

“Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy”

Excerpted from Augusto Boal's Theater of The Oppressed

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Besides his study of the views of Milton, Bernays and Racine, Butcher goes to Aristotle's own Politics to find the explanation of the word catharsis which is not to be found in the Poetics. Catharsis is utilized there to denote the effect caused by a certain kind of music on patients possessed by a given type of religious fervor. The treatment "consisted in applying movement to cure movement, in soothing the internal trouble of the mind by a wild and restless music." According to Aristotle, the patients subjected to that treatment returned to their normal state, as if they had undergone a medical or purgative treatment - that is, cathartic.

In this example we verify that through "homeopathic" means (savage music to cure savage interior rhythms), the religious fervor was cured by means of an analogous exterior effect. The cure was brought about through the stimulus. As in the tragedy, the character's fault is initially presented as cause of his happiness - the fault is stimulated.

Butcher adds that, according to Hippocrates, catharsis meant removal of a painful or disturbing element in the organism, purifying in this way what remains, free finally of the eliminated extraneous matter. Butcher concludes that applying the same definition to tragedy, one will arrive at the conclusion that "pity and fear" in real life contain a morbid or disturbing element. During the process of tragic excitation this element, whatever it may be, is eliminated. "As the tragic action progresses, when the tumult of the mind, first roused, has afterward subsided, the lower forms of emotion are found to have been transmuted into higher and more refined forms (Butcher)".

This reasoning is correct and we can accept it totally, except for its insistent attribution of impurities to the emotions of pity and fear. The impurity exists, no doubt, and it is in fact the object of purgation in the character's mind, or as Aristotle would say, in his very soul. But Aristotle does not speak of the existence of pure or impure pity, pure or impure fear. The impurity is necessarily distinct from the emotions which will remain once the spectacle of the tragedy is ended. That extraneous matter - the eliminated impurity - can only be an emotion or passion other than the ones that remain. Pity and fear have never been vices or weaknesses or errors and, therefore, never needed to be eliminated or purged. On the other hand, in the Ethics, Aristotle points to numerous vices, errors, and weaknesses which do indeed deserve to be destroyed.

The impurity to be purged must undoubtedly be found among the latter. It must be something that threatens the individual's equilibrium, and consequently that of society. Something that is not virtue, that is not the greatest virtue, justice. And since all that is unjust is foreseen in the laws, the impurity which the tragic process is destined to destroy is therefore something directed against the laws.

If we go back a little, we will be able to understand better the workings of tragedy. Our last definition was: "Tragedy states the actions of man's rational soul, his passions turned into habits in his search for happiness, which consists in virtuous behavior whose supreme good is justice and whose maximum expression is the Constitution" (Butcher).

We have also seen that nature tends toward certain ends, and when nature fails, art and science intervene to correct it.

We can conclude, therefore, that when man fails in his actions - in his virtuous behavior as he searches for happiness through the maximum virtue, which is obedience to the laws- the art of tragedy intervenes to correct that failure. How? Through purification, catharsis, through purgation of the extraneous, undesirable element

which prevents the character from achieving his ends. This extraneous element is contrary to the law; it is a social fault, a political deficiency. We are finally ready to understand how the tragic scheme works. But first, a short glossary may serve to simplify certain words which represent the elements we are going to assemble in order to clarify the coercive system of tragedy.

How Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy Functions

The spectacle begins. The tragic hero appears. The public establishes a kind of empathy with him.

The action starts. Surprisingly, the hero shows a flaw in his behavior, a hamartia; and even more surprising, one learns that it is by virtue of this same hamartia that the hero has come to his present state of happiness.

Through empathy, the same hamartia that the spectator may possess is stimulated, developed, activated.

Suddenly, something happens that changes everything. (Oedipus, for example, is informed by Teiresias that the murderer he seeks is Oedipus himself.) The character, who because of a hamartia had climbed so high, runs the risk of falling from those heights. This is what the Poetics classifies as peripeteia, a radical change in the character's destiny. The spectator, who up to then had his own hamartia stimulated, starts to feel a growing fear. The character is now on the way to misfortune. Creon is informed of the death of his son and his wife; Hippolytus cannot convince his father of his innocence, and the latter impels his son, unintentionally, to death.

Peripeteia is important because it lengthens the road from happiness to misfortune. The taller the palm tree, the greater the fall, says a popular Brazilian song. That way creates more impact.

The peripeteia suffered by the character is reproduced in the spectator as well. But it could happen that the spectator would follow the character empathically until the moment of the peripeteia and then detach himself at that point. In order to avoid that, the tragic character must also pass through what Aristotle calls anagnorisis - that is, through the recognition of his flaw as such and, by means of reasoning, the explanation of it. The hero accepts his error, hoping that, empathically, the spectator will also accept as bad his own hamartia. But the spectator has the great advantage of having erred only vicariously: he does not really pay for it.

Finally, so that the spectator will keep in mind the terrible consequences of committing the error not just vicariously but in actuality, Aristotle demands that tragedy have a terrible end which he calls catastrophe. The happy end is not permitted, though the character's physical destruction is not absolutely required. Some die; others see their loved ones die. In any case the catastrophe is always such that not to die is worse than death.

Those three interdependent elements (peripeteia anagnorisis, catastrophe) have the ultimate goal of provoking catharsis in the spectator (as much or more than in the character); that is their purpose is to produce a purgation of the hamartia, passing through three clearly defined stages:

First Stage: Stimulation of the hamartia; the character follows an ascending path toward happiness, accompanied empathically by the spectator. Then comes a moment of reversal- the character, with the spectator, starts to move from happiness toward misfortune; fall of the hero.

Second Stage: The character recognizes his error - anagnorisis. Through the empathic relationship dianoiareason the spectator recognizes his own error, his own hamartia, his own anticonstitutional flaw.

Third Stage: Catastrophe; the character suffers the consequences of his error, in a violent form) with his own death or with the death of loved ones.

Catharsis: The spectator, terrified by the spectacle of the catastrophe, is purified of his hamartia.

The words "Amicus Plato, sed magis amicus veritas" ("I am Plato's friend, but I am more of a friend of truth!") are attributed to Aristotle. In this we agree entirely with Aristotle: we are his friends, but we are much better friends of truth. He tells us that poetry, tragedy, theater have nothing to do with politics. But reality tells us something else. His own Poetics tells us it is not so.

We have to be better friends of reality: all of man's activities - including of course, all the arts, especially theater - are political. And theater is the most perfect artistic form of coercion

Different Types of Conflict:

Hamartia and Social Ethos

As we have seen, Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy requires:

a) the creation of a conflict between the character's ethos and the ethos of the society in which he lives; something is not right!

b) the establishment of a relationship called empathy, which consists in allowing the spectator to be guided by the character through his experiences; the spectator-feeling as if he himself is acting - enjoys the pleasures and suffers the misfortunes of the character, to the extreme of thinking his thoughts.

c) that the spectator experience three changes of a rigorous nature: peripeteia, anagnorisis, and catharsis; he suffers a blow with regard to his fate (the action of the play), recognizes the error vicariously committed and is purified of the antisocial characteristic which he sees in himself.

This is the essence of the coercive system of tragedy. In the Greek theater the system functions as it is shown in our diagram; but in its essence, the system survived and has continued to be utilized down to our own time, with various modifications introduced by new societies. Let us analyze some of these modifications.

First Type: Hamartia Versus the Perfect Social Ethos (classical type).

This is the most classical case studied by Aristotle. Consider again the example of Oedipus. The perfect social ethos is presented through the Chorus or through Teiresias in his long speech. The collision is head-on. Even after Teiresias has declared that the criminal is Oedipus himself, the latter does not accept it and continues the investigation on his own. Oedipus - the perfect man, the obedient son, the loving husband, the model father, the statesman without equal, intelligent, handsome, and sensitive - has nevertheless a tragic flaw: his pride! Through it he climbs to the peak of his glory, and through it he is destroyed. The balance is re-established with the catastrophe, with the terrifying vision of the protagonist's hanged mother-wife and his eyes torn out.

Second Type: Hamartia Versus Hamartia Versus the Perfect Social Ethos.

The tragedy presents two characters who meet, two tragic heroes, each one with his flaw, who destroy each other before an ethically perfect society. This is the typical case of Antigone and Creon, both very fine persons in every way with the exception of their respective flaws. In these cases, the spectator must necessarily empathize with both characters, not only one, since the tragic process must purify him of two hamartias. A spectator who empathizes only with Antigone can be led to think that Creon possesses the truth, and vice versa. The spectator must purify himself of the "excess," whatever direction it takes -whether excess of love of the State to the detriment of the Family, or excess of love of the Family to the detriment of the good of the State.

Often, when the anagnorisis of the character is perhaps not enough to convince the spectator, the tragic author utilizes the direct reasoning of the Chorus, possessor of common sense, moderation, and other qualities.

In this case also the catastrophe is necessary in order to produce, through fear, the catharsis, the purification of evil.

Third Type: Negative Hamartia Versus the Perfect Social Ethos.

This type is completely different from the two presented before. Here the ethos of the character is presented in a negative form; that is, he has all the faults and only a single virtue, and not as was taught by Aristotle, all the virtues and only one fault, flaw, or mistake of judgment. Precisely because he possesses that small and solitary virtue the character is saved, the catastrophe is avoided, and instead a happy end occurs.

It is important to note that Aristotle clearly objected to the happy end, but we should note, too, that the coercive character of his whole system is the true essence of his political Poetics; therefore, in changing a characteristic as important as the composition of the ethos of the character, the structural mechanism of the end of the work is inevitably changed also, in order to maintain the purgative effect.

This type of catharsis, produced by "negative hamartia versus the perfect social ethos," was often used in the Middle Ages. Perhaps the best known medieval drama is *Everyman*. It tells the story of the character named Everyman, who when it comes time to die, tries to save himself, has a dialogue with Death, and analyzes all his past actions. Before Everyman and Death passes a whole series of characters who accuse Everyman and reveal the sins committed by him: the material goods, the pleasures, etc. Everyman finally recognizes all the sins he has committed, admits the complete absence of any virtue in his actions, but at the same time trusts in divine mercy. This faith is his only virtue. This faith and his repentance save him, for the greater glory of God. . . .

The anagnorisis (recognition of his sins) is practically accompanied by the birth of a new character, and the latter is saved. In tragedy, the acts of the character are irremediable; but in this type of drama, the acts of the character can be forgiven provided he decides to change his life completely and become a "new" character.

The idea of a new life (and this one is the forgiven life, since the sinning character ceases to be a sinner) can be seen clearly in *Condemned for Faithlessness* (*El condenado por desconfiado*) by Tirso de Molina. The hero, Enrique, has all the worst faults to be found in a person: he is a drunkard, murderer, thief, scoundrel - no defect, crime, or vice is alien to him. Wickedness that the Devil himself might envy. He has the most perverted ethos that dramatic art has ever invented. At his side is Pablo, the pure one, incapable of committing the slightest, most forgivable little sin, an immaculate spirit, insipid, empty, the image of perfection!

But something very strange happens to this pair which will cause their fate to be exactly the opposite of what one would expect. Enrique, the bad one, knows himself to be evil and a sinner, and never doubts that divine justice will condemn him to burn in the flames of the deepest and darkest corner of hell. And he accepts the divine wisdom and its justice. On the other hand, Pablo sins by wanting to keep himself pure. At every instant he wonders if God will truly realize that his life has been one of sacrifice and want. He ardently wishes to die and move immediately to heaven, so that he can possibly begin there a more pleasant life.

The two of them die, and to the surprise of some, the divine verdict is as follows: Enrique, in spite of all the crimes, robberies, drunkenness, treasons, etc., goes to heaven, because his firm belief in his punishment

glorified God; Pablo, on the other hand, did not truly believe in God, since he doubted his salvation; therefore, he goes to hell with all his virtues.

That, in rough outline, is the play. Observed from the point of view of Enrique, it is clearly a case of a thoroughly evil ethos, possessing a single virtue. The exemplary effect is obtained through the happy end and not through the catastrophe. Observed from the point of view of Pablo, it is a conventional, classical, Aristotelian scheme. Everything in Pablo was virtue, with the exception of his tragic flaw - doubting God. For him there is indeed a catastrophe!

Fourth Type: Negative Hamartia Versus Negative Social Ethos.

The word "negative" is employed here in the sense of referring to a model that is the exact opposite of the original positive model - without reference to any moral quality. As, for instance, in a photographic negative, where all that is white shows up black and vice versa.

This type of ethical conflict is the essence of "romantic drama," and *Camille* (*La Dame aux camelias*) is its best example. The hamartia of the protagonist, as in the preceding case, displays an impressive collection of negative qualities, sins, errors, etc. On the other hand, the social ethos (that is, the moral tendencies, ethics) of the society - contrary to the preceding example (third type) - is here entirely in agreement with the character. All her vices are perfectly acceptable, and she would suffer nothing for having them.

In *Camille* we see a corrupted society, which accepts prostitution, and Marguerite Gauthier is the best prostitute - individual vice is defended and accepted by the vicious society. Her profession is perfectly acceptable, her house frequented by society's most respected men (considering that it is a society whose principal value is money, her house is frequented by financiers) . . . Marguerite's life is full of happiness! But, poor girl, all her faults are accepted, though not her only virtue. Marguerite falls in love. Indeed, she truly loves someone. Ah, no, not that. Society cannot permit it; it is a tragic flaw and must be punished.

Here, from the ethical point of view, a sort of triangle is established. Up to now we have analyzed conflicts in which the "social ethics" was the same for the characters as for the spectators; now a dichotomy is presented: the author wishes to show a social ethics accepted by the society portrayed on stage, but he himself, the author, does not share that ethics, and proposes another. The universe of the work is one, and our universe, or at least our momentary position during the spectacle, is another. Alexander Dumas (Dumas fils) says in effect: here you see what this society is like, and it is bad, but we are not like that, or we are not like that in our innermost being. Thus, Marguerite has all the virtues that society believes to be virtues; a prostitute must practice her profession of prostitute with dignity and efficiency. But Marguerite has a flaw which prevents her from practicing her profession well - she falls in love. How can a woman in love with one man serve with equal fidelity all men (all those who can pay)? Impossible. Therefore, falling in love, for a prostitute, is not a virtue but a vice.

But we, the spectators, who do not belong to the universe of the work, can say the exact opposite: a society which allows and encourages prostitution is a society which must be changed. Thus the triangle is established: to love, for us is a virtue, but in the universe of the work, it is a vice. And Marguerite Gauthier is destroyed precisely because of that vice (virtue).

Also in this kind of romantic drama, the catastrophe is inevitable. And the romantic author hopes that the spectator will be purified not of the tragic flaw of the hero, but rather of the whole ethos of society.

The same modification of the Aristotelian scheme is found in another romantic drama. *An Enemy of the People*, by Ibsen. Here again, the character, Dr. Stockman, embodies an ethos identical to that of the society in which he lives, a society based on profit, on money; but he also possesses a flaw: he is an honest man! This the society cannot tolerate. The powerful impact this work usually has stems from the fact that Ibsen shows (whether intentionally or not) that societies based on profit find it impossible to foster an "elevated" morality.

Capitalism is fundamentally immoral because the search for profit, which is its essence, is incompatible with its official morality, which preaches superior human values, justice, etc.

Dr. Stockman is destroyed (that is, he loses his position in society, as does his daughter, who becomes an outcast in a competitive society) precisely because of his basic virtue, which is here considered vice, error, or tragic flaw.

Fifth Type: Anachronistic Individual Ethos Versus Contemporary Social Ethos.

This is the typical case of Don Quixote: his social ethos is perfectly synchronized with the ethos of a society that no longer exists. This past society, now nonexistent, enters into a confrontation with the contemporary society and the resultant conflicts are inevitable. The anachronistic ethos of Don Quixote, knight errant and lordly Spanish *hidalgo*, cannot live peacefully in a time when the bourgeoisie is developing - the bourgeoisie which changes all values and for whom all things become money, as money comes to equal all things.

A variation of the "anachronistic ethos" is that of the "diachronic ethos": the character lives in a moral world made up of values which society honors in word but not in deed. In Jose, from *Birth to Grave*, the character, Jose da Silva, embodies all the values that the bourgeoisie claims as its own, and his misfortune comes precisely because he believes in those values and rules his life by them: a "self-made man," he works more than he has to, is devoted to his employers, avoids causing labor troubles, etc. In short, a character who follows *The Laws of Success of Napoleon Hill*, or *How to Win Friends and Influence People* of Dale Carnegie. That is tragedy! And what a tragedy!

Conclusion

Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy survives to this day, thanks to its great efficacy. It is, in effect, a powerful system of intimidation. The structure of the system may vary in a thousand ways, making it difficult at times to find all the elements of its structure, but the system will nevertheless be there, working to carry out its basic task: the purgation of all antisocial elements. Precisely for that reason, the system cannot be utilized by revolutionary groups during revolutionary periods. That is, while the social ethos is not clearly defined, the tragic scheme cannot be used, for the simple reason that the character's ethos will not find a clear social ethos that it can confront.

The coercive system of tragedy can be used before or after the revolution . . . but never during it!

In fact, only more or less stable societies, ethically defined, can offer a scale of values which would make it possible for the system to function. During a "cultural revolution," in which all values are being formed or questioned, the system cannot be applied. That is to say that the system, insofar as it structures certain elements which produce a determined effect, can be utilized by any society as long as it possesses a definite social ethos; for it to function, technically whether the society is feudal, capitalist, or socialist does not matter: what matters is that it have a universe of definite, accepted values.

On the other hand, an understanding of how the system functions often becomes difficult because one places himself in a false perspective. For example: the stories of "Western" movies are Aristotelian (at least, all the ones I have seen). But to analyze them it is necessary to regard them from the perspective of the bad man rather than from that of the "good guy," from the viewpoint not of the hero but of the villain.

A "Western" story begins with the presentation of a villain (bandit, horse thief, murderer, or whatever) who, precisely because of his vice or tragic flaw, is the uncontested boss, the richest or the most feared man of the neighborhood or city. He does all the evil he possibly can, and we empathize with him and vicariously we do the same evil—we kill, steal horses and chickens, rape young heroines, etc. Until, after our own hamartia has been stimulated, the moment of the peripeteia: the hero gains advantage in the fist fight or through endless shoot-outs and reestablishes order (social ethos), morality, and honest business relationships, after destroying (catastrophe) the bad citizen. What is left out here is the anagnorisis, and the villain is allowed to die without feeling regrets; in short, they finish him off with gunshots and bury him, while the townspeople celebrate with square dances. . . .

How often - remember? - our sympathy has been (in a certain way, empathy) more with the bad guy than with the good one! The "Westerns," like children's games, serve the Aristotelian purpose of purging all the spectator's aggressive tendencies. This system functions to diminish, placate, satisfy, eliminate all that can break the balance - all, including the revolutionary, transforming impetus.

Let there be no doubt: Aristotle formulated a very powerful purgative system, the objective of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it takes place. His system appears in disguised form on television, in the movies, in the circus, in the theaters. It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves the purpose better than any other; if, on the contrary, we want to stimulate the spectator to transform his society, to engage in revolutionary action, in that case we will have to seek another poetics!

S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951). pp. 248-49.

