1-1-1988

Tragedy and Comedy at the End of the Symposium

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Recommended Citation
Buchanan, William (1988) "Tragedy and Comedy at the End of the Symposium," Grand Valley Review: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 15.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol4/iss1/15

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Aristodemus, or so Appolodorus tells us, after a night of high talk and revelry some fifteen years before the night of history's most famous drinking party, awoke near dawn to find Socrates still discoursing. When he awoke he found that some were still fast asleep, and others had gone home, and that Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates had alone stood it out, and were still drinking out of a great goblet which they passed round and round. Socrates was disputing between them. The beginning of their discussion Aristodemus said that he did not recollect, because he was asleep; but it was terminated by Socrates forcing them to confess, that the same person is able to compose both tragedy and comedy, and that the foundations of the tragic and comic arts were essentially the same. (Shelley's translation)

We may sympathize with the sleepiness of the listeners, but regret it even more if we ask what Socrates might have meant.

Let us suppose that by tragedy Socrates meant something like what Aristotle meant; and that by comedy he meant what Aristotle might have meant in the lost section of the Poetics or at least the sort of comedies written by Aristophanes: an imitation of a trivial or ludicrous action, subject to repetition and variation rather than single and complete, producing laughter by the deflation of a state of inflated expectation.

Can we solve the problem posed by Socrates?

He might mean that one and the same man should be versatile enough to work in both genres, so that mastery of both would increase his skill in either — as one might advise a painter to paint both landscapes and portraits, or a composer to write both choral and instrumental works. Presumably Agathon and Aristophanes did not do this and are being counseled so to do. Sophocles and Euripides wrote satyr plays as well as tragedies; Corneille and Racine wrote one comedy and several tragedies; Shakespeare was master of both. But the connection between the comedies of these playwrights and their tragedies is not immediately evident. The connection would seem to be genetic: the same poet produced both, and the same spectator might witness both, without finding any really essential relationship.

Or was he counseling the poet to evolve a genre which alternated tragedy and comedy? We find something like that in Shakespeare's Henry IV. Here the seriousness of a court concerned with the unification of the kingdom alternates with the jovial triviality of
the Boar’s Head, the latter often parodying the former. The two are connected by Hal, the Prince who is educating himself to become a King. When he becomes king, he can no longer exist in both worlds; so, as a tragic hero who commits himself to responsible decision, he renounces Falstaff. But the moment he does that, Falstaff ceases to be comic and becomes pathetic instead. Hence the work is basically tragic. Men better than average triumph over those worse, order triumphs over chaos, and responsibility over freedom. Tragedy and comedy are not ultimately equally present in the work. Another even less equal balance could be found in the comedies of Molière. There, obsessed fathers bring families to the brink of tragedy. The obsession seems amusing at first, but as it brings ruin, unnatural conflict and unhappiness, it reaches a crisis where, in a moment of alarm, we see the tragic possibility in the idée fixe. Towards the end of the fourth act, we sense tragedy lurking in the wings; but it never comes on stage. Order and balance are restored through the intervention of the king, or some surprising discovery. Since it is restored through external intervention, by a kind of deus ex machina, and not through the hero’s superiority to the situation or to average human nature, Molière’s comedies remain clearly comedies.

To find a mean between tragedy and comedy would be a third possibility. Instead of taking men as better or worse than they are, imitate actions of men as they really are, neither better or worse. The realists and naturalists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries took this as their program. There seemed to be three results: either they showed men as they seemed to be, imitating only a surface reality (as Steinbeck or Hemingway); or despite their program they tended towards tragedy or melodrama (as with Balzac and Zola) or towards comedy and satire (as Flaubert). But could a poet take men as they really are in their essence, showing them stripped of personality and left with only their essential — their formative — characteristic? This we could say Dante does. He shows men in relation to the love of God. Those who reject it are evil and come to a bad end (which Aristotle says is untragic). Those who accept it come to a good end (which Aristotle says may be morally edifying but equally untragic). Men have different ways of refusing the love; their decision reflects some controlling force in their psychological makeup. And men find different obstacles to the acceptance of God’s love. The forces motivating the refusal and the obstacles hindering acceptance are not infinite but form recognizable patterns and categories, which determine the essential character of those who exhibit them. But even those who refuse have a kind of dignity and grandeur in their daring commitment, at least when compared with the trimmers who were neither hot nor cold; and those who accept are headed for or already participate in the beatific vision, hence elevated into a state of divine grace on the who

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divine grace so far beyond the natural man (man as he "really" is) that we can say, on the whole, that men in Dante are better than they are, that the ludicrous or the trivial are not portrayed there.

Is there a form which would maintain comedy and tragedy equally and fully present in their contrariety without allowing either to predominate? When we think of a paradoxical union of opposites, the incarnation comes to mind. T.S. Eliot brought into circulation Bishop Andrew's witticism on the Nativity: the Word unable to speak a word. The Word clothed in flesh has that element of disguise so frequently at the core of comedy. The disguised master or even god is ignored, insulted, or beaten. Deity in human flesh is a travesty of deity. The unification in one individual of an infinite divinity and a finite humanity is an absurdity. Yet in relation to man, it is serious, for it ennobles him. The double perspective of serious and absurd constitutes a mystery. No attempt to create a Christ-figure in literature can equal the mystery of the Incarnation, yet those attempts could be considered in relation to this fourth solution. In Cervantes' novel, the action is serious and tragic from Don Quixote's point of view, ludicrous and painful from Sancho Panza's. In Dostoyevsky's Idiot, Myshkin's loving but ineffectual acceptance of all people brings to light what is best in them; but that best also makes them the more aware of what is worst in them. They feel themselves self-condemned through the unwitting instrumentality of Myshkin, who wishes not to judge. They are tortured and become violent. The incongruity is absurd in thought but tragic in experience. The problem in the use of a Christ figure is to keep two perspectives not simply opposed or in alternation but in a dynamic relationship, so that they are fully integrated and are not merely alternatives. This might be a solution to the problem raised by Socrates, but a solution probably impossible to realize.

Is there a fifth solution?