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TRAGIC RELIEF IN COMEDY:

A DIMENSION IN PLAUTUS AND TERENCE

TO TALK ABOUT COMEDY a generation ago was to invoke the names of Aristotle, Bergson, and Meredith. Today the emphasis has shifted somewhat. What we have of Aristotle's treatment of comedy is altogether too fragmentary, even with the help of Lane Cooper's wrong-headed brilliance, to give a satisfactory analysis of comic art, and the comedy of which he wrote is not the source of our comic tradition—on the stage, at least; *that* derives from Plautus and Terence. As for Bergson and Meredith, their insights are still valid and valuable, but they were dealing with only one type of comedy, the comedy of manners, and that, too, from the point of view of laughter, which is only a by-product of comedy.

Today we have the findings of Cornford and the Cambridge School behind us, and the names to conjure with are Wylie Sypher and Albert Cook, Francis Fergusson and Eric Bentley. All of these, in their different ways, have re-emphasized the fact that comedy means much more than laughter and that its cause is much wider in scope than the game called comedy of manners. It is deeper than this, more real, more in touch with human experience; it explores much more than the ridiculous. If we include in the realm of comedy *Pickwick* and *Prospero*, *Don Quixote* and *Don Juan*, then comedy seems wider in scope and deeper in implications than tragedy itself. Surely it tells us a good deal about ourselves that tragedy, in its larger-than-life aspirations, must leave unsaid.

Let me venture some tentative distinctions between the two forms here.

The tragic writer explores his characters; his approach is sympathetic and often highly emotional. His audience is moved, Aristotle tells us, to pity and fear. The comic writer may sympathize with his characters to some extent, but it is his business to remain detached. His audience must be moved to laughter, and all writers on laughter agree that we cannot laugh at people with whom we are made to sympathize.

Again, the tragedian deals with man *sub specie aeternitatis*, and he centres his play in the soul of one man, his hero. The comedian, on the other hand, deals with man here and now, in his social and temporal aspects, and his play has no centre, so to speak: his range is society as a whole; it must be as wide as life itself. While the tragedian attempts to sum up all of humanity in one tragic figure, the comedian tries to represent humanity in many figures on many levels: every man must appear in his own particular humour.

Thus tragedy gives us the universal man, and comedy displays types. This fact can be demonstrated by reading down the titles of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*—all named for their tragic heroes and heroines, while for their titles the comedies are given brief, attractive catch-phrases.¹

It is even more striking with Greek drama. The tragedies are stories of individuals—*Agamemnon*, *Prometheus*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Oedipus*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*—while the comedies are named for the social types represented by the chorus, whether *Birds* or *Frogs*, *Knights* or *Wasps* or *Clouds*. It is easy to swell this list. *Phèdre* is a tragedy, *Le Misanthrope* a comedy; *Tristan* is a tragedy, *Die Meistersinger* a comedy; *Saint Joan* is, as far as Shaw could write one, a tragedy, and *The Millionairess* is a comedy.

Tragedy, then, seems to be personal: the summing up of humanity in one heroic figure. And comedy is impersonal, detached: the revelation of humanity in a variety of types. This is a helpful distinction, albeit a rough-and-ready one.

Albert Cook's treatise on the philosophy of comedy, *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, treats the tragic and the comic under headings which the author calls antinomic symbols. Tragedy, he says, deals with death; comedy, with sex. Tragedy has a handsome hero; comedy, an ugly one. The tragic hero is an aristocrat; the comic, a bourgeois—and so on through paragraphs and pages and chapters. The duality expressed by the antinomies—ethics: manners; failure: success; imagination: reason; symbol: concept; extreme: mean; wonderful: probable—this great duality is, when expressed in dramatic art, tragedy-comedy. These, Cook says, are the two basic ways in which artists explore life, and each is an infinite symbol.

Eric Bentley, admitting that all definitions of comedy have proved inadequate, comes to say much the same thing: "We might find two opposing schemes of life, the one religious, or quasi-religious, postulating an ultimate meaning in life, the other secular and ethical, postulating an immediate meaning in life."² This is as close to a definition of either tragedy or comedy as I intend to come in this paper—only to suggest that, if we consider tragedy and comedy as abstract terms,

they are opposed symbols. They approach art and life in different and opposed ways.

What I propose to do will, I suppose, blur the line of division that has just been made. It is easy to take exception to the generalizations: Euripides wrote a tragedy called *The Trojan Women*, for example, and a comedy called *Helen*. But this does not upset the antinomy that Bergson and Cook and Bentley have expressed for us. Euripides is an innovator, and little is gained by quibbling of this sort.

The point that should be made is that many artists, tragic and comic, manage to trade symbol for antinomic symbol. The tragic and comic are opposed, but not mutually exclusive, world-views. And as we can speak of comic relief in tragedy—be it Macbeth's porter to break the tension of a situation, or Lear's fool to throw the hard light of comedy on the gloom of tragedy—so, I believe, there can be a kind of tragic relief in comedy; not just a pause in the hilarity, but a point where the individual appears behind the type, the tears behind the laughter. It is a point where ethics illuminate manners, or failure points up success, or death explains the meaning of sex. In effect, one of Cook's tragic symbols is introduced to throw the whole vision of comedy into relief.

I would like to take, as an example of this idea, one of our mass-produced contemporary comedies, but the best of them in recent years. This is the film, *The Apartment*. A young and innocent "organization man" is placed in an almost Plautine situation: he has an apartment, a shabby, poorly furnished flat, but, it seems, the only place in New York where the wolves in the head office can carry on their extra-curricular affairs. The impecunious young man succeeds in business without really trying: he is forced to comply with the requests from higher-up, and as a result he gets periodic promotions and chronic pneumonia from spending his nights out in the rain. But despite the suspicions of his uncomprehending neighbours, he retains his Chaplinesque innocence. (This is important. Jack Lemmon plays the young man with a touch of dead-pan unreality, and our hero becomes a comic type while we are able to view the goings-on with the proper detachment.)

Really, the situation is little more than a joke of the travelling salesman type, and the film labours it for the better part of an hour. Then we get too much of the joke. If it was funny before, it now becomes steadily disquieting. As it is told over and over, we grow uncomfortable, we feel our detached attitude giving way. Finally, to climax the action of the comedy, a touch of tragedy: one of the office girls, someone with a little more genuine feeling than the rest, despairs and tries to commit suicide in the apartment. The whole comic situation, so laboriously

built up, is suddenly thrown into relief by the introduction of a tragic symbol. We see how heartless the joke really is. The hero is given a point of view and the story a direction in which to move, uphill again, to a comic conclusion—a conclusion of genuineness and charity: no one is condemned; only the heartlessness, the automatism of vice is exposed.

What the film has done is to show the tragic core in its comic situation. "Comedy is always an extract from reality", says film-critic Wilfrid Sheed. "There is usually somebody tearing his hair in the next room to make up the balance. Cruelty may be needed off-stage to keep the joke going."³ In *The Apartment* we are shown some of this cruelty. There is tragic relief.

Ordinarily, we would think, the intrusion of seriousness into such a situation would spoil the fun and wreak havoc with the play. In a comedy of manners, it would. But this is something else. Here, an artist with sure instinct, in this case writer-director Billy Wilder, has allowed us to take his joke seriously—and has given us a minor masterpiece.

It is essential to comedy that the viewer remain detached, apart from, even superior to the stage action. Perhaps the most notable thing about *The Apartment* is that, while the director behind the scenes remains detached, somewhat cynically wise, we the audience lose our detachment and are drawn into the little tragedy behind the comedy. I would like to go back two centuries now, to a second example, a more intense sort of tragic relief, one in which the artist himself forsakes the detachment which is proper to comedy. The artist in this case is Mozart, and the work is *Così Fan Tutte*.

Mozart's music seems the very language of comedy. His balanced perfection in the use of musical forms, his miraculous sense of timing, his grace, wit, fluency—these are comic gifts. Yet how often the comic vision reveals tragic depths—in the symphonies and quartets and concerti, and especially in the works for the stage.

The story of *Così Fan Tutte* can be briefly told. Two young Italian officers are engaged to be married to two sisters. A cynical philosopher challenges the men with the statement that all women are inconstant, and makes a wager that if each of them assumes a disguise and makes love to the other's fiancée, the ladies will succumb within twenty-four hours. The plot then spins on like a game of chess, with two pairs of mis-matched lovers and even a conniving maid to complement the old cynic. Eventually the sisters consent to marry their "new" admirers; wedding preparations are actually begun. Then the men reveal themselves, and all

ends happily as the rightful pairs are reconciled by the philosopher, who assures us "*così fan tutte*—this is how all women behave."

For a century or more this opera was not popular, and the blame was placed on the libretto, which was considered either intolerably stupid or basically immoral. Attempts were made to adapt Mozart's music to an entirely new play: in Dresden it became a Spanish comedy; in Paris, a version of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Actually the libretto is very good—an elaborate, symmetrical, highly artificial comedy of manners. To read it through is to read an object-lesson in the well-made play. But to hear the opera Mozart fashioned from this material is to hear something beyond the powers (and certainly beyond the intention) of his librettist Da Ponte. For Mozart, the comic artist with the tragic vision, cannot play the game of comedy of manners through to the end. He has not the necessary detachment. He responds appropriately enough when the behaviour of the two young ladies is patently absurd. Dorabella is so upset by her fiancé's departure that she cannot drink her chocolate, and asks for poison instead:

The poison—where is it? Close those windows! I hate the light. I hate the air I breathe. I hate myself . . . Go away, for heaven's sake. Go away and leave me alone.

Mozart underscores the absurdity of this reaction with delightfully satirical recitative. But he cannot respond in the same way to Fiordiligi's words:

Yes, my heart is guilty. Gods of love! I am aflame, and the fire I feel is not a virtuous love. It is madness, torment, remorse, sorrow, faithlessness and betrayal. For pity's sake, my love, forgive me!

In the libretto, this too is ridiculous; but the point of the libretto is that all emotion is ridiculous. In the music, this is real; Mozart believes in the value of emotion. On the printed page, surely the lady doth protest too much; on the stage, we are not quite so sure. For better or worse, Mozart has taken the characters seriously. He has pointed up serious aspects in an absurd and artificial situation. The game is played out with cold and symmetrical precision—yet we hear fervent and heart-breaking music from the chess-pieces.

As a result, the opera is not as popular as its music merits. But it is not the libretto that is at fault. If it were set to facile and sardonic music it would be thoroughly convincing. Mozart, not Da Ponte, is the offender. His refusal to treat his comic characters with the detachment demanded in eighteenth-century comedy accounts largely for the interpretative problems, not only in *Così Fan Tutte*, but in those more successful, many-levelled works, *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *The*

Magic Flute. "Are these comedies or tragedies?", the critics argue endlessly. The key to the mystery lies, I think, in Mozart's comic approach. When the characters on stage are cynical or farcical or ridiculous, the music faithfully mirrors their behaviour. When they show the least bit of genuine feeling, Mozart hurries in to lavish on them music so expressive, music which characterizes them so beautifully, that the libretto, the entire opera, is thrown into what we might call tragic relief. The masks come off; the individual appears behind the type.

What has happened is that the comic artist has become involved in his creation; he has forsaken his detachment, and the result is a work of splendid ambiguity.

A third and final example, so familiar as to require little discussion: we go back two more centuries, to Shakespeare, a master of both comedy and tragedy and a playwright who did not scruple to mingle one with the other. In *Henry IV, Part I*, when the scene shifts back and forth from low life in Eastcheap to affairs of state at the court, we pass easily from the comic to the tragic. In other plays Shakespeare explores various types of comedy: Plautus is refurbished as *A Comedy of Errors* and played simply for laughs; Homer is made a bitter exercise in anti-heroics called *Troilus and Cressida*; there is intensity and seriousness in the comedy of *Measure for Measure*, and wry, clear-seeing comic characters invade the tragedies—the fool in *Lear*, the grave-digger in *Hamlet*; Hamlet himself puts on for a time the antic disposition of the fool.

Finally there is *The Tempest*, an ultimate statement and the supreme comedy with tragic relief. In the previous works, Shakespeare explored both the tragic and the comic, and fused them; in *The Tempest*, he writes a comedy in which tragedy is forever dispersed in the radiant light of comic wisdom.

The central character of *The Tempest* transcends both tragedy and comedy. His past history has been the history of any tragic king in Shakespeare: his trust has betrayed him and brought him to ruin. Now he is the master of a magic island, a new world beyond tragedy. He has gained power over all the antinomies—death and sex, aristocrat and bourgeois, imagination and reason, tears and laughter, ethics and manners, the heroic and the social. He creates all the action of the play. I quote Albert Cook again:

[H]e causes the tempest, wrecks the ship, spares the passengers and crew, induces the two plots of Antonio and Sebastian against Alonso and of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban against himself. He kindles and fans the love between Miranda and Ferdinand, and gives them the opportunity to see one another—as they think, secretly.

Bringing the party from the ship at last within his magic circle, he himself causes in them the pangs of guilt necessary for him to pardon them.⁴

The comedy which is *The Tempest* is not only thrown into relief, it is effected by a hyper-comic, hyper-tragic character who is master of all the antinomic symbols. He alone of the people on the stage has experienced tragedy; he alone is powerful enough to view the action with comic detachment.

I have defined tragic relief as the introduction into comedy of a tragic term or symbol. And I have given examples of three kinds of tragic relief: (1) in *The Apartment*, there is a repetition of, a concentration upon, the comic situation until its tragic core is revealed; (2) in *Cosi Fan Tutte*, artificial comic types are individualized, and so made tragic; (3) in *The Tempest*, a single character who sums up the tragic and the comic propels the action.

Perhaps the difference between comedy and tragedy is, after all, stated best in terms of detachment and involvement. In that case, we can say of our examples that (1) in *The Apartment*, the audience loses the detachment proper to comedy; (2) in *Cosi Fan Tutte*, the artist forsakes his detachment; (3) in *The Tempest*, the central character, who has known tragic involvement, finds comic detachment.

To come at last to Plautus and Terence, it is true that much of what we say about them applies more to Menander and Philemon and Diphilus than to themselves, and that they inherited an Italian tradition (which still survives in Harlequin and Columbine) in which seriousness is out of the question. This does not prevent them from being artists in their own right. It does not mean that they were unaware of the tragic level in comedy.

Plautus, for example, has a way of repeating and concentrating upon a comic situation—a sordid joke, like that in *The Apartment*—until its serious side is exposed and our sympathies are engaged. In the *Persa* the climax of the action comes when a parasite, to help a friend of his defeat a slave-dealer, sells his own daughter into prostitution. It is true, this is to be only a temporary expedient, for the daughter is an Athenian citizen disguised as a Persian slave girl, and the father is able to hale the slave-dealer into court immediately after the sale. Plautus could, then, have treated the whole situation briefly, as a joke. But instead he prolongs the situation, and he complicates and deepens the play by making the *Persa* a modest, serious, intelligent girl. There are several funny scenes, but eventually the situation becomes more pathetic than hilarious. The girl's nobility becomes a commentary on the sordidness of the other characters:

(Enter Saturio, followed by his daughter dressed as a Persian slave girl.)

Saturio: May heaven grant that this business turn out well for me and for you and for my belly, and bring it food for ever and ever, enough, enough and more than enough! This way, my child, and may the gods be with us . . . you are to be sold this very day, young lady.

Daughter: But father dear, no matter how much you like to eat other people's food, would you really sell your own daughter for the sake of your stomach?

Saturio: Should I sell you for King Philip's stomach? Or Attalus'? You're mine, after all.

Daughter: Which do you consider me, father, your daughter or your slave?

Saturio: Whichever serves my belly better, I'd say.

Daughter: Father, dishonour never dies; it goes on living even when you think it's dead.

Saturio: What's this? Are you afraid I'll really sell you?

Daughter: No, father. But I don't want you even to pretend to.

Saturio: Well, like it or not, this is going to be done my way, not yours.

Daughter: Father, you are forcing me to act shamefully. Some day you'll want to give me in marriage; don't let a scandal like this spoil the wedding.

Saturio: Oh, quiet, you silly thing! Don't you know how young men are these days? Any girl can get married now, easy. As long as there's a dowry, one little slip is no slip at all (329 ff.).

In the selling scene, the girl holds up well under the shameful circumstances, and manages to answer the questions asked of her without a deliberate untruth. Many of her replies are veiled reproaches directed at her father:

(The aforementioned, with Dordalus, a purchaser, and Toxilus, a slave.)

Dordalus: Don't be disturbed if we ask you some questions about your country and parents . . . Your name is—?

Daughter: In my own country my name was Profit . . .

Dordalus: If I buy, I count on your making profit for me, too . . . And your country?

Daughter: What country have I, but the one I'm in now?

Dordalus: But I want to know where it used to be.

Daughter: Everything that used to be is the same as nothing to me, now that it is no more. Why ask a person who has breathed his last who he used to be?

Toxilus: So help me, this is philosophy! But I pity her all the same. Come now, my girl, tell us at once where you come from. Why are you silent?

Daughter: I will tell you: since I am in slavery here, this is my country.

Toxilus: Well, ask her no more. Can't you see she doesn't want to talk about it? Don't renew the memory of her sorrows.

Dordalus: Tell me this: is your father a captive?

Daughter: Not a captive; but what he once had he has lost.

Toxilus: Surely she is of noble birth: she speaks nothing but the truth.

Dordalus: Who was he? Tell me his name.

Daughter: Ah, why should I recall who he was, that sorrowful man. Now the fitting name for him is Sorrow, and for me, Sorrow (619 ff.).

There is tragic relief of this sort in Plautus' *Asinaria* as well. This is a merry comedy, but one laced with situations so revolting that a few critics, especially Gilbert Norwood,⁵ can only conclude that the author was so coarse-grained as to lack any true feeling. For example, there is a scene between mother and daughter that reads much like the father-daughter scene in the *Persa*,—only here it is a case of a greedy mother prostituting her daughter, and keeping her from the boy she loves. Later, there is a little ensemble, a bit of a *tour de force*, in which the boy and the girl sing a pathetic love duet, complete with "farewells", while two slaves look on from the wings and provide a comic commentary.

But it is the final scene that has given most offence. The boy has finally won his girl, but, because his father has supplied the money, the lecherous old man claims the right to enjoy her first. Thus, the boy sits glumly by while his father feasts with the girl and makes love to her, extolling her merits at the expense of his wife's. The boy asks, "Look here, father, do you love my mother at all?", and the response is, "Love her? Yes, I love her now, for not being here." Only she *is* there, watching the whole heartless scene. It is another effective ensemble, a prolonged situation in which each character—father, son, mistress, mother, and parasite—reacts in a different way. Then there is a Punch-and-Judy finish: the angry wife springs from her hiding place and hurries her husband away by the ear with the recurrent refrain, "*Surge, amator, i domum*". And the grossness of the situation is purged in laughter.

Now, perhaps Plautus intended us to view the whole of the *Asinaria* with the marionette detachment of those closing lines. Perhaps we are meant to laugh at all the situations, and take nothing seriously at all. These are, after all, stock

characters in predictable troubles, and no illiterate fishmonger or battle-scarred Punic War veteran in the audience is going to be touched or disturbed by them. This is the customary assumption. But it is only an assumption. A relevant *fact* is that no modern reader can feel so dispassionate. Norwood is revolted, and so are we all. Only Plautus remains, like Billy Wilder in *The Apartment*, detached. His play rattles on, while we get too much of a joke that is funny, perhaps, at first—and then disquieting.⁶

Plautus' *Truculentus* is merely a succession of scenes in which a courtesan drains every penny from three hapless admirers. There is a slight, distasteful plot: she hires a baby and poses as its mother for more money. Disgust mounts on disgust. At the end, two of the suitors agree to share the woman, and she in turn offers her favours to the entire audience. Moses Hadas says that this play "should absolve Plautus from any charge of flippant immorality There could be no more effective warning against the loose conduct described in many of the other plays."⁷ Again, it is a locker-room joke, told over and over until it ceases to be funny and becomes almost a cleansing experience. We miss the charity of *The Apartment*. Here all the characters are despicable. This is an aged and perhaps embittered Plautus writing (as Cicero tells us) one of his favourite plays. It is also the best example in Roman comedy of our first type of tragic relief, one in which we concentrate on a comic situation so exclusively that we see its tragic core. It appears ugly, and we are disquieted—and strangely cleansed.

Our second type we found before in Mozart. Unfortunately we cannot talk about Plautus and Terence in terms of the music which accompanied their plays.⁸ On this second level, we shall have to content ourselves with what we can gather from the libretti. It is interesting to note that there is a play by Plautus that has almost the same plot as Mozart's *Figaro*. It is also the most musical of Roman comedies. But again, we don't have the music, and it is doubtful if even Mozart could have made its characters believable or sympathetic. This is the *Casina*, a farce which is not quite as worthless and disgusting as many commentators would have us believe. But we shall turn to the *Amphitryo* instead to see how Plautus is Mozartian, i.e., how he dares to make his comic characters sympathetic and so, to a considerable extent, tragic.

The *Amphitryo* is the only surviving example in Roman comedy of the mythological burlesque. The subject, for once, is not low-life in some Mediterranean seaport; it is a myth as powerful and terrifying as any in the ancient canon: Jupiter visits Alcmena disguised as her husband Amphitryo and gets her with the

child Hercules. To bring this off as comedy at all, one would think, complete detachment would be essential. We must not become involved in the goings-on; all must be brilliant, facile, stylized, remote. The deceived husband and wife must be caricatures, addle-headed nonentities who deserve their fate. Thus they will provide the playwright a splendid opportunity to ridicule all sorts of human foibles.

Plautus gets off to a good start: not only will Jupiter be disguised as Amphitryo, but Mercury will pose as the slave Sosia. As in *Cosi Fan Tutte*, it will be a case of two masqueraders toying with the emotions of hapless and bewildered puppets. And as in *Cosi Fan Tutte*, something goes wrong. Mercury says in the prologue, "I don't really think I should make it comedy through and through, what with kings and gods on the stage."

What happens? Plautus gives us, in *Amphitryo*, a sympathetic cuckold, a *pious Aeneas* in love and war, and in *Alcmena*, one of the finest of all portraits of Roman womanhood. When Jupiter, whom she supposes is her husband, leaves for the war, she soliloquizes:

Now I am left alone. He is gone, the one I love above all else. I feel more sorrow now that he is gone than happiness I had when he was here. But there is joy in this thought, at least: he has been victorious in battle, and come home crowned with glory! There is my consolation. He may leave me, if only he comes back to me a hero. I'll bear his absence bravely, yes, and bear it to the very end, if only this reward I win—that my husband be known as a champion in the fight. For courage is the best reward, and comes before all else. Liberty, survival, life, home, parents, country, children—courage safeguards them all. A man who has courage has every blessing (640 ff.).

And in defending her innocence to her real husband on his return, she is particularly eloquent:

The dowry I bring is not what is usually thought a dowry; mine is purity and honour and chastity, fear of the gods and love of parents and affection for my family—and being a good wife to you, with all generosity and loving-kindness (839 ff.).

And so, though the play begins with Mercury's leering statement of the situation and runs for half its course in amusing scenes of mistaken identity, eventually, because of Plautus' thoughtful character studies, the remoteness fades and the suffering becomes immediate. In the climactic scene, the husband is dashed to earth by a thunderbolt and told of the divine intervention: even Norwood must admit that this is "all nobly written."⁹

The *Amphitryo* remains a curious, ambiguous play, one in which the comic and the tragic work at cross-purposes: we are so touched by the sad plight of the husband

and wife that we are revolted by the heartless antics of the gods. It is difficult to say if this is what Plautus intended, for the revulsion that is so effective in the other plays serves no purpose here, in a play where the gods are the villains. There is no cleansing. I suggest that this is the second, Mozartian type of tragic relief. It is not so much a case of *our* losing our detachment as of the artist forsaking his. Plautus deliberately chooses to make his husband and wife *paterfamilias* and *matrona*. Whatever the tone of the Greek play that was his source, the sympathy we feel in *this* play stems from Plautus' Roman portraits.

This may be a dramatic mistake. Norwood certainly considered it to be so. "This", he says, "is the offense that puts Plautus outside the pale of art, almost of civilization . . . his practice of tying together—not only in the same play, sometimes in the same scene—modes of feeling and treatment utterly incongruous."²⁰ Certainly Plautus lacked, in this play, the genius to fuse his comic and tragic elements, as Mozart did in *his* comedies of character. The amazing thing is that Plautus even tried—tried to take material which demanded that it be treated with detachment, and make it immediate and touching.

Terence, of course, has a much better hand at characterization. And it is on this Mozartian level of tragic relief that we should turn to him, for his art is not unlike Mozart's—in its subtlety, its exquisite finish, and especially in its powers of characterization. Mozart, we said, often took plain and silly lines in his libretti and lavished on them music of such eloquence that a whole new vision was conjured up, and the characters became noble and credible. In Terence, time and again a flash of insight into a character reveals the individual behind the type. The courtesan Bacchis brings about the reconciliation of the husband and wife in the *Mother-in-Law*; the mother-in-law herself is kind and conciliatory, despite the false charges and misunderstandings that make her life miserable; the slave Parmeno in the *Eunuch* would rather help his love-sick master with sermons than with schemes; the *senex* Demea in the *Adelphi* realizes late in life that his severity has alienated him from his friends, and has the courage to admit his fault and change his life; the next-door neighbour in the *Self-Punisher* wants to help because "*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto.*" These are striking variations from the type, and from the typical situation. Terence has taken stock characters and invested them with life. As Norwood says, Terence "loves to take some familiar *dramatis persona* and discover new character beneath the traditional mask."¹¹ In doing so, he is moving from comedy towards tragedy, from the type to the individual. Donatus notes this often in his commentary: the playwright had to be careful here, or his whole play would turn into a tragedy—"*ne tota migraret in tragoediam.*"¹² It is tragic relief of a sort, a gentler

relief than we find in Plautus, a level of seriousness that has always distinguished the one comedian from the other: "Terence . . . se tient dans cette gamme de sentiments tempérés ou les larmes, si elles perlent quelquefois au bord des paupières, ne tombent jamais de l'oeil et s'éclairent aussitôt d'un sourire."¹³

As for the third type of tragic relief, which we found in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, it is far too much to claim for the Roman comedians that they reach a point beyond tragedy and comedy. But we can note how, through the theatrical convention of the prologue, it is often a god who propels the action of Plautus' plays: Mercury tells us how Jupiter is master of the situation in the *Amphitryo*; the household god assures us that he will make all end well in the *Aulularia*, and, most notably of all, in the *Rudens*, Arcturus tells us,

When I saw the maiden swept away at sea, I brought safety to her and ruin to that slave-dealer. I raised a great storm over the waters, and sent the waves crashing. For I am Arcturus, the fiercest constellation of them all, tempestuous when I rise, and when I set, more tempestuous still (67 ff.).

Indeed, the *Rudens* is often compared to *The Tempest* in terms of externals. In both plays there is a storm and shipwreck; in both, there is a father-figure who inhabits the scene of the shipwreck and assumes control of the situation, arbitrating and bringing about the rewarding of good and the punishing of evil; in both, there is a closing scene of gentleness and charity—lovers are united, slaves are freed, trespassers are forgiven. Even Labrax can be pardoned and invited to the feast, after he has been throttled and defeated at the courts.

To do justice to both Shakespeare and Plautus, this parallel places too much burden on Daemones, the old man in the *Rudens*. He is a hospitable and authoritative figure, but he is no Prospero. It is possible, however, to think of Arcturus as presiding over the *Rudens*—Arcturus and the sea, which he commands. For the characters are washed up one by one, according to his plan; he sees to it that the slave-dealer is swept up at the very spot where he had falsely sworn to meet the hero, that the long-lost daughter emerges from the waves before her father's house. And the rope-bound trunk, which solves the problems of the plot—that, too, comes out of the sea. Throughout the play, we are never allowed to forget the sea and the storm. "How I shudder, even now, looking at the sea", says Ampelisca. Every major character comments on the stormy sea; it is a constant presence, filling the play with an atmosphere and poetry unique in Roman comedy. Arcturus and the sea he commands are set over the action of the *Rudens*, and here, perhaps, we get a glimpse

of that third type of tragic relief given by a character who stands on a tower beyond tragedy and comedy.

Is this too much? Yes, almost certainly it is. But I hope, at least, that tragic relief, as I have outlined it, is a valid concept. There are doubtless other varieties of it, even in Plautus and Terence. But I am sure, if it is a part of comedy, it is to be found in Plautus and Terence. It must be. For they are the source of the comic tradition as we know it in the West. And they were artists—old Plautus who would sacrifice anything for a laugh, young Terence who busied himself with his plots almost to a fault—they were both interested in expressing dramatic truth as well, and in showing us just what kind of people we really are.

NOTES

1. Bergson seems to have been the first to note this, in *Le Rire*, I, 2.
2. *The Playwright As Thinker* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 128.
3. "The Sordid View", *Jubilee*, July, 1960, 48—a very perceptive bit of reviewing to which I am heavily indebted.
4. *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 175-6.
5. See *Plautus and Terence* (New York: Longmans, 1932), 66-7.
6. Must we say that we are more sophisticated than the Romans of the second century B.C.? I noticed that some members of the audience at *The Apartment* found *all* the situations hilarious. This is not to say that Billy Wilder, or Plautus, has only that minority in mind. It is worth noting that, despite his sordid themes, Plautus is seldom risqué. And Terence is practically antiseptic.
7. *A History of Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 42.
8. The *didascalia* or advertisements in the manuscripts often tell us that the music was played on *tibiis imparibus*, which we interpret as a shrill, merry *dextra* and a low-pitched, serious *sinistra*. This may have something to do with comic and tragic scenes.
9. *Loc. cit.*, 78.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. *The Art of Terence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1923), 99.
12. *Ad Phorm.* 137. Cf. *ad Phorm.* 750, *ad Hec.* 281, *ad Ad.* 288, 297.
13. Francisque Sarcey, "Essai d' une Esthétique de Théâtre", *Quarante Ans de Théâtre* (Paris, 1900), vol. 1, 155. That Terence's relief is closer to the pathetic than the tragic is borne out by some of his offspring: Hrotsvitha, the "Christian Terence" of Renaissance schoolmasters, and especially the sentimental comedy of eighteenth-century England.