



# The Theater of Life and the Artistic Urge in Four of Arnold Bennett's Five Towns Stories ("The Sisters Qita," "Clarice of the Autumn Concerts," "The Death of Simon Fuge," and "Jock-at-a-Venture")

Xavier P. Lachazette

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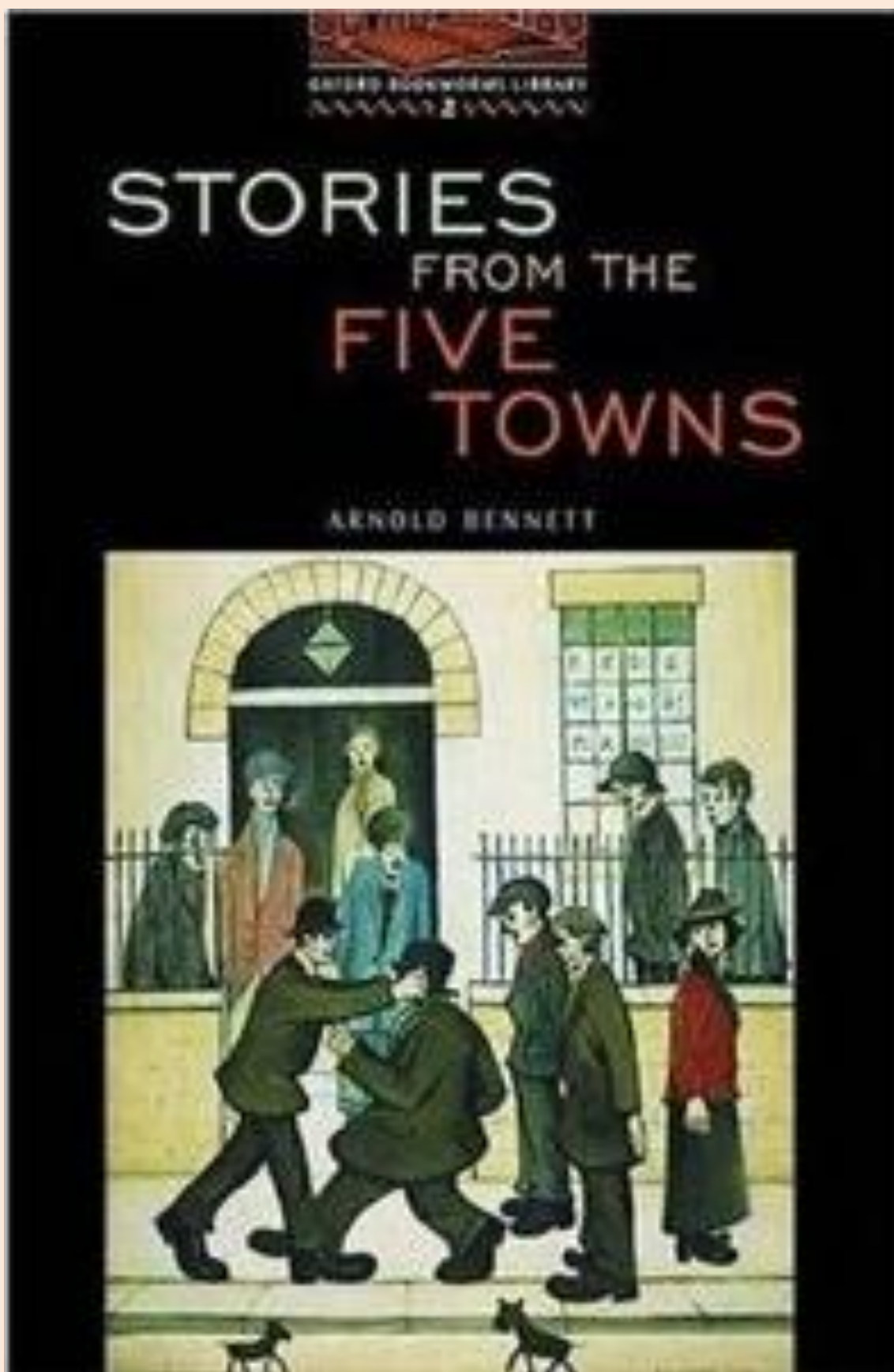
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**"The Theater of Life and the Artistic Urge in four of Arnold Bennett's Five Towns short stories ("The Sisters Qita," "Clarice of the Autumn Concerts," "The Death of Simon Fuge," and "Jock-at-a-Venture")"**  
**by Xavier Lachazette, Université du Maine, Le Mans**

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∞ ∞

Arnold Bennett's fascination with Bohemian life and the world of stage actors and managers is well documented, as are the few years he worked as a theater critic, the dozen of plays which he wrote, and his two marriages — first to Marguerite Soulié, a highbrow Frenchwoman who dramatically recited the poetry of Verlaine and Baudelaire, then to Dorothy Cheston, an English actress. Naturally enough, numerous stage-related characters crop up in his shorter fiction too, in the shape of prima donnas, trapeze artists, concert pianists, and "play-acting folk" of all kinds.

But more than just a recurrent theme, the stage provided Bennett with a metaphor for life as he saw it: an all-pervading tension between the lure of the limelight and dreary everyday living, between materialism and the artistic urge, between self-fulfillment and the inhibiting forces of religion, or between the utilitarian outlook of the industrial North of England and the need for a creative dimension to every individual's life.

In order to study these various tensions I have chosen to study four short stories taken from the three collections of "tales" which Bennett wrote between 1905 and 1912, namely *Tales of the Five Towns*, *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, and *The Matador of the Five Towns*<sup>1</sup>. As is perceptible in the titles of these collections, these tales focus on a part of Staffordshire which the writer dubs "the Five Towns," in the Northern region of the Potteries. To be more precise, they focus on the different towns which constitute the now federated city of Stoke-on-Trent, the city where Arnold Bennett was born.

My objective in this paper will be to shed light on Bennett's theatricalization of everyday-life characters, and on the inspiring notions which he personally associates with the ideas of theatricality and artistic creation — a far cry from the charges of looseness and falseness still often brought against the theater at the time. I will first argue that Bennett equates theatricality with positive excess and values. In the second part I will suggest that theatricality and creativity act as revealers of truths.

**PART 1: Theatricality as positive excess.**

When Bennett started to write short stories focusing on his native Potteries he had already published two novels set in the same region: *A Man from the North* came out in 1898 and *Anna of the Five Towns* in 1902. Interestingly, in choosing his birthplace as a setting for the three collections that he would finally devote to it he also set himself the task of describing, or setting off, what he perceived to be the distinct character of this Northern industrial city, which became federated in 1910, that is to say two years Bennett the third collection, *The Matador*.

In spite of this, it is only once in a long while that the mention of choking smoke, omnipresent pots, red furnaces and bottle-shaped kilns appears, and the reader is hardly given any geographical or topographic descriptions of the place, and very few details about the industrial and commercial aspects which were so prevalent then, partly because the place *cannot* be described. As one narrator says, "I do not think the Five Towns will ever be described: Dante lived too soon." (106)

The description of the towns' character is thus mostly reduced to the human characteristics which Bennett associates with them. But those characteristics are soon made manifest — for instance, as soon as Loring, the narrator in "Fuge," arrives at Knype station, "Knype" being the fictional name Bennett gives to Stoke. The crowd is "pushing, exclamatory, ill-dressed, determined" and "bent on

the realization of [its] own desires by the least ceremonious means" (104). It is therefore a crowd marked by its physicality, its practicality, and its self-centeredness — so much so that Loring feels that he has left civilization behind him at the British Museum where he works as a curator of a department of antiquities.

At first, the Northerners' physicality and practicality shock Loring, who, by contrast, describes himself as "a very brittle, delicate bit of intellectual machinery" (104), a short-sighted man with a taste for ceramics and literature. But very soon he comes to like what he sees around him: the way Mrs. Brindley, his host's wife, "shriek[s] femininely" (109), the deafening noise of the "continuous fusillade" of their friend's automobile, their food and alcohol binges, their violent humor, the various activities in which they engage in the course of the evening, etc. It is as if, far away from the urbane and demure pleasures of his London existence, Loring were forced to discover a world in which the basics of life apply, in which the essence of living is indeed *living*, and the aim of life is to pleasurable spend an impressive amount of energy. As Loring says: "So much crude force and naked will-to-live I had not before set eyes on." (104) In this sense Bennett's picturesque characters are theatrical because, as Anne Larue reminds us in an essay on theatricality, an "abnormal expenditure of energy" is one of the sources of theatricality on the stage<sup>2</sup>.

Another case in point, naturally, is the eponymous hero of "Jock-at-a-Venture," whose sheer energy and stamina are at the center of the story. Indeed, though introduced as "[a] rather small, slight man of about forty, with tiny feet and hands" (59) and a herbalist, Jock soon turns out to be one more in the long series of larger-than-life characters for which Bennett had a fascination. Being a herbalist is only one of his latest avatars, since we are told he previously was a sailor, a soldier, the barber who introduced hair-dyeing into Bursley, and a boxing club manager before he became a dissenting preacher. It is in this last capacity that he starts making waves and a name for himself, attracting huge crowds to his sermons at the Bethesda, much to the chagrin of the other ministers whose numerically inferior crowds are but a reflection on their skill as pastors.

It seems that Jock is too large for the life allowed in the Five Towns. His critics "accuse him of theatricality" and the "charge of theatricality" is something he tries to live down, as the narrator says (61) — but only for a second, since he is not one to control himself or his "dramatic out-stretching of the right arm" (62) for long. Indeed, when his next impassioned sermon in church broaches the subject of life as transience, of life as merely a vision and an "insubstantial pageant," it soon transpires that Jock's powerful influence over his audience comes from his oratory power and from his lifting a whole tirade from the beginning of the fourth act in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The interesting point here is that Jock sees nothing wrong in quoting, or even playing, Shakespeare in the pulpit for the reason that what matters to him is creating theatrical effects which might allow him to save a few souls.

In other words he does not understand the idea that his temple could be desecrated by profane plays because, in his eyes, effects and works of art are interchangeable and reversible : if the series of eight plates, entitled *The Bottle*, which George Cruikshank painted, can be transformed into a sermon against intemperance and performed in a theater, why shouldn't one be allowed to use a few carefully chosen bits from a play and try their effect on a Sunday audience?

Their theatrical excesses, eccentricities and exuberance thus prompt Bennett's characters to push back the constraining limits and obstacles imposed on them, and allow them to live a life which is much fuller than that of other characters or even much fuller than that of a narrator like Loring. As we have seen, these limits can be of a social, moral or religious sort, and would constitute a form of determinism if characters like Jock or Fuge let them have their way. But they are also geographic in that one of the characteristics of artists and performers is, naturally, that they go from city to city and live mostly on the road. In "Sisters Qita," for instance, we learn that it has been a long time since Selina last set foot on British soil, deliberately avoiding the Five Towns it seems, and the short story concludes with the news that, after all but falling to her death when her rope broke, she moved on to Budapest. Simon Fuge dies in San Remo, Italy while Jock finally falls for another figure of excess in the shape of a plumpish, big-breasted mother of eight with whom he leaves Bursley when he is not more wanted as a preacher.



To finish these characters also have a way with speech and language, which they know how to use both in order to conquer an audience or justify their conduct. For instance, the impression which Fuge made on Loring the one time he met him never left him after:

#1: I remembered well the burning brilliance of his blue-black eyes, his touching assurance that all of us were necessarily interested in his adventures, and the extremely graphic and convincing way in which he reconstituted for us the nocturnal scene on Ilam Lake — the two sisters, the boat, the rustle of trees, the lights on shore, and his own difficulty in managing the oars, one of which he lost for half-an-hour and found again. It was by such details as that about the oar that, with a tint of humour, he added realism to the romantic quality of his tales. (102)

That Loring should remember such a trifling incident many years after — calling it "one of Fuge's most dramatic recitals" (102) — proves that it is Fuge's ability to transform the most insignificant moment into some kind of art which impressed his listeners, in the same way that, as an artist, he is able to paint pictures of an "unearthly beauty" which, for him, "were nothing but faithful renderings of what he saw." (102)

Along the same lines, Jock's eviction from his post at Bethesda chapel could at first sight be seen as a failure, as society's victorious sanction on him, but the story's conclusion makes it clear that victory is actually on Jock's side. Indeed, all along the story, Jock — or rather, Brother Smith — asserts that he means to "save" Mrs. Clowes from perdition by having her attend his sermon (which she does), as a first step, and then by seeing the errors of her ways. Now it is extremely doubtful whether the lady or her family can indeed be made to change, especially since we also learn at the end about the "escapades of her unmarried daughter aged fifteen" (69). But Jock *does* find a linguistic way of finally asserting that he has been able to carry out his pastoral mission: he fights the highway robbers who assail her van, then jokingly exclaims: "I've saved thee, missis!," (70) as if the proper and figurative (religious) meanings of the verb *save* were one.

In other words those characters are shape-shifters which cannot be pinned down to any one place, principle or persona; who never consider that anything is "beyond the pale" (62) — especially not the theater, or theatricality in general, because those are the very means by which they manage to make life fuller or more meaningful than society would accord them.

What strikes us here is that Bennett does not make the point that role playing or emptying words of their meaning is synonymous with falseness or insincerity. He does not either associate the theatricality of his protagonists with the idea of fakeness, phoniness, or the wearing of masks,. On the contrary, if his heroes and heroines are often *scenic*, in the sense of "pertaining to, or showing the characteristics of, the stage," they are not described as *cynic*, complacent or false, so that with a few interesting counterexamples — minor characters, typically —, Bennett's theatricality is often refreshingly associated with the idea of the unveiling of truth.

## **PART 2: Theatricality and creativity as revealers of truths.**

Indeed, going back to Loring's first experience of the Five Towns, it must be noticed that, apart from their excessive and extraverted personalities, the other characteristic which strikes him as typical of the few inhabitants he meets is their sincerity. As the narrator puts it: "These Five Towns people certainly had a simple, sincere way of offering hospitality that was quite irresistible. One could see that hospitality was among their chief and keenest pleasures." (115) The way they yield to their emotions is also noted by Loring, who writes: "It may be said that she laughed as they can laugh in the Five Towns. She cried. She had to wipe away the tears of laughter." (139)

But if these characters, the Brindleys and their friends, belong to a superior stratum of society in the sense that know how to make a sincere, no-holds-barred show of their lives, it is the dead figure of Simon Fuge which reigns supreme over the whole short story, the fixed idea in Loring's mind being to discover what happened that one night on the lake, in whose company Fuge was, and how those who knew him more intimately will react to the news of his death. Such an obsession is

explained by the fact that, in Loring's mind, Fuge's theatricality was the sure sign of the artistic or creative urge which Fuge satisfied in his paintings, but which Loring feels was crushed or thwarted by the excessively practical and prosaic atmosphere of the Five Towns — even by the Brindleys and their friends, in whose hearts the news of Fuge's death creates no stir and awakens no cherished memory.

Indeed, Loring finds it hard to believe that Fuge could find it in him to act theatrically or create romance in the midst of a nearby lake. As he puts it, even Fuge could not forget that "Ilam Lake was in the middle of a country called England, and not the ornamental water in the Bois de Boulogne!" (103) Likewise, Loring painfully sees that the spirit of the place is starting to take its toll on his friend Brindley's sensitivity to the arts. He remarks:

#2: I could only gather, vaguely, that what he considered the wrong-headedness, the blindness, the lack of true perception, of his public was beginning to produce in his individuality a faint trace of permanent soreness. I regretted it. And I showed my sympathy with him by asking questions about the design and construction of the museum (a late addition to the [Wedgwood] Institution), of which I happened to know that he had been the architect. (122)

For Bennett, then, the artistic urge, is not a given but a precious gift that needs to be saved from the destructive forces of prosaic living. One emblem of this unimaginative kind of life which humans can also live is given by Annie Brett, the barmaid of a private bar whom Loring is eager to meet because she is actually one of the two girls who spent the night with Fuge on Ilam Lake. Now the interesting point is that, for a change, Bennett uses theatrical metaphors to underline the artificial quality of everything that is related to Annie, whom he sees as cold, insincere, impenetrable, and tragic. The very description of the barroom speaks volumes:

#3: It can be described in a breath: Three perpendicular planes. [...] Reckon all that as the stage, and the rest of the room as auditorium. But the stage of a private bar is more mysterious than the stage of a theatre. You are closer to it, and yet it is far less approachable. The edge of the counter is more sacred than the footlights. Impossible to imagine yourself leaping over it. Impossible to imagine yourself in that cloistered place behind it. Impossible to imagine how the priestesses got themselves into that place, or that they ever leave it. They are always there, they are always the same. You may go into a theatre when it is empty and dark; but did you ever go into a private bar that was empty and dark? (124)

The charge against Annie is staggering because Loring sees her as nothing less than a refutation, or a "condemnation" (126), of everything for which Fuge stands, though she somewhat redeems herself a few minutes later when, on hearing that Fuge has died, her eyes become moist, thus proving to Loring that there is still some humanity in her because she momentarily remembers that "[o]nce she had lived" (128).

The fulfillment of the heroines' craving for a form of art or theatricality in their lives is also at the heart of the two diverging stories which I selected from *Tales of the Five Towns*. In "Clarice of the Autumn Concerts," the short story of a young woman who aspires to become a concert pianist, this urge unfortunately goes unsatisfied. Clara, the daughter of an earthenware manufacturer, leaves the stage triumphantly after an apparently successful rendition of a Tchaikovsky sonata, but her dreams of "artistic ascendancy" end up lying in fragments at her feet (113) when her performance falls into oblivion and she becomes a "perhaps not unhappy" wife and mother, as the narrator concludes. No reason is given for Clara's failure, except the fact that the concert organizer rapaciously uses fledgling artists like her to give unpaid performances — so that she only returns to the obscurity from which she never had a chance to escape.

The same somber atmosphere and up and down oppositions prevail in "Sisters Qita" where Selina, the narrator, appears to be trapped at the top of the ivory tower that she has built for herself. Never letting herself be interviewed — except once when a bold, unimpressed reporter from Bursley

reminds her of her past —, she has put the world at a distance and looks down on it from her trapeze or her ropes. She also feels betrayed when Sally, the second artist in the double act that they perform to packed houses, claims her freedom.

As the reader understands, what is at stake in both these stories is the idea that performing as an artist on a stage allows the characters to try and sever the ties that bind them to some original hurt or to the deterministic influence of the social class, the family or the city in which they were born. It is no coincidence that Selina thinks of her "silly infancy" in the Five Towns when she is about to commit suicide by swinging across the hall on the blue rope which she previously fretted with a blade. The "strange Something" (109) which made her an artist from the age of fifteen prevented her from adapting to the atmosphere of the Five Towns — an atmosphere and a love/hate relationship from which she vainly seeks refuge, it seems, in faraway places like Budapest.

In both stories, theatricality is therefore seen as a way to turn drab, monotonous realities into more colorful living, even though it remains unclear which woman's fate — the rope artist's or the would-be concert pianist's — is more enviable. In this sense, Bennett presents theatricality as a human instinct whose origin, development and aftermath are unknown, which makes his view quite similar to that of Nikolai Evreinov, the Russian dramatist and theoretician (1879-1953) whose essays were roughly contemporary with Bennett's Five Towns short stories<sup>3</sup>. As Josette Féral explains in her essay on theatricality:

#4: Cet instinct qu'Evreinov nomme ailleurs la « volonté de théâtre » est une impulsion irrésistible, que l'on trouve chez tous les hommes (cf. *le Théâtre pour soi*) au même titre que le jeu l'est chez les animaux (cf. *le Théâtre chez les animaux*). Il s'agit donc d'une qualité universelle et présente chez l'homme avant tout acte proprement esthétique. Elle est le goût du travestissement, le plaisir à générer l'illusion, à projeter des simulacres de soi et du réel vers l'autre. Dans cet acte qui le transporte et le transforme, l'homme semble être le point de départ de cette théâtralité : il en est la source et le premier objet ; il offre des simulacres de soi. (Josette Féral, "La théâtralité : Recherche sur la spécificité du langage théâtral," Paris : Poétique n°75, septembre 1988, 347-61, p. 360.)

It therefore seems that, though Bennett avowedly only meant these three collections of tales as an elucidation of the characteristics of the Potteries, the reader not only gets a sense of their peculiarities but also sees Bennett's image superimposed on them.

Indeed, defining his self and city at the same time, Bennett theatricalizes his protagonists in ways which endear them even more to the reader. He often instills sheer energy and passion into them, makes them break the moulds into which society would cast them, and gives them the instinctive urge to make the best of the life that has been apportioned to them. Their exuberance and will to live make them stand out, and act as signs that a more meaningful and poetical life is within reach if one will only try.

As could be expected, the forces of inertia and conformity always create friction and tension between those individuals and society's interests, so that theatricality and the artistic urge are endless sources of doubt, conflict, isolation, resignation, hard-won victories or dearly-bought defeats. But it does not seem that Bennett's protagonists have a choice: they must try and take the consequences of their actions.

The perusal of these tales can therefore be described as a vivifying insight into a mind for which theatricality and creativity corresponded to a heightening of the human experience. Therefore one may choose to lament the fact that only Loring takes an interest in the little Fuge painting of which he catches a glimpse in the local museum, hanging unnoticed and uncared-for in a corner. But as Loring makes clear at the very end of the short story, a more optimistic outlook is possible:

#5: He [= Fuge] may have been a boaster, and a chatterer, and a man who suffered from cold feet at the wrong moments! And the Five Towns may have got the better of him, now. But that portrait of the little girl in the Wedgwood institution is waiting there, right in the middle of the

Five Towns. And one day the Five Towns will have to 'give it best'. They can say what they like! ... What eyes the fellow had, when he was in the right company! (141)



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<sup>1</sup> The 2005 Echo Library edition of all three collections of short stories, printed in Cirencester, has been used here: *Tales*, 122 p.; *Grim Smile*, 146 p.; *Matador*, 202 p.

<sup>2</sup> "Ces images sont théâtrales, en ce qu'elles concentrent sur un point — le "punctum" barthésien ? — une grande énergie. On a pu définir fort justement le théâtre comme une dépense anormale d'énergie. De là viendrait la théâtralité, fille naturelle de l'adrénaline." Anne Larue, "Avant-Propos," *Théâtralité et genres littéraires*, Poitiers: La Licorne, 1996, 336 p., p. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> *An Introduction to Monodrama* came out in 1909, *The Theatre as Such* in 1912, and *The Theater for Oneself* in 1915.