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978-0-521-14460-5 - The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy

Andre Green

Excerpt

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Prologue

The psycho-analytic reading of tragedy

Play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality. . . . The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object).

...

I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games.

D. W. Winnicott, 1971, 96 and 100

I A TEXT IN REPRESENTATION: WAYS FROM IGNORANCE TO KNOWLEDGE¹

There is a mysterious bond between psycho-analysis and the theatre. When Freud cites *King Oedipus*, *Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov* as the most awe-inspiring works of literature, he notes that all three are about parricide; less importance has been attached to the fact that two of the three are plays. One naturally wonders whether, for all the interest he showed in the other arts, the theatre did not have a special significance for Freud – a significance that outweighed his interest in the plastic arts (despite Michelangelo's 'Moses' or Leonardo's 'St Anne'), in poetry (despite Goethe, Schiller or Heine), in the tale (despite Hoffman), in the novel (despite Dostoevsky and Jensen). Sophocles and Shakespeare are in a class of their own, especially Shakespeare; Freud recognized in him a master whose texts he analyses as if they were the discoveries of some illustrious precursor. But he seems to have had a special affection for the theatre in general.

Scene and other scene²

Why is this? Is it not that the theatre is the best embodiment of that 'other scene', the unconscious? It is that other scene; it is also a stage whose 'edge' materially presents the break, the line of separation, the frontier at which conjunction and disjunction can carry out their tasks between auditorium and stage in the service of representation – in the same way as the cessation of motility is a precondition

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for the deployment of the dream. The texture of dramatic representation is not the same as that of the dream, but it is very tempting to compare it with phantasy. Phantasy owes a great deal to the reworking by the secondary process of elements that belong rather to the primary processes, these primary processes being then subjected to an elaboration comparable to that of ceremonial, in the ordering of dramatic actions and movements, in the coherence of theatrical plot.³ But there are many differences between the structure of phantasy and the structure of the theatre. Phantasy is closer to a form of theatre in which a narrator describes an action occurring in a certain place, but in which, though he is not unconcerned, he does not himself take part. Phantasy is much more reminiscent of the tale, or even the novel. Its links with the 'family romance'⁴ reinforce this comparison. In the dream, on the other hand, we find the same equality, *de jure*, if not *de facto*, that reigns between the various protagonists sharing the space of the stage. So much so that, in the dream, when the dreamer's representation becomes overloaded, the dreamer splits it into two and sets up another character to represent, separately, one or more of his characteristics or affects. Broadly speaking, it would be more correct to say that the theatre may be situated *between* dream and phantasy.

Perhaps we should turn to the simplest, most obvious fact. Does not the theatre owe its peculiar power to the fact that it is an exchange of language, a succession of bare statements without benefit of commentary? Between the exchanges, between the monologues, nothing is vouchsafed about the character's state of mind (unless he says it himself); nothing is added to these statements that refers to the physical setting, the historical situation, the social context, or the inner thoughts of the characters. There is nothing but the un glossed text of the statements.

In much the same way, the child is the witness of the daily domestic drama. For the *infans* that he remains long after his acquisition of language, there is nothing but the gestures, actions and statements of his parents. If there is anything else, it is up to him to find it and interpret it. The father and mother say this or that, and act in this or that way. What they really think, what the truth really is, he must discover on his own. Every theatrical work, like every work of art, is an enigma, but an enigma expressed in speech: articulated, spoken and heard, without any alien medium filling in its gaps. That is why the art of the theatre is the art of the *malentendu*, the misheard and the misunderstood.

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The space of the stage: the spectator in the spectacle

But this structure creates a space, is conceivable only in a space, that of the stage. The theatre defines its own space, and acting in the theatre is possible only in so far as one may occupy positions in that space. The spectacle presents not so much a single, overall view to be understood, more a series of positions that it invites the spectator to take up in order that he may fully participate in what is offered him on the stage. We have to consider, as Jacques Derrida does, the question of the 'enclosure' of representation. Just as the dream depends on the enclosure of the dreamer, the enclosure of sleep – beyond which there is no dream, but either waking or somnambulism – the limits of the theatre are those of the stage.

The theatrical space is bounded by the enclosure formed as a result of the double reversal created by the exchanges that unfold between the spectator and the spectacle, on either side of the edge of the stage. We may try to eliminate this edge; it is only reconstituted elsewhere. This is the invisible frontier where the spectator's gaze meets a barrier that stops it and sends it back – the first reversal – to the onlooker, that is, to himself as source of the gaze. But, since the spectacle is not meant to enclose its participants in a solipsistic solitude, nor to restrict its own effects by keeping its elements separate from each other, we must account for this in a different way. This return to the source has established a relation between source and object: the spectacle encountered by the gaze as it passes beyond the stage barrier. Nonetheless, the edge of the stage preserves its function of separating source and object. The spectator will naturally compare this with his experience of a similar encounter, where the same relation of conjunction and disjunction is set up, linking the object of the spectacle with the objects of the gaze that a different barrier, namely repression, places beyond his reach. It is as if those objects ought not to have been in full view, yet, by some incomprehensible paradox, will not allow the perceiver ever to escape them. They force him to be for ever subjected to their return, experienced in a form at once inescapable, unpredictable and fleeting. The permanence of the object seen in the spectacle is like the lure that tempts us to think that the solicitation might this time lead to the capture always denied hitherto. By arousing a hope that the secret behind the moment of disappearance of the repressed objects will be revealed, it allows the spectacle to unfold so as the better to surprise that secret.

This reversal on to oneself is always accompanied by a second reversal – the reversal into its opposite – whose meaning is more difficult to grasp. The first reversal enables us to measure, as it were,

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the fundamental otherness of the spectacle for the spectator. If the spectator allowed this otherness, he would either leave or go to sleep, and that would be the end of a spectacle that had never begun. But this otherness solicits him. Though unable to reject this otherness as totally alien, the gaze detaches itself to some extent from its object, otherwise the total participation of the spectator with the forces of the spectacle would merge them beneath the eye of a God bringing about from on high the coalescence of auditorium and stage. The gaze explores the stage from the point at which the spectator is himself observed by his object. The boundary between auditorium and stage is duplicated by the boundary between the stage as visible space and the invisible space off-stage. Together, these two spaces are opposed in turn to the space of the world, whose steady pressure maintains the space of the theatre between its walls.

The contradiction felt by the spectator is such that whereas the project of going to the spectacle initially created a break between the theatre and the world, the fact of being at the spectacle replaces the confrontation between the space of the theatre and that of the world (which has become invisible and so excluded from the spectator's consciousness) by the confrontation between the visible theatrical space and the invisible theatrical space. The world is the limit of the theatre and, to some extent, its *raison d'être*. But the relation of otherness between the subject and the world is replaced by the otherness of the spectator in respect of the objects of the gaze – an otherness no longer based simply on a boundary (the walls of the theatre, or the barrier formed by the edge of the stage), but on another space, one hidden from the gaze. As a result, there occurs a projection of the relationship between theatrical space and the space of the world on to the theatrical space, itself split into a visible theatrical space (the space of the stage) and an invisible theatrical space (the space off-stage). This latter space calls for exploration, for it is not only the space by which illusion is created; it is also that in which the false is fabricated. The space of the stage is the space of the plot, the enigma, the secret; the space off-stage is that of manipulation, suspicion, plotting. However, this space is circumscribable, since it is confined within the walls of the great chamber that is the theatre. (Its unlimited character in the cinema – here the chamber is the camera, but the entire world may be swallowed up in it – makes it impossible to explore these means as a lure for the cinema-spectator.) Thus the limit formed by the edge of the stage is extended to the limits of the space of the stage, this space offering itself as one to be transgressed, passed beyond, through its link with the invisible space off-stage.

This transgression is invited, therefore, by that which constitutes its second limit, a radically uncrossable limit, which denies the gaze of

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the spectator access to the invisible space off-stage. Since we have to renounce this second transgression as impossible, all that remains possible is the broadest incorporation of the stage space connoted by the term 'illusory', according to which what is incorporated is the opposite of the truth. That is the sense of the second reversal. By a shift of perspective, one might say, from veracity to veridicity, this reversal will affect the unsaid, the unspoken element, of the stage space: its unconscious, invisible problematic which, *qua* non-veridical, will be caught in the movement of return into its opposite, joining itself to the first reversal, which consists of a turning round upon oneself.⁵

So, whereas the spectacle takes place outside oneself, is alien to oneself, there is constituted the 'negative hallucination' of the unsaid of the stage on which all the said is inscribed. The hallucinatory value of representation, which the edge of the stage has materialized by the relation of otherness, both conjoint and disjoint, is inscribed on the opacity of the space off-stage in which the false is fabricated. Here the spectator finds himself in a place as metaphorical as that suggested by the appearance of those objects whose repression allows no more than fleeting residues to filter through. They too can be assembled into a constructed scenario. But this construction blocks, so to speak, the view of their original source, where the subject would have to recognize his own silhouette. This is like the negative hallucination in which the subject looks at himself in the mirror and sees all the elements of the setting around him, but not his own image. The impression that one sees without seeing, hears without hearing, speaks without making oneself understood, is also to be found, in a more fragmentary way, in dream space. This is not the result of some deficiency that weakens the living tissue of the dream, making it like a bloodless body – as is shown by the contrast to be found in some dreams between the effect of hyper-reality and the unintelligibility of their messages. The space off-stage frames this 'blank' of the stage on which the action is inscribed.

The conjunction of this double reversal makes possible that which is sent back to the spectator as his gaze, refused entry to the space beyond the stage. Out of this refusal is constituted the theatrical space in which outside and inside are no longer meaningful within the enclosure of the two reversals. Yet their two-sidedness – as in the figure constituted by the joining of the double reversal – which was once the expression of the opposition between the theatre and the world, has become the opposition in which the spectator is the theatre, and also the opposition between the said and the unsaid.

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Text and representation

Such is the movement of this reading process performed by the spectator – a reading that is never made explicit, but solicited from some other point situated in the potential space between text and representation.

This space defines its objects: words and characters. The characters, heroes and heralds, exist only through what they say. What they say cannot be said in their absence; no one but they can say it. Once again, we are referred back to the text. Even the destruction of the text still leaves a text. Even its abolition in a theatre given over to action will refer us back to the notional text implied by the action. What is this text about? It is telling us about a reason that is the motive-force of the characters and which, by implication, must be ours. And yet, if we are interested in what is being said, it is because at this point an effect is created, not of reason, but of truth. From what point does this truth speak? It speaks from a point in which another reason, an ‘other reason’, is spoken.

This truth is heard with the sense of shock that one feels when made to face something previously dismissed out of hand, regarded as merely improbable, discredited as pure artifice or even trumpery. Phrases like ‘It’s pure theatre!’ or ‘How theatrical!’ betray the contempt we are supposed to feel for the extravagant pretences of the counter-truth. The reasons why a spectacle does or does not succeed in achieving its effect, is liked or hated, are obscure. But when it happens, the truth is found not at the centre of the stage, but in the flies, where the lighting is placed. For the stage-hand who watches the actors from above and from behind the curtain, even the most tragic spectacle is just another show to be put on – *he* has seen it all before. When the truth is present – when the text speaks and when the hero speaks it with veracity – then even the stage-hand listens. But if he had to account for this, he would be as much at a loss as the spectator in the front row of the stalls. The comments of the initiate and the connoisseur are no more convincing. Writing about the theatre is, generally speaking, mere word-spinning or paraphrase. It throws no light on the spectator’s reasons for participating in the spectacle.

We might even suppose that the theatre has its effect only in so far as its ways are misunderstood by the spectators. And they cannot but be misunderstood both because of the structure of the subject and because of the unfolding of the spectacle. The moment of truth is so dazzling and so short-lived that it has already passed while one is still waiting for it; or it tricks one’s expectations so well that one thinks it has already passed when it is still to come. A reciprocal

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connection links the terms of a process occurring at two levels. One is that of the spectator's participation in what is taking place before him, which seems to drive the action constantly outside itself, by the very fact of that participation. The other is the internal articulation of the constituent parts that generate, by a logic peculiar to themselves, the ongoing movement of the drama. The paradox of this double process is that the empty place of the spectator is never more clearly seen than when the theatre is full – that is to say, when no other spectator can be admitted. This means that the representation can reveal an encounter with a pure testimony through the emergence of something addressed to no one specific person, but to the space occupied by the audience (a locus in constant displacement through its own multifariousness from stalls to gods). This encounter generates the sequence of actions in such a way that they follow on from one another of their own accord, as a result of the tensions that govern their conjunctions and disjunctions. No reading can be either that of the representation or that of the text, but only that of a text in performance, *in representation*.

Aristotle and Artaud

Reflection on the theatre extends from Aristotle to Antonin Artaud. Aristotle laid down canons that were accepted until fairly recently. The signifier/signified problematic is already to be found in the six elements that Aristotle distinguishes in tragedy. In this respect, the *Poetics* constitutes a composite whole that moves from thematic analysis, an analysis of the fable, to a linguistic analysis whose links with the preceding analysis are never made quite clear.

In his analysis of the fable, Aristotle notes the part played by phantasy and gives it precedence over reality: 'It is not the poet's business to tell what has happened or the kind of things that would happen – what is possible according to probability or necessity' (Aristotle, 29). The aim is simply to arouse fear and pity; and Aristotle declares, without further explanation that this result is never better attained than when illustrated by relations of kinship: 'When sufferings are engendered among the affections – for example, if murder is done or planned, or some similar outrage is committed, by brother on brother, or son on father, or mother on son, or son on mother – that is the thing to aim at' (Aristotle, 35).

The family, then, is the tragic space *par excellence*, no doubt because in the family the knots of love – and therefore of hate – are not only the earliest, but also the most important ones. But the fable must culminate in a recognition – a passage from ignorance to knowledge. Recognition by representation. The tragic space is the

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space of the unveiling, the revelation, of some original kinship relation, which never works more effectively than through a sudden reversal of fortune, a peripeteia.

It might be objected that this is taking things too literally. The theatre is the art of mimesis. What follows from this? If the theatre is the art of imitation – the art of the false, say its detractors – it is because Aristotle sees in imitation a specifically human characteristic: ‘The impulse to imitate is inherent in man from his childhood; he is distinguished among the animals by being the most imitative of them, and he takes the first steps of his education by imitating. Everyone’s enjoyment of imitation is also inborn’ (Aristotle, 20). The psychoanalyst is delighted: Aristotle presents him with two of his favourite parameters, childhood and pleasure.

This remark will have a wider implication if one compares it with Aristotle’s recommendation to take the bonds formed by kinship as material for the fable. For the climax towards which the fable is tending is recognition, which has its fullest effect only when it is wholly bound up with the sudden reversal of the action in the peripeteia. If we acquire our earliest knowledge through imitation, and if the passage from ignorance to knowledge (recognition) is effected by a sudden reversal, may we not think, from a more modern standpoint, that it is a question not so much of imitation as of identification? This sudden reversal would appear to centre on the relation of identification and desire, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the bipartite function of identification, since it is an identification that contradicts the two terms of the parental couple. (And this more especially because catharsis presupposes identification, since its true meaning is not a purification of the passions, which is a Christian interpretation of tragedy, but the treatment of emotion by emotion, with the aim of discharging it. However, this discharge must not be conceived as some kind of antiphlogistic effect, since its action is more in the nature of an ‘assuagement accompanied by pleasure’, which implies a participation in which the Other^o is involved.)

The series of examples given by Aristotle of kinship relations depicted in tragedy says nothing about any action between the parents, or about the effect of the father on his children (only the reverse case is cited). This is a strange omission in a text that refers so often to Orestes and Iphigenia, yet ignores the nature of the relations between their parents.

At the level of the signified, the kinship-relations model seems most effective in the matter of mimesis. At the level of the signifier, Aristotle observes that by far the most important thing is to excel in metaphors (Aristotle, 50). My remarks below are freely based on Lacan’s notion of the paternal metaphor. It is a happy chance that

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links the kinship relation to metaphor. It is as if the kinship relation were metaphorical of all the others – and, within it, in the shadow in which Aristotle keeps it, the relation that unites the parents or the relation that expresses the effect of the father on his children to an even greater degree than the others; as if metaphor, at the level of the signifier in poetic creation, rediscovered at the level of language the creation about which the parental metaphor implicitly speaks.

A fable centred around kinship relations indicates not what has been but what might have been, as if it had occurred as the myths recount it. Dramatic art embodies these myths in speech. All theatre is embodied speech. The tragedy of Oedipus is impossible; how can the life of a single man pile up such a set of coincidences? It is not for the psycho-analyst to answer; but rather for the countless spectators of *King Oedipus*, who might say, with Aristotle, ‘a convincing improbability is preferable to what is unconvincing even though it is possible’ (Aristotle, 58).

In a prophetic text that is now more than thirty years old, Artaud calls for ‘an end to masterpieces’. As a true man of the theatre, his concern is with the recipient of the work, the public. In the name of the public, Artaud demands the right to be involved, to be strongly affected. He does not hesitate to condemn and even to sacrifice on the altar of the theatre works of genius that no longer work today. ‘And if, for example, the masses today no longer understand *King Oedipus*, I would venture to say *King Oedipus* is at fault as a play and not the masses’ (Artaud, 114). Artaud is looking for a way by which we might recover the tragic *phobos*. If the appearance of the blinded Oedipus does not make us flinch, if it is powerless to arouse in us an emotion as violent as that which it aroused in the Greeks, if we are no longer capable of going into trance before such a vision, then we can only conclude that the representation of tragedy has become inoperative and that it must be dropped from the repertoire. We must rediscover the ways in which a relationship of enchantment and possession was created between a spectacle and its spectator. We must demand that theatre, to use his image, should affect us as music affects snakes, by a shudder that strikes us first in the belly and runs through our whole body. At the risk of our having to burn Shakespeare, Artaud calls for the advent of a theatre of flesh and blood.

How can we not approve of Artaud’s intentions if it is a matter of giving back life and participation to the audience at a theatrical festival, so that new blood can flow once more in its veins? But what Artaud demands is more radical. He wishes to face the modern spectator with something in which the intelligibility of the spectacle is no longer, as in the past, related to its emotional resonance. He

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aims to provoke in the theatrical event, at any price, a *frisson* that shakes the spectator out of his passivity, out of the softening seduction that anaesthetizes him by way of the pleasant, the picturesque and the decorative. The theatre of diversion must give way to a corrosive theatre that will gnaw away at the shell that is constricting it and give us back a forgotten aspect of the spectacle. This is the theatre of cruelty.

Artaud often had to explain what he meant by ‘cruelty’. It was far from any notion of sadism or bloody spectacle. One has only to read the ‘Letters on Cruelty’ and the two ‘Manifestos’ on the theatre of cruelty to understand that it involves something quite different. Artaud’s revolt was no mere gesture: it aims at getting a particular result. This result is the restoration of a world always present in man, but covered up, buried – whose resurrection the spectator must live through. Artaud’s virtue is that he gave back to the poetic world its face of carnal violence. It is a theatre that challenges verbal language, that appeals to a physicality of signs, to their cumulative effect, to their intensive mobilization around gestures and around the voice, which passes beyond the ordinary expressive range of speech. What the spectator sees must be totally absorbing, what he hears profoundly disturbing – an effect produced by the strangeness of the masks, the disproportion of their forms and the suddenness of their appearance. He alludes to dreams on several occasions, but always in a sense far removed from the sentimental affectation that usually accompanies writing on art and much closer to Freud’s:

If theatre is as bloody and inhuman as dreams, it is. . .to demonstrate and to confirm in us beyond all forgetting the idea of a perpetual conflict, and of a spasm where life is cut through at every moment; where the whole of creation rises up against our state as finished beings. It is to give permanent, concrete and everyday form to the metaphysical sense of certain fables whose very atrociousness and vigour suffice to show that their source and meaning derive from essential principles. (Artaud, 140–1)

It is not a matter of rejecting language; we must seek ‘a directly communicative *language*’. Artaud rejects the form of speech that wants to subordinate all forms of communication to the ‘intellectual dignity’ of grammatical articulation, as a necessary condition of the circulation and exchange of meanings.

Can we even base a theory of writing on Artaud? The letter to Paulhan of 28 May 1933, which I quote, is evidence rather that Artaud attributes ‘the ossification of speech’ to the fact that the theatre, which reflects this degeneration, reduces speech to the level of writing, attributes the same value to the written and spoken word.