

HOW TO READ A PLATONIC DIALOGUE

SCOTT BUCHANAN

In my lifetime, the reading of Plato has undergone a most extraordinary change. I think the first time I ever read Plato through from beginning to end was with an adult group at a restaurant in New York on Saturday nights. And even in those days, (that was the late twenties), Plato was still the great liberal philosopher. And what do we see him being called now? He is the Fascist; he is the Communist; the totalitarian.

And, as with most Great Books, I can read him that way, and I'm not going to tell you what the right one is. But, I'm sure that this reading that's going on now is most thin and literal, and gross, and almost boorish. I'm going to see if I can expound or suggest at least one way of reading Plato.

It's not the way I always read him, so it isn't mine particularly, but I want to say, and this is taken from all these wonderful comrades I've had in reading Plato, there is a difference which must be recognized by any good reader of Plato between what is said by various people in the dialogue and what is done -- and not just what is done in the dramatic sense of what the roles are that are played out in the conversation, but what the dialogue is doing. There are some nice Greek words -- the "logos" and the "ergon," and the word "ergon" is a great word, and of course, "logos" is much greater, but "ergon" is no simple word either. It's the work that is done. It reminds me now when I say it of the sort of thing Freud does in

some of his writings. He talks about the dream work: what the dream does as a psychic function in an individual. In the subconscious there are a lot of other findings. Well there is a work dialogue is performing, and this of course means that a Platonic dialogue is really a drama. I made this point and a critic wrote in shocked at what I had said. "Didn't I know the difference between a dialogue and a drama?" I was, I'm afraid, a little superior to his criticisms because if there is anything that is dramatic in the world it is the Platonic dialogue.

Now dramas as we talk about them, academically at any rate, are either tragic or comic or melodramatic, a kind of and so forth kind of term for it. There is an importance in thinking about a drama and about Plato of seeing which it is. You're tempted of course to think of the Apology as a tragedy and a similar one the Phaedo, as a high seriousness that suggests something different from comedy and melodrama.

But when you come right down to it I think you have to admit that the dialogues all are comedies. If anybody knew, recognizing that a Platonic dialogue is a drama first and a comedy second, they could never make Plato into these things, Fascist, Communist, or Totalitarian or what they talk about.

Now, if I'm serious, it would be nice if we could sort of get at the essence of comedy. I'm not convinced about what I'm going to tell you, but I'm going to tell you a story.

You know for the last generation or two generations, I guess, there have been new sciences applied to the humanities. And one of these has been anthropology. And the anthropologists have tried to give us pre-history as well as history. And one of the stories that has been riding highest during my lifetime has been the anthropological study of the

Greek classics. So the origin of comedy has become an anthropologists theory. The story is that comedy began along with tragedy in a common source. They began in rituals and a very primitive ritual, a very widespread and universal one, the rituals of fertility at certain seasons of the year. And, as they tell the story, there is found in almost all civilizations a fundamental fertility ritual. That is a ritual pictured as a sort of country affair, not very citified, but a country affair in which a God dies and he's then either resurrected or reborn, and this is the fundamental thing that happens. Now you can guess what this means, that is it's the dying year of the Fall or the deep Winter and the Spring, and you recognize that we have some rituals in our higher religions so called which do this same thing.

They're saying that the ritual of the Seasons, that is the order of the Seasons, suggests cosmic and divine courses and that we are concerned with them, and what we do about them will make a difference to our own cycles and so forth.

Now you can see this of course in the tragedy. Usually there is a kind of resurrection, a God appeared and there was a theophany and a revelation at the end of the tragedy which somehow brought out the meaning of birth.

Oedipus of course is a great story. There is around the death of the God or the person a semi-divine possibility; there is a conflict, a dramatic conflict. Greeks call it an "agone", and we rightfully get our word agony from it. It is a great "agone", a great conflict, with destruction, possibly general destruction.

In the case of the Oedipus of course Oedipus killed his father and this gives another dimension to this business, that somehow it is the son,

the young man, who is possibly the new man who destroys his father so that he can become King, and there is in this act an arrogance, an over-weening action that the Greeks call "hybris", which becomes very important, and there is punishment for this, and there is at the end usually something like a revelation.

The revelation in the sort of good Greek tragedy of Sophocles is very often the revelation of who the person is himself as in the case of Oedipus.

And now there's the old comedy. This is the one that's very close to the ritual, and the fertility rites here are done with very concrete images. For instance the phallus symbol has become a God in some sense, and great processions in the cities follow it and celebrate it, and so on and so on. This is a pretty murky thing to know just what was going on, but it's pretty obvious that the male organ of generation would be a symbol of fertility, at least we say that about it. But there was a great deal of tomfoolery about this. Makes you remember that a great deal of our ordinary folk humor is around the sexual organs. This is not an accident. This runs way, way back into ritual, old comedy and is the folk's business of all peoples everywhere. It is always antipathetical to the orthodox in high civilizations. It has always existed in the underworld, in the army, and this is as old and irrepressible in spite of all attempts to repress it as anything could be.

The old comedy was full of this kind of thing, and it ran a little differently from the tragedy, at least seemingly. There is an "agone." There is a fight at the beginning, and it may be a very destructive one between two fighters and then more than two fighters, and then there is a procession and a wedding. Now this is pretty obviously the very concrete

notion of all the fertility rites, the wedding being of course a symbol of the new fertility.

New comedy is a substitution of characters and sometimes no great respect for the order of this big plot. The procession can come early; the wedding can be anywhere, there are various "agones," and particularly around the procession there is apt to be a kind of riot; the procession turns into a riot. The substitution also raises the level of the subject matter. There is more generality in the characters; in fact they tend to lose any notion of being individuals. They wear masks, and they represent things like morality plays do. They even get abstract names. If you read Aristophanes' comedies, you'll find that the names always have meanings, practically always.

One of the other shifts is that in place of "hybris," which is sometimes translated arrogance, pride, takes on some semi-divine character. This becomes impostorship. In place of being a very ambitious and over-weening sort of person he becomes a boaster. He boasts about himself, his claims of what he is going to do or what he has done, and this becomes sheer boastfulness and an impostership.

So "hybris," which is one of the sort of things that all tragedy hangs around, here has a sort of comic trans^{formation}ation.

Now the great work of tragedy as Aristotle says, and I think you can verify it by your own readings is purgation, purgation of emotions on one side, but the result of purgation of the mind, the intellect and so forth, and ends with a recognition, a learning, the achievement of knowledge, and in some deep way you can say that tragedy is the only way you ever do learn.

But the comedy is doing the same thing. In here is their deep identity. The comedy is purging the impostorships, the pretenses, the sophistries, if you want to use the word, because that's where it's come in very strongly here because of Plato. You purge those -- but that doesn't mean that you really destroy them. You transform them in some way. There is something less, even something added you might say, a greater degree of abstraction, a greater degree of inside depth in the knowledge that you have.

And this is the great worth or purpose of both tragedy and comedy. And I think a case can ^{BE MADE} remain -- I'm not going to try and make it tonight -- but the comedy on the whole is the more successful thing. There is a deeper and a more complete purgation in the comedy than there is in the tragedy. The tragedy makes you see perhaps the great light, the one great light. I don't mean anything very high here or transcendental, but some one thing that was being sought for throughout the whole work or the tragedy.

But in a comedy there are many, many insights, many clarities left with you at the end. Emotional purgation has been more complete in a comedy than it has been in a tragedy.

Now I'd like to go a little closer to something here. When you get to the Ethics -- Aristotle's Ethics -- you will find a rather long, and I must say when I read it first, rather boring discussion of virtues. He wants to show, plus prove, that a virtue is a mean between ^{two} ~~the~~ vices. That is, in case of courage there is cowardice and there is rashness. There are two possible vices and courage is the mean between these two.

One of these has to do with the main structure of a comedy. The virtue is called truthfulness (in English) and the two vices are

impostership (people that behave in a boastful manner, people that overrate themselves). At the other extreme of this is the ironic man, the man who underrates himself. And of course the epithet which you all learned I'm sure about Socrates - he is the ironic man.

There is a third notion here (and Aristotle has that too because he is aware of the comic application). There is the buffoon, a person who is an incorrigible jokester. We all know them. The story is here that these three characters are represented in every comedy. And they do various combinations in commutation. The buffoon is a person who can take on the character of the other two easily, for the sake of a joke, and does. And the ironic man can play tricks. He can boast about something that is utterly silly. So that it makes him out a very humble man. He is the best this-or-that and it might be a vice that he is talking about. The buffoon, therefore, is a kind of key powerful character who can move from one to the other and have allies and or who can identify himself with these other two; and this is what makes all the fun.

These are the main large types of characters who make comedies move and you can see how they work. You will remember Socrates; it's very easy. Socrates is always the ironic man, sometimes a very boastful fellow making a fool of himself. That's putting it mildly; he loved to do that. This is a very, very powerful weapon -- to destroy, to transform, to move imposters of all kinds. There is nothing quite like it -- the power of humility, of non-resistance. These are very powerful things.

Lest you be sure I'm not confusing you completely here, let me go back just a little bit. I was saying that the work of comedy is purgation, as it is in tragedy, and the result of purgation is a recognition, or the realization that you know something.

Plato generalizes this when he does his comic writing, to show that all opinion in some way is an impostorship. All the knowledge we get is in some way a myth or a sophistry of something of this sort. And it is the act of recognition about this that decides whether you're going to have any knowledge or not. The job is to purge our opinions until they turn into knowledge.

Now let me run through rapidly the types of impostors that there are, in new comedy, and if you like, I won't mind you finding these same people in Plato (as I read them) because they're there besides Socrates, because Socrates is of course this great versatile buffoon. He plays all the games there are by taking on different identities and purging anything he happens to want to by these means. There is the swashbuckler, who is the military type, the learned doctor, teachers, the sophist (who claimed he could teach anything). Then there is the physician and he has an ancestry of being a cook. There is a funny notion in the old comedy that if you cook the hero, that is the old man who is supposed to be killed, or the young man that might get into trouble and be killed himself, if you boiled him, he would come to life again. And the doctor always did this. The cook was first, but it became the doctor's role, and you know the physician has a great role in European comedy. I think more often than not that it is this peculiar half-magic, half-quackish kind of role in our society. Then there's a poet who tends to be a soothsayer in this particular comic role, the informer probably derived from the courtier in oriental despotisms. He is an informer who tells the sovereign what he wants to hear, and he better not tell him anything else.

Then there is a smaller impostor -- and these are everywhere -- slaves, old men and old women, young men and young women. The young woman

by the way is almost always the bride of the hero at the end of the comedy. She doesn't have much other function as a matter of fact. There's fertility in that.

Well, that's just a catalogue of semi-heroes. I've just given you samples.

Now, let me see if I can turn to Plato and very briefly illustrate what I have been saying. I'd like to think of the Republic. Remember the characters Cephalus, Polymarchus, Thrasymachus, Amyntus, and Ademantus. If you notice these are morality play names -- they are masks. They are not individual portraits for the most part.

Well, there certainly is the ironic buffoon, at least in the first book. You may think that Socrates is a terribly serious fellow trying to convert these people and make them something straight. But if you watch what's going on that isn't what's happening at all. Socrates met these people before, he knows their foibles. He knows that if he asks them a certain kind of question they will clarify themselves.

They will collapse, and maybe you have to ask several, a whole series of them, but they'll take care of themselves, and they do.

But, wait a minute, do you think that Cephalus, Polymarchus and Thrasymachus disappear after the first book? Do you think that they ran away angry? No -- they're in everything that goes on from then on. They are the impostors. In this case the old man, Cephalus, is also a kind of tycoon. He may be even an aristocrat if you want to put it in there and I think probably Plato did. He is a wise man. He is refuted, his definition of justice (of paying your debts) is in character. It seems to be refuted, but is it? Paying your debts comes later, taking into account of what the real functions are and seeing that they all perform.

Polymarcus, the warrior, and not quite just a simple warrior, not necessarily a general I take it, but somehow the great fighter, the leader of this, the watch-dog later on.

Thrasymachus is a little too difficult to put in one slot. But on the whole he is the appetitive man, the rash man, and of course his name means this. Cephalus of course is a sort of comic name for wisdom and so on.

And when you come to the classes in the state there's Cephalus, Polymarchus, and Thrasymachus. No doubt about that, is there?

And when you come to the kinds of corruptions of the state, aristocratic, democratic, oligarchic, at least those three go that way.

So that these impostors that show up in the first part of the drama, the great "ergon" that opened this whole thing, become the persistent characters. They'll allow you to see before you get through with the Republic practically all the basic political problems. There are insights galore, but no perfect state, not even laid up in Heaven, but something to which you might look if you wanted to straighten yourself out by using this book.

Just before I stop, I should like to make an application of what I've been talking about. You must remember that there are two kinds of comedy, I haven't brought this out. There is one kind in which the actors, or the hero, knows that he is funny, but there is another kind of comedy that is almost as good where the hero hasn't got the faintest idea how funny he is.

So, try to be comic heroes, and try to be impostors, and then if you can, and this is the tough one, try to be ironic yourselves. This is tough.

And then I'd like to add one further thing that I haven't said at all. What is the moral teaching of the comedy? Now there's lots of answers for

each separate comedy, great questions that evidently bothered the Greeks, when they made Socrates drink the hemlock. What were the moral results of his comedies? They had their own views of this. But I'd like to make a somewhat sentimental, but I believe true, and general remark about this.

The great work of comedy is the arousing and the cultivation of irony in love.