

## SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT WITH REGARD TO DRAMATIC GENRE

### **The outcome and a predisposition to development**

One more aspect must be discussed: the influence of traditional and new paradigms of thinking on literary criticism. In criticism, the category of survival becomes a basis for defining the dramatic genre of a literary work. Grawe writes, "Comedy as seen from a formal perspective is the representation of life patterned to demonstrate or to assert a faith in human survival, often including or emphasizing how that survival is possible or under what conditions that survival takes place" (17). M

Most of today's research on comedy considers survival to be a sufficient defining characteristic of comedy. A fundamental study on survival as a core of comedy was published in an anthology *The Terrain of Comedy* (1982). The understanding of survival proposed by the editor of the anthology, Louise Cowan, however, is based on the idea of local tactics. For instance, talking about infernal comedy, Cowan states that here survival is related to the various types of deceit that come into play during the process of maintaining hope. True, for a short term such tactics may preserve one's hope, but they will eventually lead to complete destruction. We need only to recall Stalin's Russia, where hope was based on deceit, in order to appreciate the inevitable tragic outcome of such an approach.

It seems to me that a new millennium requires a more modern approach to the concept of survival, based on new views of economics and general systems theory.

While thinking about comedy, I asked myself two questions: (1) Is the category of survival a sufficient condition for comedy? and (2) Is it really the category that distinguishes comedy from other genres? I reflected on three plays to answer these questions: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Oedipus the King*, and *The Seagull*. The idea of survival is present in all of them. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the society survives through the reconciliation of the families. (Though the question remains, for how long?) In *Oedipus the King*, the protagonist survives along with a part of his environment (again the question remains as to the longevity of such survival). In *The Seagull*, the death of a protagonist is combined with the picture of the world surviving, though the same question of the strength of such survival is in the air.

One may argue that survival in comedy implies a survival of the whole, including every character. But how does this operate in the comedies mentioned above (including Balzac's *Human Comedy*) that end in disaster—death and loss—and that are woven from scenes of world disintegration? This question is puzzling, and the answer requires a nonorthodox methodology. In addition, one may wonder if such a question is valid only for modern times or if it is also relevant to ancient comedy, since dramatic genre is a developing category and may essentially change in time. Surprisingly, the question of survival is vital for some ancient comedies, such as Aristophanes' *Frogs*, in which it becomes the subject and turning point of the play. At the beginning of *Frogs*, Dionysus visits the underworld in order to take back to Earth the best tragic poet, who could help Dionysus's citizens establish order in their city. Dionysus must then choose between two distinguished poets—Aeschylus and Euripides—who are portrayed as complete fools.

The idea of survival thus becomes very questionable; a world guided by such obtuse gods and silly poets would hardly survive.

While talking about survival, especially in works with happy endings, one must think of what lies beyond the happy ending; in other words, about a predisposition to long-term survival. In actuality, the artist creates an open end, making the reader/spectator speculate about the future development of the universe. In some cases, therefore, a happy ending may be very questionable in terms of the protagonists' ability to develop in the future. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's father, Egeus, does not seem to accept his daughter's choice but is simply obeying Theseus's order. By the end of the play, Theseus announces his will and demands that "couples shall eternally be knit." In remembering Egeus's former resistance to his daughter's love, his unwillingness to reconsider his decision, and his highly emotional and vulnerable nature that does not tolerate others' superiority, one may assume that this character predisposes the system to further conflicts and changes—either positive (most likely) or negative. The same analysis is required to understand whether or not the final reconciliation in *Romeo and Juliet* will lead the society to a new development.

First and foremost, it is not the outcome but the predisposition created at the end of the artistic work that is the artist's focus. The main puzzle for the reader, therefore, is how to judge the outcome that occurs in a specific environment. O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* (1906) may serve as the best example of how an author integrates the outcome with a predisposition for further development. In the story, two young people who are deeply in love want to buy Christmas presents to surprise and entertain the other. The only problem is that they are very poor and have too little money to buy what they think would be the best present. In order to make their dreams come true they sacrifice their most valuable things. Alas! Their intentions end in fiasco—their gifts are useless without the original possessions, which were sold in order to buy the presents. Thus, in the end, the lovers appear to be losers and their current position is ridiculous. But is it really so? The story provides rich material for debate and differing opinions; but the author wants to make his statement clear, and the last lines of the story are exactly about the way he sees a predisposition for the future development of the couple.

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi. (12)

The message is clear: though from the local point of view the protagonists have failed, from the global perspective they have gained. They have gained each other's love and respect by revealing their mutual loyalty and willingness to sacrifice materials in the name of the relationship—the most valuable gift in the world. In the game of chess, this

sacrifice of material or relational parameters for the sake of a predisposition is called a positional sacrifice. Katsenelinboigen writes that in the case of a positional sacrifice, both the material and the relational are “forsaken for the sake of improving the positional parameters, that is, the actual compensation for the sacrificed material is by no means apparent” (Indeterministic Economics 83).

In creating a predisposition of his characters to future development, the artist plays a sophisticated game with the reader. To perform a proper analysis, one should wield a special methodology that would allow one to inquire into the potential of the universe represented by the artist.

### **Survival and development as two paradigms of thinking**

In general, artistic works show a certain stage of survival of the universe, and the question is how to distinguish between those stages. In approaching the notion of the dramatic genre, I applied Katsenelinboigen’s concept of the development of indeterministic systems. Katsenelinboigen outlines two types of survival in talking about socioeconomic systems—short-term survival and long-term survival (Indeterministic Economics 33–35). Following Russell Ackoff’s typology (45), Katsenelinboigen further distinguishes between three categories—survival, growth, and development—that, though interrelated, are independent. To elaborate these categories, he approaches them from the functional, structural and process-oriented points of view:

From the functional point of view, survival represents an extreme case with emphasis placed on maintaining a minimum level of vital parameters comprising the system. Growth presupposes an increase (as judged by a preset criterion) in the values of parameters already incorporated into the system. (Indeterministic Economics 33–35)

Development is accordingly defined as the creation of changes in both materials and the relationships between them. Katsenelinboigen states that development is responsible for the changeability of the system:

From the structural point of view, survival is aimed at preserving the existing objects; growth indicates an increase in the number of existing objects; and development implies a variety of objects (with new ones appearing in the course of development) as well as their interrelations.

From the process-oriented point of view, survival is a search for a stationary state; growth must facilitate the creation of a complete and consistent mechanism of coordinated growth of the sought-for variables; and development implies the creation of a mechanism that supports both the creation and the resolution of incompleteness and inconsistency in the existing mechanism. . . .

. . . long-term survival is impossible without growth, and long-term growth presupposes development. Proceeding in the backward direction, it is obvious that long-term development as long-term growth require survival. . . . I am a proponent of the primacy of development with growth and survival allotted a subordinate role. (33–35)

### **Development and dramatic genre**

My approach to dramatic genre is based on distinguishing between development and survival, for it assists me in making a more detailed classification of types of artistic universes represented in literary works. I thus distinguish between these systems: those that do not survive, those that survive without development, and those that are able to develop with survival implied.

One can speak about the survival of the Chekhovian comedic universe. For instance, irrespective of Treplev's suicide, Arkadina will continue to amuse her audience in Kharkov, and Nina will continue in her plans to "rise" in Eletsk; Uncle Vanya will somehow participate in keeping the estate with Sonya; and the three sisters will continue to dream about Moscow. As analysis reveals, however, there is no hope for development in the plays; the movement of life is just a continuation of the same, a repetition of a cycle that cannot be changed. In creating his characters' predisposition, Chekhov finds a way to reveal their inability to develop. This lack of internal change kills Treplev and makes Trigorin depressed. The same thing happens to Uncle Vanya, who envies the achievements of others and blames all his troubles on them. Even such a seemingly creative protagonist as Astrov causes only destruction in the estate.

The same can be said for Balzacian protagonists, whose lives are devoted to their utilitarian interests and pragmatic needs. No innovative thought can appear in such an environment, and the protagonists ultimately become victims of their way of life and their way of thinking. Their ruination does not, however, change the essential predisposition of the world, as it does in tragedy or drama. The comic hero, whether a villain or a virtuous character, cannot have an impact on the stationary state of his universe. Even the death of the comic character fails to influence the primary balance of his world. Chekhov's comedy is a graphic example of such unchangeable routines that continue despite death (*The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*); love (*Uncle Vanya*); and protagonists' losses (*The Cherry Orchard*).

Conversely, the worlds of tragedy and drama often represent the idea of societal development through protagonists' failures or deaths. At this point, Gary Waller's definition of comedy and tragedy—accordingly based on joy and terror—presents a problem (2–3). The tragic hero is not the one who dies but the one whose death has an impact on the world. Tragedy is thus concerned with a loss of a "star of the first magnitude," whose potential is uniquely rich. *Romeo and Juliet* is the best example of how the protagonists are able to stop a society's destructive feud and direct it to its new development. In terms of development, *Romeo and Juliet* refused to survive without each other because this would stop their mutual development. They preferred to stay together in death and thus became a symbol of true love—a strong impetus for the development of their society.

To conclude, the outcome serves to reveal a predisposition of the entire system to further development. No matter how many characters survive in the end, the question of their ability to develop remains open. There can be different combinations of the outcomes, in which either society, protagonists, or both survive; but in some cases, a small group of survivors are able to develop, while in others the entire group of characters are not able to move further. The story of Noah's Ark can serve as an example of the former and *The Cherry Orchard* of the latter. The world of comedy has a limited potential that enables its survival but not its development.

Though the question of the protagonist's potential, with regard to genre, has not been approached in literary criticism from the point of view of predispositioning theory, one may find some hints; for instance, Aristotle draws one's attention to the fact that comedy is "action . . . lacking in magnitude (Poetics I 49)." Aristotle does not analyze the cause of this low magnitude because he considers only actions, not characters. Nevertheless, in terms of predispositioning, actions of low magnitude imply limited potentials for those who are involved in them. Frye states that "Aristotle's words for good and bad are *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, which have a figurative sense of weighty and light" (33). Even so, these notions are not elaborated by Aristotle, and one may wonder if that which Aristotle called "weight" was about one's social status or one's inner ability. Unfortunately, there is no clear answer, because the analysis of protagonists' potential was not a concern of the Aristotelian school.

Bergson, in his essay "Laughter" (1900), contrasts the mechanical and the living and states that the comic consists of something mechanical. He does not develop his observations on the nature of the mechanical, however, and considers it to be in connection with the laughable, affirming that the mechanical generates laughter. In light of the current analysis, it is possible to speculate about the structure of the mechanical as outlined by Bergson. Obviously, an object with a limited potential gives the impression of something mechanical, for it is lacking in an inner ability to develop. The object with a weak potential is predisposed to a certain programmed way of acting; it is not capable of changing its automatic behavior, which makes it resemble a mechanism.

Therefore, Bergson's statement that "the comic does not exist outside the pall of what is strictly human" (62) is not valid as soon as the focus is shifted from laughter to potential: any system with a weak potential can be perceived as comic by any other system that may or may not be human.

### **Deaths and losses in comedy**

Deaths and losses, though not typical, were still subject matters of some traditional comedies. However, the clearly manifested limited potential of the protagonists in traditional comedy never deceived the reader/spectator concerning the type of genre of the work.

For instance, Alfred de Musset's comedy *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, which ends with the death of one of its heroines, represents traditional comical characters, primitive and superficial, who have no impact on their surroundings. Perdican, a main character, is described as the most educated and brilliant creature that ever existed in the world; however, the one who gives such a characterization of Perdican is his former teacher, Metr Blazius, a heavy drinker (a "wine barrel") whose words cannot be taken seriously. No special analytical skills are required to realize that the "learned" Perdican is a banal, vulgar creature with very pragmatic feelings and no imagination. The comedy ends with the death of a secondary character, the heroine's younger sister, Rosetta, who commits suicide because of the heartless Perdican. This does not change the apparently farcical nature of the play, however, because the characters' limited potential makes them resemble two-dimensional puppets.

The deaths of protagonists in Chekhov's comedy have quite a different impact on the reader/spectator, who wonders if the dramatist was serious in defining his work as

comedy. The most common reaction is to accuse the author of cynicism, as some conservative critics did with regard to death in Chekhov's major plays. Less conservative critics tried to explain Chekhov's "insensitivity" by his medical background, stating that, as a doctor, Chekhov perceived death as something natural and unavoidable and thus saw no reason to "weep" over his heroes' demise. Thomas Winner writes: "His early study of medicine undoubtedly affected his own artistic views" (66). Similarly, I. N. Sukhikh states that for Chekhov, "life, death, oblivion—this process is unavoidable and universal" (75). In general, critics deny Chekhov his global philosophical vision, stating that eternity "is a concept that is almost absent from Chekhov's work," and death "is simply the end-point of each human life" (Turner 84). Chekhov is thus often represented as a cold-minded pragmatist who simply accepts the law of nature and denounces regret and compassion as ridiculous and senseless. Indisputably, such a narrow interpretation impoverishes his rich artistic intent, whose focus cannot be exhausted by the "medical" mentality.

By introducing death into his works, Chekhov raises the question of oblivion as a universal phenomenon linked to the degree of one's influence on the development of the world. The quasi-strong potential of his characters, whose physical disappearance is combined with their vanishing as individuals from the surroundings and from the memory of friends, only sharpens the significance of the traces they leave after they are gone. This becomes a primary subject of Chekhov's philosophy of death, in which one's demise plays the role of a litmus test, revealing the impact his characters have on their surrounding. Therefore, the main questions that must be answered with regard to the death of a Chekhovian character are, what was the meaning of the character's life and did he or she influence the development of society, friends, and family? The answers to these questions serve to reveal the character's weight on the scales of eternity.

Significantly, the technique of juxtaposing a character's conditional and unconditional valuations was elaborated at a very early stage of Chekhov's work and was successfully introduced in his satirical articles and short stories. One such humorous short story, "At the Cemetery" (1884), may serve as a graphic example of exactly how conditional and unconditional values are formed in Chekhov's works. An obscure actor, a certain Mushkin, dies; his colleagues collect money to erect a memorial for him but cannot help spending everything on drinks: "Actors and newspaper boys collected money for his memorial but . . . they spent it all on vodka," recounts Mushkin's colleague. "Cheers, angels!" he adds, finishing his story. On Mushkin's tombstone his colleagues place an inscription: "In the memory of our unforgettable friend, Mushkin." However, two letters fell down and instead, one reads another inscription: "In the memory of our forgettable friend, Mushkin." "Time erased the particle 'un' and, in so doing, changed a human lie," concludes the narrator (Sochineniia 3: 76; trans. John Holman).

The question of transience and timelessness becomes central to the story, which makes the reader think about why such a "misfortune" befalls poor Mushkin and whether or not it is his predisposition that makes him sink into oblivion. An analysis of this early short story sheds light on Chekhov's late poetics, in which the cemetery and death become a scale upon which characters' unconditional value is weighed and measured—a value that is established regardless of the characters' momentary status in society. But what exactly does the term "unconditional" mean, and how can one apply it to the measurement of the potential?

The conditional evaluation of a character is based on his or her function in particular episodes. The unconditional values are often conveyed through characters' names and/or their juxtaposition with those whose unconditional weight has already been determined. In returning to Mushkin, Chekhov's worst "sin" with regard to his comic characters is that he shows a discrepancy between their conditional and their unconditional weights, which is not typical of traditional comedy. The Chekhovian character is distinguished by a very low unconditional value combined with a middle conditional value that is sometimes perceived by the character's friends as high, which makes them proclaim the character as "very talented"; such is the case of Dymov in "The Grasshopper" or Mushkin, who was a very famous actor in his town. As Mushkin's colleague says, they brought ten or more wreaths to his funeral, which indicated his important local status; however, he was completely forgotten by his friends and admirers soon after, and only his enemies remembered him for his foolishness and irresponsibility. Such a quick disappearance from the memory of those who once supported him is in accordance with the meaning of Mushkin's last name, which is derived from *mushka* ("a small fly"), indicating his very low unconditional value. At this point, Mushkin's last name is equivalent to the notion of a piece on a chessboard; namely, to a pawn that in some particular cases may have considerable weight but in general is of the lowest weight.

In addition to the character's name, some other details may serve as a scale for measuring the character's potential. One of the questions that often puzzles Chekhov's readers is whether or not Chekhov held a cynical view of humankind in general, because none of the Chekhovian characters represent a solution for a better life, no matter how much they talk about it. All the Chekhovian scientists, artists, and doctors end in fiasco, blaming either their friends or society. This does not, however, preclude Chekhov's appreciation of talents contributing to world progress, which explains the appearance of such names as Shakespeare and Tolstoy along with the fictitious names of his characters. The real and created worlds coexist on the pages of Chekhov's short stories and plays, permeating each other and thus building a scale for measuring the protagonists' creative power. In describing Ragin's inert character ("Ward No. 6"), ignorance, and ridiculous references to eastern philosophy (which serve to shield him in his helplessness), Chekhov adds:

On the other hand, he knew very well that a magical change had taken place in medicine during the last twenty-five years. When he was studying at the university he had fancied that medicine would soon be overtaken by the fate of alchemy and metaphysics; but now when he was reading at night the science of medicine touched him and excited his wonder, and even enthusiasm. What unexpected brilliance, what a revolution! Thanks to the antiseptic system operations were performed such as the great Pirogov had considered impossible even in spe. Ordinary Zemstvo doctors were venturing to perform the resection of the kneecap; of abdominal operations only one per cent. was fatal; while stone was considered such a trifle that they did not even write about it. A radical cure for syphilis had been discovered. And the theory of heredity, hypnotism, the discoveries of Pasteur and of Koch, hygiene based on statistics, and the work of Zemstvo doctors! (Essential Chekhov 141)

The introduction of such names as Pasteur, Pirogov, and Koch establishes a hierarchy that sheds light on the role of the Chekhovian characters in the development of the universe. Within the frames of unconditionality, their local importance becomes apparent, and the reason why they all eventually sink into oblivion becomes clear. The same can be said of the Balzacian universe that was intended as a parody of Dante's *Divine Comedy*; at this point, *The Divine Comedy* serves as a scale on which the momentary passions of Balzacian protagonists reveal their genuinely low weight.

Above all, the scale of unconditionality can also be formed through the symbolism of various objects whose notions may suggest the unconditional weight of characters. For instance, Treplev's suicide is followed by Dorn's remark that a small bottle of ether has exploded; this immediately generates an idea of a momentary existence, of a life that will vanish as quickly as ether evaporates from the exploded bottle—a fate that befalls all of the Chekhovian Mushkins.

After the degree of conditionality is established, the next task is to integrate the character's conditional weight with his or her unconditional value.

### **Integration of values in the artistic work**

The integration of the conditional and the unconditional requires the ascription of weights not the establishment of the average of given characteristics. The magnitude of the initial parameter ("small fly," for instance) and the value (insignificant) must be taken into account because the process of integration requires a general assessment. Taking Mushkin as an example, his last name forms a gestalt that is an aggregation of material and relational parameters. The gestalt represents the object in general, as a whole. Thus, a general perception of Mushkin's character is a gestalt of a fly. The next step is to analyze some particular features and episodes and then to synthesize them into a new wholeness.

Synthesis requires a juxtaposition of each concrete characteristic with the unconditional value of the object. For instance, the last name Dymov may suggest a vanishing into the air (*dym* in Russian means "smoke")—another metaphor for oblivion. Therefore, in approaching Dymov as a character, the interpreter may either ignore the scale of unconditionality, finding the average of Dymov's qualities, or integrate them into a whole. The latter requires a consideration of Dymov's characteristics in regard to their interaction with the notion of smoke. This would assist one in better understanding the magnitude of Dymov's talent and the richness of his human quality.

Dymov's limited scope and primitivism in the sphere of human relationships have been discussed earlier. Concerning his professional quality, which is often overestimated in criticism, one should pay attention to what kind of characters praise Dymov as a scientist. Ironically, the one who proclaims Dymov's great significance, his friend by the name Korostelev, is himself small fry in both the literal and figurative sense; his last name alludes to *korostel'*, or "corncrake," which is a small bird.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, Korostelev is described as a small man with a short cut and a rumpled face, which only intensifies the sense of his insignificance. In his monologue, Korostelev insists that Dymov is a man with an unusual gift; but the question arises, in comparison to whom? Korostelev's answer is "in comparison to all of us." Dymov's position as Gulliver among the Lilliputians makes his status equal to that of gods in comedy; he is unable to change



anything in his personal life, and even his attempt to save a patient at the cost of his own life is ridiculed by his colleague Shrek, who considers it to be a senseless sacrifice.

Two different approaches to a character—finding the average and integrating valuations—will result in two different conclusions concerning the character's potential, which may oscillate between average/strong and limited. Neglecting the unconditional valuation may not only distort the representation of a character, but also hamper one's understanding of genre as defined by the artist. It therefore seems to be extremely important to create a scale of measurement of the characters' potential and to establish a degree of unconditionality while approaching their predisposition.

### **Summary**

Names often take the place of unconditional valuations of characters. The symbolism of names conveys a notion of the characters' influence on the development of their universe and their ability to leave a trace in the memory of society.

Conditional valuations of characters are revealed through the analysis of characters' current achievements, their relationships with others, their present status in society, and the like.

To integrate conditional and unconditional valuations of the character, one must compare all particular information with the unconditional weight of the character.

Chekhov's comedy represents some essential discrepancies between the conditional and unconditional weights of characters. As a rule, characters of Chekhov's comedy are distinguished by their average or strong conditional valuations and a very low unconditional weight.

In defining the dramatic genre of his work, the artist draws one's attention to the unconditional valuations of his or her artistic universe.

In Chekhov's comedy, death becomes a litmus test of characters' unconditional importance. It outlines the degree of a character's significance from the global perspective.