

Routing the Roots and Growth of the Dramatic Instinct

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Abstract: The idea of a “dramatic instinct” is routed from its nineteenth-century roots in early childhood education and child study psychology through early twentieth-century theatre education. This historically contextualized routing suggests the functional purposes of pretense for human freedom, self-preservation, and survival. Theatre scholars may influence the discipline of cognitive psychology by employing these philosophical and epistemological theories to unpack the role of empathy in aesthetic experiences with today’s spectators.

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Robert Findlay whose text, *Century of Innovation*, co-authored with Oscar Brockett, taught me to innovate by taking scholarly and artistic risks.

Routing the Roots and Growth of the Dramatic Instinct

The term “dramatic instinct” refers simply to the human drive to dramatize. Dramatic (or pretend) play appears spontaneously in early childhood with few cultural variations as a provocative mystery of the human mind. For what functional purposes does this instinct for drama possibly serve humankind? After decades of innumerable investigations, developmental psychologists have concluded that this instinct for pretense is innate, universal, and cross-cultural, regardless of parental modeling (Lillard 188). When and how did the idea (or episteme) of a “dramatic instinct” emerge? Who first coined this term and what historical conditions gave rise to its interpretative meanings?

As one might expect, the term “dramatic instinct” first appeared in lexicons in regard to actors, as well as writers, singers, and composers, during the 1820s. However, its initial artistic meanings became entangled in “nature-nurture” debates—a Darwinian binary first expressed in 1876—when its theatrical roots branched into early childhood education and psychology. While one root grew in Kindergartens during the early nineteenth century, another blossomed in the budding discipline of psychology later as scientists began to theorize the role this instinct played in hereditary genetics and socializing environments. By the 1890s, “child study” psychologists had fully appropriated the concept, until two pivotal women re-routed its artistic roots back to theatre during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The intriguing story of its cross-disciplinary travels from Germany via France and England to the United States reveals how psychologists and educators sought to explain and harness the functions of dramatic play for their respective purposes. By routing the dramatic instinct through its historical contexts, I will argue why theatre scholars and psychologists need to jointly investigate child drama to more fully

explain its aesthetic purposes in human development. But before giving away the surprise of the term's originator, I'll begin by recounting how the idea of a dramatic instinct or "imitative impulse" came to be rooted in nature-nurture discourses.

Aristotle first conceived mimesis as an "instinct of imitation" "implanted in man from childhood" through which he "learns his earliest lessons" (Poetics 4.2-3). Yet he viewed children as "unfinished and incomplete" beings in need of education (Tress 21). Likewise, having detected a child's desired "attempt of imitation," Johann Pestalozzi began to systemize "object lessons" in formal education in 1805 after Rousseau's principles (99). His student, Friedrich Fröbel, agreed that young children need to be educated, "but not by the dead way of imitation, of copying, but by the living way of individual, free, active development and cultivation" (11). So he revised his mentor's methods by emphasizing children's creative natures and planting the first Kindergartens throughout Germany.

By mid-century, Darwin's theory of evolution led scientists to align children's "primitive" play instincts with those of animals. This child-animal conflation appears to have been initiated by Herbert Spencer, a self-taught British psychologist who sought to extend evolutionary principles in psychology. In 1872, he recalled coming upon "a quotation from a German author to the effect that the aesthetic sentiments originate from the play-impulse. I do not remember the name of the author . . . [b]ut the statement itself has remained with me, as being one which, if not literally true, is yet the adumbration of the truth." He went on to explain from "whence arises this play-impulse" by concluding that this "superfluous and useless exercise of faculties" serves no purpose other than to expend "surplus energy" for its own sake of immediate gratification (627-30). I suspect that Spencer arrived at these conclusions having

lasted only three months as a teacher at a Pestalozzi-based school in London. So much for Mr. “Survival of the Fittest”!

In Germany, Wilhelm Wundt, the founding patriarch of psychology, believed firmly that this nascent discipline should never be separated from its philosophical roots. From 1857 through his death in 1920, Wundt planted the theoretical and methodological groundwork for laboratory practices in experimental psychology, first in Heidelberg, and then at the University of Leipzig. Throughout multiple editions of his seminal 1874 text, Principles of Physiological Psychology, he discussed the human impulse (Trieb) to play (Spiel). Men from around the world flocked to study with Wundt, including William James, G. Stanley Hall, and James Mark Baldwin, the patriarchs of psychology in the United States. In turn, they imitated their mentor by teaching psychology courses, establishing university laboratories, writing college textbooks, launching journals, and founding the American Psychological Association in 1892.

While teaching at Harvard University, William James signed a book contract with Holt publishers in 1878, but due to serious illnesses, it took him another twelve years before he could complete his classic textbook on The Principles of Psychology in 1890. Here he wrote: “The dramatic impulse, the tendency to pretend one is someone else, contains this [aesthetic] pleasure of mimicry as one of its elements. Another element seems to be a peculiar sense of power in stretching one’s own personality so as to include that of a strange person. In young children this instinct often knows no bounds.” He went on to describe the dramas of his three-year-old son, noting that “He outwore this impulse after a time; but while it lasted, it had every appearance of being the automatic result of ideas, often suggested by perceptions, working out irresistible motor effects.” Based on his son’s actions, James held that this “very intense instinct,” so

“undisguised” and “rife with young children,” “has very little connection with sympathy, but rather more with pugnacity” or man’s “ferocious” desire to fight “ruthlessly” like “beasts” (409).

Meanwhile, in 1879, James’s former doctoral student, G. Stanley Hall, had also observed “what Spencer calls the play-instinct” (170). Fifteen years later, Hall’s doctoral student, Frederick Tracy, published his 1893 dissertation on The Psychology of Childhood, noting very briefly:

The dramatic instinct is very strong in childhood, though stronger and earlier in some children than in others. Children are born actors. Their lively imagination and strong hereditary tendency to imitation lead them, even before the first year of their life has gone, to perform many curious movements and gestures. In their plays, children constantly personify, represent, dramatize, assume characters, and assign fictitious characters to other persons and things. (55) (emphasis in original)

Tracy’s primary source for the term lay with Bernard Pérez, a French educator who claimed to “belong to no school,” but who also found himself “most often” quoting from Darwin and Spencer in The First Three Years of Childhood (vi). Pérez’s widely popular 1878 text sparked the interest of James Sully, a British child psychologist, who agreed that “the aesthetic interest [in infant life] must be subordinated to the scientific” (iv). Yet when translating this text to English in 1885, it was Alice M. Christie who chose the term “dramatic instinct” in lieu of Pérez’s “dramatic tendency” (la tendance dramatique) (276-79). Five years earlier, Pérez had moderated what he now termed the “dramatic imagination” (l’imagination dramatique) as an “aesthetic sense” in his 1880 text, L’Education dès le Berceau (151-58). His reviewer, Frederick Pollock, noted that “whatever the historical significance of the impulse to mimicry may be,

[Pérez] is of the opinion that it ought by no means to be allowed to develop itself without bounds” (284). Indeed, by 1888 in his next text, L’Art de la Poésie chez l’Enfant, Pérez elaborated upon la tendance dramatique and maintained that children should perform fables and histories only under the guidance of watchful teachers (209-39).

Meanwhile, when the Prussian government banned Kindergartens in 1851 as an atheistic and socialist threat to its citizens, German women transplanted Fröbel’s educational gardens onto US and British soil. Having observed Margarethe Meyer Schurz’s home school in Watertown, Wisconsin, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody became an evangelical convert and quickly spread the news across the United States with her sister, Mary Tyler Peabody Mann, wife of the common-school proponent, Horace Mann. Together they published The Moral Culture of Infancy and Kindergarten Guide in 1863, which led Milton Bradley to manufacture Fröbel’s “gifts” into specific toys that literally colored and directed children’s play solely for utilitarian purposes. Thus, rather than allowing children’s dramatic instincts to flourish freely using their own found objects to enact unscripted dramas, educators constrained their dramatic play by employing Fröbel’s scripted lessons with prescribed toys in public classrooms all across the country. To keep the “exuberant strength” of child’s play further under adult control and supervision, Progressive educators and social workers also contained children’s “unruly” bodies inside the spatial boundaries of newly constructed playgrounds. The playground movement spread like wildfire from Boston, New York, and Chicago from the 1880s through the 1920s and thereby squelched the otherwise fertile and private grounds of children’s dramatic instincts in outdoor urban environments.

But by 1878, Fröbel’s patron, Baroness Bertha Marenholtz-Bülow, believed that

“incompetent” Kindergarten teachers had “perverted” his educational theories, and they needed a “renewed interpretation” of children’s natures (xii). So she wrote Child and Child-Nature, translated by our versatile Alice Christie (Pérez’s translator), and explained young instinctive impulses as follows:

. . . At the beginning of existence the child of nature rules in man as instinctive life, as an impulse which awakens the will—at first only as an ungoverned force of nature. Self-preservation is almost exclusively the unconscious object of all childish utterances. And we have no right to blame children for this so-called egoism; had not an all-wise providence implanted this impulse so strongly in the human breast, how could weak, helpless beings preserve their existence in the midst of the countless perils of life? It is, however, the business of education to moderate this instinct of self-preservation, and by the exercise of the capacity for loving, to lead the child out of the narrow range of personal life into that of the child of humanity, i.e. the social being who constitutes a member of human society. In this sphere feeling and reason bear rule, and by these the will is guided, and pointed to a higher aim than mere personal well-being. (20)

(emphases in original)

Here the Baroness provided a cogent synthesis of our originator’s otherwise sprawling treatise.

Psychological interest in the nature, scope, and significance of “the imitative functions of mankind” grew as Josiah Royce, James’s colleague at Harvard, posed a series of nature-nurture questions to “a larger public” in an 1894 issue of The Century magazine. He wondered, for instance, “Of what use can the imitative functions, at any age, be made for the development of the child’s intellect and will?” (137-8). James Mark Baldwin, who had just completed his text,

Mental Development in the Child and the Race, replied that imitation arises as a function of “social heredity” whereby children imagine, plot, and copy every dramatic situation directly from within their family contexts. Having observed “the extraordinary fertility of the child mind” in his two young daughters (born in 1889 and 1891), Baldwin interpreted the uses of their domestic dramas as “direct lessons” from parents. While playing “mama,” four-year-old Helen learned “a lived-out exercise in sympathy, in altruistic self-denial, in the healthy elevation of her sense of self to the dignity of kindly offices, in the sense of responsibility and agency, in the stimulus to original effort and the designing of means to ends”—all of which “is quite lost in wretched self-consciousness in us adults when we personate other characters.” As for two-year-old “baby” Elizabeth, she “obeys without command or sanction [and] takes in from her sister the elements of personal suggestion”—all of which alludes to “the sense of variety and social equality which real life afterward confirms and proceeds upon” (308-10) (his emphasis).

While James left the “pugnacious” uses of drama unresolved, Baldwin was relying upon the “instinct or impulse of imitation,” its intention-driven actions, and its flights of “fancy” or unreality to cultivate his developmental theories of genetic epistemology, social psychology, and reality itself. In 1894, he introduced the germinal (now postmodern) notion of socially constructed knowledge by delineating the “mental operations” through which anyone comes to know oneself and others. Through imitation children act intentionally upon objects with others and organize their “sensorimotor” experiences into “schemes” or “symbolic representations” through the life-long processes of “assimilation” and “accommodation.” “That great theatre of experience,” he wrote, “is a practice ground in imitative semblances of what is afterwards life’s serious business; and the young learn how such things feel by these imitations of them, and so get

prepared for their actual onset in later life” (Mental 262). Three years later, he grounded “the sources of the emotions” in “the theatre of sentiment” by which imitative persons experience and use “reflective sympathy” to sweep away “the external and internal boundaries between you and me” (Social 223-4).

Baldwin found affirmation for his socio-evolutionary views of imitation in Karl Groos’s wildly popular 1898 tract, The Play of Man, translated to English by Elizabeth L. Baldwin in 1901 (Preface iii-iv). Based on Groos’s account, he considered the “play-impulse” (Spieltrieb) to be a “better” term than Spencer’s “play-instinct” in his hugely collaborative Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology (vol. 2, 304; vol. 1, 519). Yet throughout his own works, he preferred to rely on the term “imitation” which he defined as any repetition or “circular reaction” in thought and action that reinstates a copy (e.g., Mental 290).

Unlike Spencer, Groos appears to have read our originator’s treatise; yet like Spencer, he confined its characterization of Spieltrieb to “an aimless expenditure of exuberant strength”—and thereby rejected the surplus energy theory for not meeting the “necessary or universal condition of play.” Instead, Groos interpreted children’s dramatic play less philosophically and more pragmatically from biological, psychological, sociological, pedagogical, and aesthetic standpoints. First, he observed children’s “capacity for illusion,” their complete lack of self-conscious deception, and how young girls and boys respectively exemplified “love and conflict as [their] chief motives.” Yet because he doubted “there would be any nursing plays among children without parental models,” he concluded, like Baldwin, that the “imitative impulse is fully developed only when imagination supplements the copy.” Although he maintained that “The imitative impulse is an inborn faculty resembling instinct” from a biological standpoint, he

dismissed Aristotelian imitation “as universally a mark of play” because imitation may exist without illusion (300-92).

To explain the mystery of illusory play, Groos combined psychological and aesthetic standpoints and concluded that it requires aesthetic perception, willful attention, sensorimotor imagination, and intense feelings of self-absorbed pleasure. However, he divorced children’s dramatic play from artistic production because artists work at their life’s calling through “a long and painful process” which “ceases to be playful” and “which to the mass of mankind seems unworthy of serious effort,” even while admitting that artistic works are “rooted in playful experimentation and imitation.” Finally, from sociological and pedagogical standpoints, he concluded that, above all, dramatic play makes the attainment and refinement of intelligence possible through practice, especially when Fröbelian teachers direct children’s play “toward what is good and useful” to establish their “ethical individuality.” Thus, like Pérez and Baldwin, Groos maintained that the biological play-drive merely serves as a “pre-exercise” for practicing and mastering basic human survival skills in preparation for life’s more serious, utilitarian works that may include artistic creations for aesthetic pleasures (393-404).

Yet beyond the spontaneous pleasures and “semblant” reconstructions of children’s imitations, Baldwin sought a “higher” mental organization and more comprehensive “end-state” of human development that could both mediate and reconcile the persisting dualisms between mind and body, intellect and emotion, inner and outer realities, self and others, truth and falsity, and moral judgments. In 1903, he boldly staked a claim that had been brewing in his mind since 1886 when he translated Théodule Ribot’s account of German Psychology Today: The aesthetic experience transcends all dualistic oppositions between scientific facts (Compte’s positivism)

and Progressive values (James's pragmatism). Following his theatre metaphor, he wrote,

In the essential union of two points of view respectively of the 'producer' and the 'spectator' from which a work of art may be approached, we find in our experience the richer whole. In aesthetic contemplation there is the fulfillment at once of the demands for a system of relationships essentially finished and formulated—something completely true—and also the satisfaction of a genetic ideal of perfect outcome—something divinely fair! . . . [I]n aesthetic appreciation we reach a form of immediacy of experience in which the dualism of external [objective] and subjective is blurred and tends ideally, at least, to disappear. ("Mind" 245-6)

To explain the dialectic progression of human consciousness, he formulated "successive stages of cognitive development" based on "logical modes" or "domains" of thinking. From this 1904 schematic framework grew his three-volume landscape entitled, Thought and Things: A Study of the Development and Meaning of Thought or Genetic Logic (1906-1911), and a fourth volume that elaborated upon his Genetic Theory of Reality (1915) that he called "pancalism." Although he did not attach particular ages to each "pre- to hyper-logical" stage, his account of aesthetic experience grew out of the cognitive nature and social nurturing of children's imitative play (Broughton 403).

But in the 1890s, dramatic orators, such as Samuel Silas Curry, dismissed child study scientists altogether—and thereby failed to intervene and redress widespread misconceptions about the originating well-springs of pretense in theatre. In his 1896 text entitled, Imagination and the Dramatic Instinct, Curry believed that, "The too exclusive study of science, however, is in turn slowly leading to the realization that of the inadequacy of facts to develop the whole man

harmoniously and completely. Slowly but surely our leading educators are coming to feel that science alone is insufficient for the complete development of the whole man” (14). As evidence for his divisive claim, he quoted Darwin’s initial pleasures and subsequent “nausea” from reading Shakespeare and never referenced any child psychologists. Nevertheless, Curry traveled along Baldwin’s road by proffering that a child’s universal instinct and action-driven imitations might be better called “dramatic assimilation” (315); for “only by imaginative insight and dramatic sympathy, causing the identification of ourselves with others . . . [does the] dramatic instinct really [have] any play or expression” (318). Although he did not mention James’s (1884) germinal theory of emotion, he explained how “emotional truthfulness” arises from the union of thinking, feeling, and willing actions into dramatic realization—in keeping with what would become Stanislavsky’s acting method (356).

By the turn of the century then, the dramatic instinct had grown into a veritable forest as schools of education trained scores of Kindergarten and elementary school teachers in its principles (e.g., Fleming; Payne). But one social worker, Alice Minnie Herts, “had always marveled why this same instinct . . . had not been organized by the educator to meet the increasing need of the adolescent as well as the child mind” (2). So in 1903 she founded the Children’s Educational Theatre and hired Emma Sheridan Fry, a professional actress from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, to direct productions with young immigrants in New York’s Lower East side neighborhood (Tukesbury).

Despite its phenomenal success, Herts believed that their “evolving theory” required “far greater authority from experts” (86). So she arranged a series of lectures on the dramatic instinct in relation to theatre and education in 1909 at the Lyceum Theatre. G. Stanley Hall reiterated his

infamous theory that “Little children are recapitulating a past stage of existence long since obsolete for adults” (Herts 101), and Percival Chubb expounded upon why “We must give the children a chance to create their own world of play” (Herts 96). While decrying “the result of Puritan prejudice” in the “Anglo-Saxon tradition” of theatre, Percy Mackaye argued that a Theatre for [and with] Children and Young People could best propagate the most “effectual” means of “educating a democracy in artistic insight” (Herts 125-28). For his part, George Pierce Baker explained why children should perform Shakespeare under the direction of “a competent, intelligent coach” whom he believed could be found “without serious difficulty” (Herts 115).

Yet “competent and intelligent” acting and directing coaches of Fry’s professionally trained caliber could not be found so easily, for Baker himself, and others who subsequently established university theatre departments, largely ignored the training of K-12 teachers as they debated their “craft-or-culture” missions. From 1899 through 1921, fifty-five colleges and universities offered general play production courses, but only half as many provided elective courses in acting. Not until 1912 were courses in directing and teacher training made available to prospective teachers—and at only twelve institutions scattered across the country (Hamar 205; Berkeley “Changing”).

It is little wonder then that in 1915 the National Council of Teachers of English debated whether “dramatics” belonged in the public school English curriculum (Barnes et al.). Despite Fry’s explication of her directing methods published in her Educational Dramatics handbook two years earlier, all too many “incompetent” teachers simply drilled young actors on copying their imitations rather than inducing students’ own, more organic, expressions from intensive script analyses (Dorey). The excessive time it took to mount full play productions was simply not

changing students' indiscriminate tastes for "cheap entertainments" as English teachers had hoped. Likewise, Hall's doctoral student, Elnora Whitman Curtis, found children's preferential uses of their dramatic instincts running rampant across fields of various contexts in her expansive multi-media survey, The Dramatic Instinct in Education.

Subsequent teaching manuals and more "suitable" plays for child actors also failed to alter perceptions over the aesthetic utility of the dramatic instinct (e.g., Hilliard, McCormick, and Oglebay; Moses). Amateur productions of adult-written plays for children, performed by Junior League women in elementary schools beginning in 1912, literally took the stage away from child actors and further denied them any justifiable reason for performing their own original plays in school (Bedard). With Baker's advice to keep the "hard labor" of play production for "pure pleasure" separate from the "regular curriculum," high school productions became "extra-curricular activities" with primary support from the National Thespian Society founded in 1929. By the 1930s, Elbridge Gerry's campaign to banish all child actors from the professional stage, begun way back in 1874, had finally succeeded in relegating the dramatic instinct to amateur recreations (Zelizer 85-96). Instead, young "stage-struck" actors, as well as future acting teachers, had routed their instinctual talents to Hollywood's bursting film industry.

Thus, what started out as a promising future for the dramatic instinct in middle childhood ended—with no evolutionary evidence to support its hereditary claims. Not even Winifred Ward and her nationally organized advocates could revive educational interest in "creative dramatics," despite her optimism that the "psychological moment," once lost during the century's first decades, was "just arriving" in Progressive education (1). Despite Herts's attempt to graft child psychologists and theatre educators, each disciplinary field had already taken its separate routes.

For these reasons, few (if any) elementary schools require drama in their curriculums today. As Patti Gillespie reminds us, university theatre “lost part of its head” by turning away from K-12 education entirely by the 1960s—literally by disregarding the mindful lessons of the dramatic instinct once espoused by child psychologists (xi). It is little wonder then that only nine percent of adults attend live theatre today and only four percent read plays for leisure—a situation the National Endowment for the Arts calls “an erosion in cultural and civic participation” (Reading xii; All America’s 7).

So what became of our originator’s thesis that the cultivation of children’s instinctive play-drives could emancipate individuals from their political constraints and thereby preserve human life from self-annihilation? Our originator, Friedrich Schiller, well knew from first-hand experience all about tyranny. As a youth, he had found freedom in playwriting when his soldiering father marched him off to military school; yet his first play, The Robbers (1782), cost him a prison sentence and banishment from writing. When the French Revolution disintegrated into the Jacobin Reign of Terror, Schiller responded by writing his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1793), for “if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom” (Letter 2:5). To resolve these respective problems, he theorized that we are only fully human when we dramatize our “beautiful souls” through our play-drives (Spieltrieb)—the transcendent unification of what Kant had separated as our sensory- and formal-drives (Stofftrieb and Formtrieb). The healing power of the aesthetic play-drive both complements and mitigates the opposing forces of emotion and reason by literally re-forming our sensuous natures with developing reason and morality, thereby raising aesthetic consciousness

through both aesthetic contemplation and artistic production. By this process of aesthetic education, autonomous individuals may experience psychological and socializing freedom from within and ethical and political revolutions from without in order to actualize true democratic freedom and preserve the human race from self-extinction (Murray).

With equally idealistic fervor, James Mark Baldwin had also found the seed of human freedom growing in children's fanciful dramas that blossomed into the self-reflective beauty of aesthetic experiences. Yet rather than follow Schiller's route, Baldwin had taken Hegel's high-way by actualizing his phenomenology of the mind's logic into an all-encompassing dialectical synthesis of epistemological dualisms. In addition to re-cultivating Kant and his critics, Baldwin found a satisfying theoretical methodology in Hegel's stages of self-knowledge embodied in historical and cultural contexts. Just as the "thesis" of the French Revolution had resulted in its antithetical Reign of Terror, so too, Hegel speculated that the educative end or moral aim of art, which purports to make bad men good, could backfire when art makes seductive sins look beautiful, depending on spectators' interpretations. Baldwin confronted this vexing (postmodern) problem of subjective interpretation in his 1915 text on pancalism by examining how interpretations of reality develop through pre- to hyper-logical stages in relation to minds who know and distinguish known "absolute" facts and "relative" values.

To reconcile the realities of colliding facts and conflicting values, Baldwin speculated that only in the aesthetic domain may spectators seek and find individual freedom in four senses of meaning: 1) by escaping their personal struggles; 2) by "asserting" their "autonomic" selves into arts experiences; 3) by indulging in and controlling their "self-illusions" of "semblant" realities; and, 4) by "personalizing" their imitative instincts based on the principle of circular

reaction—all in relation to the “independent objectivity” of physically detached art objects. Although he did not delve into the aesthetic realm of theatre, he pointed out that, during performances, spectators experience “a certain vibration of the mind between the ordinary and prosaic system of actualities and the dramatic situation depicted on the stage” that occurs in “the mind’s eye” or dramatic imagination. Owning the freedom to determine their own realities, they idealize and contemplate the immediacy of others’ imitative actions in that “theatre of sentiment” now known as Einfühlung (empathy).¹ After the play, they experience “a violent return, a reaction amounting sometimes to a shock, to the partial interests and concerns of every-day life” and reflect upon significant meanings that refer back to their natural worlds. Having reconciled “the true and the good” in the semblant scheme of make-believe constructions, they “return from the ideal completeness of a fully organised [sic] aesthetic whole to the sphere of relativeness, opposition, incompleteness” (Genetic 281-2).

While Hegel had criticized Romantic art for failing to achieve the transcendent spirituality of Classical art, Baldwin side-stepped the maelstrom of conflicting aesthetic judgments over Modern art from his new vantage point in Paris.² Instead, he owned that each artwork “produces its own special effect [and] may be variously judged, each for itself; but they cannot be weighed synchronously as two different but related artistic units . . . without losing their character as independent works of art” (Genetic 282). From this proposition, he held that

The work of art is appreciated as having the same meaning and value for all competent observers. Now so far as the individual reads a mental life into the thing of beauty, he speaks not for himself alone, but for the community, for all men; for the aesthetic consciousness in general, not for his private taste and judgment alone. True it does

express his private taste; but that is not its whole meaning. He feels he is the organ of the larger circle, of the universal taste which works in him. The mental life which his sympathetic feeling reads into the object becomes a representative mental life. Its assertion of worth issues from a typical tribunal of judgment, not from a private bureau of opinion. (Genetic 298-9)

In effect, following his critical readings into Kant's Critique of Judgment (1790), Baldwin left the reconciliation of divergent aesthetic tastes to the community of "competent" arts critics whose moral duty it was to re-construct "aesthetic intuitions" based on "the rules of valid art and the norms of its appreciation" ("Autobiography" 14; cf. Parsons). In leaving the vagaries of arts criticism behind, he had also moved far afield from the cultural community of child critics whose tastes and judgments about their aesthetic experiences were by no means "disinterested" as Kant might have presumed. Yet rather than pursue Schiller's impassioned plea for aesthetic education stemming from French massacres, his subsequent writings ironically took a highly personal and political turn by pleading for US engagement in the Great War raging between France and Germany.³

While Baldwin may be forgiven for not applying his theories on the circular dramatic instinct at the global level, children were still practicing Schiller's Spieltrieb at the local level. When waves of immigrants arrived on US soil during the 1880s to preserve their lives and enact their freedoms, they expressed their dramatic instincts within the literature-based boundaries of theatre productions performed at such settlement houses as the Children's Educational Theatre. Believing that "high-brow" literary culture could resolve individual and social welfare problems, Herts and Fry had employed the dramatic instinct for the expressed purpose of assimilating

immigrants into US culture.

Yet outside the confines of settlement houses, another manifestation of the unfettered dramatic instinct was coming to fruition. Immigrant children were finding personal freedom in “moving pictures” that dramatically visualized and expressed their emotion-driven play-impulses. The non-verbal spectacles of more affordable nickelodeons and films allowed them to fully experience their humanities as they and their parents relied on dramatic assimilation to learn English as a second language. For these linguistic and economic reasons, scores of immigrants helped to popularize Theatre Syndicated vaudeville sketches and sensational melodramas over incomprehensible Shakespearean plays. By denigrating these “cheap entertainments” as “low-brow culture” and disregarding the subtextual intentions of immigrants’ dramatic instincts, theatre and English educators failed to recognize the cultural fruition and evolutionary evidence of Schiller’s calls for aesthetic education.

As my routing of the dramatic instinct demonstrates, twentieth-century professors of psychology and theatre came to neglect the theoretical grounds of their common philosophies rooted in the floriferous dramatic imagination. Baldwin’s genetic epistemology greatly influenced Jean Piaget who matured the field of cognitive development as we know it today (Cahan). However, unlike Baldwin’s end-state of aesthetic reasoning, Piaget denied any relevancy of children’s dramatizations with aesthetic development. In his 1945 account of Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood, he argued that the child’s “retreat from reality” through “symbolic play” merely serves her imagination for its more important end-state of scientific reasoning during the final stage of formal operations (Harris 4-7). Baldwin’s speculations on the significance of aesthetic experience flew in the face of positivist psychologists who saw in

Piaget's clinical methods a more pragmatic way of observing child behaviors in a language conducive to empirical replications. Thus, Piaget's canon led contemporary developmental psychologists to ignore the continuity of dramatic play during middle childhood and to assume it went "underground" as day-dreamed fantasies (Lillard 191). Despite numerous studies, many still question the very functions of pretense for human survival. As Angeline Lillard ponders, the survival purpose of pretend play remains a biological mystery because "young children need to adapt to the world as it is, yet in pretend play they contrive the world to be as it is not" (189).

For their part, early professors of theatre initially sought to legitimize the collegiate study of theatre as a humanistic and liberal art—liberal in the sense of freely exploring its aesthetic roots. As Anne Berkeley recounts in her historical routing of undergraduate curriculums,

Affirming the current romantic definition of aesthetic expression as the search for eternal truths, scholars referred to a universal 'dramatic instinct' based on emotion and empathy as factors that could enliven literature as a theatrical event, and more ambitiously, as a source of untapped educational potential that promised an important contribution to the fulfillment of the humanist ideal. ("Changing" 12)

However, Curry's and Fry's explications of the belief-driven dramatic instinct lost their footings when acting and directing teachers ran with Stanislavsky's method—and stopped at psychological realism. Theatre pedagogues turned away from an aesthetically-oriented curriculum grounded in humanist philosophy toward a technically-oriented curriculum focused on transmitting the crafts of production, resulting in a "craft-or-culture stalemate" (Berkeley "Changing" 22). By the late twentieth century, scholars of cultural studies dismissed the tenets of aesthetic philosophy altogether by embracing the promises of performance theories, denying the certainty of

epistemology, and privileging argumentative conflicts over peaceful resolutions to ongoing aesthetic problems. As David Krasner and David Saltz point out, the validity of poststructuralist theories rests on conditional if-then forms of analytical discourse that “flows almost exclusively from elsewhere and into performance theory, and only occasionally does it flow out again to influence other disciplines” (8). Likewise, the current “cognitive turn” in theatre studies risks re-containing disciplinary boundaries by simply re-playing the conceptual metaphors of embodied minds (McConachie and Hart)—unless we give back to psychological disciplines and stop resisting empirical science.

By returning to both disciplines’ mutual roots in philosophy, I believe that theatre scholars can impact cognitive psychology by cultivating Baldwin’s epistemological work on aesthetic development. Schiller’s poetic explication of Spieltreib is no mere “conceptually blended metaphor,” for it resides, as it always has, within the sensory-motor bodies of children and adults whose dramatizations make aesthetic thinking visible. The dramatic instinct still frolics freely today—in mass mediated entertainments largely devoid of theatre experiences. Why does the physical presence of live actors no longer matter for spectators’ aesthetic pleasures? We cannot explain this phenomenon away simply by ascribing preferential tastes or by describing mirror neurons. Instead, we need to account for nature-nurture mysteries by unpacking such taken-for-granted notions as Freudian identification, empathy-sympathy, aesthetic distance, disbelief, and perceived realities by conducting reception studies with actual audiences, rather than through hypothetical or historicized spectators based on one critic’s interpretative analysis.

If we seek a peaceful world free from global tyrannies, then perhaps Schiller’s account of Spieltreib and Baldwin’s epistemological theories of aesthetic experience hold the potential to

explain the purposes of pretense for human survival, for freedom from internal and external oppressions, and for the self-preservation of cultural identities. If we seek to nurture present and future theatre audiences, then we also need to adopt Berkeley's call for a "civically-oriented curriculum, contextualised [sic] in students' aesthetic, cultural, and social interests" ("Phronesis" 221). By taking these felicitous routes, we just might effect Schiller's aesthetic vision of moral cultivation for all people on and in every stage of human development.

Notes

¹ German philosopher Robert Vischer coined the term “Einführung” in 1873. Violet Paget, a British-French aesthetic philosopher writing under the pseudonym Vernon Lee, explained and disseminated the concept in English with her partner, Kit Anstruther-Thomson in 1897—well before Edward Titchener popularized the term in 1909 (Gunn 147-60).

² In 1908, Baldwin was arrested in a police raid on a brothel which ended his career at Johns Hopkins University in 1909. After brief sojourns to Mexico, he lived with his family near London and in Paris until his death in 1934 (Horley).

³ In 1916, Baldwin and his family narrowly escaped death when their steamship exploded from a German torpedo or mine in the English Channel. In a cablegram to his former Princeton University employer, now President Woodrow Wilson, Baldwin demanded that “reparation for assault on American life and liberty be exacted.” His cable was reprinted on the front page of The New York Times, April 3, 1916 (Horley 28-30).

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