

On the apparent superiority of tragedy over comedy and the consequent misunderstandings

One of the most terrifying and depressing phenomena of modern times is the elevation to perverse heights of the need for value judgements. This is expressed in the insane, indefatigable desire to distinguish the "best" element in any group (be it a leader, a boss, tyrant, etc.). To counter this reproach there is the theory of man's "equality" purportedly attained by twentieth century civilization. This too is but another example of valuation! When one cannot establish a hierarchy, all elements are made identical, thereby producing equally grand results.

But not everything can so easily be compared. The heroes of *Winnie the Pooh*³ are a motley group, each of them possessing some quality unacceptable to our "industrious" society (Pooh's indolence, Piglet's pusillanimity, Eeyore's hypocrisy, Owl's conceit, not to mention that social parasite, Tiger!), and yet each one of them is loved and needed by the others, if only because he is what he is and deceives neither himself nor the rest of the world.

Equally admirable order has been brought to the world of art. Today "tragedy" is more meaningful than "comedy", since it "touches upon profound, timeless and universal problems." Let us assume now that anyone having just read these few lines does not agree that comedy is any worse than tragedy, also does not grasp the hypothesis that it is comedy which touches on these problems—that tragedy has nothing at all to do with them, though this fact in no way takes away from its appeal. That is precisely what I'm trying to say.

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I will not conceal the conviction that I have discovered an essential fallacy in the history of culture, particularly ancient culture. And if my assertion sounds strange, then all the better, indeed, all the better. It is not my intention to alter society's convictions; tradition has a mighty army of terrorists on its side; I have nothing with which to oppose it.

Quite simply, I am seeking the truth.

Let us examine contemporary works of art. If we in fact do this, we will be forced to inspect little stories, some kind or other fictional tales, invariably moving or in some comparable way affecting our insides. Oh yes, there will be pseudo-philosophical mumbles, stemming from the deep conviction that philosophy is related to art. But no! Art is no worse than tear-jerky emotion, no worse than philosophy, hence it need not assume the form of one or the other. It is perhaps the only social product of modern times which has not succumbed to disquieting alienation; this is not a result of the majority's love for art, rather its oblivious attitude to it.

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Unalterably, like mirrors, we copy reality, only to escape ourselves completely.

Apparently the reality we see before us is not good enough.

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Traditionally, we seek the sources of contemporary culture in antiquity. The Greeks gave us models of beauty and other arts, we somehow try to conform to them.

What, then, were Greek comedy and tragedy? Let me repeat—that is what I'm trying to find out. Jorge Luis Borges² tells of Averroes—how the Arab philosopher read Aristotle¹ and in his commentary called “comedy” satire and “tragedy” a panegyric. But, look, Averroes was mistaken!—we think with satisfaction—and here Borges destroys all our pleasure, reminding us that our interpretation of the Arab philosopher might also be off the mark, just as his notion of Aristotelian onomastics. Too bad—I thought to myself after reading the story of Averroes—the conclusion is depressing, but what if all of us have similarly, splendidly, erred in our understanding of the words “tragedy” and “comedy”? That wouldn't be so terrible—I answered myself—after all, they're only words.

But what is the answer if we ask the following question: what did the words “tragedy” and “comedy” mean to the Greeks in ancient times?

That is precisely the question I posed myself.

We know, of course, which products of their spiritual culture the Greeks labelled “comedy” and “tragedy”. Like every other conscientious researcher, I will now try to extract those characteristics of the concepts in question which will support my conclusion.

And so, to work!

The viewing public knew well the action of a tragedy, each event which was to take place came as no surprise to them. That is why they never asked “What will happen next?” and they never worried over the hero's fate.

No conflict, which critics have grown accustomed to calling tragic, could in any way be termed a conflict in the standard latter-day meaning of the word.

Comedy was different. Furthermore, comedy was concerned with essential contemporary or historical problems, it was inseparably tied to life—it could therefore be political, satirical, etc. This cannot be said of tragedy.

And one more very important thing. We know the ancient definition of tragedy comes from Aristotle.¹ There is no certainty that it concurred with other latter-day definitions. I doubt that it did. Especially since it has echoes of a then contemporary Hindi attitude to art.

One should similarly remember that in Plato's works, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are called tragedies.

Indeed there can be no other conclusion—tragedy was, by its nature, a pure construction harking back to “supra-civilized” strata of consciousness, more—harking back to complete consciousness, to essential metaphysical feelings.⁶

And comedy was an art in our sense of the word.

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In making known the true meaning of the words “comedy” and “tragedy”, I would like to underline the notion of the Greek division of art, Further—I am

referring to the essence of the distinction between tragedy and comedy as perceived by the Greeks.

Quite simply, tragedy cannot be called an art if comedy is to be called one; it also cannot be considered solely as a religious or philosophical mystery. Because as Pure Form it is something completely different from religion, philosophy and, above all, comedy (art).

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