

***Le roi s'amuse*: Drama and Melodrama**

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For at least three centuries, 'melodrama' has asserted itself as one of the predominant aesthetic categories in literature, theatre, cinema, the vast field of music, etc. It brings with it an easily recognised structure which develops through pairs: misrecognition – agnition; disguise – unmasking; kidnap – recovery; pursuit – revelation; betrayal – punishment, forgiveness; damnation – repentance; pleasure – penitence; damage – revenge; seduction – conquest.

In Victor Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse* we find many melodramatic *topoi*: revenge; agnition; the relation between revelation-recognition; the heroine as symbol of innocence; the interrupted party (think of how many interrupted parties trigger the melodramatic narrative); kidnapping; disguise; the consonance between psyches and climactic elements; successions of coincidences, intrigues, plot twists. But these elements are not enough to make *Le roi s'amuse* a melodrama. According to Hugo's own definition, this play remains a drama.

It is in Hugo's preface to his play *Cromwell*, the true manifesto of French Romanticism, that the grotesque in its expressive, graphic, decorative form, transforms itself into the very symbol of the romantic age, raising itself to an aesthetic category of equal dignity to that of the sublime. The Hugian concept of the grotesque involves a range of complex problems, from the revisiting of humanity's stages of development, to the meaning of Romanticism, to the problem of mimesis – namely, the relation between art and nature. It is a kind of rupture or innovation that, in order to obtain full legitimacy in the world of art, needs to be inserted into a historical context which justifies its rebirth under the guise of an autonomous aesthetic category.

As in melodrama, a genre which reifies contrasts, so in Hugo's drama we can see the representation of the chiaroscuro equation. As in melodrama, in which 'antinomical' polarities are pushed to their maximum intensity, so in Hugo's drama the game of contrast is played to the extreme. If melodrama, however, sheds light on the terms of conflict – simultaneously providing the key to understanding the significance of antinomies, which in the majority of cases is resolved in a final conciliation or the victory of one of the two extremes – in Hugo's dramas the show of contrasts does not result in their harmonious reconciliation and is not settled by a resolution that necessarily means the domination of one polarity over the other. The melodramatic conciliation of opposites, which in a sort of gradual process of development bends bad to good, is thus foreign to the Hugian vision, which nevertheless transforms its antithesis into a unifying force. In fact, the opposition of contrasts is not revealed in Hugo's art as a principle of disintegration but, paradoxically, as an element of harmonious relationality within an overarching unity guaranteed by the function of the art itself. To sum up, in Hugian drama we

move from a Manichaean universe governed by the disjunctive sign ‘or’, to a universe governed by the sign of the conjunction ‘and’.

In *Le roi s’amuse*, the grotesque configures itself in this way: “A fool’s revenge the globe itself doth shake”.¹ It is precisely the grotesque that moulds the central hero of the drama, overturning the roles of master and servant. Hugo knows exactly what he is doing.

We are in 1832; censorship intervenes and interrupts the first performance. Very few will follow, and without much success. The reaction of the press to the performance is fierce. *L’Entr’acte* (of the 24th of November) aims to discredit Hugo’s poetics; in *Le Temps* one reads that “it has for some time been noted that Hugo is totally lacking in comic spirit. Energy, verve, and colour are all of his dominion, but lightness and quick wit are not at all”. A dramatic fool! What horror, what contradiction! Let us examine the character more closely. He is a monster that loves and above all is loved by his daughter. *Le National* deems this a beastly love.² *La Quotidienne* notes that “the union of the fool and the sublime has thrown the audience into distressing confusion.”³ Thus Hugo’s antimelodrama is not understood or accepted until years later, when it is made more palatable in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*.

Triboulet demonstrates a complex grotesque structure that goes beyond the duality (exterior nature – interior nature) that characterises many of Hugo’s characters: from Quasimodo to Marion Delorme, a courtesan under a veil of purity, from Ruy Blas, servant disguised as a minister, to Lucrèce, a criminal and a loving mother, all the way to Jean d’Aragon in the clothes of Hernani, the bandit, etc. Triboulet is not just an affectionate father, as one would usually think in a simplistic vision of the grotesque adaptation of character. Triboulet is more.

“But here at least, where all is innocence, I am thy father — loved, revered. No name is holier than a father’s to his child”. An excessive request, extreme for a daughter! Triboulet mirrors himself in Blanche, who is the source of life and, in turn, an object of veneration. Certainly, melodramatic elements, beyond those previously mentioned, are by no means lacking in the plot: the king’s disguise; pretending to be a “student” and “poor”; the conspiracy with the corrupt Berarde, who rather than protecting Blanche “sells” her in exchange for a bag of money; the kidnapping of Blanche by courtiers in the night (in which Triboulet participates – unbelievably but cruelly – by his very own will); Triboulet’s final cry, after having discovered the conspiracy: “Oh! The curse!”⁴

The scene between the king and Blanche forms part of the theme of unveiling and recognition. It is the king who reveals to Blanche her father’s work: he is the court fool, a jester, an idiot who completely depends on the king’s will. The girl’s sense of impotence reaches its climax. Thus Blanche, attempting to escape from the lascivious requests of the king hides in a room... but it is that of the sovereign; she is lost, as is emphasised by the courtiers. The girl’s virginity –

¹ V. Hugo, *Le roi s’amuse*, in *The Dramatic Works of Victor Hugo*, vol. 5, New York 1894, p. 246

² A. Ubersfeld, *Le roi et le bouffon*, José Corti, Paris 1974, p. 134.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴ V. Hugo, *Le roi s’amuse*, cit., p. 210.

another typically melodramatic element that melodrama tends to preserve, on the pain of the victim's death (as also happens in this case) – is entirely compromised. The door to the king's room is shut and Blanche is forced to submit to the violence.

Scene three of the third act is among the most impressive and has three levels of dramatisation: in the first moment Triboulet, who is desperately searching for Blanche and is still hoping that she has not fallen into the clutches of the king, asks for his daughter back. The revelation of Triboulet-as-father astonishes the noblemen ("fawning race accurst!").⁵ The first level of dramatisation plays on Triboulet's desperation and the accusations he levels at the noblemen, all involved, all complicit, corrupt in the same way.⁶ The king does not care about the age or beauty of the women he seduces. Like a Dongiovanni who doesn't even need to think of the conquest but only of the final "prize", the king counts (or perhaps no longer bothers to count) his easy conquests.

At what price, then, is Blanche sold? At this point the second phase of the dramaturgic development begins. Realising that his tirade has had no acknowledgement, and that indeed its only result has been to stiffen the resolve of the noblemen who barricade themselves behind their wounded pride, Triboulet unsheathes the weapon of compassion. "Behold these tears, Marot! – Be merciful!"⁷ The fool targets Marot, the most indulgent and sensitive of the noblemen, and begs for mercy. Mercy for his daughter, mercy for his physical condition (no one has known that behind his laughter and his jokes lies hidden a terrible pain, a terrible physical pain born from his deformity), mercy for that poor jester that has entertained them so. But his pleading is of no avail. Blanche emerges from the king's room "*agitated and disordered*", as the stage direction specifies.⁸ This "dishonour" is the obvious sign of rape (even if Triboulet at first pretends not to have understood, or still 'hopes').

The third phase is that of true invective. Triboulet, who has already compared himself to the king and feels his equal, indeed his source of inspiration, at least in terms of his perversions, openly challenges him, asserting the right to ban him from one of his own rooms: "Go, get ye hence! And if the King pretend to turn his steps this way, [...] Tell him he dare not! — Triboulet is here!"⁹ The fool's vendetta against the king has begun.

The figure of Blanche, that now begins to define itself, has merely the semblance of a melodramatic heroine. She is not the passive victim of a conspiracy. She is an agent in the drama and indeed determines its ending.

The father-daughter relationship is non-linear, not melodramatic. After the revelation of dishonour, the father speaks of his daughter using the past tense: the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221. "A maiden's honor is to you as nought — A king's fit prey — a profligate's debauch. Your wives and daughters (if they chance to please), belong to him. The virgin's sacred name is deemed a treasure, burthensome to bear: a woman's but a field — a yielding farm let out to royalty".

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

privilege of possession and of the exclusivity of love have been definitively lost.¹⁰ From here on, father and daughter can no longer understand each other: the father locked in his desire to reclaim and vindicate that which he has definitively lost; the daughter becoming ever more autonomous from an egotistical love that could not protect her.

As well we know, the plot hatched by Triboulet to generate in his daughter hatred for the hated does not work, and only serves to manifest once more the lechery of the sovereign. At this point in the plot – that is, in the moment when Triboulet is implementing his revenge, asking a good for nothing to kill a young man (the king) who will appear at his inn to lie with his sister – we come across two more typically melodramatic elements: Triboulet’s reply to Saltabadil’s request to know the name of the man he will kill – “Would’st know his name: Then hear mine own as well, for *mine* is *chastisement*, and *his* is *crime!*”¹¹ – and the explosion of the thunderstorm which underlines the most dramatic moments of the play’s ending.

Blanche’s distress outside Maguelonne and Saltabadil’s door, which is subdivided into monologues and internal debates, is instead underlined by its dramatic valency. Blanche is not yet sixteen, but she knows that the affirmation of her own identity depends on an extreme choice, namely that of saving her lover on the pain of death and against the will of her father and master. Where has the pure, chaste, submissive melodramatic heroine gone? The king is by no means the knight in shining armour that will save her from the violent usurper! The king she loves is an abominable monster that in classic melodrama should meet death. Here not only does he survive, he sings!

The fifth and final act (scenes three and four) is a masterpiece, except for the finale, in which Verdi’s *Rigoletto* makes great gains by having father and daughter alone onstage.

An in-depth analysis of Triboulet’s long monologue in the third scene allows all of the character’s potency to emerge emphatically.¹² The king lies in a sack under the feet of the hunchback, the fool, the court jester, the derided, the exploited, the marginalised, the man who suffers and who life has mocked. Here is his last, definitive, deadly prank. And while the audience knows who is in the sack, Triboulet continues to exalt his plan and its results. “Twas a hard strife, the weak against the strong: The weak hath conquered! He who kissed thy foot hath gnawed thy heartstrings. Dost thou hear me now? Thou King of Gentlemen! The wretched slave, the Fool, Buffoon, scarce worth the name of man — He whom thou calledst dog — now gives the blow! [*He strikes the dead body*]”. “The poor oppressed one, draws his hatred forth, the cat’s a tiger”¹³ ...and in the meantime that melodious

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 225. “Once the sole refuge of my misery, the day that woke me from a night of woe, the soul through which mine own had hopes of Heaven, a veil of radiance, covering my disgrace [...] What am I now? [...] These eyes, weary with the sight of crime, turned to thy guileless soul to find repose; Then could I bear my fate, my abject fate”.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 247. “Now, giddy world, look on! Here see the Jester! There, the King of Kings, Monarch o’er all, unrivalled, Lord supreme!”.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 248.

song, that tenor voice sings a carefree air. Nothing could be crueller, more atrocious, more fundamentally antimelodramatic: the king is an anti-hero; the young virgin (virgin no longer) is the creator of her own destiny and her paternal destiny, saving the anti-hero; the protagonist – a fool, a jester, who usually in melodrama would assume a secondary role – receives upon himself the most atrocious revenge.

In the fourth scene, the opening of the sack in which Blanche lies dying makes the heart bleed, and at the same time reaffirms the complex grotesqueness of the protagonist's soul: "Dearest, sole delight on earth, hear'st thou my voice? Thou know'st me now?"¹⁴ This is not just the desperate cry of a father. It is the desperate cry of one who has lost his reason to live, or, even worse, his very soul. In an extreme and 'monstrous' monologue, Triboulet reveals that his nature is not univocal, as melodrama would have it, but double, profoundly and unequivocally double, and thus grotesque. It is an incredibly powerful nature, and it is this potency that Verdi recognised.¹⁵

Triboulet recognises his dual nature, reflected as it is in the dying body of Blanche, who showed him another side of humanity. A side that knows how to love and knows how to suffer. A side that now is dying with his daughter, his creation and his executioner. A side which one has to face up to only if it is revealed. A nature that represented the liberation of Triboulet's soul. The finale reveals the symbiosis between father and daughter that is acknowledged by the father, but not by the daughter, who has affirmed her own independence and thus killed her father's 'pure soul'.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 253. "Thou would'st not leave me thus. [...] Oh, God of Heaven! Why should this be? How cruel 'twas to give so sweet a blessing. Yet forbear to take her soul away ere all its worth I knew. Why didst thou let me count my treasure o'er? Would'st thou had died an infant! aye, before thy mother's arms had clasped thee! or that day (when quite a child) thy playmates wounded thee, I could have borne the loss. But, oh, not now, My child! my child!"