

William Archer

Point of Attack 1

If [the playwright's work] be a comedy, and if his object be gently and quietly to interest and entertain, the chances are that he begins by showing us his personages in their normal state, concisely indicates their characters, circumstances and relations, and **then lets the crisis develop from the outset before our eyes.** If, on the other hand, his play be of a more stirring description, and he wants to seize the spectator's attention firmly from the start, **he will probably go straight at his crisis, plunging, perhaps, into the very middle of it, even at the cost of having afterwards to go back in order to put the audience in possession of the antecedent circumstances.** In a third type of play, common of late years, and especially affected by Ibsen, **the curtain rises on a surface aspect of profound peace, which is presently found to be but a thin crust over an absolutely volcanic condition of affairs, the origin of which has to be traced backwards, it may be for many years.**

Let us glance at a few of Shakespeare's openings, and consider at what points he attacks his various themes. Of his comedies, all except one begin with a simple conversation, showing **a state of affairs from which the crisis develops with more or less rapidity, but in which it is as yet imperceptibly latent. In no case does he plunge into the middle of his subject, leaving its antecedents to be stated in what is technically called an "exposition."** Neither in tragedy nor in comedy, indeed, was this Shakespeare's method. In his historical plays he relied to some extent on his hearers' knowledge of history, whether gathered from books or from previous plays of the historical series; and where such knowledge was not to be looked for, he would expound the situation in good set terms, like those of a Euripidean Prologue. But the chronicle-play is a species apart, and practically an extinct species: we need not pause to study its methods. In his fictitious plays, with two notable exceptions, it was Shakespeare's constant practice **to bring the whole action within the frame of the picture, opening at such a point that no retrospect should be necessary, beyond what could be conveyed in a few casual words.** The exceptions are *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, to which we shall return in due course.

How does *The Merchant of Venice* open? With a long conversation exhibiting the character of Antonio, the friendship between him and Bassanio, the latter's financial straits, and his purpose of wooing Portia. The second scene displays the character of Portia, and informs us of her father's device with regard to her marriage; but this information is conveyed in three or four lines. Not till the third scene do we see or hear of Shylock, and not until very near the end of the act is there any foreshadowing of what is to be the main crisis of the play. **Not a single antecedent event has to be narrated to us;** for the mere fact that Antonio has been uncivil to Shylock, and shown disapproval of his business methods, can scarcely be regarded as a preliminary outside the frame of the picture.

In *As You Like It* there are **no preliminaries to be stated** beyond the facts that Orlando is at enmity with his elder brother, and that Duke Frederick has usurped the coronet and dukedom of Rosalind's father. These facts being made apparent without any sort of formal exposition, the crisis of the play rapidly announces itself in the wrestling-match and its sequels. In *Much Ado About Nothing* there is even less of antecedent circumstance to be imparted. We learn in the first scene, indeed, that Beatrice and Benedick have already met and crossed swords; but this is not in the least essential to the action; **the play might have been to all intents and purposes the same had they never heard of each other until after the rise of the curtain.**

[...]

In *The Tempest* the poet employs a form of opening which otherwise he reserves for tragedies. The first scene is simply an animated tableau, calculated to arrest the spectator's attention, without conveying to him any knowledge either of situation or character. Such gleams of character as do, in fact, appear in the dialogue, are scarcely perceived in the hurly-burly of the storm. Then, in the calm which ensues, Prospero expounds to Miranda in great detail the antecedents of the crisis now developing. It might almost seem, indeed, that the poet, in this, his poetic last-will-and-testament, intended to warn his successors against the dangers of a long narrative exposition; for Prospero's story sends Miranda to sleep. Be this as it may, we have here a case in which **Shakespeare deliberately adopted the plan of placing on the stage, not the whole crisis, but only its culmination, leaving its earlier stages to be conveyed in narrative.** It would have been very easy for him to have begun at the beginning and shown us in action the events narrated by Prospero. This course would have involved no greater leap, either in time or space, than he had perpetrated in the almost contemporary *Winter's Tale*; and it cannot be said that there would have been any difficulty in compressing into three acts, or even two, the essentials of the action of the play as we know it. His reasons for departing from his usual practice were probably connected with the particular occasion for which the play was written. He wanted to produce a masque rather than a drama.

[...]

Coming now to the five great tragedies, we find that in four of them Shakespeare began, as in *The Tempest*, with a picturesque and stirring episode calculated to arrest the spectator's attention and awaken his interest, while conveying to him little or no information. The opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is simply a brawl, bringing home to us vividly the family feud which is the root of the tragedy, but informing us of nothing beyond the fact that such a feud exists. This is, indeed, absolutely all that we require to know. There is not a single preliminary circumstance, outside the limits of the play, that has to be explained to us. The whole tragedy germinates and culminates within what the prologue calls "the two hours' traffick of the stage."

[...]

King Lear necessarily opens with a great act of state, the partition of the kingdom. A few words between Kent and Gloucester show us what is afoot, and then, at one plunge, we are in the thick of the drama. There was no opportunity here for one of those picturesque tableaux, exciting rather than informative, which initiate the other tragedies. It would have had to be artificially dragged in; and it was the less necessary, as the partition scene took on, in a very few lines, just that arresting, stimulating quality which the poet seems to have desired in the opening of a play of this class.

Finally, when we turn to *Hamlet*, we find [that there is a] cogent reason for beginning the play after the commission of the initial crime or crimes... By a piece of consummate ingenuity, which may, of course, have been conceived by the earlier playwright, **the initial incidents of the story are in fact presented to us, in the guise of a play within the play**, and as a means to the achievement of one of the greatest dramatic effects in all literature. The moment the idea of the play-scene presented itself to the author's mind, it became absolutely unthinkable that he should, to put it vulgarly, 'queer the pitch' for the Players by showing us the real facts of which their performance was to be the counterfeit presentment. **The dramatic effect of the incidents was incalculably heightened when they were presented, as in a looking-glass, before the guilty pair, with the eye of the avenger boring into their souls.** And have we not here, perhaps, a clue to one of the most frequent and essential meanings of the word 'dramatic'? May we not say that the dramatic quality of an incident is proportionate to the variety and intensity of the emotions involved in it? [Note that Archer, when writing about *Hamlet* (p.115) explains that the story does not "come within the frame of the picture" also because "Hamlet unpacks his heart to us in a series of soliloquies--a device employed scarcely at all in the portrayal of Othello and Lear, and denied to the modern dramatist."]

[...]

In sum, then, it was Shakespeare's usual practice, histories apart, to bring the whole action of his plays within the frame of the picture, leaving little or nothing to narrative exposition.

[...]

Let us now look at the practice of Ibsen, which offers a sharp contrast to that of Shakespeare. To put it briefly, the plays in which Ibsen gets his whole action within the frame of the picture are as exceptional as those in which Shakespeare does not do so.

Ibsen's practice in this matter has been compared with that of the Greek dramatists, who also were apt to attack their crisis in the middle, or even towards the end, rather than at the beginning. It must not be forgotten, however, that there is one great difference between his position and theirs. They could almost always rely upon a general knowledge, on the part of the audience, of the theme with which they were dealing. The purpose even of the Euripidean prologue is not so much to state unknown facts, as to recall facts vaguely remembered, to state the particular version of a legend which the poet proposes to adopt, and to define the point in the development of the legend at which he is about to set his figures in motion. Ibsen, on the other hand, drew upon no storehouse of tradition. He had to convey to his audience everything that he wanted them to know; and this was often a long and complex series of facts.

[...]

[S]urveying the whole series of [Ibsen's later works] in which he had stage presentation directly in view, we find that in only two out of the fifteen plays does the whole action come within the frame of the picture. These two are *The League of Youth* and *An Enemy of the People*. In neither of these have any antecedents to be stated; neither turns upon any disclosure of bygone events or emotions. We are, indeed, afforded brief glimpses into the past both of Stensgaard and of Stockmann; but the glimpses are incidental and inessential. It is certainly no mere coincidence that if one were asked to pick out the pieces of thinnest texture in all Ibsen's mature work, one would certainly select these two plays. Far be it from me to disparage *An Enemy of the People*; as a work of art it is incomparably greater than such a piece as *Pillars of Society*; but it is not so richly woven, not, as it were, so deep in pile. Written in half the time Ibsen usually devoted to a play, it is an outburst of humorous indignation, a *jeu d'esprit*, one might almost say, though the *jeu* of a giant *esprit*. Observing the effect of comparative tenuity in these two plays, we cannot but surmise that the secret of the depth and richness of texture so characteristic of Ibsen's work, lay in his art of closely interweaving a drama of the present with a drama of the past. *An Enemy of the People* is a straightforward, spirited melody; *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* are subtly and intricately harmonized.

Going a little more into detail, we find in Ibsen's work an extraordinary progress in the art of so unfolding the drama of the past as to make the gradual revelation no mere preface or prologue to the drama of the present, but an integral part of its action. It is true that in *The Vikings* he already showed himself a master in this art. The great revelation – the disclosure of the fact that Sigurd, not Gunnar, did the deed of prowess which Hiördis demanded of the man who should be her mate – this crucial revelation is brought about in a scene of the utmost dramatic intensity. The whole drama of the past, indeed – both its facts and its emotions – may be said to be dragged to light in the very stress and pressure of the drama of the present. Not a single detail of it is narrated in cold blood, as, for example, Prospero relates to Miranda the story of their marooning, or Horatio expounds the Norwegian-Danish political situation. I am not holding up *The Vikings* as a great masterpiece; it has many weaknesses both of substance and of method; but in this particular art of indistinguishably blending the drama of the present with the drama of the past, it is consummate.

[...]

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen makes a sudden leap to the extreme of his retrospective method. I am not one of those who consider this play Ibsen's masterpiece: I do not even place it, technically, in the first rank among his works. And why? **Because there is here no reasonable equilibrium between the drama of the past and the drama of the present. The drama of the past is almost everything, the drama of the present next to nothing.** As soon as we have probed to the depths the Alving marriage and its consequences, the play is over, and there is nothing left but for Regina to set off in pursuit of the joy of life, and for Oswald to collapse into imbecility. **It is scarcely an exaggeration to call the play all exposition and no drama.** Here for the first time, however, Ibsen perfected his peculiar gift of imparting tense dramatic interest to the unveiling of the past. **While in one sense the play is all exposition, in another sense it may quite as truly be said to contain no exposition; for it contains no narrative delivered in cold blood, in mere calm retrospection, as a necessary preliminary to the drama which is in the meantime waiting at the door. In other words, the exposition is all drama, it is the drama.** The persons who are tearing the veils from the past, and for whom the veils are being torn, are intensely concerned in the process, which actually constitutes the dramatic crisis. The discovery of this method, or its rediscovery in modern drama, was Ibsen's great technical achievement. **In his best work, the progress of the unveiling occasions a marked development, or series of changes, in the actual and present relations of the characters. The drama of the past and the drama of the present proceed, so to speak, in interlacing rhythms, or, as I said before, in a rich, complex harmony. In *Ghosts* this harmony is not so rich as in some later plays, because the drama of the present is disproportionately meagre...**

In *An Enemy of the People*, as already stated, he momentarily deserted that method, and gave us an action which begins, develops, and ends entirely within the frame of the picture. But in the two following plays, *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*, he touched the highest point of technical mastery in his interweaving of the past with the present. I shall not attempt any analysis of the fabric of these plays. The process would be long, tedious, and unhelpful; for no one could hope to employ a method of such complexity without something of Ibsen's genius; and genius will evolve its methods for itself. Let me only ask the reader to compare the scene between old Werle and Gregers in the first act of *The Wild Duck* with the scene between Nora and Mrs. Linden in the first act of *A Doll's House*, and mark the technical advance. Both scenes are, in a sense, scenes of exposition. Both are mainly designed to place us in possession of a sequence of bygone facts. But while the *Doll's House* scene is a piece of quiet gossip, brought about (as we have noted) by rather artificial means, and with no dramatic tension in it, the *Wild Duck* scene is a piece of tense, one might almost say fierce, drama, fulfilling the Brunetière definition in that it shows us two characters, a father and son, at open war with each other. The one scene is outside the real action, the other is an integral part of it. The one belongs to Ibsen's tentative period, the other ushers in, one might almost say, his period of consummate mastery.

From *Play-Making*, William Archer (1912) (pp.86 – 108)

William Archer Point of Attack 2

There is a peculiar interest in watching the rise and development out of nothing, as it were, of a dramatic complication. For this class of play (despite the Shakespearean precedents) a quiet opening is often advisable, rather than a strong *einleitende Akkord* [‘introductory chord’]. **“From calm, through storm, to calm,” is its characteristic formula;** whether the concluding calm be one of life and serenity or of despair and death. To my personal taste, **one of the keenest forms of theatrical enjoyment is that of seeing the curtain go up on a picture of perfect tranquillity, wondering from what quarter the drama is going to arise, and then watching it gather on the horizon like a cloud no bigger than a man's hand.** Of this type of opening, *An Enemy of the People* provides us with a classic example; and among English plays we may cite Mr. Shaw's *Candida*, Mr. Barker's *Waste*, and Mr. Besier's *Don*, in which so sudden and unlooked-for a cyclone swoops down upon the calm of an English vicarage.

[...]

There is much to be said, however, in favour of the opening which does not present an aspect of delusive calm, but shows the atmosphere already charged with electricity. Compare, for instance, the opening of *The Case of Rebellious Susan*, by Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, with that of a French play of very similar theme – Dumas's *Francillon*. In the latter, we see the storm-cloud slowly gathering up on the horizon; in the former, it is already on the point of breaking, right overhead. Mr. Jones places us at the beginning, where Dumas leaves us at the end, of his first act. It is true that at the end of Mr. Jones's act he has not advanced any further than Dumas. The French author shows his heroine gradually working up to a nervous crisis, the English author introduces his heroine already at the height of her paroxysm, and the act consists of the unavailing efforts of her friends to smooth her down. The upshot is the same; but in Mr. Jones's act we are, as the French say, “in full drama” all the time, while in Dumas's we await the coming of the drama, and only by exerting all his wit, not to say over-exerting it, does he prevent our feeling impatient. **I am not claiming superiority for either method; I merely point to a good example of two different ways of attacking the same problem.**

In *The Benefit of the Doubt*, by Sir Arthur Pinero, we have a crisply dramatic opening of the very best type. A few words from a contemporary criticism may serve to indicate the effect it produced on a first-night audience –

We are in the thick of the action at once, or at least in the thick of the interest, so that the exposition, instead of being, so to speak, a mere platform from which the train is presently to start, becomes an inseparable part of the movement. The sense of dramatic irony is strongly and yet delicately suggested. **We foresee a “peripety,” apparent prosperity suddenly crumbling into disaster, within the act itself; and, when it comes, it awakens our sympathy and redoubles our interest.**

[...]

When the whole of a given subject cannot be got within the limits of presentation, is there any means of determining how much should be left for retrospect, and at what point the curtain ought to be raised? The principle would seem to be that slow and gradual processes, and especially separate lines of causation, should be left outside the frame of the picture, and that **the curtain should be raised at the point where separate lines have converged, and where the crisis begins to move towards its solution with more or less rapidity and continuity.** The ideas of rapidity and continuity may be conveniently summed up in the hackneyed and often misapplied term, unity of action. Though the unities of time and place are long ago exploded as binding principles – indeed, they never had any authority in English drama – yet it is true that a broken-backed action, whether in time or space, ought, so far as possible, to be avoided. An action with a gap of twenty years in it may be all very well in melodrama or romance, but scarcely in higher and more serious types of drama.

[...]

There are cases, no doubt, when **verbal exposition** may advantageously be avoided by means of a dramatised “Prologue” – a single act, constituting a little drama in itself, and generally separated by a considerable space of time from the action proper. But this method is scarcely to be commended, except, as aforesaid, for purposes of melodrama and romance.

[...]

The question whether a legato or a staccato opening be the more desirable must be decided in accordance with the nature and opportunities of each theme. The only rule that can be stated is that, when the attention of the audience is required for an exposition of any length, **some attempt ought to be made to awaken in advance their general interest in the theme and characters. It is dangerous to plunge straight into narrative, or unemotional discussion, without having first made the audience actively desire the information to be conveyed to them.** Especially is it essential that the audience should know clearly who are the subjects of the discussion or narrative--that they should not be mere names to them. It is a grave flaw in the construction of Mr. Granville Barker's otherwise admirable play *Waste*, that it should open with a long discussion, by people whom we scarcely know, of other people whom we do not know at all, whose names we may or may not have noted on the playbill.

[...]

There is, however, one limitation to this principle. A great effect is sometimes attained by retarding the entrance of a single leading figure for a whole act, or even two, while he is so constantly talked about as to beget in the audience a vivid desire to make his personal acquaintance. Thus Molière's *Tartuffe* does not come on the stage until the third act of the comedy which bears his name. Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman is unseen until the second act, though (through his wife's ears) we have already heard him pacing up and down his room like a wolf in his cage. Dubedat, in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, is not revealed to us in the flesh until the second act. But for this device to be successful, it is essential that only one leading character should remain unseen, on whom the attention of the audience may, by that very fact, be riveted.

[...]

The advantage of a staccato opening – or, to vary the metaphor, a brisk, highly aerated introductory passage – is clearly exemplified in *A Doll's House*. It would have been quite possible for Ibsen to have sent up his curtain upon Nora and Mrs. Linden seated comfortably before the stove, and exchanging confidences as to their respective careers. **Nothing indispensable would have been omitted; but how languid would have been the interest of the audience!** As it is, a brief, bright scene has already introduced us, not only to Nora, but to Helmer, and aroused an eager desire for further insight into the affairs of this – to all appearance – radiantly happy household. Therefore, we settle down without impatience to listen to the fireside gossip of the two old school-fellows.

From *Play-Making*, William Archer (1912) (pp.115 – 128)