

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Thirteen: Drama (2)

Classical tragedy and the **scapegoat ritual**; ancient Jewish practice of purifying the community by high priest laying its sins on the head of the sacrificial goat, which was then driven out into the wilderness to perish. The ritual was known to the Greeks as well: sins of the community loaded onto the **pharmakos**: a human being chosen to be the bearer of sins, who was then driven out of town. Collective sense of relief at the expense of sacrificial victim.

■ Pattern survives in Christianity in the story of Christ dying on the Cross to redeem humanity.

■ Consider katharsis in this light. Is the pattern discernible in *Oedipus the King*?

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The connection between classical tragedy and the tragedy of later periods: tenuous. The Greeks highly respected in Rome, but tragedy did not flourish there; **Seneca**'s didactic tragedies meant to be recited, not acted.

English Renaissance drama: largely product of native development; antecedents in the morality plays, cf. *Everyman*. Little affected by the Greek legacy; some Senecan influence (murder, revenge, ghosts, as in *Hamlet*). Yet paradoxically, owing to the prevalence of the morality pattern, it may be described in Aristotelian terms: *tragic flaw, recognition (anagnorisis) spiritual regeneration*. Read *King Lear* in this light.

Aristotle exercised a restrictive influence in Europe the 16th and 17th centuries owing to misreading of *Poetics* > the **unities** of Neoclassical drama; **action**: no subplots; the **time** of the action not to exceed the actual time of the performance (later increased to twenty-four hours); the **place** of the action should not change (departures acceptable if the new scene still within the same building). Prevalent in French drama (Corneille, Racine, Molière); no firm roots in England. *The Comedy of Errors* (1590) and *The Tempest* (1611) among the few which meet such requirements.

Dryden taking stock of English dramatic practices and defending them in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668); consider the words of his Lisideius:

There is no theatre in the world has anything so absurd as the English **tragicomedy**; 'tis a drama of our own invention, and the fashion of it is enough to proclaim it so; here a course of mirth, there another of sadness and passion, a third of honour, and fourth a duel: thus, in two hours and a half, we run through all the fits of Bedlam. [. . .] [O]ur poets present you the play and the farce together [. . .]. [The French, who afford] "as much variety on the same day" [proceed] "not so unseasonably, or *mal à propos*, as we [. . .]."

Set this against the arguments of Neander (Dryden himself): in English plays, "besides the main design," "underplots or by-concernments, of less considerable persons and intrigues" "are carried on with the motion of the main plot" = despite the seeming incoherence, they have an organic unity as the subplots fit into the general scheme, which in turn is determined by the main action. Eugenius: in English drama the audience watches the movements of the minds of the characters, as much as the changes of their fortunes = character is more important than action.

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The concept of the tragic re-examined by Hegel:

- the **tragic** capable of manifesting itself in other forms of literature, although nowhere as fully as in drama (*Aesthetics* [1835]);
- the tragic conflict is the clash of two kinds of ethics, that of the individual (partial) and that of the community (substantive) (*The Phenomenology of Mind* [1807]);
- conflict ends with restoration of ethical substance to its former position through the destruction of the hero;
- most important tragic emotion: neither pity nor fear, but **reconciliation**: the restoration of the disturbed ethical order;
- the idea of **progress**: the implicit communal ethical consciousness finds its actuality in the self-conscious, that is, explicit, ethical action of the individual; neither ethics is superior to the other; both sides "devoured" in the process.

Nietzsche's concept of tragedy:

- “life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearance, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable”; this is reflected in the chorus of satyrs, “a chorus of natural beings” (*The Birth of Tragedy* [1872]);
 - pity and terror are not the proper tragic emotions; the spirit of tragedy is evoked “not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge—it was thus Aristotle understood it—but beyond pity and terror, *to realize in oneself* the eternal joy of **becoming**—that joy which also encompasses **joy in destruction**,” that is, **tragic joy** (*Twilight of the Idols* [1889]).
- Yeats (*The Death of Cuchulain* [1939]) and Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1923) exemplify N's concept.

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Comedy, according to Aristotle (see previous lecture) is about people who are worse than people are in real life. The comic hero appears ludicrous to us owing to some defect or ugliness, but he is not depraved (morally unredeemable). Spectators judge him from position of moral or intellectual superiority.

While there is always something substantive (ethically justifiable) in the claims of the tragic character, there is nothing substantive in the claims of comic heroes (Hegel). In tragedy we experience awe in the presence of powers greater than we are, comedy reassures us that we are in control of our destinies.

Laughter reduces the laugher to the status of the object of laughter (both undignified); the gap separating them is eliminated by temporary identification of spectator with comic character (the same in tragedy through pity and fear/terror) > experience of their common humanity. Consider George **Meredith** and Henri **Bergson**:

- “to love Comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good” (Meredith); the actual (the real world) judged in the light of the ideal (you may still hope for good);
- the comic stems from the contrast between “mechanical inelasticity” and “living pliability” = what is mechanical is repeatable, thus incongruent with life, which never repeats itself. The comic effect is produced by the spectator's discovery of this incongruence = the comic effect arises from our seeing through appearances (Bergson).
- “You may estimate your capacity for Comic perception by being able to *detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them the less*: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes” (Meredith).
- “Shall we be told that [. . .] we often punish because we love, and [. . .] laughter, by checking the outer manifestations of certain failings, [. . .] causes the person laughed at to correct these failings and thereby improve himself inwardly?” (Bergson).

Comedy flourishes in mature societies: “sensitiveness to the comic laugh is a step in civilization” (Meredith). “The greater the tendency towards increasing stability below, the more does it force to the surface the disturbing elements” (Bergson).

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The difficulty of writing tragedy today. Our view of man different (the idea of the heroic gone). Attempts successful when fate is located in the human psyche (O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Miller, *Death of a Salesman*). The spirit of tragedy passed into the novel and poetry? Consider the case of Th. Hardy (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: “‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals [in Aeschylean phrase] has ended his sport with Tess.”).

Conscious adoption of Classical examples in the 18th to 20th centuries. Chorus (Eliot and Yeats); the Unities observed (O'Neill, Beckett, Pinter); deliberate adaptations (Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Euripides's *Alcestis* by Eliot, Electra myth by O'Neill, etc.).

Tragedy and comedy combined in the **theatre of the absurd**.