

## Excess (1987)

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As a means of introducing the theme of excess, let us consider how it may be discerned within the Aristotle's *Poetics*. Though never precisely named in its generality, the possibility of excess represents an ever present threat to the aesthetic moderation that Aristotle ostensibly prefers. It is present at times through its inconsistent omission, at times through its latent possibility, and at times - in relation to specific dramatic perils - through its explicit denunciation. Accordingly, I shall concentrate first on its ambivalent status within the theory of imitation, then upon its presence as a secret temptation within the theory of dramatic action, and then finally upon its explicit formal danger, evident in the twin dramatic sins of monstrous spectacle and the *deus ex machina*.

### Mimesis and Excess

What is it precisely that imitation sets out to imitate? Chapter two of the *Poetics* is entitled "The Objects of Poetic Imitation". It is a very short chapter, only a paragraph long, and begins,

Since imitative artists represent men in action, and men who are necessarily either of good or of bad character...these men must be represented either as better than we are, or worse, or as the same kind of people as ourselves. (Aristotle 1986, p. 33)

The rest of the chapter simply expands upon this basic observation. Are we to believe then that the objects of poetic imitation are limited solely to the sphere of human action? If so, how is it that Aristotle can refer to the representation of the Cyclops within the very same paragraph: "for instance, the Cyclops might be represented in different ways" (Ibid.)? How can the Cyclops, a giant one-eyed monster, possibly be regarded as a man? This apparent inconsistency is ignored, suggesting perhaps that this severe restriction of the objects of imitation is less a statement of fact or of essence than of moral propriety - an injunction, perhaps, that the only proper object of poetry is man. Certainly, as Aristotle himself makes evident, poetry will have never obeyed this injunction. Poetry has interests not only in the human but in the monstrous, the divine, and all that exceeds the safety of the familiar. Representations of the Gods, of daemons and centaurs, of nature and original chaos, indicate that the objects of poetic imitation extend well beyond "men in action".

Just a few pages later, in the process of arguing that people take an instinctive pleasure in works of imitation. Aristotle employs the following example:

What happens in actual experience is evidence for this; for we enjoy looking at the most accurate representations of things which in themselves we find painful to see, such as the forms of the lowest animals and of corpses. (Ibid, p. 35)

Once again Aristotle employs an example that undermines his claim that the objects of poetic imitation are limited to “men in action”. The lowest animals are not men and corpses are scarcely active. It seems ironic and revealing that Aristotle should choose these particular examples precisely when he is trying to illustrate the most basic appeal of imitation. He explains the appeal of such depictions in terms of a desire to learn.

The reason for this is that learning is a very great pleasure, not for philosophers only, but for other people as well, however limited their capacity for it may be. (Ibid.)

But what type of learning is this? What is it exactly that the representation of a corpse can teach us? Aristotle does not tell us, but clearly it must teach us something of death. Death itself can never become visible, but we can stare with morbid fascination at its visible consequences, at the corpse which mutely announces the ruin of all human aspirations. If the representation of the corpse grows ever more accurate, it is so that we may approach more closely still the unseen and unknown texture of death. This is a learning then bound by an impossible contract; the knowledge that it seeks endlessly eludes and outplays it, precisely because, however much learning desires it, death, in its otherness, in its blinding force, can never become knowledge. Much to the chagrin of his ostensible argument, Aristotle leads us to contemplate the possibility of representational excess - an orientation, within imitation, towards the impossible.

### **Excess and Dramatic Action**

This tendency towards excess is evident not only in terms of the struggle to find ever more imitatively lucid means of figuring the unfigurable, but also, relatedly, in terms of a complex orientation towards disunity at the level of dramatic structure. Aristotle stresses the importance of plot unity, which he theorizes not as an abstract formal principle but, in imitative terms, as the representation of an action as a coherent whole. Yet if this unity is to have any dramatic interest it must be fashioned through a crucial violence - the action must be characterized at least as much by its eruptive disorder as by its coherence. Therefore Aristotle argues, within the context of his discussion of tragedy, that the coherent whole must be shaped by, and contain, one or more of the following features: reversal (“a change from one state of affairs to its opposite”); discovery (“a change from ignorance to knowledge”); and calamity (“an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as death openly represented, excessive suffering, wounding, and the like.” (Ibid., pp. 46-7)). It is interesting to note that calamity is permitted an independent status alongside reversal and discovery. It could be argued that calamity is but a species of reversal, representing a change from wellbeing to disaster. Where it differs, perhaps, is in its awful finality - a reversal can always be reversed, whereas a calamity, particularly within tragedy, tends to be total, tends to utterly obliterate its opposite. But, unlike reversal and discovery, calamity denotes not only a type of action but also a type of content (calamity cannot escape its relation to disaster). This inextricable relation between formal and thematic violence will later prove significant.

Reversal, discovery and calamity appear then as modes of dramatic change, breaching the coherence of an initial situation only in order, Aristotle would have us believe, to constitute a greater level of coherence - the unity of an action. But surely this relation

between violence and coherence can be interpreted differently? Perhaps the unity of a plot merely provides a coherent framework for the expression of violence, for the celebration of reversal, discovery and calamity? Perhaps tragedy preserves an impulse beyond the safety of cathartic resolution (the exhaustion of the tragic emotions of fear and pity), a secret wish for the calamity to express itself totally?

Yet this is to wish, once again, for the impossible. The total calamity is inexpressible, for it would have to affect us as well, for it would have to destroy everything entirely, for there would be nobody left to say that an action had occurred. But nonetheless, the total calamity must be expressed. This is the paradox that opens up the necessity for excess. Within the context of the dramatic structure, excess is the means by which an orientation beyond unity is articulated. We shall find that for Aristotle it appears as a negative breach, as a flaw within the structure of the plot, ruining the coherence of the tragic action. But it could be regarded more positively as the plot struggling towards an untold and untellable story, risking its own annihilation in order to enable the violence it contains to pass beyond constraint; attempting this through extreme reversal, through impossible discovery, through all the resources of calamity. It is worth stressing though that the risk of annihilation must always remain just that, only a risk, for if the plot were literally to annihilate itself, then the pursuit of the untenable story would cease altogether. Excess is concerned with the lucid expression of the impossible, not with silent and invisible obliteration.

### **Spectacle and the Deus Ex Machina**

We turn now to the means by which this lucidity is enabled, Spectacle and the deus ex machina are the two aesthetic improprieties that realize the possibility of excess within the *Poetics*. As well as dealing with each separately, it will be necessary to recognize their crucial affinity and correspondence. They are not simply isolated flaws, but reveal, through their interdependence and common orientation towards calamity, a systematic tendency towards excess.

Spectacle is not always subject to denunciation within the theory of tragedy. At first it seems simply to indicate the material realization of the drama - the actual acting out of the play upon a stage.

Now since the representation is carried out by men performing the actions, it follows, in the first place, that spectacle is an essential part of tragedy... (Ibid., p. 39)

But very quickly, as Aristotle stresses the supreme importance of the abstract structure of plot, spectacle begins to seem far less essential.

Spectacle, or stage-effect, is an attraction, of course, but it has the least to do with the playwright's craft or with the art of poetry. For the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and of actors, and besides, the production of spectacular effects is more the province of the property-man than of the playwright. (Ibid. p. 41)

Despite its attraction, spectacle now appears as something basely extraneous. But in distinguishing it so absolutely from the true heart of tragedy, Aristotle unavoidably grants it a certain autonomy. Spectacle can never again be regarded as simply subservient. It dangerously goes its own way, constantly appearing as the improper other of plot, sometimes producing similar effects, but always in an 'inferior' fashion.

Fear and pity may be excited by means of spectacle; but they can also take their rise from the very structure of the action, which is the preferable method and the mark of a better dramatic poet. (Ibid. p. 49 )

But much worse, much more threatening, much more difficult to cogently denounce, is when spectacle dares to produce its own effects.

Those who employ spectacle to produce an effect, not of fear, but of something merely monstrous, have nothing to do with tragedy, for not every kind of pleasure should be demanded of tragedy, but only that which is proper to it; and since the dramatic poet has by means of his representation to produce the tragic pleasure that is associated with pity and fear, it is obvious that this effect is bound up with the events of the plot. (Ibid. )

It is curious that pity and fear are treated as though they are comparable to the monstrous. Is the monstrous an emotion? Is it an effect produced in the audience? Surely the monstrous denotes less an affective response than an order of content? This discrepancy seems significant, indicating a level of ambiguity in Aristotle's definition of spectacle. Spectacle is not simply the material realization of the plot, but is related to a specific order of content - the monstrous. This is particularly evident when Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of tragedy.

There is complex tragedy, which depends entirely on reversal and discovery; tragedy of suffering [...]; tragedy of character [...]; and fourthly, spectacular tragedy, as in the Phorocides, in the and in plays with scenes in Hades. (Ibid. , p56)

Apart from again confusing us about the relation between spectacle and tragedy, this statement certainly associates spectacle (spectacular tragedy) with a certain type of content. Why else would plays with scenes set in Hades necessarily be linked to spectacle? What sets Hades apart so that actions that occur there can never be sufficiently represented by plot means alone? Can it be because Hades can never adequately be incorporated within the sphere of "men in action"? Can it be because the spectacle of Hades arouses something beyond the tragic emotions of pity and fear - a sense of horror; the very same emotion that the representation of the Cyclops or of a corpse, or of calamity would arouse? Wouldn't this horrific spectacle represent a form of impossible discovery, a seeing beyond the calamitous reversal? In this sense then, rather than opposing spectacle to plot, we can recognize their intimate relation. Reversal, discovery and calamity, in their potential orientation towards excess, lead toward horrific spectacle.

The term *deus ex machina*, meaning literally "a god from a machine", refers to the practice within Greek tragedy of producing a resolution through divine agency - a god

suddenly intervenes, artificially whisked within the diegesis by a piece of stage-machinery. Notice that the *deus ex machina*, like spectacle, is associated with the art of production - specifically with the dangerously alien sphere of the special effect. Aristotle writes of this unsettling device,

Furthermore, it is obvious that the unravelling of the plot should arise from the circumstances of the plot itself, and not be brought about *ex machina*, as is done in the *Medea*, and in the episode of the embarkation in the *Illiad*. The *deus ex machina* should be used only for matters outside the play proper, either for things that happened before it and that cannot be known by the human characters, or for things that are yet to come and that require to be foretold prophetically - for we allow to the gods the power to see all things. However there should be nothing inexplicable about what happens, or if there must be, it should be kept outside the tragedy, as is done in Sophocles' *Oedipus*. (Ibid. p.52)

It is important to recognize that the *deus ex machina* is not forbidden altogether, but only inasmuch as it finds its way within tragedy. The sphere of the inexplicable, of everything that lies beyond "men in action", is permitted as long as it does not intrude within, and interfere with, the properly human space and logic of tragedy. Once again like spectacle, the *deus ex machina* is not simply a formal flaw but is associated with a specific kind of content - with the inhuman (however anthropomorphically conceived) otherness of the gods. The *deus ex machina* is cast as a flaw precisely because Aristotle forbids any tendency towards excess, forbids tragedy any expression of its violence beyond the teleological horizon of human resolution, forbids tragedy any access towards horror. Excess is eliminated as an intrinsic possibility within tragedy by treating the forms of its manifestation (spectacle and the *deus ex machina*) as though they were merely isolated and external faults. This is what enables Aristotle to praise Euripedes as a tragedian despite his conspicuous 'faults'.

Those critics are on the wrong tack, therefore, who criticize Euripedes for following such a procedure in his tragedies, and complain that many of them end in misfortune; for, as I have said, this is the right ending. The strongest evidence of this is that on the the stage and in the dramatic competitions plays of this kind, when properly worked out, are the most tragic of all, and Euripedes, faulty as is his management of other points, is nevertheless regarded as the most tragic of our dramatic poets. (Ibid. p.49)

But does the greatness of Euripedes bear only an accidental relation to his faults? Only one of these faults is specifically mentioned by Aristotle; Euripedes' *Medea* (see previous quotation) apparently contains a classic instance of the *deus ex machina*. Aristotle refers to the moment when Medea, having avenged herself against her husband Jason, having murdered her own children and Jason's new bride, escapes from Corinth in a chariot supplied by Apollo. Powerless to stop her, Jason can only hurl insults from the ground below. The tragic conflict between Jason and Medea, which constitutes the substance of the dramatic action, is decided then through divine intervention. Aristotle clearly regards this as an unsatisfactory and artificial device - a resolution that comes from without, rather than from within the structure of the dramatic action proper. But if the dramatic action were always to preserve a longing beyond propriety, if it were to have interests

beyond the autonomy and coherence of the human, then Medea's chariot would appear less as a flaw than as a point of culminatory violence. It is Medea's revenge - the crucial reversal within the play - pushed to an extreme limit, pushed beyond the limits of the explicable. The family misfortune, the amatory calamity, is rendered in unbearable excess. Seeing her above the roof in her chariot, Jason recognizes, (in an instant of discovery) the literally monstrous (inhuman) character of his wife's jealousy.

You abomination! Of all women most detested. By every god, by me, by the whole human race! You could endure - a mother! - to lift sword against Your own little ones; to leave me childless, my life wrecked. After such murder do you outface both Sun and Earth. (Euripides 1975 p. 58)

To "outface" - wouldn't this be precisely for the calamity which is articulated at the very limits of tragedy (as tragedy drifts into horror) to appear brilliantly, blindingly, impossibly? The *deus ex machina*, which is not a mere external fault but crucially realizes the excessive interests of plot (the violence of reversal, discovery and calamity straining beyond all anthropomorphic limits), is also a moment of spectacle. All that is foreign to "men in action" not only inexplicably intervenes but impossibly appears. The chariot is monstrous - it is drawn by two dragons and Medea has the corpses of her two children beside her. Confronted by this awful scene, Jason requests that Medea return his sons for proper burial. She refuses, leading him to implore,

I long to fold them in my arms; To kiss their lips would comfort me. [...] For God's sake, let me touch their gentle flesh. (Ibid. p.60)

To which Medea replies, "You shall not. It is a waste of breath to ask." (Ibid.)

The limit of tragedy would be precisely the passivity of Jason before this calamity. Tragedy passes into horror when human action becomes irrelevant. The dead appear, but they cannot be drawn back from the invisibility that beckons them. Jason can do no more than gaze from a distance in frustration at this brilliant and utterly intangible spectacle of loss. Jason is doomed precisely to the separation of vision (the passivity of the witness). The gods have intervened and punished him with this atrocious spectacle which he can do nothing to affect, and yet which still, brutally, leaves open the possibility of desire. His only release would be through amnesia or death. Excessive representation is always characterized by this mingling of liminal brilliance and insufficiency. It is constituted always as an impossible contract. It is the "waste of breath" that struggles to forge a relation to everything that "men in action" cannot control, cannot see, cannot know. It does so, however, with a strange optimism that the tragic Jason (crushed by horror) could never comprehend, with the optimism that leads Euripides to pursue misfortune to a 'fault'.

## References

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