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I

Introduction: Aristotle and Horace

Attitudes to neo-classical dramatic criticism have changed little since last century when it was fashionable to believe that the post-Renaissance critics endeavoured to perpetuate a doctrine of formalism which gave practitioners neither good guidance nor sound assumptions on which to base their work. The specimens selected for detailed examination in the following pages may throw a more liberal light on the criticism of this period. To take an example of the older view, it has been said that the doctrine of the unities provides a stultifying model, yet on reflection one may well ask whether this is necessarily so or always so. The moral purpose which neo-classical critics felt to be the very heart of serious drama is sometimes censured by those moderns who in the same breath make a case for 'committed' literature. The idea of mimesis in the Aristotelian sense is under attack in a manner apparently calculated to blur the line between life and art although it has not yet been clearly demonstrated that the line is not a matter of considerable importance. A passing glance at, say, Scaliger, may lead one to the hasty conclusion that this seemingly sapless grammarian has little of moment to record, but on looking more closely at these early critics, one quickly perceives that an earnest search is in progress for a theory of drama, based on principles first expounded by Aristotle, but tested, and in different degrees distorted by their application to very different theatres serving very different communities.

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This kind of period study will in its nature reflect changes in social, economic and political contexts. We start from the assumptions of an aristocratic society and move into a world dominated by middle-class ambitions and implications of newly discovered entitlements. From Scaliger to Diderot is a journey from the post-Renaissance Italian court to the eighteenth-century drawing-room and on the personal level from a highly organised hierarchic public world to the private darkness and vexations of the individual soul. We become aware of the perils of passing judgment on a critical view when we may in fact merely be censuring a society towards which we have an ingrained antipathy. The isolation of a scale of dramatic values in a state of clinical purity is revealed for the absurdity which it is and each critical statement is seen to maintain its status only as a starting point for a discussion of its validity in a given context.

While the relativity and continued search for readjustment of value judgments with the consequent search for new analytical tools are revealed in this brief study, so too is the permanence, or apparent permanence, of certain critical approaches to drama. Aristotle isolated many problems about drama which seem to recur in every age whenever plays are critically examined. Sometimes the neo-classical critics misinterpreted the nature of Aristotle's questions or provided alternative answers based on non-Aristotelian reasoning. They approached the *Poetics* as if it were a treatise on rhetoric and manufactured a curious amalgam of pseudo-Aristotelian and Horatian precept. Nevertheless, they used the ancients as a starting point for the discussion of matters which seemed relevant to them in their time and which still lie at the heart of most works on drama published in this present age.

For instance, they considered the relationship between the fictional truth of the theatre and the reality of the

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world outside it, or, in neo-classical terms, 'verisimilitude' and 'truth', a complex relationship which both binds the play on the stage to the audience's experience of life outside it and at the same time separates it from that life. The actor who has been killed on the stage is not dead. Fiction, the description of events which have not happened, and reality or our interpretation of those events which we think have happened and are happening, are reconciled in the theatre and the process of reconciliation has puzzled most critics. An action has been imitated, but what is the relation of the imitation to the action? Castelvetro is never at ease in the world of illusion and comes down on the side of history, defined as a description of what he considers to have been real events; consequently he relegates drama to the lower status of a pastime suitable for those of feeble intellect. Contrariwise, Sidney elevates poetry, including drama, to a plane of ideality beyond nature, so that the truth of fiction authenticates itself by virtue of its freedom, not being shackled to a description of existential experience. In the writings of Diderot, we read how one man in a lifetime of reflection moved from the position of confusing life and dramatic action to an acceptance of the essential barrier between life, in so far as we are able to feel and respond to its random impact, and the composed narrative about possible lives, which is the art of drama or fiction.

These neo-classical critics are also concerned, as we are today, about the continuing relationship between drama and the social realities of its time.[1] Drama in the sense of statement achieved through theatrical devices seems to have developed out of religious ritual. Both in Greek and Greco-Roman drama and in post-Renaissance European

[1] This relationship is examined in detail by Elizabeth Burns in *Theatricality.*

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drama, the line of development indicates a move from the exploitation of myth and symbol towards a more literal representation of life as it is experienced, a structured reflection of social modes and manners and of the responses of men and women to the social pressures and demands of their age. Elizabethan drama and to a less but still significant extent French classical drama are rooted in an authoritarian society of which inevitably authors, critics and audience are part. The later instability of an evolving society is reflected in the challenge to the hard prescriptive neo-classical line, a challenge which finds expression in the qualified formalism of Samuel Johnson and in the search for a 'popular' theatre described in the writings of Diderot and Mercier.

Apart from being an imitation of life, a mirror of customs and an image of truth, has drama any social function, any obligation to operate beyond itself, to feed back into the society which it reflects a pattern of behaviour, a model for a universally acceptable ethic or a codification of laudable social action? Aristotle appears to have answered in the negative, certainly as far as tragedy is concerned, but his commentators, as will be seen, came to many different conclusions. Horace gave a positive invitation to treat drama rhetorically, as doctrine, as a means of moving and improving an audience as well as entertaining them. Neo-classical critics, nurtured on the writings of medieval divines, of whom they felt themselves the true successors, preferred the Horatian position and this has come into fashion once again in the convictions of those committed authors and critics who maintain that social institutions must here and now be radically altered and that drama along with the other arts must play its part in helping the bad old world give birth to the brave new world.

Fourthly, our critics will declare their concern for the

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nature of events within the theatre. In what manner is this imitation of an action being carried out and what kind of actions should be the subject of imitation? They are writing with one eye on the ancient doctrine and the other on the theatre of their own day, which was not medieval theatre where the actor in the morality tradition represented a good or bad quality, a human virtue or a vice. Sixteenth-century theatre, moving away from the pure morality towards something more concrete, more personalised, doubtless also more materialistic, encouraged questions about the kind of stories audiences liked to hear, and particularly about their readiness to listen to a tale of woe and misery. Towards the end of the period, in the mid-eighteenth century, discussion centres more and more on the resemblance of the character being acted on the stage to the person sitting in the auditorium. Shakespeare's characters, in Johnsonian criticism, are subjected to the test question: Is this how I would have felt and reacted in this situation? What is happening on the stage is now considered as a replica, exaggerated so as to conjure up laughter or pity, of what I imagine might be going on in my neighbour's house. Mimesis comes closer to mere copying, or, as it was later called, 'naturalism'. Sidney asks that the theatre illumine an ideal world; Mercier urges his poet to become acquainted with the abattoirs of Paris and the suburbs of Lyon.

There is constant reference, too, in these writings to what Professor Styan calls the elements of drama,[2] the terms of the convention which writers, actors and audience agree to accept. Aristotle listed six such elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. Should one play contain both tragic and comic incidents in its plot? Are some characters unsuitable for presentation on the stage or in certain kinds of plays? Is it

[2] J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama.*

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acceptable or absurd for characters to speak in verse rather than in prose, and if verse, has blank verse certain attributes denied to rhymed verse or vice-versa? Neo-classical critics were unsure of the purpose and propriety of a chorus. Arrangement of the incidents is subjected by – for instance – D'Aubignac to a detailed analysis which shows that even if the earlier critics may have tried to write a grammar of the theatre and nearly suffocated it with theory, their immediate successors brought a considerable understanding of the essential nature of drama, its demands, its materials and its structure, to their scrutiny of 'the theatre in practice'. Following Donatus and Scaliger rather than Aristotle, the earlier critics had no doubts about their structural geometry. A play set off from a given starting point, explored the complexities of its plot in measured sequences and arrived at its destination in a manner which precluded a random choice of endings. The formula was sound, durable and sufficiently flexible to avoid obvious repetition of patterns, at least for a couple of centuries. If it is no longer valid in our time we are probably still searching for adequate substitutes. We may tamely accept the view that process has precedence over form, but if form disappears completely, process might find itself without a vehicle of communication, or at best with a vastly underpowered one.

Sufficient has been said to indicate that the matters raised by the critics of this period have more than mere historical interest, and that few topics of real and permanent importance to a discussion about drama have escaped their notice. They tend, it is true, to be cursory about the actor himself, his training, techniques and mental orientation towards his craft. We have to wait for Diderot, inspired by his admiration for Garrick, to provide a sustained and detailed meditation on the theory

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of acting. The historical explanation for this is simple and probably correct. Until Garrick (even allowing for Nell Gwynn) the actor tended to be looked on as a menial, of little account as a person, earning his precarious livelihood in the exercise of a craft which he picked up by practice. If he was successful, he was deemed to be so in virtue of his nature and there the matter ended. Johnson's relationship with Garrick as described by Boswell is typical. Talking of Garrick, he said: 'He is the first man in the world for spritely conversation'.[3] or again, 'And after all, Madam, I thought him less to be envied on the stage than at the head of a table.'[4] The matter of theatre architecture is a separate issue, already well documented, and no attempt has been made in the following pages to re-tread any of this ground.

Ideally, one would like to ask the reader to have a copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* in front of him, ready for immediate reference when the commentaries of the earlier neo-classical critics are under review. The following summary of Aristotle's main points is offered as an *aide-mémoire*.

He begins by pointing out that epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, most flute music and harp music, are all forms of representation, or re-creations of reality. The desire to imitate, he says, seems to be inborn in men from childhood. One of these forms of imitation is called tragedy, which differs from epic in so far as epic is in narrative form and can cover an unlimited stretch of time. Tragedy usually tells a story the events of which take place in one revolution of the sun. This, it should be noted, is Aristotle's only reference to 'unity of time'. In his sixth chapter he comes to the heart of the matter with a definition of tragedy. Tragedy deals with the serious

[3] J. Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Ingpen, p. 242.
[4] Ibid. p. 1031.

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concerns of living, is complete in itself (i.e. has a formal unity) and is of a certain length. The action is demonstrated in front of an audience, not narrated to them, and in the course of the performance the emotions of pity and fear are aroused and 'purged'. The exegeses centred on the concept of purging (catharsis) have through the ages reached almost theological proportions. Explanations have taken in general either an ethical, a psychological or an aesthetic turn. Our sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators, bringing Horace to their aid, adopted, as will be seen, the ethical view that catharsis, purging, means quite simply a moral cleansing. One becomes a better person for being acquainted with heroic suffering. The psychological view adopted by later generations of critics (we see it starting in Johnson) translates the language of moral philosophy into the language of neurology. Pent-up instincts and desires are allowed the free range of the imagination for a time and a profound human need is satisfied. The aesthetic argument, made explicit in noble terms by A. C. Bradley at the turn of the century, invokes the abstractions of sublimity, beauty, awe as the source of a special kind of pleasure. We delight in the knowledge that man can look down into the abyss of despair and still retain his humanity. Catharsis as a form of exaltation brought about through the blending of 'passion with enlightenment'[5] is yet another reading which might be taken as an attempt to combine the psychological and the aesthetic views.

Of the six parts of tragedy which Aristotle categorises, those which encouraged long and careful reflection on the part of later critics are plot and character. Why does he say that plot is the soul of tragedy and takes primacy over character? 'Plot' may be given a simple or a complex meaning and either, or both, would seem to fit Aristotle's

[5] John Gassner in *European Theories of Drama*, ed. Barrett H. Clark.

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train of thought. If plot is taken to mean simply the arrangement of the incidents in the sense that the plot of *Hamlet* is the revealing of a series of happenings which culminate in the death of the king, and of course of Hamlet and others, then the plot patently comes before the characters. (References to playwrights' notes and letters are irrelevant here – e.g. Ibsen's story of sketching out *The Wild Duck* without characterisation or contrariwise Shaw saying he thought up his characters and then 'let them rip'. Aristotle is at this point defining the elements of tragedy from the point of view of the audience. What they see happening on the stage is the play.) But merely to define plot as the ordering of incident is hardly sufficient to explain why it should be the very soul of tragedy. Plot is therefore more than a structural stratagem. It is so arranged that it contains within it the essential nature of the play. Because things are represented as happening in this kind of way, the play is this kind of play, just as in a portrait the black and white outline provides the essential representation of the subject (this person and no other person) whereas colour (in drama, characterisation) simply fills in the picture.

The eight and ninth chapters provide authority for what in later ages came to be known as the well-made play. Aristotle's medico-scientific training made him sympathetic to the idea of organic unity. A play should display the signs of its own wholeness. 'Plot' is now used in its simpler structural sense. The action within the play must not be random. Even the story of one man's life fails to measure up to this rigorous structural standard. The argument embraces the virtues of good composition, the placing together of the right elements in the right order, but unfortunately it readily lends itself to giving a special bonus for ingenious but superficial manipulation of the narrative.

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Aristotle's reference to universals in his ninth chapter is sufficiently important to merit quotation even in a brief summary:[6]

It is clear from what we have said that it is not the function of the poet to tell what has actually happened but what might or could happen according to probability or necessity. The difference between a historian and a poet does not reside in the use or non-use of metre, for the works of Herodotus could be put in verse, but they would still be history either with or without metre. The difference is that one tells what has happened, the other what might happen. For this reason, poetry is more philosophical and more significant than history for it deals with universals while history deals with particulars.

Neo-classical critics were quick to note the dilemma which this expansion of the concept of mimesis thrust upon them. On the one hand the poet gave an interpretation of the general, not what was but what could be, either in the past or the present or the future. On the other hand he appeared to be obliged to hold a mirror up to Nature and Nature dealt in particulars. How can general truth and particular truth be reconciled? The idea of Horatian decorum indicated a possible compromise. Young men were generally ambitious, hot-tempered, bold; old men were generally irascible, timid, avaricious. Action focussed on the particular could illuminate its general purpose through the utterance of 'sententiae' or aphorisms, a practice taken over very largely from Seneca and often used in seventeenth-century French drama. A further complication arose when Renaissance Platonism was grafted on to the Aristotelian doctrine, as in the case of Sidney, and so the kind of confusion which arises when universals are presumed to equate with an

[6] Translated by the authors from the text of the Loeb Classical Library (Heinemann, 1965).

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