Theatrical Terror: Attentats and Symbolist Spectacle

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Theatrical Terror

Attentats *and Symbolist Spectacle*

The 1890s in Paris were a period of intense terrorism. There were more than a dozen bombings in the city between 1892 and 1894, attributed to a score of perpetrators, either identified as or assumed to be anarchists. The period of violent activity, known as "propaganda by the deed," both stoked public hysteria about every shady malingerer on the city streets and sparked popular support for—even idealizations of—the dynamiters in revolt against a corrupt political and social order. Ravachol (François Koenigstein), for instance, the first bomb-thrower to meet the fate of the guillotine, was immortalized in art as a martyr, in song and dance as a popular hero: "Dansons la Ravachole!" Among the literary and artistic avant-garde, there was enthusiastic support for anarchism's critique of *père, patron et patrie*, not only in spite of anarchism's tactics of terror but because of them. Symbolists and decadents were equated with anarchists in the period press, not merely because of an analogous rebelliousness, but because symbolist and decadent *littérateurs* were making the "destruction of the old mold" both an artistic and a political principle (Montorgueil 1).

In such a climate, the Symbolist theater house the Théâtre de l'Œuvre put on productions of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* in 1893 and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896. Staged during and after the apogee of anarchist terror, the press characterized both productions as *attentats* ([bomb] attacks), their authors as "anarchists of art" who were "exercising a veritable terror over the public" (Fouquier 87). Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* opened the initial season in 1893, and the Théâtre de l'Œuvre presented it as a sort of anarchist manifesto: the poet Laurent Tailhade introduced the performance with a thirty-minute discussion declaring the virtues of revolt, which as a result brought the theater under police surveillance. As Richard Sonn notes with regard to Jarry's *Ubu*: "the play resembled an anarchist *attentat* in its violent assault upon the sensibilities of the audience, upsetting their expectations of theatrical decorum and dramatically involving them in the performance" (Sonn 77). Some have argued that such characterizations are due more to the political climate than to the content of the works (e.g., Weir 207–210), but I would suggest otherwise. Both Jarry and Ibsen attest to markedly anarchist sympathies, and their plays—while stylistically wildly different—make scathing critiques

of corrupt authority and the illegitimacy of state power. In addition, part of what Ibsen's play dramatizes is the marginalization of the intellectual and the inefficacy of public speech; the hero, who wants his words to have the power of "dynamite," is utterly ignored and ultimately silenced. Jarry's *Ubu* has given up on speech altogether, bearing a destructive relationship to language, and relies on a theater of action and of violent gesture in a mode of confrontation with the public. The trajectory between the two plays and their productions at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre reveals a shift in Symbolist theater from an emphasis on the word to a focus on gesture, which I will argue is tied to the Symbolist fascination for anarchist theories of action. The *attentat* became the Symbolist spectacle par excellence, an act whose polysemic *éclat* made it the model for a kind of theatrical terror.

I
IBSEN AND SYMBOLIST THEATER

The 1890s saw the foundation of the earliest examples of avant-garde theater houses in Paris: the naturalist Théâtre Libre (1887), followed by the symbolist Théâtre d'Art (1890–1892), which gave way to the Théâtre de l'Œuvre (1893), the most prominent site of symbolist theatrical productions.[1] Symbolist theories of theatrical representation sought to eliminate many aspects of traditional staging in order to let language evoke the décor and scene rather than materially executing them, achieving a scenic representation of the "Idea" through voice, stylized gesture, and radically nonnaturalistic set design. In 1891, Pierre Quillard announced some of the principles of the new direction in theater. "Nowhere is the idiocy of Naturalism more clearly apparent than in the theater," he declared, denouncing both the banality of naturalist theatrical representation and the Naturalists' tendency to adapt novels for the stage, a procedure he viewed as "the antithesis of theater" (Quillard, "De l'inutilité," 180). He argued for the idea of drama as a poetic synthesis, whereby sets were intended as a "pure ornamental fiction" created through "analogies of line and color," in the effort to produce theater as "a pretext for a dream" (181–182). The focus, above all, on lyric speech revealed the central tenet of Symbolist theater: "the word creates the décor as it creates everything else" ("la parole crée le décor comme le reste") (181).[2]

Yet another early and influential article, by Gustave Kahn, poet, editor of Rimbaud, and promoter of free verse, seemed to push beyond an apparently text-centered orientation. In "Un théâtre de l'avenir," Kahn outlined five possible forms for a new direction in theater: drama, character comedy, circus comedy (including farce and clownish mime), modern pantomime, and evocation of setting through mime (344). The fact that of the five genres three are focused around mime underscores the high value that Symbolist theorists placed on gesture in their search for

ways to make theater more "autonomous." Kahn suggests that to use actors' abilities to the full "it is necessary to spare them words and multiply their gestures" (350). In fact, Kahn foresees dramatic situations where language *fails*, where it is impossible for a poet to "impose his dramatic language" and where one must turn to the "evocation of setting through pantomime" (344). Here, Kahn betrays anxiety about the possibility of poetic discourse in a public art form; he seems to suggest that gesture is somehow both more immediate and more comprehensible than language. The tension is profound between the desire for a theater in which the word would be all powerful and the apprehension of an impossibility of communication between dramatist and audience. Both Quillard and Kahn see language in Naturalist theater as debased; dialogue seems merely recorded from everyday interactions and lacks any poetic value. The turn to pantomime, to a focus on stylized movement and gesture, as well as to the decorative elements of lighting and abstract décor were part of a desire to heighten what was truly theatrical about the theater.

Despite the apparent aestheticism of such views, the founders of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, Aurélien-François Lugné-Poe, Eduoard Vuillard, and Camille Mauclair, made clear that the aesthetic aims of Symbolist dramaturgy were on a par with, or even subordinate to, the aim of social and political struggle. In a letter to the *Mercure de France* in October 1893, Mauclair explains why the theater chose Ibsen as its first production. It is the quest to "live violently," to "spark energies," to disseminate "libertarian ideas" and to promote the "individualist cause" that Mauclair gives as the group's primary motivation, only noting as their second orientation the desire to create a "scenic art of fiction, fantasy, and dreams" (Mauclair 191–192). The expressed aim here, to create controversy and bring to the stage works that would bear directly upon contemporary social issues, belies the obscurantism and esotericism often attributed to Symbolist discourse.

The choice of *An Enemy of the People* to head up the program of the new theater was polemical in more ways than one. Not only was the play presented in explicitly anarchist terms, but its production marked the definitive appropriation by the Symbolists of a playwright first championed by Zola and the Naturalist school. After the production of *La Dame de la Mer* (The Lady from the Sea) at the Théâtre d'Art in 1892, Ibsen "rose to the forefront of the Symbolist movement" (Lugné-Poe, *Ibsen* 32). The Symbolists seemed to be wresting Ibsen away from their literary adversaries—as Lugné-Poe smugly notes, "le premier joué" in the affair was Zola: "Could he have foreseen that one day Ibsen would rally together the Symbolists and the poets in an assault on . . . Naturalism?" (Lugné-Poe, *Ibsen* 13).

Ibsen inspired not only the Symbolists, but also many who rallied under the anarchist banner in the 1890s—malcontents whose anger at government corruption, systematic exploitation, and rampant nationalism had led them to champion the unfettered individualism and destructive ethos that anarchism proposed. The

pointed social critique of Ibsen's plays, which tended often to pit the individual against repressive social institutions, galvanized Lugné-Poe and his cohort at the Œuvre as they sought out new plays that would be both dramatically innovative and politically provocative, viewing themselves in a position vis-à-vis artistic and social authorities analogous to that of the anarchists. For instance, Lugné-Poe states in regards to *An Enemy of the People*, "This study of a man with a passion for liberty, dreaming of the liberation of his fellow citizens, in combat with the authorities of his hometown, shouted down by the people for whom he seeks the truth, remains the eternal story of great men in society. . . . For us, it offered the grounds for magnificent debates and put many ideas into circulation" (*Acrobaties*, 58). Lugné-Poe and Mauclair's admissions make plain that the play was selected out of a polemical desire to relate in a particular way to contemporary events.

The critic David Weir has argued in *Anarchy and Culture* that Ibsen's fin-de-siècle status as an anarchist artist was an anomaly that evidences "the power of political context to determine political meaning" (209). Indeed, Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, in her *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theater, 1890–1900*, aptly points out the dramatic differences in reception to Ibsen's work in England and in France in the same decade. (In England, *An Enemy of the People* was not received as an anarchist play). While it is clear that the 1893 French production was heavily colored by the political affinities of the Œuvre group and by the play's staging at a moment of peak anarchist activity, Weir's contention that the reception was a mere anomaly fails to give adequate weight to the content of Ibsen's play, which centers on the fundamental anarchist article of faith: the individualist revolt against political, economic, and moral authority. The play presents the attack on corrupt authority in terms of radical iconoclasm and a hygiene of purification and the protagonist as an avant-garde man of ideas who asserts his freedom like a "dynamiter" against the malignant social order (Ibsen, 67).

The main character, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, is a successful physician in a small town in Norway. His brother, Peter, is the smug, pompous mayor of the town. When Stockmann discovers that the water supply of the baths, which the town has been investing in to make itself a destination for heath-seekers and vacationers, is gravely contaminated by tanneries upriver and poses a health risk to the entire community, he endeavors to make his discovery known, thinking he will be celebrated for averting a health disaster. Instead, the mayor and the press stifle his findings and vilify him; ultimately, the whole town votes him an "enemy of the people," his house is vandalized, and he and his daughter are fired from their positions because no one "would dare" go against public opinion. Even blackmail on the part of his father-in-law, however, does not make Stockmann waver from his determination to fight the "ignorant majority." In the final scene, he declares that "the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone" (126).

The whole of the play turns on the conflict between the individual and corrupt authority over the nature of "truth." Truth, for the mayor and the rest of the town, is whatever the majority says it is—"the majority is always right!" (96)—while Stockmann proposes what is essentially a theory of the avant-garde: that is, that only a few individuals at the forefront of society can ever make new and valuable discoveries. The mayor makes his view of social relations clear early on, when he reproaches Stockmann for being an independent thinker: "The individual must be ready to subordinate himself to the community as a whole; or, more precisely, to the authorities charged with the welfare of the community" (30). The whole question of subordination to authority is at the heart of the matter; as the newspaper editors declare, the paper must follow public opinion rather than shape it. Stockmann, in exposing the moral vacuity of authority, declares that "the majority is never right. Never, I tell you! That is one of these lies in society that no free and intelligent man can help rebelling against" (96).

Crucially, the town's polluted water source constitutes an invisible threat, a poisonous hazard that cannot be directly evidenced to the public but only represented through words. Stockmann has evidence of chemical tests, but he must convince the public of their import and veracity. His father-in-law is the first to remark that no one will "believe a thing like this" (44) and others ultimately dismiss the claim as "just . . . imagination" (78). In the course of the play, Stockmann goes from being a man with a profound faith in the power of speech to a man whose words have been revealed as utterly impotent, unable to sway even one member of the community to the truth of his findings. Part of what the play allegorized, then, for the Symbolist and anarchist adherents of the 1890s, was not only the struggle of the avant-garde against the majority, but also the failure of rhetoric, the inefficacy of language to effect social change.

Initially, when the town's newspaper and the "compact majority" of petty tradespeople seem to be behind him, Stockmann imagines he will wage war with the power of his pen. At this point, Billing, the newspaper editor, likens him to an iconoclast and a revolutionary: his "every word lands like the blow of a sledgehammer," his articles are "like bomb-shells," and Billing cries in his support, "we're on the brink of revolution!" and "don't spare the dynamite!" (64–67). But in fact Stockmann's rhetorical artillery is shown to be utterly ineffectual. When the newspaper turns against him, Stockmann declares that they will not succeed in "gag[ging] me and silenc[ing] the truth" (84), but that is precisely what happens. In the public meeting scene, the community first bars him from speaking and then shouts him down, condemning him for "misrepresenting" the facts. At this point, Stockmann's viewpoint takes a radical turn; where previously he has wished to be a benefactor and hero to his native town, in the face of the townspeople's intransigence he gives up on the idea of remedying the situation and declares that the whole

community should be destroyed: "when a place has become riddled with lies, who cares if it's destroyed? I say it should simply be razed to the ground! And all the people living by those lies should be wiped out, like vermin!" (102). The extremism of such a position could not but strike a chord at a time when bombs were indiscriminately hurled into both government edifices and locales of public leisure in Paris. In a crucial moment in the final scene, when the newspaper editors attempt to force Stockmann to recant, his response—significantly—is no longer verbal but *gestural*: As the stage directions reveal, he finds an umbrella and attempts to attack the two men with it. With this threat of actual physical violence, he chases them from his home. This final move more than anything else signals the ultimate defeat of the man of words—his despair over language and his turn to violent action.

Stockmann's passage from faith to disillusionment with the power of words and his fall from esteemed writer to pariah clarify the connections between Symbolism and anarchism in a number of ways. The Symbolist generation, like Stockmann, held fast to an ideal inherited from Romanticism of the writer as revolutionary, able to effect broad cultural and political change by the power of the pen. Yet the Symbolists were confronted with an exacerbated sense of their total marginalization within public culture, the ineffectiveness of their writing and of their public role. Symbolist journals of the 1880s and 1890s are rife with statements that attempt to impute to writing the impact of the anarchist bomb, precisely because writing had no such impact.[3] Within the same journals, the sense of the pariah status of the artist is profound: Rémy de Gourmont, in one article, sardonically suggests that the bourgeoisie, committed to the "destruction" and "persecution" of all intellectuals, ought to carry its campaign to its logical conclusion and guillotine a poet every year as a national holiday (194). Likewise, Paul Adam, in an article defending the *attentat* of the anarchist Ravachol, asks, "Is he any more guilty than society itself, which allows beings to perish in the solitude of a garret, beings as worthy as the student of the Beaux-Arts recently found starved to death in Paris? Society kills more than any assassin. . . ." (Adam 29). In essence, the Symbolist avant-garde saw in Stockmann's predicament a representation of its own struggles in the face of the indifference and "ignorance" of the public. An article on "L'art et l'anarchisme" by Louis Lormel in 1894 makes the connection explicit: Lormel claims of the *littérateurs anarchistes*, "Our individualism is that of Dr. Stockmann, the enemy of the people. As Laurent Tailhade put it, we strive towards the glorification of genius" (34). Lormel's identification of the struggles of the avant-garde with that of Stockmann in the play draws from this sense of being an embattled minority, writers that "no one listens to anymore" (34).

A sense of fundamental antagonism between the intellectual and the public was enhanced and emphasized both in the text and in the staging of the play at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, which framed Stockmann's predicament as an allegory of con-

temporary struggles—the individual fighting for intellectual and artistic freedom in the face of the unenlightened majority. On its opening night, the poet Laurent Tailhade introduced the production with a thirty-minute commentary extolling the virtues of revolt. With his characteristic disdain, acerbic wit, and *sang-froid*, he announced:

> When the beneficent revolt has broken the old framework and reduced to nothing the usurpations of the middle class, brought "office slaves" to the realm of human dignity, and perhaps brought back to this world the reign of goodness, the masses will bend before strong individuals and will greet in them the only nobility of the future . . . they will understand that it is for them a sufficient reward . . . to smooth the path of those who bear the mark of genius and, when they pass by, to kiss their divine footprints (109).

Tailhade's comments enraged some and enchanted others, setting off raucous outbursts within different groups within the audience. An observer called the evening "one of the most tumultuous uproars I ever had the occasion to attend," while one of the company's actors called it "a baptism by fire . . . full of insolent remarks, challenges, provocative paradoxes, and incendiary explosions" (Retté 209; Jordain 202). This very rhetoric, likening Tailhade's remarks to a violent, explosive attack on the crowd, suggests the extent to which Tailhade's antagonistic and theatrical presentation aimed to implicate the audience directly in the conflict between the minority and the majority enacted in the play, as well as to frame the play's content explicitly in terms of contemporary controversies. The jeers and bravos that met Tailhade's introduction continued during the performance, where during the town meeting scene the crowd of extras was divided into a bourgeois majority and a libertarian minority, with the audience cheering or booing the respective camps. As one critic puts it, "This interpretation of the text allowed the audience to actively participate in the production. This was not Ibsen's intention, but it successfully dramatized contemporary feelings about individualism and anarchy" (Deak 201).

It was not only the lecture by Tailhade that politicized the event. Some well-known anarchist sympathizers participated as extras in the crowd scenes; Lugné-Poe later recalled how during the intermissions and after the play they engaged in "zealous" and "intransigent" political proselytizing, and when the company took the play subsequently to Brussels, "anarchist tracts rained down on the orchestra seats" (*Acrobaties* 64). Following the opening night, the Théâtre de l'Œuvre was put under police surveillance and a number of its company were imprisoned, deported or tracked; by order of the police, the theater's next production, of *Âmes solitaires*, was canceled. A month later, furthermore, when Auguste Vaillant detonated a bomb in the Chambre des Députés (9 December 1893), he cited Ibsen as one of his sources of inspiration (Jasper 127). Had he meant to put Stockmann's

attack on the herd into action, or did his comment indicate rather the conscious creation of *attentat* as spectacle?

II
ACTION AND GESTURE

Responding to the news of Vaillant's attack, the same Tailhade infamously quipped, "What do the victims matter if the gesture is beautiful?" (Quel importe les victimes si le geste est beau?). His remark, which was splashed across the headlines the next day, making him as vilified as the author of the *attentat* himself, reveals the Symbolist fascination for and aestheticization of acts of anarchist violence. Tailhade's characterization of *attentat* as *beau geste*, as an aesthetic gesture, draws attention to the dimensions of embodied signification and performance that Symbolists perceived in this new form of urban violence. In an interview several months later, after he himself had been maimed in a subsequent attack and was asked to clarify his position on anarchism, Tailhade was even more explicit: "In any case, my phrase did not mean that I was an anarchist, but only an admirer of *all aesthetic events* whatever they may be . . . It is thus, I will say it again, that I would love a revolution for the great shows (*beaux spectacles*) that it would give us" (Picard 1). He thus specifically underscores the theatrical value of anarchist violence in and of itself, as pure spectacle apart from any sort of aim or utility: "All revolutions are useless and only end up aborted. The only things of interest are *gestures*" (Picard 2).

Gesture as the last hold-out of aesthetic or political interest: Tailhade's final comment here, that the violence of anarchist revolt does not serve the purpose of revolution, but only the purpose of aesthetic spectatorship, demands examination. It suggests first of all that if a Romantic revolutionary mode tends to instrumentalize revolt, anarchism celebrates insurrection as an end in itself. In this sense, the pairing of anarchism and Symbolism might be considered a symptom of the failure of revolution, a failure to deliver on its promise of future gain and meaningful social change. For the critic Peter Bürger, fin-de-siècle Aestheticism was the culmination of the separation of art from bourgeois society and artists' awareness of their own social ineffectiveness. Yet for him, Symbolism's or Aestheticism's "artistic practice could not free it from its restricted social status" (Schulte-Sasse xxxvi). But the point that bears emphasizing here is that it was precisely the awareness of art's restricted social status, its marginalization, that produced what Margaret Scanlan characterizes as a sort of "agency panic," leading Symbolists to embrace anarchist theories of action and to idealize what Howard Lay has called the "explosive signifier" of anarchist bombs (Scanlan 4; Lay 80). If the deferred desires of revolution never bear fruit, if they, in Tailhade's words, only end up "aborted," then action is

understood essentially only in terms of its immediate impact, in terms set by the ephemerality of theatrical performance. And there is a second level of disillusion here: a purposeful rejection of language. If nothing is interesting but gesture, then speech has been cast aside for the merits of action.

This despair over language is what unites the writer and the terrorist, as Scanlan has suggested. "We have lost all faith in words," wrote Sergei Nechayev, the founder of Russian terrorism, in 1869, and it is similarly the perceived inefficacy of *propagande théorique* that spurred French anarchists to adopt *la propagande par le fait* in the 1890s (Nechayev 350). The writings of anarchist polemicists such as Paul Brousse and Peter Kropotkin justifying the use of individual violent action show not only their discontent with the impotence of language but also their belief that the act defies mediation, defies representation, that it somehow incarnates "the idea" itself. For instance, Brousse writes:

> The idea will not appear on paper, nor in a newspaper, nor in a painting; it will not be sculpted in marble, nor carved in stone, nor cast in bronze: it will walk, alive, in flesh and bone, before the people. The people will hail it as it passes.[4]

The idealized notion that the act will somehow be both immanent and unambiguous—its meaning fully present and immediately understood—is ironic on many levels. First, while Brousse presumes to dispense with artistic representation, his description falls back upon allegory, describing "the idea" in human form. Secondly, there is no reference to what the "idea" might be, other than, presumably, the call to revolution. "Hence," as Lay writes, "the unconscious hankering for allegory, for personification, for figuration in general, even among the same anarchist propagandists who would distinguish detonations from more conventional forms of communication" (85). The distrust of the vagaries of language and the desire for the immanence of embodied meaning stem from the defining characteristic of anarchist ideology: the radical and absolute rejection of all social mediation. The nostalgia for an imagined prepolitical state of immanent community, of direct association and immediate contact away from "representation" (in both senses of the term), dominates anarchist thought.[5] As Uri Eisenzweig has persuasively argued, "The anarchist refusal to legitimize political representation could only imply a negative conception of what is at the root of such representation—that is, language, understood as a medium of transmission, as a means of expression" (11). Yet the idea that a transparent meaning inhered in acts of terror is wildly paradoxical; as the *attentats* of 1892–94 made plain, such acts were subject to and dependent upon a host of competing explanatory discourses. The *attentats* served as propaganda inasmuch as they were able to grab headlines, but they were characterized

and interpreted according to all manner of explanations. Their random and unprovoked violence seemed above all to be meaningless, an "explosive signifier" perhaps, but one that was essentially unreadable. The intractable illegibility of these violent acts defied the didactic intent that they were meant to embody.

Thus the *attentats* were a form of communication that approximated what the literary avant-garde took to be Symbolist aims. That is to say, Symbolist aims concerning language (whether poetic or pictorial) were to create signs that would point outside themselves; Symbolists sought to suppress the referential function of language (signs would not point to a material object-world) and heighten language's indexical or symbolic function (signs should point to an ideal *au-delà*). The *attentat* was conceived of as an explosive signifier, which generated no single meaning but instead a host of significations, seeming to embody Symbolism's desire for mystery and polysemic evocations. If Symbolists supported anarchism in the 1890s not in spite of the *attentats* but because of them, part of the reason was that the characteristics of propaganda by the deed as a form of communication—including illegibility and gratuitousness—made it congruent with Symbolist theories of signification. Above and beyond the militancy of an antibourgeois attitude and anti-establishment rebelliousness, the Symbolist fascination for anarchism stemmed from the idea that acts of terror were largely symbolic.

Tailhade, for one, understood the *attentats* in terms that were inherently theatrical—as spectacle and performance. Similarly, in an article entitled "Être et Vivre," Alfred Jarry saw in the *attentats* of Vaillant and Emile Henry the epitome of a tumultuous and discontinuous sphere of action, which he characterized as "living," as opposed to an eternal and immutable realm of "being." Jarry compares himself to Vaillant and the act of the artist to that of the bomber when he writes, "my bombs are not yet constructed; but before Being disappears I want to note its symbols . . ." (344). Jarry concludes his piece by calling for the destruction of "being": "To live is to act . . . action and life are the decline of Being and Thought . . . So let's live, and in doing so we will be Masters" (344). Here as in many of Jarry's other writings, he takes from anarchist theories of action to create a radically new form of theatricality and at one and the same time asserts that art is superior to anarchist bombs in its destructive and catalytic potential. Making the claim explicit in the context of his plays, he announces that *Ubu*'s infamous "debraining machine" outdoes the bomb: "Mieux que la guillotine . . . [Mieux] que la Bombe banale et bourdonnante, la Machine à Décerveler" (337). And in a final word, referring explicitly back to Tailhade's comments on Vaillant's *attentat*, Jarry solemnly declares, "c'est une machine qui ferait le *Geste Beau*" (338). If Tailhade aestheticized acts of political violence in terms taken from theater, Jarry brought aestheticized violence back to the stage, creating theater based on action and gesture in a mode of confrontation with the public that was appropriated from the *attentats* while attempting to outdo them.

III

"MIEUX QUE LA BOMBE" — *UBU ROI*

If ever there was a word hurled like a bomb in the face of the public, it was the "merdre!" which infamously opened Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. The addition of the second "r" could be seen as a euphemizing gesture or part of Jarry's ludic system of *jeu de mots*, but it was also quite clearly taken as an act of linguistic sabotage. Not only the word's placement as the opening line but its semantic deformation shattered theatrical decorum and orthography in one blow. But it was the word's gratuitousness, its random, unprovoked violence, that most likened it to an *attentat* in the minds of spectators. Henri Fouquier, critic for *Le Figaro*, led the charge in this accusation, decrying Jarry as an "anarchist of art" who was "terrorizing the public." And Fouquier's view of the opening-night riot was that the public had risen in revolt against the "terrorism of the artist" (Fouquier 87). Fouquier's charge, which prevailed among many, is not to be taken lightly; the causes that provoked the charge, however, went far beyond the shock value of the first line. Indeed, in the legend that has been erected around *Ubu*'s opening, the *merdre* moment has been elevated to mythological status—the moment that ignited a riot, that constituted the "birthplace of the avant-garde," and so on.[6] Yet Frantisek Deak has convincingly shown that, if riot there was, it did not break out until much later in the production, a result of the audience becoming exasperated with many of the jarring aspects of staging, and, as Jarry himself suggests, a result of the horrified recognition of Ubu as a grotesque portrait of contemporary life. Those two elements are intimately connected: for all of the attention that has been paid to Jarry's semantic licentiousness, as a dramatist he was much more concerned with the theater as a space of action than a space of words. It was through eliminating naturalistic décor and staging and heightening the physical and the gestural qualities of the characters that he could establish Ubu as a "universal" type. And it was through a conception of the theater as a kind of violent action that Jarry meant to "strike the crowd" (417), outdoing the bomb by perpetrating a more enduring destruction.

If one were to attempt to summarize the plot of *Ubu Roi*, one might say it was a parody of *Macbeth*, representing Père Ubu, urged on by his wife, who murders the king of Poland and illegitimately appropriates the throne. Dimwitted and rapacious, he hoards as much money as possible by massacring the other nobles and is ultimately undone by the rightful heir to the throne, who, aided by the Czar, forces Ubu to flee the country. The play concludes with Ubu and his cohort on a boat set for France. In the notable scene of "la trappe," Ubu brings in a group of nobles, each of whom is asked what their revenue is and is thrown into the "trappe" to be "debrained." But a plot summary cannot truly do the play justice, as it is the vehemence

and vulgarity of Ubu's language (he calls his wife at one point "madame de ma merdre") and the absurdity and grotesqueness of his physical presence (his giant paunch, the fact that he wields a toilet brush) that make the play unforgettable.

The image of Jarry that has been propounded by his biographers, in particular Rachilde and later Roger Shattuck, is that of a prank-pulling "schoolboy"; as a result, much scholarship has been loath to take either his dramatic intentions or the political implications of his work seriously. The Collège de Pataphysique has elevated Jarry to the status of patron saint of the absurd but rarely if ever has turned a critical eye to his work in the social context of the fin de siècle. Yet there can be no question that Jarry held anarchist views and that he conceived of his work as having political import. Throughout his life he was on close terms with such prominent and active anarchists as Félix Fénéon and Octave Mirbeau (Fénéon solicited work from Jarry for the *Revue blanche*, supported him in bad financial times, and was with Jarry at his death[7]), read the work of Jean Grave,[8] and wrote for libertarian journals like *L'assiette au beurre* and *Le canard sauvage*. As Henri Béhar puts it:

> Through his entourage, through his activities, through the meaning given at the time to his works, through the critical attitudes that he constantly expressed in regard to social rituals, published in markedly political journals, he indeed participated in the political counterculture that developed at the turn of the century (*Cultures* 237).

Jarry supported the attentats in his writings even as he considered art superior to bombs. Most significantly, he clearly used Ubu—not only Ubu Roi, but the whole Ubu cycle including *Ubu enchaîné* (1899), the "counterpart" to *Ubu Roi, Ubu cocu* (1897), and *Les almanachs du père Ubu*, which includes *Ubu colonial*, a satire on French colonialism in Africa, and *L'Île du diable*, a pro-Dreyfus satire of "our national and military conscience"—as weapons against the greed and corruption of Third-Republic France. Jarry believed in the anarchic value of black humor and in the theater as a space where the "herd" might be jolted into a change in consciousness.

Jarry's essays on theater and his writings in preparation for the production of *Ubu Roi* reveal his desire to "retheatricalize the theater" (Béhar, *Dramaturgie* 51). Jarry re-envisioned character, masks, décor, and movement in order to create a theater of action, one in which the public would play a part in the creation of the work. In a manuscript entitled "Réponses à un questionnaire sur l'art dramatique," written previously to the production of *Ubu Roi* but never published, Jarry gives his views on the state of contemporary theater. He poses the question, "What is a play?" and responds by opposing a conventional theater of didacticism and "false sentimentality" to a theater for the artistic elite; of the latter, he states, "This other sort of theater is not an amusement for the public, nor a lesson, nor a mode of

relaxation; it is *action*" (412). In this avant-garde theater, there is a reciprocal relationship between the playwright and the audience, for "the elite participates in the realization of the creation of one of their own," while the author "sees the being he created come to life in this elite" (412). Thus, Jarry envisions not only a dramaturgy in which emphasis is put on action and on the gestural dimension over speech, but also one in which the spectator is actively implicated in the creation of the spectacle. In the article, Jarry places a premium on theatrical innovation, a point that belies the naiveté often attributed to him, and underscores rather his conscious creation of diverse theatrical elements for maximum *nouveauté* and impact.[9] In a letter to Lugné-Poe from the same period, Jarry states as much: he suggests using a boy of thirteen for the role of Bougrelas, for "that will excite the old ladies and make some cry 'scandal'; in any case, it will make people take notice as it has never before been seen and I believe that l'Œuvre must monopolize every innovation" (Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, 167). The need to create the shock of the new is nursed by Jarry's sense that he feels he is witnessing and participating in "a birth of the theater . . . since for the first time in France there is . . . an ABSTRACT theater" (Jarry 411).

The focus in Jarry's writings on formal innovations and on a renewed theatricality, which he associates with the practices of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, emphasizes the need to reappraise Symbolist theater apart from the legacy of Stéphane Mallarmé, who has been seen as rejecting the stage and the value of theatricality altogether.[10] Jarry cites both Ibsen and Maurice Maeterlinck as precursors and innovators in a renewed theatrical tradition in which it is not the word that is central but rather the values of silence, abstraction, and depersonalization (411–412). Jarry and Maeterlinck's shared interest in the marionette as a means of transcending the troubling doubleness of the actor points to their interest in the place of gesture in theatrical representation. While both dramatists framed their works in terms of marionette performance, the crucial point for both was not to reject the human actor in favor of the puppet but rather to use the puppet as a means of depersonalizing the human. Actors' movements and gestural range were formalized and simplified; the puppet "occur[ed] less as [a] practical solution to be applied literally than as [a] possible paradigm from which real actors c[ould] learn their art" (McGuinness 114). By examining Jarry's relationship to Maeterlinck, we may clarify the shift in Symbolist theater away from text and toward an emphasis on gesture, dehumanization—with the ultimate aim of creating theatrical "terror."

Part of what Maeterlinck and Jarry are aiming for is a process of alienation—not only the dehumanization of the actor but the creation of a sense of the uncanny that would be profoundly unsettling for the spectator. Both dramatists want to confront the audience not with a sense of the familiar, but with an experience of incongruity and fear—in short, an experience of terror. Both make their objective explicit. Maeterlinck writes of the estranging properties of the marionette,

which inspires fear by approximating the human yet in a form that cannot die and that is not subject to any "eternity"; for the playwright, the resulting "atmosphere of terror" is the "very atmosphere of the poem" (336). Maeterlinck remarks in another essay that "In a drama, it is necessary to produce terror by any means available," a dictum that he implemented as part of his innovation in modern tragedy, by using techniques such as darkness, prolonged silences, and waiting. Spectators often remarked on the atmosphere of "almost unbearable terror" that his dramas produced (Knowles 154). Jarry conceived of theater in similarly visceral terms; for all his reputation as a comic artist, he flatly stated that *Ubu Roi* was not a comedy at all, or if so, then a "macabre" one like a "Dance of Death" (416).

One might conclude, then, at this point, that the Symbolist theater of Maeterlinck and Jarry is more than merely text-centered; in fact, one might posit a migration from the antiperformance stance of Villiers d'Isle-Adam and Mallarmé, for whom the word is supreme and the stage debased, to that of Maeterlinck and Jarry, who attempt to invent a new kind of theatricality through depersonalization and formalized gesture. Maeterlinck and Jarry envision and desire a dramatic effect of "terror" in a way that looks forward to Antonin Artaud's idea of the theater as destructive and purifying. It is necessary, though, to distinguish between the kind of "terror" Maeterlinck wishes to provoke and that envisioned by Jarry. Maeterlinck's art is entirely saturated with metaphysical concerns, with the powerlessness and blindness of humans in the face of an inscrutable destiny, humans who, like puppets, lack the agency to break free of the fate meted out to them. For Maeterlinck, theater has the power to confront the spectator with the abyss of the unknown and the terror of death. The desire to depersonalize the actor in order to render the character "universal" is part of a desire to evoke an existential malaise. In contrast, while Jarry starts from a similar conception of the estranging function of the marionette, he conceives his work as a "modern satire," meant to present the public an image of "its ignominious double" in a mode of violent confrontation borrowed from anarchist acts of terror (Jarry 416).

Jarry's plans for the production made plain his intention to use physical elements to jarring effect. Besides the technique of the actors assuming the qualities of marionettes, each character was to take on a special voice or a specific accent, thereby denaturing the voice as well as the body. On the list of characters was included the debraining machine, eliding further the distinction between animate and inanimate, a dehumanizing element that in itself was disconcerting to many spectators. The set was composed of a single backdrop, decorated by Paul Serusier, Pierre Bonnard, Vuillard, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, which offered a collage of incongruous images: on one side, a bare tree grew out of the foot of a bed, in the middle was a fireplace with an alchemist's crucible, on the other side a gallows with a skeleton dangling from it; here was snow falling out of a blue sky, there were

woods and an ocean with a sun setting. At each "scene change," a man holds up a sign indicating where the scene was taking place. As Deak remarks:

> When the sign read: "a cave in Lithuania. It's snowing," it not only communicated this information of dramatic space and specific circumstance, but also, since somewhere on the painted backdrop there was a cave and somewhere else snow falling, it actualized part of the backdrop for a specific scene (231).

This use of text to gesture towards and actualize the images had several important consequences. First, Jarry (and others who rejected the mimetic illusionism of Naturalist staging) wanted to situate the action in an indeterminate place: "it takes place in Poland," he announced before the curtain was raised, "that is to say, Nowhere" (Jarry 401). But the indeterminacy makes the play all the more "universal," for, as Jarry adds in the printed program, "Nowhere is everywhere, and to begin with the country in which one finds oneself" (402). Second, Jarry wanted the décor to be "hybrid, neither natural nor artificial" so that each spectator "sees the stage in the décor that suits his or her vision of the scene." The viewer thereby experiences "the active pleasure of creating" (406). Finally, by doing away with two of the vaunted three unities—by relativizing time and space—Jarry put all the emphasis upon the play's action. Jarry considered the "unity of action . . . sufficiently observed if everything gravitates around a single unique character" (415). That is to say, Jarry's conception of theater revolves around the creation of a single hyperbolic personality. He makes this plain when he writes, "I think that there is no possible reason to write a work in a dramatic form unless one has the vision of a character that is more easily loosed upon the stage than analyzed in a book" (415). And what does the stage offer that a book cannot? The denaturalized physical presence of Ubu and the shock of the public's reaction—the confrontation of Ubu with the crowd.

In a text published in the *Revue Blanche* ten days before the opening of Ubu Roi (10 December 1896), Jarry calls Ubu "the perfect anarchist." Entitled "Les Paralipomènes d'Ubu," the piece explicitly sets out to explain the play to those "who will not understand it." Jarry states:

> [Ubu] is not exactly Monsieur Thiers, nor the bourgeois, nor the rabble: he is rather the perfect anarchist. He has this that prevents *us* from ever becoming the perfect anarchist: that he is a man of cowardice, filth, ugliness, etc. (467).

The fact that Jarry begins by dismissing the other meanings that had been attributed to Ubu points to the fact that there was already an active dialogue around the play and its significations, which had been going on for the better part of a year in the pages of the *Revue Blanche* and the *Mercure de France*. A portion of *Ubu Roi* had been published in the *Mercure* as early as September 1895; the play was

then printed in its entirety and distributed in the summer of 1896, and throughout the summer and fall it had been discussed in the *petites revues*.[11] In September, the editor and Symbolist poet Gustave Kahn had characterized Ubu as "the modern bourgeois . . . the personification of a crowd that has arrived brusquely to power" (Kahn 31). Others had made more direct political associations to the grotesque and rapacious figure of Ubu, such as to Adolphe Thiers, the disreputable leader of Paris at the time of the eruption of the Commune. The irony of the "Paralipomènes" is that it does not elucidate but rather mystifies further, heightening anticipation for the play's opening. Jarry's statement is deliberately provocative—stating that Ubu is the perfect anarchist so that Jarry himself does not have to be—implying an appropriation of anarchist violence by aesthetic production. Jarry made the assertion more than once: at the performance, the theater distributed a program containing a text by Jarry which again likens Ubu's indiscriminate violence to that of "un anarchiste" (Jarry 402).

Yet, if Jarry declares Ubu bloodthirsty and anarchic, he explicitly intends the character also to be a representation of the governing forces of his time, of the illegitimacy of State power, and of the crass materialism of "those who have dined well." In his article "Questions de théâtre," published in *La revue blanche* on 1 January 1897, Jarry lashes back at his critics and declares Ubu a "mirror" for the audience's own self-importance, corruption, and greed:

> When the curtain lifted, I wanted the stage to be in front of the public like the mirror in the stories of Mme. Leprince de Beaumont, where the depraved sees himself with bull's horns and a dragon's body, according to the exaggeration of his vices; and it is not surprising that the public was stupefied at the sight of its vile double that had never before been entirely presented to it; made, as M. Catulle Mendès excellently put it, "of eternal human imbecility, eternal lust, eternal greed, the baseness of instinct turned into tyranny; of propriety, virtue, patriotism, and the ideal of people who have dined well." Truly, there is no reason to expect a funny play, and the masks indicate that the comedy should be at most the macabre comedy of an English clown or a dance of death (Jarry 416).

Jarry, suggests, then, that Ubu is a reflection of the public itself: his pompous stupidity is their pompous stupidity, his violence their violence, his gluttony their gluttony. The tone of the whole piece is combative, striking out at "the herd" which Jarry considers "insane by default." Jarry not only admits that he aims to do violence to the crowd ("It's because the crowd is an inert and uncomprehending, passive mass that one must strike it from time to time . . .") but that the crowd's furious reaction to the play derived from recognizing themselves portrayed in it ("[the herd] got angry because they understood all too well, despite what they say") (417).

From the conflict between an individual and the "compact majority" enacted in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, which dramatized the failure of speech, Jarry has moved to a form of theater conceived explicitly as an attack on the crowd. He notes that in the play he has intentionally debased language, but that uncomprehending viewers could not understand the tactic. Jarry ridicules those "ubucules" who criticized the play for its lack of "mots d'esprit"—those who misrecognize Ubu's idiocies are the ones who most resemble him in their smug and uncomprehending prattle (417). Jarry thus underscores the assertion that language here has lost any possibility of communication and merely stands to signal its own emptiness and inanity.

Deak has offered a perceptive analysis of the legend of Ubu's opening-night riot. By rereading the contemporary press reviews of the play, he establishes that nowhere is there mention of a fifteen-minute riot after the initial *mot de Cambronne* was pronounced, as recounted years later by Rachilde and often repeated since. In fact, according to an account by Firmin Gémier, the actor who played Ubu, there was laughter and shock to be sure, but all went relatively smoothly until a scene in the third act when

> instead of an actual prison door, an actor was standing on the stage with an extended left hand representing the door. I put the key into his outstretched hand as if it were a lock. I made the sound a turning bolt "cric crac" and turned his hand as if opening a door. At that moment the audience, which without a doubt thought that the joking had been going on for too long, began to roar and rage. Cries, insults, cat calls gushed from all over—in short, a protestation a thousand times worse than I had ever experienced (Deak 235).

In short, according to Gémier's account of events, it was not the first line alone and out of context that determined the audience's rejection of the play; instead, "the formal innovations, the conscious mise-en-scène can be seen as the primary cause of the uproar" (236). The mechanistic gestures, the lack of "mots d'esprit," the reduction of décor to theatrical signs, all "reaffirmed the autonomy of the stage." While Deak acknowledges Jarry's inventiveness, he illustrates plainly the way that this "seminal work of the avant-garde" grew out of the development of Symbolist dramaturgy as well as the polemical aims of the l'Œuvre group. He also makes the important point that *Ubu Roi*, when read in conjunction with *César-Antichrist* (of which, in abridged form, it constituted a section), presents an apocalyptic vision, whereby Ubu as Antichrist rules the world through destruction and chaos, devouring his enemies. With that in mind, "instead of looking for a single explanation, [if we] connect the outrage at the 'poetic obscenity' of *merdre* with the new theatrical language and the apocalyptic, nightmarish vision of the play, we can see what

a radical gesture *Ubu Roi* was at the turn of the century, and we can understand better the reasons for the violent rejection it received" (245).

Nonetheless, Deak fails to account for the specific contention of a number of contemporary reviewers that the tumult of the opening night constituted a "9 thermidor littéraire." The apocalyptic, nightmarish vision of the play was not merely a generalized millennial panic but connected in the public mind to specific acts of terror—anarchist acts of terror in the streets and what some reviewers deemed a reign of terror in the world of letters. The revue *La Critique* made the Thermidorian allusion, proclaiming that "we must renounce Symbolism" and calling on the public to reject artists "feverish with anarchist blood." The reviewer took particular offense at the machine-like gestures of the actors, considering the fact that humans assumed the qualities of marionettes and not the other way around "a painful deformation of human nature" (Robillot 79). Henri Fouquier of *Le Figaro* saw the public's reaction to *Ubu* as "symptomatic":

> It seems to me that there was in this evening a sort of deliverance and a literary ninth of Thermidor. At least, it initiated the end of a sort of Terror that has reigned over literature . . . Truly, for several years now this abstract and impersonal tyrant, this literary Ubu, terrorized the snobs and made them into an organized band that terrorized the public in turn. But they have demanded too much of the public's indulgence and counted too much on their docility. They were angered, and it is not without some joy that I was present at their revolt (Fouquier 86).

For Fouquier, the "anarchists of art" had appropriated tactics from the Commune; they had conflated politics and art in a reprehensible way and were radicals who needed to be silenced. In his view, the revolt of the audience was a victory for reason, moderation, and realism in art. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Romain Coolus, in the *Revue Blanche*, crowed, "Ah! The premier of *Ubu Roi*—that was some great evening—and historic as well! Since then, literature, art, and politics have been saturated with Ubu" (74). For his part, Coolus understood clearly the intent of the puppet-like movements: "puppets are beings a thousand times more suggestive than living characters because they are simplified humans and their mechanical gestures evoke the eternal gestures of humanity" (74).

Catulle Mendès wrote, immediately after the opening, that "a new type has appeared . . . Père Ubu exists":

> Made of Pulcinella and of Polichinelle, of Punch and Karagueus, of Mayeus and M. Joseph Prud'homme, of Robert Macaire and M. Thiers, of the Catholic Torquemada and of the Jewish Deutz, of a police agent and of the an-

> archist Vaillant—an enormous crude parody of Macbeth, Napoleon, and a pretender become king, he exists from now on, unforgettable. You will not get rid of him; he will haunt you, oblige you without fail to remember that he existed, that he exists; he will become a popular legend of vile, voracious, and filthy instincts . . . (Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, 180).

Mendès's perceptive characterization underscores the multivalent readings of Ubu: he is a union of opposites, the torturer and the tortured, the jester and the tyrant, the policeman and the anarchist. That is perhaps the best response to Jarry's paradoxical comments noted above, where he at once calls Ubu an anarchist and a representative of the common herd. In response to the question that the critic Henri Béhar poses, "Is Ubu the crowd or its opposite, the anarchist?" (*Cultures*, 257), I would suggest that Jarry asserts an equivalence of the two: what his satire underscores is that political power is based on the same indiscriminate violence that the authors of the *attentats* perpetrate. The responses in the press to the play make clear that neither admirers nor detractors saw Ubu as merely a stage creation; he was emblematic of either side of a contentious social divide. For some, he epitomized the terrorism of the artist; for others, he epitomized the grotesque nature of bourgeois pretensions. For both sides, however, Ubu seemed the definitive appropriation of anarchist violence into art.

Examining Symbolism's fascination for anarchism and the ways in which that liaison influenced the dramatic practice of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre suggests a different reading of Symbolism from that which would insist upon its hermetic withdrawal from the public sphere. As the Symbolist productions of their works at the Oeuvre show, by drawing on the rhetoric of the *revolté* and the tactics of the *attentat* as gesture Ibsen and Jarry do not so much withdraw from the public sphere as dramatize the anxieties of an artistic minority in relation to it. The Ibsen of the French Symbolists created in Dr. Stockmann an avant-garde hero whose failure to effect change within the public sphere leads him in desperation to advocate a violent ethos. And Jarry appropriates terrorist tactics—random, gratuitous, testing the limits of meaning—for a new form of theatricality, an adversarial face-off with the crowd. It is perhaps here, in this disdain for but utter dependence upon the public, that this theater most mimics the position of anarchism, for as Arthur Redding puts it, "Anarchism, whose episodic political history founders on an unresolvable tension between collectivist and individualist liberation, performs a theater of violence beseechingly dependent upon the very audience it horrifies" (47). For Symbolists, anarchism pointed to a means of both conjuring and excoriating an indifferent public, to the creation of violence as spectacle, and to the production of art that might mimic the status of the bomb as pure affect. It was not for the

most part anarchist ideology that drew Symbolist adherents but what might more properly be called anarchist aesthetics.

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NOTES

1 For more on the formation of the Œuvre and on Symbolist theater history, see Deak; Henderson; Jasper; Knowles; Marie; and Robichez.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French are my own.

3 For example, Pierre Quillard writes, "Il faut avouer que l'explosion de quelques bombes de dynamite frappe de terreur les esprits vulgaires. Mais cet affolement de surprise dure peu . . . Au contraire, la puissance destructrice d'un poème ne se disperse pas d'un seul coup: elle est permanente et sa déflagration certaine et continue" (It must be admitted that the explosion of certain bombs strikes vulgar minds with terror. But the surprise of this panic doesn't last long . . . . On the contrary, the destructive power of a poem does not disappear at a stroke: it is permanent and its detonation is certain and continuous) ("L'idéalisme," 151).

4 Paul Brousse, "Le Propagande par le fait," *Bulletin de la fédération jurassienne* (5 August 1877), cited in Maitron 1:77.

5 Sonn, ch. 4, entitled "Language, Crime and Class," notes the anarchist nostalgia for prepolitical figures of rebellion like the criminal and the vagabond.

6 This reading of Jarry's *Ubu* as an utterly singular event without any literary precedent is common. For instance, Benedikt and Wellworth write that the production single-handedly created avant-garde drama, an event "virtually unprecedented in theatrical history" (ix).

7 See Halperin 312–314.

8 Jarry's letter to Lugné-Poe of 11 June 1896 asks, "Faut-il vous retourner quelques livres, Jean Grave, etc.?" (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 1047).

9 Blackadder makes a similar point about the calculated nature of Jarry's innovations: "Jarry had progressed from pushing *Ubu Roi* as simply a potentially entertaining spectacle to one that could radically differ from anything that had previously been done on stage, and therefore would provoke some of the audience members" (44). Blackadder's analysis of the 1896 production, however, remains focused on the use of the word *merdre* and fails to account for any of the broader political ramifications of Jarry's satire.

10 For instance, Puchner sees Mallarmé as paradigmatic of the "anti-theatrical impulse" in modernism, a writer in "systematic retreat from the stage" (59).

11 In "Comment Jarry et Lugné-Poe glorifièrent Ubu à l'Œuvre," P. Liè maintains that Jarry and Lugné-Poe were responsible for much of the attention in the press—he asserts that they undertook "une campagne de propagande" in order to promote the play (39).

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