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Corey ANTON

FACING THE GORGON:
KENNETH BURKE ON DRAMATIC FORM, CATHARSIS,
AND TRANSCENENCE

Abstract: Drawing mainly upon the thinking of Kenneth Burke, this essay overviews a few psychological functions performed within dramatic works of art. It shows how dramatic works of art (e.g. novels, plays, films, and even TV shows) operate as subtle modes of applied psychology: they offer different types of therapeutic benefits for those who produce such works and also for those who read them and/or audience members who witness them. I try to bring out how modes of catharsis as well as means of transcendence are afforded by dramatic form within art. Even more specifically stated, I review some of Burke's ruminations upon his own semiautobiographical novel, *Towards a Better Life*, and I outline how dramatic works of art provide adequate symbolic distance for sizing up one's life situations and for facing various challenges that can otherwise be too difficult to face head-on. Through symbolic and artistic maneuvers, which enable kinds of identification, authors and audience members learn to face their demons and gain new psychological resolves and/or vistas of self-understanding.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, dramatic form, catharsis, transcendence, Greek mythology, formal causality, final causality, Perseus myth, popular culture.

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Кори АНТОН

ВЗГЛЯД ГОРГОНЫ: КЕННЕТ БЕРК О ДРАМАТИЧЕСКОЙ ФОРМЕ, КАТАРСИСЕ И ПРЕОДОЛЕНИИ

Аннотация: В этой статье, главным образом с опорой на теории Кеннета Берка, рассмотрены некоторые психологические механизмы, заложенные в драматическую форму. Предпринимается попытка проанализировать, как драматические произведения (например, романы, пьесы, фильмы и даже телешоу) незаметно приобретают функции инструментов практической психологии: они оказывают разного рода благотворное терапевтическое воздействие как на тех, кто их создает, так и на своих читателей/зрителей. В статье показано, как драматическое искусство дает возможность в той или иной форме пережить катарсис и преодолеть собственные границы. Говоря конкретнее, рассматриваются некоторые размышления Берка о его собственном полуавтобиографическом романе «В поисках лучшей жизни» (*Towards a Better Life*) и прослеживается, как драматические произведения искусства позволяют человеку отойти на символическое расстояние, необходимое, чтобы оценить ситуации, с которыми он сталкивается в жизни, и решить различные задачи, которые без этого опыта показались бы ему непосильными. За счет символических и художественных приемов, которые помогают вживаться в изображаемые события, авторы и публика учатся справляться со своими страстями, находить новые психологические решения и/или открывать новые грани собственной личности.

Ключевые слова: Кеннет Берк, драматическая форма, катарсис, преодоление, греческая мифология, формальная причина, конечная причина, миф о Персее, популярная культура.

© 2020 Кори Антон (PhD, профессор, Государственный университет Гранд-Вэлли, Аллендейл, Мичиган, США), antonc@gvsu.edu

Introduction¹

In a revealing chapter entitled “On Stress, Its Seeking,” published within Samuel Klausner’s edited book, *Why Man Takes Chances*, Kenneth Burke explains three different orders of motives in dramatic works (e.g. aesthetic or internal, personal or psychological, and social or environmental). He furthermore ruminates upon the nature of stress as it relates to tragedy and comedy, and, for his primary illustration, he focuses on the ‘why and what for’ regarding his semiautobiographical novel *Towards a Better Life*. A good deal of the chapter examines the formal aesthetics which engage the main character, Neal, in “a grotesque tragedy with the birth of comedy ambiguously in the offing,”² and, while the ‘perfection’ of Neal’s fatal flaw, i.e. celebrating “his ‘despitals’ as a ‘vocation’”³ helps to keep the plot going, it more interestingly bears homeopathic effects for Burke as well as for readers. Hence, by taking items of concern from his personal life and giving them reflective distance as imagined through distorted and displaced artistic forms, Burke’s *Towards a Better Life* not only enables an aesthetic catharsis and transcendence for its readers—it worked its potent magic upon Burke himself. In this reflexive way, Burke shows how all three orders of motives can coalesce most productively within semiautobiographical dramatic works.

Form, Catharsis, and Transcendence

For Burke, the homeopathic potentials provided by dramatic art can be examined by first considering how artistic form, catharsis, and transcendence all intertwine. Most basically stated, *art*—as a massive edifice of substitution, condensation, displacement, stylistic maneuvers, and other subterfuges of form—enables catharsis and transcendence. As vicarious substitution, dramatic art enables a cathartic purging and release; by draw-

¹ I wish to first acknowledge Don Burke’s 1995 seminar in “Early Kenneth Burke” at Purdue University where I first encountered some of these ideas. Second, I wish to thank Erik Garrett and Bryan Crable for putting together the 2013 National Communication Association Conference session in Washington DC, where I was able to first present these ideas orally and gain valuable feedback from colleagues. I also need to thank the Kenneth Burke division of the Central States Communication Association for allowing me to present some an earlier draft of the paper during its 2016 Convention. Finally, I need to thank Valerie V. Peterson, Brooke Bellamy, and Bryan Wehr for editorial assistance and useful conversations during the final stages of production.

² Burke, Kenneth. “On Stress, Its Seeking.” Klausner, Samuel Z., ed. *Why Man Takes Chances: Studies in Stress-Seeking*. New York: Anchor Books, 1968: 85.

³ Burke, Kenneth. “On Stress, Its Seeking”: 82.

ing upon symbolic resources and articulating these resources into a certain form, people can transcend their personal quandaries or existential troubles by breaking through into different states of mind (e.g. resolve, confidence, consolation, etc.). When witnessing some dramatic work of art, whether a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, or the homeliest of TV melodramas, different audience members experience different degrees of catharsis and transcendence. Much of that variance depends upon the aesthetic styling and artistic forms, but it also depends upon the personal circumstances and interpersonal situations—the motives, attitudes, and psychological dispositions—of particular audience members.

These two issues—elements of style internal to the art itself and dimensions of aesthetic relevance to the audience—can be understood further by employing Burke's terms and concepts. A good place to begin is Burke's *Counter-Statement*, and, in particular, his distinction between the *psychology of the hero* (largely the *psychology of information*), and the *psychology of the audience* (largely the *psychology of form*). Burke suggests that, at a minimum, a dramatic work can gain and maintain motivational coherence only if the artist carefully presents certain kinds of information on the stage at the right time (setting, costumes, gestures, lines, etc.). As any character's motivations remain intertwined with their situations as well as their interactions with other characters, the audience must understand why these particular characters are doing what they are doing. At this level of analysis, we identify the *psychology of the hero*: characters find themselves within situations that bear publically intelligible motivations in their own right. The characters' actions, their doings and non-doings, contain directives internal to those particular scenes and/or to the situations depicted by the play in its entirety. They chiefly keep the plot going. All of the above must be analytically differentiated from (and should not be confused with) the *psychology of form*, which is also, principally, the psychology of the audience.

Regarding the psychology of form, the artist not only needs to draw upon stylistic maneuvers, dramatic tactics, rhetorical and aesthetic strategies and the like, but must do so in such a way that the overall effect bears upon the building of appetites and the adequate satisfying of those appetites. It thus refers to the modes of catharsis and transcendence afforded to audience members by the symbolic action contained in the drama. Some of the appetites and patterns of experience that must be met or resolved remain so perennial, obvious, and taken-for-granted, that they easily escape attention or hardly appear worth mentioning. Nonetheless,

people always bring with them various kinds of appetites, and those can be played upon for cathartic ends.⁴ For example, when entangled in situations involving trust, vulnerability, love, infidelity, betrayal, murder, and the like, individuals may gain much by witnessing particular—*highly similar but not wholly identical*—fictional situations dramatically placed before them. As Burke suggests, “the topics exploited for persuasive purposes *within* the play will also have strategic relevance to kinds of ‘values’ and ‘tensions’ that prevail *outside* the play.”⁵ In fact, audience members whose life circumstances and existential predicaments most closely match the character’s situations (in sheer principle rather than existential detail) are most susceptible to the homeopathic potentialities latent within the drama. In summary, then, dramatic art needs to sustain the motivation of the characters internally, making sure that characters do and say only what makes sense in reference to the plot, subplot, etc., but it also needs to maintain the interest of the audience and psychologically manage the audience’s wishes and desires. Whether audience members suffer from an unrequited love, a yearning for justice, a betrayal and a hunger for revenge, or perhaps, the simple craving to flee from quotidian boredom if only for a moment, such existential material calls upon the artist to reach well beyond motivations internal to the art itself. They refer us, fundamentally, to the *psychology of the audience*.⁶

An additional noteworthy difference between the psychology of form and the psychology of information is that the former—as always drawing upon natural curves of emotion and appetite—can be repeated or re-enacted without significant degeneration.⁷ As Burke suggests, “Music, then, fitted less than any other art for imparting information, deals minutely in frustrations and fulfillments of desire, and for that reason more often gives us those curves of emotion which, because they are natural, can bear repetition without loss.”⁸ Hence, music is accordingly more well suited to the psychology of form, whereas information cannot bear repetition

⁴ See Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968: 149–56.

⁵ Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966: 81.

⁶ See Burke’s discussion of “Perfection” in *Counter-Statement*: 178–81.

⁷ Also see Anton, Corey. “On the Nonlinearity of Human Communication: Insatiability, Context, Form.” *The Atlantic Journal of Communication* 15:1 (2007): 79–102.

⁸ Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-Statement*: 36.

without loss of meaning and is sought again only because it had been forgotten. In some important regards, then, dramatic art was (and still is for some people) “psychology” at its best. Such a view stands in obvious contrast to many modern “scientific” approaches to human psychology. In the wake of countless scientific studies and the deluge of information associated with them, many people have assumed that their personal distresses, mental anguishes, existential trials, and psychological troubles can be aided only by more information about them, or perhaps, by a pill to fix what ails them. They underestimate their continuing need for the catharsis and transcendence afforded in and through dramatic action. This issue can be teased out with precision by carefully considering the fine line drawn between two of Burke’s claims. On the one hand, Burke suggests that, “Art, at least in the great periods when it has flowered, was the conversion or transcendence, of emotion into eloquence, and was thus a factor added to life.”⁹ In harmony with this though in significant contrast, he maintains that, “Truth in art is not the discovery of facts, not an addition to human knowledge in the scientific sense of the word. It is, rather, the exercise of human propriety, the formulation of symbols which rigidify our sense of poise and rhythm.”¹⁰ These two passages fit together even more harmoniously once we underscore how art, as a drive toward eloquence, bears upon psychological demands that cannot be “removed” or “solved once and for all.” At best, they can only be met and regularly dealt with, momentarily transcended, and perhaps increasingly understood. Unfortunately, though, as tides of information wash people over, with many increasingly drowning in scientific literalism, more and more people seek wholly scientific “fixes” for their interpersonal stresses and psychological quandaries. They find it increasingly difficult to recognize how various psychological troubles recur perennially. They likewise underestimate the extent to which some of these difficulties are best handled or dealt with through artistic and/or ritualistic means.

In many regards, the great tragedies of the ages performed routine but important psychological services that today, subtly and yet pervasively, are being replaced by a thickheaded literalism. Great tragic art throughout the ages routinely performed its medicinal work on and for people, treating those suffering from bad conscience and other ailments of desire. Artists helped to articulate and dramatically enact symbolic tensions but also of-

⁹ Ibid.: 41.

¹⁰ Ibid.

ferred various kinds of resolve and thus hopefully provided ripe conditions for catharsis and transcendence. A key question guiding these artists has been: ‘*How will this particular audience benefit from witnessing these particular acts and/or this kind of resolve to that particular situation?*’ Here, few things are more valuable than knowing the audience’s appetites and knowing how to play upon them for therapeutic ends.

The Complexities of Semiautobiographical Drama

In the classic Greek world both pity and fear were recognized as needing regular purging, and tragedy was explicitly known to serve this vital but routine psychological function. For this reason, some background regarding the Aristotelian influences on Burke is useful. By reviewing Aristotle’s four causes and showing how they relate to Aristotle’s distinction between a “simple plot” and a “complex plot,” we can more plainly reveal the interrelation between the ‘psychology of the hero’ and the ‘psychology of the audience.’ In fact, we can begin to reveal how their interminglement, especially within autobiographical or semiautobiographical works, enables increasingly potent modes of catharsis and transcendence.

For Aristotle, an artistic object such as a play or dramatic performance is the product of four interrelated causes (material, efficient, formal, final). All of these are part of what brings the play into being, what causes it to come into existence. The *material cause* includes all of the props, set design, costumes, and various objects and gestures that make up the overall production. The *efficient cause* would be the playwright or director who oversees the creation, composition, and direction of the play. The *formal cause*, perhaps the least directly perceptible, refers loosely to the play itself in the abstract, the script with directives and the idealized performances therein, including the expectations regarding the play, however vague, that audience members bring to the performance. The *final cause* refers to the ends served by the performance. These might be something as simple as entertainment or merriment, although, obviously, much more sophisticated aesthetic ends can be sought.

Now, we need to briefly review Aristotle’s distinction between a simple plot and a complex plot to reveal how formal cause and final cause potently come together for aesthetic ends. Within a simple plot, the characters act and undergo repercussions, but they remain largely unaware of the consequences of their actions; they fail to realize the overall situation. *Aesop’s Fables* might serve as exemplars of simple plots. Only the audience explicitly recognizes the relations between a character’s actions and

the outcomes. In a complex plot, on the other hand, the characters act with regard to their situations, and the audience not only witnesses the upshot that befalls the characters, but they get to see how characters themselves dramatically realize their situation. As the characters openly and visibly suffer *anagnorisis* before the audience, formal cause and final cause can join together: a complex plot opens to the possibilities of robust catharsis.

After having reviewed Aristotle's four causes and his two kinds of plot, we now can advance the foregoing discussion. The task is to carefully consider Burke's fascinating interpretation of the Perseus myth from the ancient Greek tradition.¹¹ Burke suggests that the Perseus myth holds a key to grasping one central dynamic within the ancient understanding of dramatic art. Perseus is the Greek hero who slays the Medusa, a mythical monster with snakes for hair and who immediately turns to stone anyone who looks directly upon her. Previous foes failed to conquer the Gorgon, for they gazed directly at her and were solidified in their tracks. Perseus takes guidance from the goddess Athena and uses a more oblique approach; he takes his stand against Medusa not viewing her directly, but rather, through the reflective image cast in the shield given to him by the goddess.¹² The metaphorical import of the myth, Burke argues, is that most people remain unable to face and deal with certain existential quandaries because of the danger of looking at them straight on. But, like Perseus' use of the shield, the artist's dramatic work provides a viable reflective surface that, accordingly, affords an image of one's problems, one that provides a perspective through which difficulties may be faced and addressed.¹³ Art, then, is a

¹¹ In addition to "On Stress, Its Seeking" also see Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974: 63; and also Rueckert, William. H. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982: 62–63.

¹² That Perseus' shield was divinely created as a special gift from Athena, who, knowing Perseus was son of Zeus, prepared him for the battle with Medusa, leads one to wonder if Burke, by his use of this particular metaphor meant to imply a divinely grounded prowess to artistic or symbolic work. At the very least, we should recall that, in the Epilogue from *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke has The Lord (TL) respond to Satan's questioning about the value of prayer and the like by suggesting the *sheer possibility* of a divine nature to language. Burke, voicing TL, writes: "And in any case, you will agree that, even if their ideas of divine perfection were reducible to little more than a language-using animals' ultimate perception of its own linguistic forms, this could be a true inkling of the divine insofar as language itself happened to be made in the image of divinity," in Burke, Kenneth. *The Rhetoric of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961: 289–299.

¹³ Georges Gusdorf well captures the spirit of these concerns where he writes, "Sainte-Beuve, a man of letters, said that for a certain kind of mind, 'writing is

gift given by the gods, one that offers a vital protection; people can, with reflective distance, face and do battle with problems that otherwise would be too oppressive and/or too ominous to address.

Explaining his own semiautobiographical novel, *Towards a Better Life*, in terms of the tight interplay between and among the artist, the artist's quandaries and motives, and the dramatic object, Burke writes,

Perseus is particularly relevant in this regard. Although one cannot stare directly at the Gorgon's head of his entangled motives without being as it were turned into stone, their nature as material for art acts as a kind of protective reflector. By the subterfuges of form, one may be able to examine one's difficulties quite 'realistically,' even though the instrument also has the properties of a magnifying glass which can transform a tiny spider into a huge, glowering, hairy ogre about to seize and devour the observer, who somehow imagines himself dwarfed and defenseless.¹⁴

This most intriguing metaphor illustrates the way in which an artist can examine personal quandaries or dilemmas in a close-up and yet also far-away manner. The objects "in the mirror" may be smaller, tamer, and humbler than they appear but by their exaggerated proportions one can gain both new perspective and fresh motivation. Symbolic reflections allow for various abstract condensations and displacements and other forms of substitution. As Burke elsewhere clarifies, "The poet's style, his form (a social idiom) is this mirror, enabling him to confront the risk, but by the protection of an indirect reflection."¹⁵ In keeping with the Perseus metaphor, the artist's work allows an indirect look, or a *symbolic distance* that benefits the artist's perspective and capacity to act with regard to troubles.

Dramatic art performs a double service, one for the audience and one for artist; catharsis operates at both the level of the art-audience relation as well as at the level of the artist-art relation. It hence works on artists themselves. In producing their art, artists may draw from their own

deliverance.' Such is the way of the writer: the discipline of expression frees him from the specters which haunt him. A victim of his own unfortunate love, Werther dies, but Goethe is saved... To speak, to write, to express is to act, to survive crisis, to begin living again, even when one thinks it is only to relive one's sorrow. Expression is a kind of exorcism because it crystallizes the resolve not to let oneself go." Gusdorf, Georges. *Speaking (La Parole)*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965: 73.

¹⁴ Burke, Kenneth. "On Stress, Its Seeking.": 92.

¹⁵ Burke, Kenneth. *Philosophy of Literary Form*: 63.

experiences in such a way as to distort and disfigure original situations and yet, by focusing upon principles rather than factual details, they extend, if not downright amplify, the artwork's cathartic potency. The point here is that dramatic art plays a vital psychological role for audiences and authors alike. Imagine, for instance, individuals in relationships peppered with jealousy, doubt, mistrust, and betrayal. Such individuals, if they were to produce dramatic pieces of art, may work through their own trials by bringing their own emotional states and existential situations into as much eloquence as they can muster. And, here, Burke's 'principle of perfection' directly relates to the development of symbolic resources (i.e. sufficient symbolic space for speculative rearranging) as a means of facing psychological quandaries and sources of distress.

In discussing his personal relation to the events that unfold on account of and generally around his main character, Neal, Burke explains how his life, in various forms, lent material to the fiction and how the fiction became, to various degrees, a form of homeopathic magic for dealing with his situation. Burke clarifies the semiautobiographical dramatic relation in this passage:

...although the actual story is a fiction from beginning to end, in principle it was 'true'—at least in the sense that...it produced a monster by magnifying some aspects of the author's character and minimizing others. In this alembicated sense, it was a perversely idealized self-portrait. The author was in a state of acute internal conflict owing to maladjustments in his personal affairs. He was caught in a kind of dilemma from which such imaginings seemed like a kind of escape, or at least relief...I am trying to make as clear as possible those respects in which a story that is totally false in its details can somehow be true in principle.¹⁶

Burke thus maintains that the perversely similar situational depictions, as a kind of self-portrait, fail in terms of accurate representation of their original "real life situation." Nevertheless, the underlying principles express a truth, one that works throughout the novel to enable a vicarious release, a homeopathic drawing out and quelling of passions.

Citing Milton, Burke writes, "tragedy is designed 'to temper and reduce' such passions as pity and fear 'to just measure with a kind of delight,

¹⁶ Burke, Kenneth. "On Stress, Its Seeking": 91, 93.

stirred up by the reading or seeing of those passions well imitated.”¹⁷ This notion of “well imitated” nicely leads into Burke’s ideas of “perfection.” Burke identifies the “principle of perfection,” another Aristotelian derived idea, as the tendency in life for things to fully become themselves, to fulfill themselves by following out their telos, their *entelechy*. Just as the oak is the perfection of the acorn, so atomic bombs are the perfection of sticks and stones as weaponry. For Burke, then, we can speak ironically of the perfect fool or the perfect villain as much as we can speak of the perfect ending to a wicked deed. In all of these cases, we refer to “the end of the line,” the fullest embodiment and/or the most completed stage of growth and progression. Within artistic presentations, perfection takes the crucial role of driving the artist to concoct the most effective, i.e. aesthetically distilled, medicines. The logic of homeopathic magic is not only that “*like causes like*,” but that weaker forms are naturally drawn to stronger, more potent forms. Consider the medieval cures for jaundice: the sick went to the apothecary shop and paid to stare at a canary or the most yellow object the local alchemist could obtain. The idea was that the “purer” the yellow, the more that the less pure would be drawn to its purity—(for that which is more pure, it was reasoned, must be the source of the less pure). Such misplaced application of “homeopathic medicine” seems silly by today’s perspective. But this should not hide from view the many ways that such perfectionist principles can be used for psychological ends within dramatic art. As Burke’s *Towards of Better Life* makes clear, an artist’s ‘strategic fictions’ of personal quandaries can temper the intensity of passions by homeopathically depicting aspects of life at “monstrous” proportions.

Burke’s general insights—that he was able to face his own quandaries through poetic process, and that without the novel to provide artistic distance for thoughtful reconsiderations he would have been at a loss—imply that art is in some ways most valuable to artists themselves. He spells out how he personally benefitted from his mostly imaginary tale:

According to my tentative notion, all such fictions are ‘ideal contemplations’ of personal experiences that are circumstantially quite different; but they contain some problematic motivational trace which, if isolated and made absolute, would be symbolized most accurately—or with most dramatic thoroughness, most ‘drastically’—by such a fulfillment as the fiction settles on. And I would tinker with the possibility that any such aesthetic imitating

¹⁷ Ibid.: 92.

of motives prevailing outside the realm of art can have literal analogues involving persons who in effect make up such works of art but live them wholly in the realm of life itself, and without the benefit of the formal reflector that Perseus had in his battles with the snake-headed monster he could not dare to look upon.¹⁸

An artist's personal problems, Burke suggests, may be symbolically amplified and distorted, perverted and rearranged, and yet, through the work of art, the artist can now look at what was previously psychologically inadmissible or psychically unapproachable. So, although audiences may admittedly take away some benefit from the kinds of catharsis and transcendence dramatic art presents, it may be when the artists are able to become their own audiences, and the audience their own artists, that people learn not only how to approach Medusa but how to face her in battle.¹⁹

Facing the Gorgon

We can enjoy the possibilities of catharsis and transcendence within dramatic art only because we so easily project ourselves into witnessed situations while remaining at a distance. Our susceptibility to imitative dramatic magic seems to occur largely because "perfected similarities" naturally cathect their lesser forms. We thus can "perfect" the ideas just mentioned, offering what at first pass likely appears as a flagrant overstatement: *any fictional story that meaningfully speaks to you is in some way about you, even if only indirectly.*

If lullabies, as Burke suggests, offer easily overcome obstacles, then, comparatively, folktales present tightly perfected narratives, ones that provide simple symbolic structures designed for easy release. Consider, as one simple example, the well-known fairy tale, "The Three Little Pigs." This story is clearly fantasy, is filled with many species of substitution, displacement and condensation, and yet is likely the imaginative product of some actual person(s) facing a real threat and having various alternative

¹⁸ Ibid.: 94.

¹⁹ Rueckert rightly observes that the Greek Myth includes two other gifts from the gods, the winged-shoes and the sword, and he attempts accordingly to add them to the logic of Burke's account. As Rueckert suggests, "The sword and winged shoes are as important as his shield if one is to take Perseus as Burke's figure of the poet." [Rueckert, William. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*: 63.] His account is provocative and heuristic but also a bit overly literal. We can settle for the fact that symbols afford people with a sense of moving from place to place, of facing demons, and, sometimes, of slaying them.

resources and/or precautionary materials at their disposal. This classic Western tale, though purportedly about pigs, wolves, and different building materials and their relative safety, is obviously loose and metaphorical enough to be substitutable for any individuals, countless threats of various sizes, and numerous other kinds of resources for safety and protection. The “big bad wolf” is a nasty gorgon, a distorted and personified perfection of “threat” generally understood, just as the houses stand for different means of defense. Hence, by “perfecting” threats and troubles in this symbolic way, real challenges and hardships crystallize into symbolic form and now offer means of strategic coping and transcendence. The fable of the “The Three Little Pigs” asks us, if only in a roundabout way, whether or not we have “built our houses out of brick,” though, obviously, we are not talking about either houses or bricks!²⁰ Where substitution operates as a basic rule, principles maintain their truth regardless of variance in details and particulars. Such robust substitution is the very forcing bed of catharsis and transcendence; were we unable to move comfortably through such substitutions, catharsis and transcendence would be impossible.²¹

When individuals suffer under supervision from a bad boss and find their co-workers annoying or incompetent, they may take cathartic pleasure by sitting in front of the TV and watching *The Office*. Similarly, those struggling with an overbearing mother-in-law may find the reflective artistic distance of *Everybody Loves Raymond* to have quite a comedic cathartic effect. If people have anxiety regarding their social status and comparative value, they may take some symbolic relief in viewing a show such as *Keeping Up Appearances*. Urbanites worried about their relationship possibilities, indiscretions, and fidelities, may take solace in watching *Friends* or *Sex in the City*, whereas elderly widows, now dealing with life on their own, may find the dramatic art within *The Golden Girls* to whet and feed their existential appetites.²² For those with fears regarding marriage

²⁰ It is worthwhile, too, to consider how the different renderings of the tale turn it from a simple plot to a complex one. In early versions, both first and second pig get eaten by the wolf, whereas, in some later versions, the two pigs successively flee from their wrecked domiciles to find safety in the remaining pig’s house. These later stories cast pigs that seem to realize that they had failed to make adequate preparations (i.e. they somewhat suffer *anagnorisis* for the readers/listeners).

²¹ Also see Anton, Corey. *Sources of Significance: Worldly Rejuvenation and Neo-Stoic Heroism*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2010.

²² One point of exploration for future scholarship would be the artistic connection between Burke and Marshall McLuhan. The argument would go something like this: In the contemporary US scene, comedies, especially sit-coms, have taken up a great deal

and married life, shows such as *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, or perhaps, *Married with Children* may, depending upon one's generation, scratch a vital itch. But the television shows just listed should not be taken to imply an overly literal and somewhat constraining sense of homeopathic principles. No such literalism holds sway.

Given the loose and rangy potentials of substitution, a capacity for maintaining symbolic integrity despite various displacements, condensations, hyperboles, and the like, we might consider how the flurry of medical shows in the 1990s such as *ER* captured the interest of anybody who felt increasing pressures and heavy demands in their lives; they thus found some relief by vicariously witnessing even higher pressure stakes played out before them. Or consider more current television shows such as *Dexter* or *Breaking Bad*, where moral ambiguity is negotiated in front of viewers who can maintain considerable symbolic distance. Zombie shows, too, such as *Walking Dead*, appeal to people, not because audience members are zombies or actually fear zombies, but because of a vague and general fear of lifeless and unanimated humans (of corporate drones), of people whose agency seems compromised, or of people who are unable to be reasoned with and whose blind drives threaten the living.

Film, too, perhaps obviously, well illustrates how people face their Gorgons. One notable example can be seen in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, written, produced, and directed by John Hughes. In this well-known and popular holiday movie, Neal Page, played by Steve Martin, is a successful and somewhat neurotic executive who, due to a cascading series of unfortunate happenstances in his attempt to get home for Thanksgiving, is forced to share rides of all sorts with Del Griffith, an optimistic and uninhibited shower-curtain ring salesman, played by John Candy. Their adventures, for Neal, were hair-raising, frustrating, and often traumatic, while Del always seemed to take things in stride. Near the very end of the

of the artistic space in mass media. The mass media is filled to the brim with "good vs. evil" drama, but, in most cases, the villain gets killed or caught and punished, and the audience enjoys a happy ending. Within mainstream US culture, almost everyone loves the theme of 'good wins in the end and all live happily ever after.' The obvious exception, the place where tragedy still reigns throughout the culture, is that *living art* popularly known as collegiate and professional athletics. Games, mass mediated (i.e. televised) sporting events, carry increasing amounts of the tragic element by which pity and fear can be cathected. If McLuhan correctly suggests that games are a microcosm of a culture, giving visible form to the kinds of tensions and stresses that culture and life pose, then today's sports seem to be one of the main domains where people can witness nonfictional tragic action: See McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man: Critical Edition*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003: 315–27.

film, Neal unexpectedly realizes how his awkward traveling companion, Del, had been covering up and downplaying his personal tragedies. Scanning back over his memory and noticing a collection of inconsistencies, Neal suddenly realizes that things are not at all what he had thought. The lug-headed oaf he'd had for his traveling buddy was not, in fact, soon to be reunited with his wife. Running back to the station, Neal finds Del sitting in a desolate train station alone on the holiday. Del, not wanting Neal to take pity on him, states that he is running late but he will catch up with his wife later. Neal does not buy it. There, in this empty station, Del finally admits, for the first time in the movie, that he'd been lying all along. Still smiling and trying to cover it over, he admits that his wife died years earlier. About this painfully beautiful scene much more could be said, but suffice it to say that we can know with reasonable certainty that Hughes experienced something like this unfolding of events, *if only in principle*.²³ In fact, when Hughes was asked about how he came up with the idea for the film, he stated, "This actually happened to me. I left Chicago, for New York, on a one day trip...and ended up in Wichita, and got home five days later..."²⁴ Granted the characters and events have been made larger than life, amplified and distorted for dramatic effect, but they no doubt offer up a psychological truth of the first order.

One final and rich example of semiautobiographical catharsis can be found in the contemporary television show *30 Rock*. In it, the character Liz Lemon, both written and acted by Tina Fey, stands as a double semi-autobiographical reflection of Fey and her existential dealings. The show itself is about a television show, and in many ways is self-similar to, and reflective of, the kinds of situations likely to be encountered behind the scenes. The particular episodes that most clearly exemplify autobiographical styling occur near the end of the show, when Fey herself actually

²³ In an interview about the movie, Hughes clarifies that in the original set up, Martin escapes Candy, hops on a train, makes it home for Thanksgiving only to discover that Candy, a nuisance to the very end, followed him home in a cab. Hughes, strongly disliking the character, changed the ending post-production, and with the help of Paul Hirsch, the movie editor, was able to make Candy "a noble person" who realizes that he was unwanted. This allows Martin to go back to his family (while Candy goes off to suffer alone) until Martin realizes that Candy is actually a tragically lonesome noble person, and seeks him out to invite him back for Thanksgiving. See Appelo, Tim. "The Truth About John Hughes and Dede Allen." *Thompson on Hollywood*, 2010. Online at http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/the_truth_about_john_hughes_and_dede_allen

²⁴ See Appelo, Tim. "The Truth About John Hughes and Dede Allen."

becomes pregnant and eventually leaves the show to have her baby. Within the show, Fey's pregnancy becomes converted into a decision, for Liz Lemon, to adopt children. Many of the woes associated with parenting are still represented but they are refigured and recast, made to align with Lemon as a character who fits with the other characters on the show, and also to meet audience needs. Very likely, they were also part of Fey's own coming to terms with principles needing expression. She may have been trying, by telling the adoption story, to find grounds for re-identifying with the LGBT crowd that had grown critical of Tracy Morgan and, by association, the show. Perhaps she was amplifying a kind of love, one not based in bloodline, that she wanted to advocate and that she thought more audience members could relate to and needed to hear. Maybe she was trying to adjust to the fact that her own children were being raised by a nanny, and she wanted to emphasize, to herself and others, how love and parental guidance need not come solely from one's biological parents. Perhaps she sought to present dramatically exemplified commitments that people ought to be ready for if they wish to become successful parents. It might have been some combination of these or maybe something else. One cannot be sure.²⁵ At the least, in some regards, the decisions that were made in scripting Lemon's adoption of children were more than the artist's special prerogative for carefully overseeing a dream the public dreams.²⁶

It was a semiautobiographical drama by which Fey, as artist (writer, director, and actress), symbolically dealt with private affairs through public means. William Gass once wrote that he sometimes attends Halloween costume parties dressed as himself and in that way no one suspects that he is there.²⁷ In a similar regard Fey may have been able to deal with her own dilemmas by living them out, amplified and distorted but true in principle, as Liz Lemon.

²⁵ See Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011.

²⁶ In significant ways, all people work the nightshift as artists. Admittedly, everybody is sleeping on the job, but, nonetheless, they seem to create and consume private semiautobiographical dramas as they dream. The principle of substitution operates within the dream, allowing dreamers to conjure, address and/or resolve unrecognized and /or repressed difficulties, but, unfortunately, such "eloquence" unfolds without the benefit of conscious direction and foresight. Dream symbols, originally composed by and for a sleeping audience, may seem rather vague and unspecified to the fully awake, rational mind. As Burke suggests, sleepers are so lazy that their symbolic expressions willingly proceed through the roughest and loosest of approximations; any remote connection or slight semblance functions well enough for the dreaming mind.

²⁷ Gass, William H. *Habitations of the Word*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985: 207.

This brief review of a few of Burke's basic ideas attempted to reveal the tight interconnection between dramatic form, catharsis, and transcendence. It tried to disclose not only the ways that audience members and artists benefit psychologically from dramatic works, but, also, it sought to show how, given the interweaving of formal cause and final cause within complex plots, semiautobiographical works serve an especially interesting aesthetic purpose. Here we can see so clearly that dramatic art is much less a representation of life as it is a part of the way artists convert their existential quandaries into eloquent and potent forms of homeopathic magic.

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