

Message, plot and characters in the theatre

Talking about the novel, we stumbled upon the existence of a 'narrator': a voice of a mixed nature. Sometimes a character, sometimes not, sometimes the author's spokesman, and sometimes distanced from him. Then, the narrator might be a character among others, whom we may judge or disbelieve. The narrator's voice, we found, was the main medium for irony and ambiguity of meaning, especially when inner monologue and free indirect style, make it difficult to attribute many a statement with certitude either to a character or to the narrator himself.

Because in a novel there is an authorial voice and this voice can have many qualities, and can entertain or thrill us enormously, a novel can be a success with a weak plot or a shallow characterization, or both. 'Ulysses' on the one hand, has a deliberately banal plot, whereas most great detective and adventure stories are worth reading mainly because of an exciting plot. Now it can be said that Thomas Mann's 'Death in Venice' or Kafka's 'The Process', or many of Poe's tales have neither: what keeps us listening is not the few, banal or on the contrary unbelievable events that take place, or the often very ordinary characters who are being depicted: it is quite often a narrator's deep tone of anxiety that keeps us awake, the halting voice of a narrator who, we feel, more or less covertly describes something more important than the apparent tale he's telling. Something which has to do with the human condition at large.

If we now try to build up a contrast between the novel on the one hand, and on the other hand the two dramatic forms of fiction which are the theatre and the cinema, we discover that, contrary, maybe, to some expectations, the cinema is not wholly on the side of the theatre. Actually, it is quite obvious from the start that the cinema is different from the theatre. The cinema can make characters act and speak, like the theatre, but, in addition to this, it can actually show the events or objects that the novel or the theatre can only describe. And at the same time, the cinema is not totally without the means which more properly belong to the novel, since it has the 'off-voice', a cinematographic equivalent to the novelistic narrator's voice. Finally, the cinema holds a middle ground between theatre and novel, and it is in a way more potent than both. Yet it must be observed that the 'off-voice' is not as versatile and subtle in its range of possible effects as the novelistic narrator's voice: mainly because it is always identifiable as such, and cannot so easily merge description and judgement, narrator's voice and character's voice. It cannot so easily be used for irony.

In a theatre play, now, no narrator ever speaks to us, except maybe for, sometimes, a few direct addresses to the public from an actor who is then clearly identified as the author's spokesman. As a result, it could seem that the theatre play is the literary medium which least allows for authorial irony or ambiguity of meaning. We can have no doubt as to who is actually talking at each individual moment of the play. For this reason, the theatre is probably the most limited in its means of all forms of fiction: which is not necessarily a fault. In a way, it's the purest form of fiction; the most difficult to lie with; the least easily

captious or specious one. The most honest one. In plays, the author cannot speak covertly or overtly because he has no voice of his own, and no character is both a character and a commentator.

If the message in a theatre play can be neither directly or indirectly conveyed by a narrator nor indirectly implied by controlled distanciation between narrator and character, it needn't result that a playwright has no message of its own. In a play, the message is conveyed through characterization and plot. Hence two schools of criticism when it comes to eliciting the meaning of plays: one emphasizing character analysis, and the other plot-analysis. Between these two attitudes, it is legitimate to take sides. The nature of the theatre and of its means is such that its characters cannot have the degree of mystery and depth that they have in the novel. And the judgments passed upon them cannot have the same complexity and subtlety that are allowed by a narrator's controlled distanciation. Hence, a play which encourages the identification of the audience with some of the characters and the rejection of others, a play with 'positive' and 'negative' characters, and whose plot boils down to telling the incidents through which evil characters are discovered and possibly punished must be manicheist, simplistic, uninteresting: in all, a bad play. And conversely, criticism of a play that we know and feel is a good one, yet insisting that the message of the play is to be found in the mystery and deep personality of its characters, must be mistaken, and will generally fail to unearth the author's intention and message.

A playwright has finally two means of expressing subtle notions: one is through some character assuming, permanently or just occasionally, the role of his spokesman. The other is through the plot itself. Resorting to an obvious and permanent spokesman taken among the characters goes against the complexity and meaningfulness of the plot itself: a character among others becomes an equivalent of the novelistic narrator and assumes a double nature. This is a crude ploy, and a risky one, because it tends to build up at least one entirely positive character, and to destroy any possibility of a subtle message in the plot itself. What actually happens on the stage no longer matters if we expect to be told from time to time and in so many words what we should understand and remember from it. Any subtlety that the message could have must revert to what the author's spokesman says, and at best, if the author -while a bad dramatist- is a subtle thinker, the play ceases relying on the means of theatre to rely on those of the written word instead: be it novel, or pamphlet, or treatise, or sermon. This clumsiness is typical of the more primitive forms of dramatic art. Among these, Greek tragedy is a successful exception because the choir assumes the role of a novelistic narrator, or rather commentator, without being a character at all in the action, thus preserving the possibility for a meaningful plot to unroll free of its interference. More often, plays resorting to an unquestionable consistent spokesman are oversimplistic and worthless because they have lost all possibility of a distanciation between what is said and shown and what is meant.

More often, and more interestingly, one or several characters in the play may occasionally express views that the author holds true, and which are an explicit formulation of the general message of the play. Then, such interventions duplicate the lessons which can be inferred from the plot itself. Here, subtlety is restored because we can never be sure of the status of a speech. It has to be interpreted as describing a character's point of view, or preparing a development in the plot, or as a message from the author himself. It may fulfill these three functions at one and the same time, and the key to the ascertainment of this fact is in the rest of the plot. Which means that the strict

separation between plot and authorial comment has disappeared, thus restoring the possibility of a variable, hence subtly meaningful distance between them. In practice, passages in a play that seem to convey general ideas should not be assessed only in terms of what is being said, but in terms of who says it, and at what moment of the play they occur. In a good play, plot and comment belong to one another, and finally, a playwright's message is to be found in the detail of his plots. For in a play, the plot alone can be intricate, complex, ambiguous or ironical. In the plot alone is there scope for a rich message and the expression of subtle thoughts. So in a cathedral: the statues must be expressive, the stone must be fine and solid: yet what matters most, and what is meaningful alone is their respective positions. In the same way, fine poetry, deep thoughts and high feelings, taken separately, do not make a great play. Without the organization of a plot these elements are just parts of a beautiful chaos. A great play is built like a cathedral. Such is Shakespeare's 'King Lear'.