibsen, on the other hand, belongs to a "more rational, less brutish tradition," whereby "women are not merely females who nurture their young and feel for them a love made up of carnal spasms and avid emotionalism. Instead, [the women of Ibsen's stage] are human beings that have a rational conscience, inner needs, a distinct human personality, and the dignity of an independent being." By contrast, Italian middle class women, being morally shallow and devoid of rational needs, are insensitive to Ibsen's drama which, because it is drama of moral conflict, shows the very essence of theater. For Gramsci, moreover, the "moral conflict" in Ibsen cannot be separated from social and class conflict. The sufferings and predicaments of Ibsen's bourgeois characters have a particular social relevance: they provide instances of reality that only the proletariat can understand and, therefore, serve as a means for the creation and development of class consciousness: "[potential] *cocottes* cannot understand the drama of Nora Helmar. But the women of the proletariat can, because they live it every day, for they are women who work and produce something other than pieces of new humanity and voluptuous spasms of sexual pleasure" (LVN, 281). (The reference is clearly to D'Annunzio and the Dannunzianism of the times.)

It goes without saying that *A Doll's House* provides Gramsci the opportunity to seize on the condition of women as an oppressed class. Again, his purpose is to heighten his readers' sensitivity, this time to sexism, male privilege and exploitation, in a way which from a contemporary feminist standpoint would appear unreproachable. Unlike Marx and Engels, who gave to the social inferiority of women a strictly economic interpretation, Gramsci directs his polemic against the cultural institutions ("il costume") that maintain and reinforce women's oppression. He points out that the then recent abolition of the "istituto dell'autorizzazione maritale," because it is motivated by the idea of woman as simply a holder of property, neither alters the relation between the sexes, nor is effective in bringing about changes in social institutions:

The bourgeois woman of our country who has a history of her own remains as ever a slave, morally shallow, devoid of rational needs, submissive even when she appears rebellious, and even more a slave when she discovers her only freedom to consist in being the object of chivalrous attention. She remains the female

of the species who cares for her young, the doll who is the more dear the more stupid she is, the more delightful and exalted the more she renounces herself and the duties she should have toward herself, for the sake of others whether they be members of her own family, the sick, the human waste which charity maternally assists. The hypocrisy of beneficent sacrifice is another of the signs of this inner inferiority of our way of life (*LVN*, 280-81).

Three things in Gramsci's review of *A Doll's House* are worthy of remark. First, Ibsen's theater can be taken as a model because with it the stage becomes a tribunal or testing ground of morality, where society is prosecuted by the reality of its institutions and customs. Nora Helmar, determined to do her duty to herself, sets out at the play's conclusion to find out who is right, she or the laws of society. Second, Gramsci is conscious of the necessity not to treat the play as a mere social tract or thesis play, but to show that in Ibsen the ethical and the esthetic are inextricably connected, implying that the realism he is espousing, rather than documentary reportage, is essentially formal in nature: "the artistic form endows Ibsen's world with concrete life and thus historical accuracy which is one and the same with psychological and social exactness." The third point to be made about Gramsci's observations on Ibsen regards the specific character of modern tragedy. Implied in his remarks is the notion, later developed by Peter Szondi,<sup>13</sup> that the tragic conflict inherent in Ibsen's world of the bourgeoisie finds its expression not in death, as in classical tragedy, but in life itself. To use Gramsci's words, it is the "struggle to survive morally" in a world of inferior (degraded) values that constitutes in Ibsen the essence of modern tragic conflict.

When Gramsci thinks about dramatic literature, he does so keeping in mind the future of the Italian theater. When he cites the violent moral conflict in Ibsen and Andreev as prototypes of esthetic expression that can be used in the struggle for a new society, he does so in relation to the contemporary avant garde stage, in particular to Pirandello, in whom he shows a sustained interest far beyond his practical responsibilities as a theater critic. The many references to Pirandello in the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrate the extent to which Gramsci believed him to be a playwright capable of transforming Italian culture. In fact, we know from the often cited letter to his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht that Gramsci included Pirandello among four major projects he had planned to undertake while in prison ("A study of Pirandello's theater and of the transformation of Italian dramatic taste which Pirandello has represented and contributed to determining.") and proudly remarked that, long before Adriano Tilgher, he had discovered Pirandello's theater and fostered its popularization, declaring that his criticisms, contained in the theater reviews he wrote for *Avanti!* were original and without precedent ("originali e senza esempio"), because before him Pirandello "was either amiably tolerated or openly derided."<sup>14</sup>

No doubt Gramsci's interest in Pirandello originates in his concept of theater as a social art form and in what he came to regard as the subversive character of Pirandello's dramas. For him, Pirandello's importance, he will conclude, is largely cultural and consists in his having used the theater as a way of introducing the "dialectics of modern philosophy" into popular culture (*LVN*, 47). On the other hand, Gramsci's evaluation of Pirandello's plays from an esthetic standpoint is generally negative—a fact conditioned mostly, it has been argued, by Croce's influence and by his unfamiliarity with Pirandello's major dramatic texts.<sup>15</sup> Also, it should be pointed out that there exists between Gramsci and Pirandello a definite incompatibility relative to the nature of their respective cultural projects. Gramsci's critical method has as its main objective the demythification of literature and the restoration of its social and historical character; Pirandello's metatheater, on the other hand, effectively devalues the historicity of life by representing the theatrical artifice as a self-contained totality. Gramsci's acceptance of the subversiveness of Pirandello's art, its structures of humoristic decomposition, shows a thoughtful appreciation of what is culturally and artistically valid in Pirandello and what has determined his lasting influence.

Gramsci reviewed for *Avanti!* ten of Pirandello's early plays.<sup>16</sup> Later, in the *Notebooks*, he takes up Pirandello in the wider context of the political organization of culture and according to his understanding of "national-popular" literature. From his early commentaries to his treatment of Pirandello's cultural importance, Gramsci maintained a fundamental coherence and continuity in his perspective and in the criticism he offered. Characteristic of his readings is the attempt to invest largely esthetic judgments with sociological relevance, his purpose being to affirm the autonomy of art while singling out the cultural and social experience embodied in the art product. In *Avanti!*, however, esthetic judgments seem to predominate. *Pènsaci Giacomino* for instance, is seen entirely as a "display of virtuosity, literary skill and discursive glitter:"

The three acts run on a single track. The characters are the objects of photography rather than psychological insight; they are depicted from the outside more than through an inward recreation of their moral character. Such a manner of representation is characteristic of Pirandello who prefers to capture the grimace rather than the smile of life, the ridiculous more than the comic. His art focuses on reality with the physical eye of the *litterato*, rather than with the agreeable eye of the artist; this perspective, furthermore, deforms life by means of an irony which is more a professional habit than sincere and spontaneous vision. The characters of this comedy are frightfully shallow, as they are in the author's short stories and other plays (*LVN*, 281-82).

And in regard to *Così è (se vi pare)*, a play which in many ways represents the quintessence of Pirandellianism, he writes:

Whether the notion that truth in itself does or does not exist, whether or not it is a highly subjective impression drawn from a certain event, whether it is lacking in good sense or judgement and is carelessly presented to incite shallow laughs from the incompetent audiences, does not matter. Such a notion can still give rise to drama. Who is to say that drama must be the effect of logic and reason? But Luigi Pirandello has been unable to transform his philosophical statement into drama; instead, it remains external to the play's development. . . . The action and episodes have no reason to exist except to satisfy the petty curiosity of a small provincial world. But not even this is a necessary and sufficient reason for drama. Nor does it result in the artfully vivid representation of character, of real people endowed with an artistic, if not a logical, reason for existing. Pirandello's three acts are a simple fact of literature devoid of any philosophical and dramatic substance: a pure and simple mechanical aggregate of words that creates neither truth nor imagery (*LVN*, 299).

It cannot be disputed that these criticisms derive from a traditional, nineteenth century idea of representation. Implicit in them is the question of whether the dramatic characters are at once individual and representative. Pirandello fails to create convincing characters who depict and stand for their historical and social types and, therefore, he distorts reality for the sake of a philosophical thesis. Insensitive to Pirandellian modernism, Gramsci rejects Pirandello's attempt to produce a world of pure subjectivity by making epistemology the dramatic center of his plays; for him it is non-representational and thus tantamount to "distortion." To recall Fredric Jameson's assessment of Lukàcs' hostility to modern art, it could be said of Gramsci too that, like Lukàcs, his "whole dimension of judgment rests on an ambiguity:" the presupposition that an author can actually choose a dramatic form not already determined "by the logic of his moment in history"<sup>17</sup> Yet, unlike Lukàcs, Gramsci does not ground his preference for realistic literature in a universal, such as the Aristotelian dictum of man as *zoon politikon* on which Lukàcs bases his critique of modernism, and, in other reviews, he captures well Pirandello's break with tradition. Moreover, Gramsci's general approach to the problem of modern irrationalism is notably different from that adopted by Lukàcs. For he views the "destruction of reason" not as a widespread tendency forming the ideological basis of political reaction, but rather, from the standpoint of class conflict and mode of production, as a concrete strategy, dictated by specific

conditions of struggle, potentially open to socially progressive solutions.

So, rather than being antagonistic toward Pirandello's symbolic mode of representation, Gramsci simply refuses to accept his formal strategies as successful in the creation of art. This does not mean that Gramsci has followed Croce in asserting that structure always remains distinct from esthetic creation, but merely that, in the cases of the above mentioned plays, Pirandello has failed to transform his conception into art: that his presentation and development of characters and incident has been hampered by the overriding imposition of the artifice. However, when he discusses the dialect play *Liola*, he argues that Pirandello has abandoned his artistic vices in favor of a "truthful representation of Sicilian popular traditions." Commenting enthusiastically, he underlines the play's "Dionysian furor" which reminds him of the ancient popular heritage of Magna Grecia:

*Liola*—is a farce in the best sense of the word, which recalls the satirical plays of ancient Greece and finds its pictorial equivalent in the vase paintings of the Hellenistic age. It makes you think that dialect art, such as it is expressed in these three acts by Pirandello, is rooted in the ancient, popular art traditions of Magna Grecia, with its *phylakes*, its idylls and its rustic life full of Dionysian furor, so much of which has remained in the popular, rural heritage of modern Sicily. It is a naive and coarsely honest life in which the bark of oak trees and the water of the fountains seem to quiver. It is an efflorescence of naturalistic paganism where life, all life, is beautiful and labor is a happy task and where an irresistible fecundity explodes from all living matter (*LVN*, 283).

In his reappraisal of Pirandello undertaken in the *Notebooks*, Gramsci will refer to *Liola* as reflecting a hidden resistance to the dominant Aristotelian-Christian ideology and, therefore, the existence of an unexplored reserve of unchristianized thought and emotion from which could spring a new "anti-idealistic" and "post-western" hegemony.

With his review of *Il piacere dell'onestà* Gramsci establishes the historico-cultural line of argument that all of his subsequent criticism of Pirandello will follow, indicating both the playwright's ability to penetrate and undermine middle class ideology and the limits of his esthetic achievements:

Luigi Pirandello is a "commando" in the theater. His plays are like grenades that explode inside the brains of the spectators, demolishing their banalities and causing their feelings and thoughts to crumble. Luigi Pirandello has at least the great merit of flashing images of life [onto the minds of the audience] that

deviate from the conventional schema of tradition, and yet they cannot begin a new tradition, they cannot be imitated, they cannot establish a fashionable stereotype. His plays have the power of abstract thought that tends to become materialized in representation, and when it succeeds, they endow Italian theater with admirable plasticity and imagery (*LVN*, 307).

For Gramsci, Pirandello is a “commando” in the theater because he breaks the traditional relationship between author and public, formulating ideas dangerous to bourgeois complacency and the ideological *status quo*. Thus, Gramsci saw the potential importance of Pirandello within the context of revolutionary culture, where the systematic destruction of age-old conceptions of life was imperative. Pirandello’s critique of the ideal human personality, a myth fiercely defended by traditional society, takes on a primary function in the struggle for a new cultural hegemony. In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci emphasizes repeatedly this subversive aspect of Pirandello’s work, while at the same time not failing to comment on the playwright’s “artistic liabilities:”

Pirandello’s importance seems to be of an intellectual and moral nature, that is, cultural rather than artistic. He sought to introduce into popular culture the dialectics of modern philosophy in contrast to the Aristotelian-Catholic mode of conceiving the “objectivity of reality” . . . . Catholic critics oppose Pirandello’s theater because his world-view—however it may be defined and whether it is coherent or not—is undeniably anti-Catholic, unlike the positivistic “humanitarianism” found in the bourgeois realism of traditional drama (*LVN*, 47).

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci’s observations point continually to the fundamental question of Pirandellian ideology. For just as it is mistaken to consider intellectuals as autonomous and independent thinkers, rather than—as is certainly the case—belonging to particular social groups which maintain their own classes of intellectuals, it is equally mistaken to make critical judgments wholly intrinsic to the artifact. Commenting on the then current debate between Silvio D’Amico and Italo Siciliano on the question of the relationship between art and philosophy in Pirandello, Gramsci attempts to restate the problem in a more dialectical manner in order to establish valid premises for interpretation:

For Siciliano, there is no such thing as Pirandello the “philosopher”; the so-called “Pirandellian philosophy” is “an unfelicitous, variegated and contradictory dustbin of clichés and worn out sophisms, the

renowned Pirandellian logic is a futile and faulty dialectical exercise, and both [Pirandello's logic and philosophy] constitute dead weight, the ballast pulling down, sometimes fatally, an artistic work of doubtless power." According to Siciliano, "Pirandello's tiresome intricacies have not been transformed into lyricism or poetry, but have remained unelaborated; and since they are not truly experienced but a veneer, unassimilated and sometimes discordant, they have harmed, fettered and suffocated Pirandello's real poetry." Siciliano, it seems, was reacting to the criticism of Adriano Tilgher who had made of Pirandello "the poet of the central problem," that is, had presented as "artistic originality" what in Pirandello was a simple cultural factor which should have been kept subordinate and examined in a cultural context. Since Siciliano believes that Pirandello's poetry does not coincide with this abstract artistic content, he considers his ideology as being completely parasitical. At least this seems to be his argument and if so it is not acceptable. It can be granted that this cultural element is not the only one in Pirandello; anyway this is a matter for textual verification. It can also be conceded that this cultural element has not always been transformed artistically. But, in any case, it remains to be seen 1) whether it at some point becomes art; 2) whether as a cultural factor it has not had a function and significance in changing the public taste by making it less provincial and more modern and whether it has not changed the psychological inclinations and the moral interests of other playwrights, thereby joining with the best of Futurism in the task of destroying the cheap petty-bourgeois and philistine culture of the nineteenth century (*LVN*, 49-50).

Then, responding to D'Amico, Gramsci attacks the central point of the Catholic resistance to Pirandello, exposing its ideological bias:

D'Amico's ideological position concerning "Pirandellianism" is expressed in these words: "With all due respect to those philosophers who, beginning with Heraclitus, think the contrary, it is certain that, in an absolute sense, our personality is one and the same, from birth to the hereafter. If each of us were 'many,' as the Father says in *Six Characters*, each of these 'many' would be able neither to enjoy the benefits nor to pay the debts of the 'others' that he carries within him. Whereas, the unity of our consciousness tells us that each of us is always 'that one' and that Paul must

redeem the sins of Saul because, even having become 'another' he is always the same person." This way of posing the question is pretty simplistic and ridiculous. Moreover, it remains to be seen if humor is not a predominant element in Pirandello's art, that is, if the author does not amuse himself by raising certain "philosophical" doubts in little non-philosophical minds in order to "poke fun" at subjectivism and philosophical solipsism (*LVN*, 50).

Gramsci goes on to argue that, in attacking Pirandellianism, neither the Crocean Siciliano nor the Catholic D'Amico are concerned with the historical foundations of Pirandello's ideology. For they both ignore the fact that, rather than to Hegel, Pirandello owes his philosophical education to Decartes and Positivism and that his ideology does not have scholarly roots, but rather is tightly linked to real historical and cultural experiences, marked by a minimum of theoretical contributions. Instead, Gramsci traces the origins of Pirandello's structures of paradox and contradiction (his Pirandellianism) to a particular historical and social matrix: "Pirandello is quintessentially a Sicilian who acquired certain national and European traits, but who experienced within himself these three cultural elements as opposed and contradictory. From this experience he derived the attitude of observing contradictions in the personalities of others and, then, actually of seeing the drama of life as the drama of these contradictions" (*LVN*, 48).

To understand fully these remarks they must be related to Gramsci's concept of national-popular literature. Gramsci believed that Italian intellectuals had been traditionally handicapped in expressing the genuine interests of the populace and, as a result, could not contribute to the creation of a homogeneous nation, based on a national-popular cultural hegemony. In his view, this inability to represent the thoughts and feelings of the popular masses predisposed literary intellectuals of the middle and lower-middle strata of regional society to conserve in their works at best only the formal aspects of real social problems, suppressing as it were their material contents. As a consequence, the insecurity or alienation that ordinary people concretely experience in everyday life takes on an abstract character simply because, in their artistic transformation, the symptoms of social and existential malaise are separated from their real causes. Hence, Pirandello's esthetic weaknesses derive from the absence of a historically verifiable subject matter. This may be seen as a form of theoretical justification for the preference Gramsci shows for Pirandello's dialect theater which, he argues, does not represent intellectuals "disguised as plain folk or plain folk who think as intellectuals, but real, historical, regional Sicilian peasants who think and behave in a certain way just because they are plain folk and Sicilians. Just because they are not Catholics, Thomists and Aristotelians does not mean that they are not plain folk and Sicilians. Just because they are not familiar with the subjective



philosophy of modern idealism, does not mean that in popular tradition there cannot exist traces of a 'dialectical' or immanent nature" (LVN, 48).

Gramsci never wrote a complete essay on Pirandello, nor did he ever go beyond establishing a direction which a deeper and more comprehensive study of Pirandello should take. Yet from the first reviews he formulates essential critical problems which later help him explain Pirandello's art in relation to the cultural, social and political factors that both condition and invest its structures. He offers, moreover, critical judgments that show an integral understanding of Pirandello's historical importance and artistic originality, sensing well how the plays may be seen as a potent weapon against tradition: "Pirandello has contributed more than the Futurists to 'deprovincializing' Italians and to promoting a 'critical' and modern viewpoint in opposition to the traditional, nineteenth-century melodramatic attitude" (LVN, 52). In sum, Gramsci attributes to Pirandello the great merit of presenting "images of life" that challenge the traditional theater. These are images of abstraction that, when successful, produce outstanding drama. For Gramsci, in other words, Pirandello's importance consists primarily in what he sees as a kind of *arditismo culturale*. But—Gramsci is quick to add—although Pirandello subverts traditional drama, he fails to initiate a new tradition. At this point, it is necessary to interpret Gramsci, to develop what in our opinion are the inferences to be drawn from this remark.

When Gramsci refers to Pirandello as an *ardito del teatro*, he uses a term (rendered above as "commando") denoting not only a specific military organization, but also a number of other qualities that lend definition to the cultural and intellectual characteristics of the entities he is comparing. By saying that Pirandello is an *ardito del teatro*, Gramsci calls the attention of readers familiar with the "*ardito*" enterprise to traits common to both. The study of Pirandello's early drama in relation to the subversive, but non-revolutionary social movements that paved the way for fascism, such as *'Arditismo* (as expounded, for example, in the works of Edmondo Mazzacato and Ferruccio Vecchi) has yet to be seriously undertaken. But Gramsci appears to have understood the practice they held in common, so much so that when he refers to the plays as "hand grenades that explode in the minds of the spectators causing their banalities to crumble," he may well have been showing *Arditi* (such as Vecchi who once lamented having written a book instead of having thrown a grenade)<sup>8</sup> that literature and bombs are not totally irreconcilable. Like the *Arditi*, Pirandello destroys tradition while preserving its social and economic structures. His subjectivism, like that of Vecchi and Mazzacato, attacks only the sphere of traditional values (objectivity of reality, uniqueness of human identity, etc.) to which the bourgeoisie held fast. Together they renovated middle and lower class hegemony by supplanting the then current bourgeois rhetoric with a new ideology of individualism. The eternal drama of man who creates as many images of self as the parts he plays, while underlining the genetic impossibility of self-realization within society, presents self-creation as the only form of survival. At the forefront, as the primary sign of conflict, emerges the forceful im-

position on society of "individuality." Such an imposition has many points in common with *l'Arditismo* as well as with emergent fascism.<sup>19</sup> What, in sum, Gramsci saw in Pirandello and rejected as his inability to begin a new tradition was what turned out to be a socially non-progressive and anti-revolutionary use of the irrational.

The passionate interest shown by Gramsci in dramatic literature, as we have seen, is characterized by attitudes and judgements relative to the question of the proletariat as a potentially hegemonic class, which stress the importance of developing in the working people an awareness of the cultural pressures and limits of a powerful middle class hegemony. The view of literature projected by his theater commentaries and notes is traditionally Marxist and, in fact, reproduces—albeit in a much less systematic way—Marx's own beliefs. These writings are all based on the premise that literature represents definite social realities and is produced and received by people who belong to particular social classes and groups, and who for reasons of social conditioning are capable of being either manipulated or educated, fortified in their complacency or morally aroused, and that writers have the power to act upon human conscience and thus the potential to transform society. Yet, at the same time, Gramsci shared in many respects the ideology of bourgeois subversivism which, in Italy, found its most effective expression in Pirandello, Futurism and *La Voce*, and its ideological foundations in the work of Sorel, Bergson and Croce. But, as Romano Luperini, has convincingly argued,<sup>20</sup> the difference between Gramsci and these groups consists in his trying to make bourgeois subversivism into a weapon of class struggle and an instrument of proletarian hegemony. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that from a strictly literary-critical standpoint (although it would be mistaken to view Gramsci's criticism in such a way) his perspective is flawed by an inability to rid himself of Croce's esthetic theory. The central weakness of Gramsci's writings on literature is seen to rest on a paradox recurrent in his criticism: that the literary work embodies two distinct and separate "moments," the "socio-historical" and the "artistic." To see why it was important for Gramsci to connect literature to social and political questions is not difficult. But why then was he concerned at all with the esthetic dimension of literature? Why did he not adopt a more complete sociological point of view, one which might have led him to realize, for instance, that the esthetic point of view was ill-suited to Pirandello's plays even when it led to favorable judgements? In concluding, let it suffice to say that such a paradox can be resolved only if we challenge the assumption on which it rests: that is, as it has already been suggested, it was much less Gramsci's intention to capture the poetic moment in historically determined works of art than to historicize criticism, which in the last analysis entails a return to the politics of the critic.<sup>21</sup> This implies not only that all criticism reflects a political bias, but, more importantly, that it is actively engaged in a process of ideological control. The Crocean distinction between the artistic and the socio-political then takes on a meaning and relevance unknown to Croce, insofar as, with Gramsci, it calls the reader's attention not to the would be "purity" of the former,

which the latter ostensibly corrupts or contaminates, but instead to its "difference" or "otherness" that can never be appropriated and catalogued in the archives of historically determined expression. Gramsci's theater criticism, chiefly his discussion of Pirandello, attempts to confront precisely the question of esthetic difference which he views in terms of the work's immediate contact with a specific public of spectators (whereby performance becomes a crucial part of representation); at the very same time he transforms the text into an instrument of cultural struggle, thereby both revealing and realizing its potential.

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## NOTES

- 1 For my discussion of the theater chronicles, I have cited from *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1950), pp. 225-390. A good selection of these reviews may be found in English in *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and translated by William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1985). My translations will differ only slightly from those of this edition.
- 2 "Socialismo e cultura," in *Scritti giovanili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1958), pp. 22-26, signed "Alpha Gamma" and published originally in *Grido del Popolo*, 29 January 1916. Translation by John Mathews, taken from A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1910-1920)*, Quintin Hoare, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1977), pp. 10-13.
- 3 The journal *La Voce*, founded by Giuseppe Prezzolini in 1908, was the major cultural forum for Italian intellectuals in the years immediately preceding the First World War. It hosted the writings of such diverse thinkers as Croce, Gentile, Giovanni Papini, Giovanni Amendola and Gaetano Salvemini, as well as Prezzolini himself, and several literary figures including Umberto Saba, Scipio Slataper and Camillo Sbarbaro. In spite of the diversity of opinions it expressed, its orientation was largely anti-positivist and its principal discussions concerned educational reform, culture and politics, especially matters pertaining to the Libyan question, irredentism and the Mezzogiorno. For a sampling of the critical debate on the role played by *La Voce* in Italian culture, see Alberto Abruzzese, *La classe dei colti: intellettuali e società nel primo novecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1971); Umberto Carpi, *La Voce: letteratura e primato degli intellettuali* (Bari: De Donato, 1975); Silvio Lanaro, *Nazione e lavoro: saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia (1870-1975)* (Venezia: Neri Pozza, 1979).
- 4 "*La Voce* must help the public approach the more genuine and important sources of culture. Its task is that of bringing about a moral reform of intellectual life." G. Prezzolini, in *La Voce*, n. 4, 1909, cited in G. Prezzolini, *La Voce 1908-1913: cronaca, antologia e fortuna di una rivista* (Milano: Rusconi, 1974), p. 241. The subsequent quotation is from the same text, p. 239.
- 5 See Romano Luperini, *Il Novecento*, Vol. II (Torino: Loescher, 1981), pp. 348-54.
- 6 *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, p. 247. Henceforth *LVN*.
- 7 Gian Carlo Ferretti, "Sulle cronache teatrali di Gramsci," *Società*, 2, 1958, pp. 271 f.
- 8 C. E. Gadda, "Teatro," in *La Madonna dei filosofi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1963).

- 9 The observation is from the *Prison Notebooks. Quaderni del carcere*, Valentino Gerratana, ed., Vol. III (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), p. 2122.
- 10 See Edo Bellingeri, *Dall'intellettuale al politico: Le "Cronache teatrali" di Gramsci* (Bari: Dedalo, 1975), p. 66 f.
- 11 E. Bellingeri, *Dall'Intellettuale al politico*, pp. 90 ff.
- 12 On this point see Alberto M. Cirese, "Gramsci e il folklore come concezione tradizionale del mondo delle classi subalterne," *Problemi*, 49, 1977, pp. 155-67.
- 13 Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1956), Chapter II, Pt. 1.
- 14 *Lettere dal carcere*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1947), p. 36.
- 15 Niksa Stipcević, *Gramsci e i problemi letterari* (Milano: Mursia, 1968), p. 92 ff.
- 16 *Pensaci, Giacomino* (March 24, 1917), *Liolà* (April 4, 1917), *Così è (se vi pare)* (October 5, 1917), *Il piacere dell'onestà* (November 27, 1917), *A'beritta ccu li ciancianedi* (June 27, 1917), *Il giuoco delle parti* (December 6, 1918), *L'innesto* (March 29, 1919), *La ragione degli altri* (January 13, 1920), *Come prima, meglio di prima* (April 8, 1920), *Tutto per bene* (July 7, 1920).
- 17 F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. P., 1974), p. 198.
- 18 For a good, brief account of *Arditismo*, see Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), pp. 98-109. "Meglio lanciare bombe che scrivere un libro, che la bomba poteva realizzare in un'istante tutte le idee esposte a parole." F. Vecchi, *Arditismo civile* (Milano, 1920), cited by Gentile, p. 102. This is an interesting variation on the mythical notion of "ideas without words," which Furio Jesi discusses in *Cultura di Destra* (Milano: Garzanti, 1979).
- 19 Keeping in mind Gramsci's characterization of Pirandello as an *ardito*, consider the following letter, written by Pirandello in 1929 to convey his regrets for not being able to attend the "Convegno per le istituzioni fasciste di cultura," held that year in Bologna in order to draft what became known as the "Manifesto degli intellettuali del Fascismo:"
- "Illustrious and dear friends, convened in Bologna on behalf of fascist culture, do not reproach me for lacking in zeal in carrying out my duty, only because You do not see me there at work with You. If You recognize the fact that within fascist culture, that is to say, contemporary Italian culture, for thirty years my intellectual activity has held its place in combat, You will surely recognize my right to expect that this expression of complete solidarity does not appear to You as rhetoric. I have always fought against words, and I am clearly aware of the necessity uniting You. But to respond to it, it is important that even today I remain here at work. Therefore, with this letter I do not wish to show my participation, which is superfluous, nor do I wish to justify my absence. I will strive to the best of my ability with You to give a new consistency to the reality of today's Italy." Cited by Emilio R. Papa, *Fascismo e cultura* (Venezia-Padova: Marsilio, 1974), p. 162.
- 20 R. Luperini, *Il Novecento*, p. 350.
- 21 See Evan Watkins, "Historical Criticism and Contemporary Poetry," *Contemporary Literature*, 22, 4, 1981, pp. 556-73.

9 giugno 1911

Carissima mamma,

ho ricevuto la lettera che mi hai scritto con la mano di Ceresina. Mi pare che devi spesso scrivermi così: io ho sentito nella lettera tutto il tuo spirito e il tuo modo di ragionare; era proprio una tua lettera e non una lettera di Ceresina. Sai cosa mi è tornato alla memoria? Proprio mi è riapparsa chiaramente il ricordo di quando ero in prima o in seconda elementare e tu mi correggevi i compiti; ricordo perfettamente che non riuscivo mai a ricordare che "eccellenti" si scrive con due c e questo errore tu me lo hai corretto almeno dieci volte. Anzi se ci hai aiutato a imparare a scrivere (e prima ci avevi insegnato molte poesie a memoria) io ricordo ancora "Rataplax" e l'altro: "Lungo i clivi della Lora, - che qual manto inargentato - corre via per cento miglia - un bel volo avventurato." -) è giusto che uno di noi ti serva da mano per scrivere quando non sei abbastanza forte. Scommetto che il ricordo di Rataplax e della canzone della Lora ti faranno sorridere. Eppure ricordo anche quanto anni fa (dovevo avere quattro o cinque anni) la tua abitudine nell'andare sul tavolo il sedillo del bambino quando declinavi

Chataplan. Del resto tu non puoi immaginare quanto cosa  
io ricordi in cui tu apparsi sempre come una forza benefica  
e piena di tenerezza per noi. Se ci pensi bene tutte le  
questioni dell'anima, e dell'immortalità dell'anima e  
del paradiso e dell'inferno non sono poi in fondo che  
un modo di vedere questo semplice fatto: che ogni nostra  
azione si trasmette negli altri secondo il suo valore, di  
bene e di male, passa di padre in figlio, da una gene-  
razione all'altra in un movimento perpetuo. Poiché  
tutti i ricordi che noi abbiamo di te sono di bontà  
e di forza e tu hai dato le tue forze per tenerci tu,  
cioè significa che tu sei già da allora nell'unico  
paradiso reale che esiste, che per una madre penso  
sia il cuore dei propri figli. Vedi cosa ti ho scritto?  
Del resto non devi pensare che io voglia offenderti le  
tue opinioni religiose e poi penso che tu sei d'accordo  
con me più di quanto non pare. Di a Beresina che  
aspetta l'altro lettera che mi ha promesso. Ci abbraccia  
teneramente con tutti di casa

Antonio

Lettera dal carcere riprodotta per gli "Amici della casa Gramsci di Gharza"  
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