

## **The Emergence of the Invisible** —Brief Notes Towards a Definition of the Dramatic—

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### 1. The Invasion of the Alien

A popular, conventional notion of being 'dramatic' seems usually to be that a play or scene is full of striking events, fraught with high tensions between some sharply conflicting causes. While this definition fitly describes certain types of drama, it does not always cover other types so satisfactorily. To give just a few obvious examples, *Oedipus the Rex* or *A Doll's House* is certainly 'dramatic' in this sense, while *Oedipus at Colonus* or *When We Dead Awaken* is hardly so. The plays by Osborne or John Arden are highly 'dramatic', whereas those by Beckett or Pinter are far from it. To take instances from Japanese theatre, Kabuki is intensely 'dramatic' according to this notion, but most Noh plays scarcely satisfy such a definition. Thus the conventional way of defining the dramatic cannot be a comprehensive definition of the inherent nature of drama; it cannot properly explain what makes drama as such.

There is another important defect in the old idea; it is a definition inferred exclusively from dramatic *texts*, and not from dramatic experience as we actually have it in the theatre. Unless we can simply identify drama with dramatic texts, we will have to deal with the question in a different way; our new definition must be deduced from what is actually happening in the theatre. In addition, it must be such a one as can effectively distinguish drama from apparently similar genres—from cinema, for example. Once we can discover such a definition, it will also enable us to explain potentially all types of drama, apparently 'undramatic' plays as well as obviously 'dramatic' ones in the conventional sense. For the new definition is inferred from the essential nature of dramatic performance in the theatre as such, whatever type the play in question belongs to.

A new definition of the dramatic I would propose is this: drama must be defined as the emergence of the invisible into the visible world of reality; to put it differently, what makes drama as such, the essential quality peculiar to dramatic presentation, is a process in which a certain unreal, invisible, alien being is revealed, through the physical presence of actors, in visible, tangible forms upon the stage; in short, it is a process of the alien invading and occupying the actual reality of here and now.

This formulation may well appear too abstract or too general to be of any practical use, but its practicality will become clear when it is applied to cinema. Apparently cinema is closely akin to drama, in that both rely upon players' acting as their principal means of expression, and both are usually presented in a theatre. In cinema, however, actors do not share with the audience the same time or the same space as in

drama. The acting in cinema, done in some other place and at some other time, has been merely printed on the film; it is only a package of acting sealed up in the past. That is to say, the condition we pointed out above as indispensable to dramatic presentation is lacking in cinema: the condition that an unreal world directly invades the real world.

On the other hand, we cannot always infer that when acting or playing is done in the space and time shared by the audience, it is a dramatic performance. This will become immediately evident when we think of 'playing' in gymnastics or football games. For in such sporting events there is no element of 'the unreal world' in our formulation. That is to say, the dramatic in our new definition requires two essential elements: first, the existence of an unreal, invisible, alien world, and secondly, the invasion and occupation of the real world by that unreal world.

## 2. Acting as a State of Being Possessed

If we can define the essential nature of drama as the revelation of an invisible, unreal world to the visible, real world, and as the former's invasion of the latter, we can then understand how fundamental actors are to drama. They are not simply a means or instrument to convey the ideas of the playwright or director; rather they constitute a pivotal point in a dramatic performance upon which the whole process hinges. For it is exactly in their mind and body that the process of the invisible revealing itself in visible forms takes place. In this sense the process may even be called a sort of 'incarnation'.

Indeed an actor who is playing a part on the stage shows a peculiarly paradoxical mode of existence. He is living an unreal existence in the real world; he is living a fiction in reality. When, for example, John Gielgud is playing the role of, say, Hamlet, Gielgud is living a fictional life of Hamlet here and now upon the stage, and at the same time the unreal existence of Hamlet is being actually incarnated in the body of Gielgud. In other words, Gielgud, while living Hamlet, is at the same time *being lived* by Hamlet. To put it in yet another way, an actor playing his part is *being possessed* by an unreal being, as if by a spirit. In this sense, an actor might be likened to a shaman in a state of ecstatic trance. I do not imply that an actor while playing his part is in a state of unconsciousness; in fact, he is in an unusually heightened state of consciousness. What I mean is simply that a peculiar mode of existence experienced by an actor while acting is structurally similar to the mode of existence of a shaman in a state of possession.

## 3. Analogies to Ritual

If we are right in considering that an actor is somehow analogous to a shaman in terms of their mode of existence, then we can perhaps take a step further and point out another structural analogy between drama and religious ritual. According to our

definition, the basic structure of a dramatic presentation can be described as the invasion of the visible world of reality by an invisible world of unreality. Can't we say that this formula is in fact equally applicable to religious ritual as *hierophanie*, the revelation of the sacred?

To say that the origin of drama was in religious ritual is nothing more than a critical commonplace. What I am trying to point out is not simply that. What I am trying to say here is this: whatever origin drama may have, the fundamental structure of a dramatic performance is essentially analogous to that of ritual, however secularized the drama in question might be. This will become evident at once when we substitute each constituent element in religious ritual for its counterpart in dramatic presentation; our formula itself, which has been deduced from the latter, holds equally valid for the former. 'The invisible world of unreality' in our formula corresponds to 'the sacred' in religious ritual. Actors as a kind of shaman are exact counterparts to those people who play the roles of gods or demons in ritual. And through their holy 'acting' the invisible, sacred mystery is revealed to the religious congregation of the ritual, who again correspond to the secular audience in the theatre.

This fundamental structural correspondence between drama and ritual is of course no mere accident, for ritual itself is a kind of dramatic presentation. According to Eliade, ritual is a symbolic *re-enactment* of cosmogony, that is, the divine act of creating the ordered, meaningful cosmos out of the primordial chaos at the very beginning of the world. Eliade further points out that the principal function of ritual is to confer on the secular world an order and meaning, or rather the source of order and meaning, that which creates them. If so, we can probably go yet a step further and say that drama is analogous to ritual not only in its basic structure, but in its function as well.

In drama, it is true, the subject-matter is often secularized, and the image of the cosmos presented there is personalized or fragmented. Nevertheless, drama still presents a system of symbols with its own order and meaning, if only in the form of the author's highly personal myth. All the same even the most secularized or personalized drama remains a world-image conceived by the playwright. Furthermore, drama embodies that world-image in a concrete, corporeal form, making it a lived reality in the midst of actual time and space, and the audience, sharing the process themselves, witness, as it were, an imaginative cosmogony. Drama is thus an act of re-establishing an order in reality, an act of conferring a meaning on the real, everyday world, which is always on the verge of collapsing back into an amorphous, meaningless chaos.

#### **4. A Meta-Theatrical Structure of Plays**

Up till now we have tried to define the inherent nature of the dramatic in terms of theatrical presentation, in contradistinction to dramatic texts, and have observed the basic structure of dramatic performance and its analogies to religious ritual. But when we apply the results of these observations back to dramatic texts and examine their structure afresh from this point of view, it seems we can find some interesting facts

about them. The first of these is that dramatic texts often reflect the basic structure of theatrical presentation, like, so to speak, an inner concentric circle set within a larger outer circle. Let us examine this point in the example of *Oedipus the Rex*.

By the time the play begins almost all the important incidents in Oedipus' life have already taken place—his birth, his desertion in the mountains, his growth in a foreign land, his murder of his own father without knowing it, and his marrying his own mother, again, of course, without knowing it. Nothing really new or significant happens in the course of the play itself. What actually happens instead is only the discovery or revelation of those past incidents; the dramatic action of the play takes the form of a long, sustained process of dragging the hidden past into the light of the present. But what we have to remember here is that all these events in Oedipus' life are exactly those which had already been predicted by the oracle of Apollo before his birth. Thus the process of dragging the past into the present in fact means the process of revealing the fact that the oracle has all been perfectly realized in the course of Oedipus' past life.

Now if we substitute 'the invisible' for 'the oracle' in the process, can't we see that the dramatic action of *Oedipus* exactly fits in with the basic structure of dramatic presentation we have formulated above? In the play 'the invisible', in the form of Apollo's oracle, or providence, or, to put it in more abstract terms, destiny, invades the visible, real world of Thebes. Thus the dramatic text of *Oedipus* reflects within itself the basic structure of dramatic performance; the text, as it were, imitates a performance, like an inner circle set within a larger concentric circle, or, to change a metaphor, like a inner little box contained within a larger Chinese box. In this sense we may well call *Oedipus* a meta-theatrical play, although this particular aspect was not in all probability due to the playwright's conscious design.

Incidentally, there is another interesting phenomenon in this connection. Not only the text of the play imitates the basic structure of performance, but the dramatic character of Oedipus too imitates the peculiar mode of existence of an actor playing his role on the stage. Oedipus has lived Apollo's oracle in his own body; in other words, he has *been lived* by the oracle. In yet other words, he has been, so to speak, *possessed* by the invisible will of God. Thus we can see that this paradoxical mode of Oedipus' existence exactly corresponds to the peculiar mode of existence of an actor in performance. Both Oedipus and an actor in performance are at once living and being lived by the invisible, unreal, or alien. In this sense we may probably regard Oedipus a meta-theatrical character.

But it is not *Oedipus* alone that discloses such a meta-theatrical reflection built in the text; such a phenomenon is also observable in plays much more secularized, and apparently quite different from Sophocles' tragedy. Ibsen's *Ghosts* will provide a good example. Here, reflecting the current interests of the late nineteenth century, the playwright chose as his subject-matter the problem of genetics, the idea of biological determination by heredity, but this is in fact a merely ostensible innovation. In terms of deeper, thematic structure the dramatic function of genetics in *Ghosts* exactly corresponds to that of Apollo's oracle in *Oedipus the Rex*. The life of the hero, Oswald, is

here represented as having been lived, in spite of his own will, by the law of genetics or biological determinism, just as Oedipus' life has been lived by the will of Apollo, and the dramatic action of the play as a whole takes the form of the process of this invisible fact being brought out into the visible reality of Mrs. Alving's household. And the play reaches its thematic consummation when Oswald finally collapses in a fit of the hereditary disease, that is to say, the moment when the invisible, here in the form of genetic destiny, completes its invasion of the visible reality. It is evident thus that *Ghosts* and *Oedipus*, in spite of their obvious differences from each other, have a common 'meta-theatrical' structure, a reflection of the basic pattern of dramatic presentation in the play-text itself.

Let us take another example, this time from modern American drama, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Here the playwright employs as part of his innovative design the technique of the stream of consciousness, but again this is a merely technical novelty; in terms of basic thematic structure the play nonetheless discloses a close parallelism to *Oedipus* and *Ghosts*. In this play there is little plot in the usual sense of the word, that is, a plot constructed along the horizontal axis of time. Instead we have here the action devised along, so to speak, the vertical axis of the depth of the hero's consciousness, the whole gamut of his mind from the surface to the most secret recess in the subconsciousness. Thus the action of the play takes the form of the process in which the hero's memory of the sin he once committed in a hotel in Boston, the sin he has kept hidden in the deepest bottom of his subconsciousness, is gradually dragged into the light of the visible present. It will be easy enough to recognize that this sinful act, in terms of its structural function, is an exact counterpart to Apollo's oracle in *Oedipus* and the past sin committed by Oswald's father before his birth in *Ghosts*.

Of course we cannot afford here to examine every type of drama exhaustively, but perhaps we can discuss at least one more example, this time out of the modern 'absurdist' drama, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It will not be so difficult to see that here 'the invisible' takes the form of the mysterious character of Godot, who is literally invisible in the sense that he makes no actual appearance on the stage after all. Thus it may seem it is equally easy to see that, although the element of 'the invisible' does exist, the play does not conform to our formula of the dramatic, since here the invisible is *not* visibly revealed. Whereas in all the plays we have analyzed till now the most dramatic moment, the moment that constitutes the focal point in the whole structure, comes when the invisible visibly reveals itself, such a moment never comes in *Waiting for Godot*. In this sense the play may well appear to be an emphatically *un*-dramatic or even *anti*-dramatic one, the whole point of which consists in its deliberate inversion of the normal formula of the dramatic. However, we should not fail to recognize that every character in the play, at every moment in the course of the action, is intensely, almost painfully aware of the *absence* of Godot, and that through this unusually heightened sense of absence the play gets densely filled, paradoxically, with his negative *presence*. In short, Godot, the *signifiant* of 'the invisible' in the play, wholly possesses the world of the play through his absence itself.

Thus, in spite of its apparent deviation from the normal pattern of the dramatic we have formulated, or rather because of it, *Waiting for Godot* is to be regarded as an intensely *dramatic* play, powerfully exemplifying our formula.

### 5. The Case of Noh Plays

As I suggested at the beginning of the article, one of the possible merits of our new definition of the dramatic is that it explains the essentially dramatic quality of Noh plays more satisfactorily than the conventional one. It may not be inappropriate here to apply our new formula to a Noh play to see how far our definition is workable in explaining its dramatic effect. Any play will serve as an example for our purpose, but let us choose *Sumidagawa (The River Sumida)*, for it may not be quite unknown to the European readers as the source play of William Plomer's libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera, *Curlew River*.

The play is set at a ferry across the River Sumida, now in Tokyo, but in the period when the piece was composed, a forlorn, bleak place far away from Kyoto, the capital of the country then. There appears on the scene a mad, old woman, after a long and weary journey all the way from the capital. Answering the question of the ferry-man, the woman tells the story of her life; she had her dear little son kidnapped by a slave-dealer, the overwhelming grief of which has driven her mad, and hearing a rumour that her son was seen somewhere in the far Eastern part of the land, has thus travelled a long way to the bank of the River Sumida. The story reminds the ferryman of a young child, who was indeed brought here by a slave-dealer, but who, alas, died a miserable death on this very spot. The mother's anguish is great. The ferryman, consoling her, tells her that today is the very day when the people in the neighbourhood have a monthly praying ceremony, to mourn for the dead child and pray for the bliss of his soul in heaven, chanting the name of Amida in chorus. The mad mother joins the ceremony, and when the chanting reaches its climax at midnight, the clear, shrill voice of a boy is heard over the chorus, and the dim figure of the lost child is seen over a little tomb on a mound. It is the ghost of the child.

The feature of the play that immediately arrests our attention is that a religious ritual, the chanting of the name of Amida in chorus, is incorporated as the crucial part of the dramatic action, but the point I want to make here is not so much this feature as that the play shows a structural correspondence on a deeper level to the essential pattern of ritual. The climax of the play comes evidently at the moment of the appearance of the child's ghost; this is the focal point of the whole play. According to the conventional definition of the dramatic, however, this moment can hardly be said to be 'dramatic'; there is no noticeable element of conflict here, as, for example, in the antagonism between Nora and her husband, and the appearance of the child's ghost is not such an arrestingly 'dramatic' action as, say, Othello's suicide. However, when we actually see the play in performance, the moment never fails to strike us very deeply. The reason is obvious according to our new definition; it is because this is one of the most typical instances in all world drama of the emergence of the invisible.

### 6. A Play-within-the-Play, Disguise, etc.

Up till now I have deliberately avoided discussing Shakespeare, for in the case of his plays, especially in *Hamlet*, there are some particularly interesting phenomena from our point of view, and I thought it would be more convenient to discuss them later on.

Like *The River Sumida*, some of Shakespeare's plays have a religious ritual, or at least a strongly ritual-like scene, built in; for example, the emergence of the goddess Diana in *Pericles*, the appearance of Jupiter's eagle in *Cymbeline*, and the scene where the statue of Hermione comes to life in *The Winter's Tale*. These scenes are the almost direct, literal dramatization of ritual as *hierophanie*, and it is hardly necessary to point out that the basic structure of religious ritual is meta-theatrically reproduced there.

But in other plays too, in which the invasion of the visible world by the invisible does not take such a direct, explicit form, it is still observable that the same basic pattern is reflected. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the emergence of the invisible makes its first appearance with the apparition of the ghost of the Old King at the very beginning of the play, thus exercising decisive control over all the subsequent incidents—indeed over the fundamental structure of the whole play. But the feature yet more interesting is the play-within-the-play, "The Murder of Gonzago." This little play presented in front of Claudius brings to light the hidden crime committed by the King in the past. In this respect it structurally corresponds to the revelation of past sin in, say, *Death of a Salesman*, and is another instance of the basic structure of dramatic presentation, the emergence of the invisible, reflected in a play-text. But what is particularly remarkable in *Hamlet* is that here the revelation directly takes the form of a dramatic performance within the play. Here the invisible past sin is revealed, not only to the audience of *Hamlet* in the real theatre, but also to the audience of "The Murder of Gonzago" in the court of Elsinore, and these two dramatic performances, one real and the other fictional, are linked to each other by the common basic structure, the emergence of the invisible and its invasion of the visible, real world. If we can call the play-text of *Hamlet* 'meta-theatrical' in that it reflects the basic structure of theatrical presentation, then perhaps we can call the play-within-the-play 'meta-meta-theatrical'.

But it is not only the device of a play-within-the-play that shows such a meta-meta-theatrical quality. Disguise, for example, is another. In terms of our definition of the dramatic, disguise can be explained as a technique for creating a state of invisibility in characters; it intentionally puts a barrier in the 'visibility' of their identity, thus building up a powerful dramatic potentiality in the situation. When this barrier is destroyed, and the invisible is visibly revealed, as in the denouement of, say, *As You Like It*, it can create a highly dramatic moment. This is another case of the inherent structure of theatrical performance set within the framework of a play, and in this sense a 'meta-meta-theatrical' technique, like a play-within-the-play.

### 7. Five Concentric Circles—An Epilogue

We began our discussion by postulating a hypothetical definition of the dramatic, inferring it from the inherent structure of dramatic performance, and then pointed out the fundamental correspondence between this structure and that of religious ritual, likening this relationship to two concentric circles: dramatic performance, by reflecting the basic structure of ritual, forms an inner circle set within the outer circle of religious ritual. We further observed that this common structure is often reflected in dramatic texts themselves, and that dramatic texts thus constitute, as it were, the second inner circle. However, there may exist yet another circle *outside* that of religious ritual; in other words, religious ritual may not be the outmost of these concentric circles.

We cited Eliade's definition of ritual as a re-enactment of cosmogony, the creation of the universe. But isn't it possible to consider cosmogony itself to be a kind of dramatic process, that is, the emergence of the invisible and its invasion of reality? For cosmogony in fact means the process by which the sacred (the invisible) reveals itself to chaos (raw reality), invades or possesses it, and creates an ordered, meaningful world. This conforms perfectly to the new definition of drama we have here formulated. If indeed we can say this, then we have to think that what forms the outmost circle is not ritual but cosmogony, and consider ritual to be the more specifically or technically dramatic re-enactment of cosmogony.

In the beginning gods enacted in the theatre of the universe the archetypical drama of the creation of the cosmos; this was the ultimate drama. Ritual, as it were the second inner circle, re-presents this primal drama. Then theatrical performance, the third inner circle, reflects or imitates the basic structure of ritual. This structure is again reflected in the fourth circle of dramatic texts. And lastly, we can characterize the devices of play-within-the-play, disguise and so on, as reflections of the same basic pattern, in a more conscious, more condensed form.

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