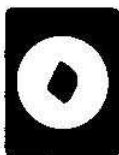


Avant-garde Tragedy: A Pyramidical Poetics

Helen O'Rourke

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Preface

The figure who revolutionized the concept of language and challenged the former cherished notions of the readers about language as a system of symbols was the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's theory inaugurated a school known as Structuralism; which whether supported, rejected or modified by later linguists, philosophers or critics, reared its influence on the whole body of linguistic and critical studies. Saussure's influence is probably even more tangible for the students, scholars and critics of modern literature who witness the emergence of many critical schools concordant with Saussure's *sign system*. To see the way Saussure revolutionized and modernized the previous traditional beliefs, one has to take a look at the way literary texts were read and judged, for example by Romantic traditionalists who believed that (1) a literary text, as the child of the author's creative life, expresses the personal experience of the writer and thus illuminates the writer's self; (2) they believed that a literary text provides us with some *truths* about real life. In other words, novels and plays try to show the way things are.

But Saussure's theory opposed "all forms of literary criticism in which the human subject is the source and origin of literary meaning" (Selden, *Reader's* 52-53). Saussure's two major ideas provide answers to the two questions which had always obsessed the linguists and literary critics: "What is the object of linguistic inquiry?" and "What is the relationship between words and things?" To answer these questions, Saussure distinguishes be-

tween *langue* and *parole*-- language system, which precedes the examples of language, and the individual *utterance*. *Langue* is the social aspect of language and the common system which we (unconsciously) follow in speaking. *Parole* is the individual realization of the system in the actual instances of language. This distinction is central to all the later Structuralist theories. The proper object of linguistic study is not the individual utterance, "but the system which underlies any particular human signifying practice. In other words, when we study poems or myths or economic practices, we do so in order to discover what system of rules--what grammar--is being used" (Selden, *Reader's* 52). After all, there is a big discrepancy between human beings and parrots: human beings have an understanding of a system of rules which enables them to produce an infinite number of organized sentences; parrots lack such an apprehension. Furthermore, Saussure protested the idea that language is a heap of words which accumulate in the course of time and refer to things in real world. In his view, words do not function as symbols which correspond to the referents, but rather they are 'signs' which are made of two parts: the acoustic and graphic part, called 'signifier'; a concept or what is 'thought' when the mark is made, called a 'signified'.

To sum up Saussure's view, one has to see that if the conventional way thought of language as SYMBOL=THING, Saussure's model is SIGN=signifier/signified. As can be observed, in Saussure's system THINGS have no place and the elements of language attain meaning not as a result of correspondence between words and things, but only as parts of a system of relations.

Thus by giving an example of traffic signs according to which we associate the red light with 'stop' and the green light with 'go', Saussure shows how arbitrary the relation between signifier and signified is. He asserts that there is no natural bond between the color red and 'stop', but when this arbitrary relation is established, it may feel natural. Therefore, language is one among many sign-systems which some believe is the fundamen-

tal one. The science of such systems is called 'semiotics' or 'semiology' which is usually considered as belonging to the same theoretical universe as Structuralism does. Consequently, as far as it concerns the present study, the Structuralists with Roland Barthes (earlier a Structuralist and later an enthusiastic Poststructuralist), declared the "death" of the author, who was the focus of inquiry in the previous traditionalist studies, and introduced the text itself as the sole source of critical evaluation and meaning.

However, the first announcement of the death of Structuralism and the beginning of the era of Poststructuralism is usually taken to be Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (1968). The passage from Structuralism to post-structuralism can be described as a passage from centered to decentered or centreless structures. (Connor 735) The Poststructuralist thought, commenting and elaborating on Structuralism (to the point that it is sometimes considered the late Structuralism), harbors at some new discoveries including the unstable nature of signification. The poststructuralists asserted that the sign is not so much a unit consisting of two signs as "a momentary 'fix' between two moving layers." Saussure had recognized the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified as two distinct systems, but he had not realized how unstable units of meaning can be when the systems come together. Having established language as a system independent of physical reality, he made an effort to preserve a sense of the coherence of the sign, even though his separating the sign into two halves threatened to undo it. Poststructuralists have tried to prise apart these two parts in various ways.

The evidence that the poststructuralists present to prove the unstable nature of signification is the meanings (signifieds) found for the words (signifiers) in a dictionary: not only do we find several signifieds for every signifier, but each of the signifieds becomes yet another signifier which can be traced in a dictionary with numerous other signifieds. This process can continue interminably which displays the chameleon-like existence of

signifiers. Much of the energy of Poststructuralism has been devoted to the insistent activity of the signifier and the way it produces chains and cross-currents of meaning with other signifiers and denies the usual requirements of the signified (Selden, *Reader's* 71).

As mentioned before, Poststructuralism is a movement toward decentred structures. In his famous essay, Derrida questions the major assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato:

The notion of 'structure', he argues, even in 'structuralist' theory, always presupposed a 'centre' of meaning of some sort. This centre governs the structure but is itself not subject to structural analysis (to find the structure of the centre would be to find another centre). People desire a centre because it guarantees being as presence. For example, we think of our mental and physical life as centred on an 'I'; this personality is the principle of unity which underlies the structure of all that goes on in this space.... For example, if we try to undo the centering concept of 'consciousness', we are in danger of introducing a new centre, because we cannot choose but enter the conceptual system (consciousness/ unconsciousness) we are trying to dislodge. All we can do is to refuse to allow either pole in a system (body/soul, good/bad, serious/unserious) to become the centre and guarantor of presence. (Selden, *Reader's* 71)

Steven Connor quotes Derrida, who "teases this duality into the following paradoxical formulation: 'The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its centre elsewhere*. The centre is not the centre'" (Connor 738). This is how Poststructuralists come to believe that the meaning of a literary text cannot be limited to one interpretation and there may be as many meanings and interpretations as the number of readers. Even these meanings may be changed with the change of time, taste, attitude and perspective for a single reader.

This concept put forward by Poststructuralism that interpretations and meanings cannot be fixed may be generalized to the interpretations

of genres like Drama, and for that matter tragedy, which was modified by Hegel for the first time and formed the embryo of Modern Tragedy, the focus of the present study. The same way that the Structuralists and Poststructuralists revolutionized the concept of language, Hegel has also modified and modernized the Aristotelian definition which suggested that the major tension and conflict of tragedy is caused by pity and fear which are aroused by the plot of tragedy. Hegel rather sees the central tension of tragedy in its ethical conflict (Wimsatt and Brooks 557). Hegel in his presentation of *Antigone* also presents the dialectic of individual state, guilt-innocence and birth-death by taking the conflict between Creon and *Antigone* as a conflict not between good and evil, but between good and good or truth and truth. Then he elaborates on the two contradictory and antagonistic actions of *Antigone*, the emblem of divine law and familial bond, and that of *Creon*, the emblem of man-made law or the state. Thus family and state stand against each other and the actions of the representatives of these two contradictory domains are interpreted as two planes of being; both characters struggle to prove their identity and fulfill their tasks through their actions, one in response to her loyalty to familial and, therefore, divine law; the other in response to his faithfulness--not just duty-- to the welfare of state and earthly law. Yet Hegel argues that ironically the resolution of this conflict, even though it results in the death of one and the defeat of the other, is what brings about an equilibrium which is the synthesis of thesis, *Antigone*, and antithesis, *Creon*.

In a world-wide perspective, this interpretation can justify many human conflicts in the level of logic, metaphysics and psychology. In other words, Hegel's view of man as a self-divided, isolated and fragmented being exactly corresponds to the view that modernism adopts toward human character. It is also a commonplace idea that the conflict of individual versus society is the root of man's dilemma who, on the one hand is a social being and cannot divorce himself from society; on the other hand, he is an individual with

some certain private rights which are somehow doomed to be sacrificed for the sake of society. Socrates had to sacrifice himself and drink the poison in order to surrender to the welfare of society which desperately needed a strict law to endow it with order. Socrates' action of suicide was the price if he had to pay his respect for law and order of the state. This situation can be generalized to many domains of human existence and his? existential problems.

The same way that in social and political domain, the collision between Antigone and Creon can manifest many of the modern conflicts extant in our modern world, it may justify the metaphysical resolutions as well. The same way that Hegel argues that Antigone's death is in fact the assertion of her being and her existential identity, and in this way in the core of rebel against Creon's law, she gains unity with the same state against which she rebelled. Hegel believes that "death is the fulfillment and highest labour an individual takes upon himself" (Steiner, *Antigones* 32).

In literature, which is strongly influenced by all fields of Humanities, especially philosophy and psychology, we constantly witness similar conflicts with which the characters are confronted whose resolution is not as facile as it was in many black-and-white conflicts of many heroic and romantic adventures. In other words, the modern man's conflict, first of all is internal, as Hegel has also pointed out, and is not always between good and evil; his main collision is between truth and truth: individual and society, mortal and divine issues, innocence and guilt each of which could change place with the other in a deconstructionist reading. This is exactly the principle of binary opposition with which Roman Jakobson, the structuralist critic, dealt.

In literature, from late 18th to 19th century and present, one can detect the embryo of modernity which was indeed put forth by Hegel's dialectical philosophy which embraces logic, metaphysics and psychology, the same domains which involve many of modern man's daily affairs and conflicts. Man's struggle to resolve these conflicts may demand sacrifices on his part

on various forms; thus the existential irony of human life is that in order to achieve unity and existential independence and identity, s/he has to sacrifice? and this is exactly what moulds the tragic thought in literature which blends with irony too. Although Hegel's view was later challenged by Schopenhauer and others, his view did leave its influence on the thought of 19th and 20th century man whom we call "modern". The main issue in the present study is to show how Hegel's interpretation of Antigone and his eliciting from it the germ and essence of tragedy is somehow the deconstruction of Aristotle's tragic hero, whose spirit is reflected in his action (again according to Hegel), is neither a villain nor an innocent being; s/he is in fact paradoxically both guilty and innocent as Antigone or Creon is. But Aristotle does not determine the degree of culpability, whereas Hegel does: First, they are both right for their ethical loyalties and are wrong because they assume "ethical principle exerts an absolute claim upon his loyalty." The reconciliation occurs when we realize that the claims are partial and not absolute and the catastrophe is the result of man's failure of confusing the part for the whole (Wimsatt and Brooks 557). Second, the resolution excludes neither the guilty nor the innocent, but synthesizes them and the fruition of this synthesis is the resolution which leads to the character's taking a conscious action the way Antigone did. And what makes Antigone's suffering and death worthwhile is that they do not alienate her from existential unity, but takes her "through that morning twilight which is the unhappy conscience and consciousness" (Steiner, *Antigones* 25). Yet Hegel himself admits that not all Greek tragedies fit into his system and definition. That is why he chooses Antigone.

However, in modern drama, considering heroes and heroines is inconsequential. The frontier of modern drama is Ibsen who revolutionized it and purged it from conventional run-on-the-mill concerns and presents modern men and women in conflict with internal forces and the inevitability of action. A.C. Bradley, in his defense of Hegel against

charges of inflexibility states: "(Hegel) does not teach, as he is often said to do, that tragedy portrays only the conflict of such ethical powers of family and state... He adds to these...others, such as love and honor, together with various universal ends" (Wimsatt and Brooks 558). Ibsen indirectly practiced the same Hegelian dialectical philosophy in *Enemy of the People* where Dr. Stockman's individual and private needs and his perspective of truth, which he takes as absolute, stands against the public good or Nora Helmer's individual attempts are antagonized by the law system in *The Doll's House*. Yet both these characters have to take a conscious action, however unpleasant and tragic the consequences are in order to fulfill their existential identity. What makes Ibsen's works most controversial and complex is his concern with these conflicts and the tragic sense with which the plays deal. In other words, his works exactly correspond to Hegel's dialectic of ethical conflict. Again Bradley broadens Hegel's definition that "the typical and essential conflict to be found in tragedy is not that of good against good, but rather a conflict within the self: any spiritual conflict involving spiritual waste is tragic" (Wimsatt and Brooks 559).

In brief, this study means to focus the issue of Hegelian dialectic of ethical conflict as a determinant in the development of modern tragedy from Henrik Ibsen to Caryl Churchill and depict the way modern drama through a deconstructionist approach moves away from the center toward the margin or circumference. This means the same way that we, like Hegel, may judge the play *Antigone* in a different light and within a more modern framework and consciousness than the Greeks did, many modern plays may give way to some modern readings which break the conventional hierarchies, as Derrida suggests, and offer interpretations which may be at odds with previous interpretations. Probably that is why when we move toward most postmodern plays, like those of Beckett, or of Albee, or of Pinter, for example, the interpretations grow more multiple.