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## **DRAMA AND WORLD VIEW REVISITED**

### **PREAMBLE AND INTRODUCTION: WORKING HYPOTHESIS**

Within the British tradition of literary criticism, and then more specifically the Formalist tradition of the post-war years, the idea of value judgment implied by the appellation Christian (or by the use of the concept of world view within the confines of an essay in literary criticism) would seem to be positively repugnant. The use of any criterion in literary criticism that deals with philosophical concepts has to be very carefully considered.

There are certain basic premises underlying this essay. Elder Olson (1968) has stated that “the last kind of criticism must involve extra-literary, indeed extra-artistic considerations; for it must depend upon such values as we hold in life itself” (p. 127). These extra considerations I take to be questions of world view — and indeed the whole matter of ideological considerations in literary criticism has come to be of absorbing interest, also within the framework of Marxist criticism.

A firm stand has to be taken in the sense that it is acknowledged throughout that the foremost formal responsibility of the literary critic is to literary principles and practices, so that artistic merit is his first concern. This has the result that, when a work is judged to be inferior artistically speaking, it is to be rejected already on those grounds, and not even subjected to scrutiny on the grounds of ultimate values expressed. In this regard it would be well to quote T.T. Cloete (1981) when he says that “’n Christelike literatuur-beskouing met name moet, soos enige ander literatuurbeskouing, waarderig hê vir die manifestasievorme, transformasievorme of transfigurasievorme van die literatuur, ook vir dié dinge wat nie ’n onmiddellike weerstand met lewens- en wêreldbeskouing het nie, soos die foniese en ritmiese taalwaardes, wat genadegawes aan die kunstenaar is waarmee hy taaldinge maak en wat ewe goed as idees ensovoorts tot verheerliking van God kan dien” (p. 39). In dealing with the work of art, then, one approaches it first from the aesthetic angle, also to preserve the sovereignty of the work of art. (This is also in keeping with the Dooyeweerdian concept.) The sovereignty of the work of art is to be acknowledged also in the sense that no prior value judgment is allowed to impede the critical process as practised by the literary critic using literary norms. Once the artistic quality and value of the work in question have been demonstrated in critical terms the final evaluative function of the critic comes into play, and this final

evaluative faculty of the critic cannot function in a vacuum — it is determined to the largest extent by the world view of the critic. The degree of subtlety and discrimination revealed in his application of this faculty will of course depend on the ability of the critic.

In the consideration of artistic matters such as coherence and balance, implicitly, one recognizes the nature of the work as reflecting the coherence and balance of created reality itself, but at this stage the realization is still implicit and oblique and has to be explicitly expressed and evaluated.

One of the most popular misconceptions about the Christian approach to literary criticism is in the concern with thematic content. Often the entire idea of this form of criticism is derogated because it is assumed that to be amenable to Christian criticism a work of art has to have an overtly Christian theme or content. This is not so by a long shot, nor is the idea that one should of necessity concur with an author's doctrinal beliefs in order to understand his writing, or to appreciate it even. Harp (1976) has asserted that "a great writer's work contains the ring of truth; it is no more incumbent upon the Christian to look expectantly for catechetical statements of faith in a literary work than it is for the non-Christian to guard himself tenaciously against them: we know it is not the purpose of the poet to provide them" (p. 9).

Roper (1979) has pointed out that "Christians, however full of faith they may be, can still make bad art ... they may have little technical ability. On the other hand a person who does not confess the name of Christ may have a far greater appreciation of the God-given norms for artistic activity. Hence, a work of art is not good simply when we know the artist to be a Christian. It is good when we perceive it to be good" (pp. 18-19).

This in turn ties in with the idea that is of crucial importance in a Christian approach to literary criticism, which is that the work of art should be, should exist, for the honour and edification of God. But — it is not merely the "beautiful" which is to the honour of God, or the emotional strength or the "good" intention of the author. It is the totality of the literary work, the coherence, the reflection within it of the coherence of the total creation, and the transfiguration of the given material in terms of the language, which is a unique gift of God to man, which will determine whether God is in fact edified and honoured, served in the fundamental sense of the word, in the work of art under consideration. And this service may well be done by a non-believer ... In this regard I quote D.H. Steenberg: "Voorop staan die geldigheid van die algemene genade van God vir die benadering van die kunsvoortbrenging vanuit hierdie oogpunt, naamlik dat God die gawe van

kunsvoortbrenging nie tot gelowiges beperk het nie; dit is ook die besit van nie-gelowiges, sodat nie-Godgerigte kuns moontlik is” (1981, p. 127).

A final idea to be stressed before the actual illustration of the approach followed is the following. The Christian critic is not a tame moralist, nor does the Christian author abstain from using the truth in an aesthetically satisfying and tasteful manner. The Christian critic is not a guardian of public morality if that idea is to be taken to mean that he is going to prescribe what may and what may not be read. This unfairly circumscribes and limits the function of the Christian critic of literature. He will best fulfil his calling if he points out the extent to which the literary artist has succeeded in conveying the complex and variegated nature of created reality so that the glory of God will be seen to emerge if only implicitly and subtly. His particular point of view will be operative in the final evaluation, but will be a reasoned consideration and not an emotionally motivated rejection based on an idealized and romanticized concept of what is included in the created reality.

### **Application of these principles: Two plays from two different ages**

In applying these principles, the following two plays will be looked at from various angles. The approaches to the plays will differ to a certain extent to make allowances for the different ages from which they come, and this will be illustrative of the role played by world view in the analysis and teaching of drama.

The plays to be considered are *Hamlet* by Shakespeare and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard.

*Hamlet* is perhaps the play most familiar to all Western readers and theatre-goers. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is a contemporary reinterpretation of the Hamlet story, a reinterpretation in which the emphasis moves from the concerns of the ordered Elizabethan society\* to the disordered world of the twentieth century. In dealing with these two plays it is essential that a certain amount of background study should be done. Hamlet the man and his struggles and agonies can only be fully understood and accurately interpreted against the background of the Elizabethan world picture, whereas the contemporary play will only make sense fully against the background of the nihilistic philosophies of the twentieth century. This is

In the Elizabethan period it had been somewhat easier to act upon certain assumptions regarding world view and the nature of man with more confidence in view of the fact that a more homogeneous world view had prevailed than is the case in the twentieth century.

particularly true, because the drama has always been assumed to be the voice of the age, to express the pre-occupations and the beliefs of an age in vivid and imaginative detail. In drama one has to be completely initiated into the details of the particular before the universal can be apprehended fully. It is also important to study the background with a view to understanding the world views of the people of the time, for while this is perhaps an extra-literary consideration in terms of the aesthetic norms to be used in the study and the evaluation of the play in question, it is yet of great interpretative value to know the predilections of the audiences of the time as well as those of the playwright in question. In the study of dramatic genre too an intimate knowledge of the background is of great value, even if it only serves a supportive function. It has been suggested that great tragedy flourishes in times of political stability and national prosperity, thus when there is time and leisure to turn inward and to exploit fully the intense individual and personal awareness that is the tragic spirit. On the other hand it is suggested that comedy, with its peculiarly ironic underpinning, flourishes in times of great social and political upheaval, where the stress is on social relationship rather than on individual agony and suffering. This would seem to be the case, broadly speaking — which brings one to the point that in the twentieth century British drama has shown a heavy preponderance of black comedy or savage comedy, etc.

The two plays will be studied in terms of theme, characterization and language, and a final evaluative section will be added in terms of the value of lifeview in the final interpretation of the plays.

(There is an interesting relationship between *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in that the one is derived from the other and the later play should ideally be read in close conjunction with the earlier one. The very way in which Stoppard has chosen to reinterpret the material he uses from *Hamlet* is indicative of the view he himself has of the world. He shifts the emphasis in the contemporary play to the extent that one finds most of the contemporary preoccupations of the twentieth century reflected in it.)

When one comes to the themes used in the two plays there are various intriguing discoveries to be made. Various themes occur in both plays, and are used in illuminatingly different ways.

In the first place there is the theme dealing with identity and the loss of identity. Hamlet comes back to the Royal court of Elsinore and experiences a vertiginous sense of loss. He is suddenly removed from his direct accession to the throne. His mother has deserted him and married his hated uncle. He is

pitched into a state of utter moral confusion by the demand of the ghost to take revenge. There is a state of supreme disorder all around him which shakes his being to the core. He finds himself unwilling to accept the responsibility to restore order:

The time is out of joint. O curséd spite  
That ever I was born to set it right.

Under the influence of these stresses Hamlet slips into a state of severe melancholy. He contemplates suicide and gives expression to his emotional and intellectual agony in the speech "To be or not to be ..." We see him as the tragic hero in the Shakespearian sense. He is a man of high moral and material standing who is brought to a downfall because of some disastrous choice that he makes (or fails to make) and which destroys him. And yet Hamlet's destruction does not fill the audience with the sense of emptiness and utter loss that comes at the end of a contemporary play like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. On the contrary, at the end of the play we do experience the sense of exaltation following on the sense of awe, fear and pity that we experience of the great tragic heroes. Hamlet has come to terms fully in the end: the rather petulant rebellion expressed in the "O curséd spite ..." speech is resolved in his acceptance, after a long and agonizing struggle, of the humble insight that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will. But thou would'st now think how ill all's here about my heart. But 'tis no matter. We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. It is be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (Act V, sc. 2, 190).

Hamlet has come full circle. The exquisite Renaissance gentleman (as we gather from Ophelia's speech) has disintegrated and has been reintegrated. He has come to accept that which has been laid upon him. There is, at the end of the play, together with the sadness and the sense of waste, the overwhelming awareness of the magnificence of a solitary man confronting the worst that fate can fling against him and emerging with dignity. This ties in with the concept of tragedy in the conventional sense — and brings one to the point that great tragedy demands a god or gods for its fullest expression. The relationship of the tragic hero with forces greater than himself, the vertical relationship, is of the greatest importance in this respect. It seems to impart a fulness, an encompassing wholeness to the image created, which is the most complete reflection of created reality, *and which is most readily accessible to an audience whose world view also acknowledges this image of reality.*

In *R & G* the theme of the loss of identity is equally if not more important,

but this is in a more destructive sense than it is used in *Hamlet*. In the first place the very choice of character (in deciding which characters from *Hamlet* to use) the playwright has revealed his particular twentieth century preoccupations. He has taken the two treacherous attendant lords, called by one critic of Shakespeare the two “most peripheral characters in Shakespeare”. They are confused about everything, they are faceless, they even confuse their own identities. They have been summoned to the Royal court for a dark and devious purpose.

Whereas in *Hamlet* they actively participate in the nefarious designs of the king, they now blunder on in ignorance. They have an intuitive awareness that it is important that they should obey some summons, but there is an emptiness within them. Their search for meaning and for some sort of substance remains on the horizontal level, and this dooms them to the death for which they have been summoned. Hamlet dies at the end of the play and is borne with respect and ceremony to a stage, R & G disappear after the heart-breaking statement that

“All right, then. I don’t care. I’ve had enough.

To tell you the truth, I am relieved (p. 91).

They remained firmly on the horizontal level in their search for identity. They have a wistful awareness that there should be another level, an awareness expressed in more than one of Stoppard’s plays — the search for a metaphysical entity that might just fill up the void within them\*\*.

This purely horizontal awareness is also important in terms of the genre of the play. To my mind this play falls firmly within the contemporary concept of comedy in its expression of theme, characterization language and tone. It also presents us with the peculiarly modern vision of comedy in the black unredemptive ending of man teetering on the edge of the abyss, of man stripped of all hope gathering the tatters of his human dignity around him. It has profound implications too for our interpretation of the play in terms of our own world view. In most contemporary plays we are only too aware of the emptiness at the core — an emptiness portrayed with great vividness, an emptiness that is part of the total impression that the playwright wishes to

\*\* At one stage Guildenstern rather wistfully says that “I’m sorry it wasn’t a unicorn. It would have been nice to have unicorns” (p. 15). This is given force by the fact that the crowd has lost the sense of mystical to the extent that they can say “Look ... a horse with an arrow in its forehead!” (p. 15). The same sense of irretrievable loss is expressed in Stoppard’s *Jumpers*: the main female character sings romantic songs about the moon. She goes mad when the first man lands on the moon and moon becomes, not a symbol of the romantic and the mystical, but just a lump of dusty matter.

convey and which will of necessity have a different effect on people with differing persuasions as to world view. The sense of something lacking is interpreted by the Christian in terms of the deficient view of created reality represented in these plays. It is also important in terms of genre, as in the words of Kerr; who believes that "Black comedy is a phenomenon of the moment that derives from the complete absence of any tragic aspirations ... it acknowledges the disappearance of affirmation altogether ... tries to work with the proposition that no motive is ever good and that no man would care to deceive himself into thinking that one might be" (1967, p. 317).

In a world conditioned by bleakness comedy has no choice but to try to make something of the situation. "It cannot turn its back on the pervasive bleakness of an age. Having so long been the gleeful urchin calling out that the emperor had no clothes, it cannot really retire from a society which sees neither clothes nor emperor. It must go down into the pit, clawing furiously, and with luck, entertainingly, the whole way down" (p. 320).

The implications of this virtual take-over of the field of tragedy by the comic mode are enormous. What "the present situation means for comedy is that it must assume a double burden" (p. 324), and it "must do all the work", even though "it was ordained to co-exist with tragedy" (p. 325).

This idea is taken further by White (1978) in very strong terms, for "once tragedy is eclipsed, comedy remains to translate desperation" (p. 11), and as "tragic purgation fades, comedies of corrosion offer new kinds of solace; those procured by sardonic derision" (p. 12).

So, whereas traditional tragedy offered renewal and a sense of release together with a reaffirmation of man's essential dignity, these new comedies offer only further disillusionment.

This idea is further strengthened in the two plays in question in the treatment of the theme of appearance and reality, a theme which occurs in both plays. In *Hamlet* this interplay becomes a major source of conflict and disorder. The introspection that he falls into results in the discovery of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Hamlet appears, for example, to be the perfect Renaissance gentleman, hiding in fact his insecurity and immaturity. He gradually grows towards a closer approximation of the mature man demanded for the task he has to fulfil, so that at the end of the play it is possible for reality to take over. The presence of the players has a special significance in the play, for they serve to unmask the reality that is festering under the smooth appearance that Claudius takes pains to create. Ultimately the players serve here to unmask evil and to help put goodness in

the ascendancy once again. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the situation is far more equivocal. The players are even more important in this play, and the chief player makes one of the most important statements in the play:

For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions (p. 49).

This reflection reveals a completely horizontal involvement and does not touch upon the crux of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. The intermingling of appearance and reality, the finally indistinguishable confusion, is the hallmark of the play.

This is equally true of the use of the concepts of temporarily and eternity in the plays. The core of the crisis in the human condition is to be found in the distortion of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. In *Hamlet* the order is restored after the temporal and the eternal have fallen into their proper places. In the modern play the temporal and the eternal are fused and the result is disastrous. Guildenstern, in a broken voice, gives expression to this awareness:

We've travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over;  
we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope  
of explanation (p. 88).

Contrast this with Hamlet's reasoned surrender when he can say that "the readiness is all", in spite of his earlier rebellion and agony in "O cursed spite" and "To be or not to be". His death is therefore an affirmation, while the deaths of Guil and Ros are a negation —

"Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over ... Death is not anything ... death is not ... It's the absence of presence, nothing more ... the endless time of never coming back ... a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound ... (p. 91).

### **Final remarks**

The character of Hamlet is fully rounded. He has stature and dignity, and his character seems to encompass the play fully. There is in the play a fusion of plot and character. The contemporary play, on the other hand, reveals to a large extent the fragmentary nature of the background against which it



has been created. There are more than accidental allusions in the play to *Waiting for Godot* - the faceless homunculi of Stoppard's play approximate those of Beckett's play closely. In this play character functions in a vacuum, there has been a complete breakdown. The nothingness of the world of the characters mirrors the nothingness of the world in which these plays had been conceived. (In this regard it would be of great value to read the article by Peet van Rensburg: *Lifeyview and perception of message in drama*, published in *Koers*, vol. 46, no. 2, p. 164). He has maintained, for example, that "the personal lifeyview of the playgoer plays a conclusive role. When the playgoer's approach to a play (based on his lifeyview) is *pietistic, dogmatic or reductionist* in nature, this role of lifeyview is almost exclusively negative determinist - therefore it does not only prevent true perception, understanding and interpretation of the meaning and the overarching message of the play, but it also contributes to the fact that the playgoer develops a sense of antipathy towards the play. He therefore becomes inured to the truths behind the "conversation" (Gadamer's term) as well as to the shaping values of the "conversation" as such. With regard to *Godot* Van Rensburg has said that "the existentialist and the Christian both come to an idiosyncratic message on the basis of their idiosyncratic lifeyviews after an investigative-shaping questioning process aimed at the play" (p. 180).

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