

The Theater of Trauma: American Modernist Drama and the Psychological Struggle for the American Mind, 1900-1930. By Michael Cotsell. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. 377 pp. \$80.95 cloth.

Although hardly in need of another subtitle, Michael Cotsell's expansive study of psychological dissociation in modernist drama might well be called "beyond Freud." While acknowledging that Freud "brought into focus . . . a realm that made Modernism possible" (52)—namely trauma—Cotsell suggests that the institutionalizing of Freud's theories eclipsed their primary value, namely, the articulation of terror, trauma, and the subsequent psychological dissociation in response to traumatic events. Preferable to Freud's notion of repression based on unpleasant, even unacceptable self-knowledge, is French psychologist Pierre Janet's concept of dissociation, which "implies the splitting-off of painful experience" (6). It is this dissociative response that animates Cotsell's reconsideration of theatrical modernism in which he argues that "the representation of trauma and its dissociative consequences is the primary characteristic of American modernist drama in the first three decades of the twentieth century" (5). So entwined is dissociation within modernism, Cotsell claims, that "the demise of dissociationism as a cultural influence and model brought about the end of modernist drama proper" (7-8).

To his credit, Cotsell anticipates the possible objections to this broad categorization by devoting the first third of the book to establishing the connections among trauma, dissociation, and modernism, especially in the theatre. His introduction locates both the drama and dissociative theory in their historical contexts, and Part 1 charts the rise and fall

of Janet and dissociative theory's cultural influence, particularly the dissemination and reception of his ideas in the US. Although Cotsell's introduction to the major writings of Janet and fellow "dissociationists" (19) provides a useful overview, the sheer amount of material he attempts to cover obscures the larger purpose, and he occasionally adopts an unnecessarily combative tone. Some readers may object to Cotsell's surprisingly vehement reaction to recent feminist writers whose work on female hysteria has omitted Janet and the concept of male hysteria. For example, in reaction to Juliet Mitchell's assertion that "Hysteria has not then disappeared," Cotsell responds, "Mitchell fails to reflect on the long feminist denial—including her own" (30). Cotsell may well be right in this, but his discussion of Mitchell's own book is too brief to make this clear.

Part 2 of Cotsell's book attempts to chart a parallel development to that of dissociationist theory in the theatre itself. Chapter 3 considers the emergence of psychological drama in American realism, identifying many lesser-known plays influenced by the prevailing psychological theories; Chapter 4 follows this psychological influence from the middle-class social problem plays of realism into American expressionism and what Cotsell identifies as "modernist form." The remaining two-thirds of the book is devoted to the plays themselves, and Cotsell is comprehensive in his list. As may be expected, Eugene O'Neill figures prominently throughout, appearing in multiple chapters on theatre in Greenwich Village, the Provincetown Players, and Broadway, and emerging at last as a Freudian. But Cotsell also devotes attention to drama of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Susan Glaspell, John Howard Lawson, and Sophie Treadwell. Through the lens of dissociationism, Cotsell establishes the playwrights' dramatic oeuvres in the context of their contemporaries and theatrical collaborators. The attention to the theatrical framework surrounding his analysis of the plays both underscores the significance of Janet's theories for modernist drama, most especially relation to scenic design.

Given the amount of material he covers, the range of plays, and Cotsell's obvious enthusiasm for Janet's psychological theories, the book's organization is somewhat disappointing. Despite my investment in Cotsell's thesis, I found myself continually returning to early sections of the book in order to make sense of his later arguments, and finding myself stymied. The early section outlining the influence of the dissociationists progresses in an overlapping, and at times redundant, chronology; the details, many fascinating on their own, often cloud the larger argument necessary to move smoothly through the later dramatic analyses. For example, Cotsell's history of the psychological automatism in dissociationist thought is quite engaging, but here, as in much of the book, he tries to do too much at once. Take, for example, his introduction to Janet's influential *L'Automatisme*

psychologique (1889):

The context of Janet's work is important. Eugène Azam's (1822-99) studies from 1858-93 of a famous case of multiple personality, Félicité X, had provoked both the utilitarian Hippolyte Taine (*De L'intelligence*, 1870) and Théodule-Armand Ribot (*La psychologique anglaise contemporaine*, 1870) to argue from "the various state in which direct intuition of the self is lost" in Félicité's [sic] case that the mind was essentially an automatism. In contrast, Janet's uncle, Paul, read such evidence as a case of "an extension of dreams or somnambulism" which affect "the fundamental self." (It was Azam who coined the term *dédoublement de la personnalité*, meaning the splitting off of part of the personality.) (27)

This foundation is both compelling and crucial to Cotsell's overall argument. He connects psychological automatism to Harold B. Segel's history of the puppet and automaton in modernist drama, specifically Edward Gordon Craig's *Übermarionette* (though strangely not to European experiments in puppetry and automatism, such as Walter Gropius and Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus theatre experiments). But without adequate introduction of the names and references Cotsell cites, the reader must accumulate diverse dissociationist data quickly, often tangentially. One wishes that the series of names and key works of Janet and his most important contemporaries and followers unfolded a bit more linearly, and with greater attention to the most prominent of such titles, making clear the sequence of works and their connection to one another.

That one wants to know more in a book of nearly 400 pages is a testament to the significance of Cotsell's topic. The book's jacket claims *Theater of Trauma* to be a "ground-breaking rereading of the relations between psychology and drama" and so it is in many ways. In a field long associated with Freud, it is intriguing to revisit these texts in light of their traumatic history, and Janet's theories open up new domains of interest within well-considered plays. Yet, Cotsell's ambitious density limits other important aspects of the book-length study. His readings of individual plays could easily be expanded (some plays receive only a few pages of discussion). Cotsell may be correct when he concludes that the "present American academy offers little encouragement to the study of dissociation" (292), but his initial study in this area should encourage other scholars to refine and concentrate his argument that modernist drama rose and fell with dissociative thought.

—Sarah Bay-Cheng, SUNY-Buffalo