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SAVIORS OF MANKIND OR FOOLS OF ILLUSION? HOW TO UNDERSTAND SAROYAN'S «ABSURD» HEROES[1]

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> The inability to fly is the reason man's philosophy is more intricate than that of the sea gulls, and man's contempt for horizontal walking is the cause of the staircase.
> WILLIAM SAROYAN (*Tipped Hat to the Lamp Post*, 1932)

O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) closes with the pessimistic resolution that believing in dreams is only an escaping solution that makes man a fool of illusion. As Theodore Hickman puts it: «[I]t's exactly those damned tomorrow dreams which keep you from making peace with yourself. So you've got to kill them as I did with mine» (1957, 189). However, facing reality and coming to terms with the truth of our grim destiny can only bring about either death (Parrit) or madness (Hickey). Man is always the guilty animal eternally trapped in the dilemma of cherishing chimerical hopes or living in an existential vacuum. Hickey's longed-for coming ironically displays the anguish of building up one's fate without the support of a pipe dream. His message of salvation is no other than the sad realization that man's commitment to delusion can only be overcome by his bitter acceptance of a barren, hopeless life. Very similarly, the message of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is a reaffirmation of the futility of living anchored to a world of emotional vagaries and impossible dreams. Both Amanda and her daughter's evasive attitudes towards the harsh demands of reality prove to be as fragile as Laura's collection of glass-made unicorns. Not surprisingly, Saroyan's dramatic production of the forties reformulates the same dichotomy between these two extreme poles but, far from reaching the same negative conclusions, another solution to man's existential conundrums is suggested. In fact, it is difficult to speak of the Saroyanesque theater without referring to his heroes' Quixotic ambition to infuse the world with a renovated optimism and a stubborn faith in hard-to-attain goals. Yet the nature of the Californian writer's characters has always been a controversial issue. Even though they search for a world of undefiled innocence, their quest very usually comes to next to nothing. Perpetually frustrated and defeated, their efforts are constantly disparaged and their ideals also become pipe dreams. However, Saroyan's attitude –unlike O'Neill's– is that of a yea-sayer for he is adamant that only dreamers can save man from the maelstrom of the world. This paper is an attempt to probe into the Saroyanesque idealists' struggle against the grain. My intention is to analyze the playwright's complex philosophy in relation to this question within the context of the American socio-political situation of the forties.

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I. SAROYAN AND HIS DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Despite the variety of situations and disparity of motives, Joe T., Michael Sweeny, Jim Dandy, Saul Politzky and a long list of wacky, extravagant characters share a common trait: they believe in impossible dreams. Joe, the central character of *The Time of Your Life* (1939), still has faith in the redemption of the world through the love union of Kitty, an innocent prostitute on the San Francisco waterfront, and Tom, the big half-witted guy who looks like a child. Michael Sweeny, «the noble fool» of *Sweeny in the Trees* (1940), advertises for a job without wages and spends most of his time kicking around fake bill notes with the aim of showing mankind that money cannot rule the world. Jim, the protagonist of *Jim Dandy* (1940), is the resilient optimist who never stops believing that man's fate should never be «hunger, or cold, or pain, or embarrassment, or disease, or homelessness» (1947, 36); and, despite Fishkin's continuous pessimistic counterarguments, he never hesitates to cling to the power of the heart-shaped stone he uses as a talisman. Saul, the Polish immigrant in his middle sixties of *The Politzky Surprise* (1950)[2] is deeply convinced that he will beat the powerful: even though he is unable to make ends meet, he turns down every single offer to sell his small candy store to the delegates of the United Nations, for he has «made this place out of dreams, not money» (Scene 4). Ben Alexander, the poet of *My Heart's in the Highlands* (1939), becomes the victim of hunger and eviction but his never-failing idealism gives him the strength he needs to keep on defending his poetry and to inveigh against the forces which rule the world: money, war, destruction and hatred.

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[2] *The Politzky Surprise* or *World Failure at the Candy Store* is one of the unpublished plays of The William Saroyan Collection, Ctn 55.

However, it is true in every case that the idealist's struggle to change the meaninglessness of living and to correct the errors of the world prove to be utterly futile. As Robert G. Everding has argued, it is highly improbable that Kitty and Tom's escape to San Diego in the search for a better life be successful for they are too innocent to contend with difficulties:

> Kitty has been stripped of her self-esteem and faces a new life accompanied only by poetry books and a boy whom she cannot satisfy. Tom has been sent without a driver's license or union membership into a world that had almost annihilated him three years earlier. His inability to handle Kitty's tears as well as his violence towards the sailor serve as foreboding omens of the doom that awaits the couple. (1996, 127)

Michael Sweeny's dream that people may learn to despise money by kicking it –«I am indifferent to money . . . I am someone worthwhile» (1941b, 117); «Money is all they think about», (147)– is shattered when the characters finally discover that the bills are real. Similarly, Fishkin's speeches about man's existential failure prove to be more moving and persuasive than Dandy's attempts to invigorate human faith in love, peace, innocence and wisdom; and the sound of the cash register, a pervasive symbol of the rottenness of civilization in Saroyan's plays, is more frequently heard than the peals of church bells or the bugle sound. Saul Politzky's effort to keep the Manhattan candy cornerstore –a shelter for dreamers and spiritually hungry people– is frustrated when he realizes he has not made any profit or had any moment of peace and contentment for fifteen years. His final decision to sell it to the people who will make it a practical place, i.e. a place created to satisfy the needs of the body, implies not only the futility of his goal but the inevitable victory of gross materialism over dreams. Ben's poetry can do nothing to mend the atrocities of war nor can the old musician and poet, MacGregor, alleviate the burden of the outcasts: their final journey to nowhere exemplifies that there is no place for idealists in the world.

Yet our contention is that these diehard heroes serve a function that is far from being dramatically and ideologically ineffectual. First, they constitute one of the poles of the tension which shapes Saroyan's dramatic method. Secondly, they help to make the audience see beyond the boundaries of a dull, mechanical existence and they act as an antidote to man's degraded condition in contemporary American society. In order to understand these ideas it will be helpful if we analyze Saroyan's dialectical conception of the world.

II. SAROYAN AND THE DIALECTICS OF BEING

To speak of dichotomies, dialectical struggles or internecine strifes between two opposing realities is nothing new in the history of the American drama of the thirties and early forties. The «lean and angry» decade of the Great Depression adopted the Marxist doctrine of class warfare as the driving force of history, and its pervasive influence can be felt both in the political arena and in the field of theatrical experimentation. Indeed it was John Howard Lawson who first saw the necessity to apply the basic Marxist postulates to the stage. In *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (1936) he defines «the essential character of drama» as «social conflict –persons against other persons, or individuals against groups, or individuals or groups against social or natural forces– in which the conscious will . . . is sufficiently strong to bring the conflict to a point of crisis» (1974, 881). *Processional* (1925) combines both the distortion of melodrama and vaudeville techniques and the clash between the ruling classes and the miners. Clifford Odets and Marc Blitzstein, among others, will follow to a greater or lesser extent Lawson's dialectical model in the construction of plays such as *Waiting for Lefty* (1934) or *The Cradle Will Rock* (1935).

However, unlike dramatists of social protest, Saroyan's interest is not focussed, as James H. Justus asserts, upon «exploring the potential revolutionary spirit of the rural or urban dispossessed» (1996, 66). Neither are his plays –despite their clear didactism (Whitmore 1995, 13)– attempts to rebel against ruthless capitalism or proposals of remedies to social inequities. Yet the Saroyan method still retains the dialectical structure exploited by the political theater of the thirties but the mechanism has now been deprived of direct political intentions linked with any partisan program, simply because, as the writer puts it, «[t]he theater and politics are too out of the phase to be ever compatible» (Tompkins 1967, 7). Obviously, Saroyan's rejection of any commitment between politics and playwriting does not entail that his drama excludes any political and/or ideological message. Much to the contrary, his conception of the true nature of art is one essentially political, for only art can accomplish the arduous task of teaching men how to live:

> Art and politics must move closer together. Reflection and action must be equally valid in good men if history is not to take one course and art another ... Political systems, however, ... are worthless when they can survive only at the cost of the actual lives of the people they claim to protect. And yet we know one political system or another is still necessary for the management of the world. For this reason, art must enter the arena. It must be part of a large thing: the world and its management, life and its instruction. Art must not be a separate and special thing. The intention of art has always been to deepen, extend, elevate, ennoble, strengthen and refresh the experience of living. It cannot begin to do these things until it accepts part of the management of the physical life of men, which is now in the hands of inferior men. (Saroyan 1940, 3-5)

Art, unlike politics, «entertain[s] as it instructs» (1940, 8). The problem is always finding «truly superior men» who can exert «a truly superior influence» (6). Many of the Saroyanesque plays deal precisely with this quest. Every man is a hero by definition: «The true hero . . . is what he is out of the womb» (*The Hero of the World*, 1939).[3] But man's heroic nature has been corrupted by the world: his perception of the true miracle of living has been nullified by the absurd routine of a deadening existence, and his «first-rate» wishes finally satisfied with a «tenth rate fulfillment» (*The Hero of the World*). Human nature is then trapped between two opposing extremes around which the playwright creates a dialectical tension:

(a) The «real» world which is empirically apprehended but which is closer to a phantasmagoria.
(b) The imaginary world made of dreams and illusions which cannot be seen but which constitute the driving force of man's life.

Over and over again Saroyan rewrites the same dichotomy throughout his work in many different ways: the Romantic antithesis matter vs. spirit may be changed into the duality of America vs. Armenia, present in his latter writings. The antagonism of the pinball machine and the Missouri waltz (*The Time of Your Life*) can similarly be replaced by the contrast between the cash register groans and honks and the bugle music (*Jim Dandy*). In every case, the writer displays an irreconciliable opposition between the socio-political situation of America and man's desires and aspirations, out of which a tragic sense of human existence emerges. As Joe, the central character of *The Babylonian Confusion* (1956)[4] puts it in the final monologue of Act II, the world is in a state of «Babylonian confusion that must be studied very carefully if a man hopes to understand anything»; in other words, what we believe to be the real world is simply «a figment in a nightmare of an idiot» (1942, 63). Essentially contradictory, too big to be apprehended, defined by a never-ending disorder and formlessness, empirical reality under the glossy cover of American civilization has done nothing but enslave man to a senseless degraded existence. «The contemporary compulsion of society to save what is known as precious time is responsible in part for nobody having time to see anything . . . so that contemporary reality is without dimension or truth» (1941a, 205). The only way to endow the phenomenal world with some kind of enduring meaning is to counteract its disruptive force with the healing influence of dreams, illusions and ideals. This is essentially the role of art: «to gather together again the fragments of men» and to restore «order to the world, and man to godliness» (Saroyan 1983, 206). Obviously this goal can only be attained by artists, writers, dreamers and heroes, i.e. by individuals potentially capable of making others see through the masquerade of the world and discover the primary sense of living: «All the elements of art were always there, waiting for a perception in one man to reveal these elements to all men.» (1948, 34). Only by this transformation can man regain his dignity and triumph over conventions and the «wretched state of life» (1939, 875). Yet the tragedy is inevitable for the sole reason that the battle between illusory reality and the incongruous world is one in which man's dreams are bound to be perpetually destroyed. Illusions are condemned to be the losing side in the dialectical opposition which dominates man's fate. Unfortunately, the masses are not «spiritually equipped to face the inward tragedy» which emerges from this knowledge (Cf. Foster 1991, 32). «[The] tragedy of modern life» –argues Harold Clurman in *The Fervent Years* (1945)– «is the forced separation and contradiction between the 'way of the world' and the 'way of man,' between the power motif of our external machinations and the love motif of our subjective desires» (235). Saroyan may not give a definite answer to this fundamental question but he does not hesitate to believe that only poets, dreamers and madmen can make man recover his lost hope in the basic conflict between dreams and the dictates of the external world: «I may go so far as to say that when the living become inhuman –which appears to be sometime during the summer of 1939– art and artists will continue to be human...» (1948, 34).

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[3] Also titled *The Great Life*, *Every Mother's Son* or simply *The Son*. Unpublished. The William Saroyan Collection, Ctn 49.

[4] Unpublished. See carton 43 of The William Saroyan Collection.

III. IN THE QUEST OF THE MEANING OF LIFE: LOST MEN AND DEFEATED HEROES

Despite the seemingly pessimistic outcome of Saroyan's existential dialectics and the tragic conclusion that «we live and go to our graves –hungover, confused, and stupid» (1969, 29), the paradoxical alternation between chaos and order dominates man's life from beginning to end. Heroes are therefore necessary to enable men to get rid of their simulacrum of life and recover –albeit temporarily– his spiritual dimension. In this regard, the vast array of Saroyanesque heroes share a number of identical traits. First, they seem to have regained a new state of innocence through the hardships of experience and, much like Blakean bards, their distinct, almost prophetic message keeps out of tune with the crowd's clamor. However, most frequently they speak very little and music or silence are preferred to the babble of voices.

Kenneth W. Rhoads (1996) has deciphered the symbolic overtones of Joe T., the hero of *The Time of Your Life* as a Christ-type figure: «His origins are vague and mysterious»; his vocation is no other than to guide his fellowmen, particularly «the poor, the outcast and the oppressed» (108); the fact that he only drinks champagne can be seen as a symbolic enactment of the wine of communion; his second initial, a T, is the traditional symbol of the Holy Cross; he loves kids and feels an irresistible fascination with children's toys, and eventually he emerges as the savior of Tom and Kitty. Michael Sweeny's non-realistic characterization also leads to the same point: he is the fool who loves the world's «dream and its dreamers» (1941b, 197) and who despises «those who love money» (115) and the very thought of business (132). He has managed to shake off any material need («I want nothing, since I know of nothing to want,» 171) and he encourages people to «look for something better» than a job (165). He is the only one able to recognize that man is «feebly wasted,» for the destructive force of money can only deaden his spirit (171); and, finally, he prefers the holy power of music or the calmness of silence to «the galloping idiocy of . . . words» (173). Saroyan's use of symbolic props helps to reinforce the dialectical opposition between the phenomenal reality which keeps man tied to materialistic goals– (the rain, the telephone bells, the fake money, horseraces...) and the intangible world of freedom and dreams (mostly the tree and the bird images). The tree symbolism is particularly interesting for it provides a spiritual shelter away from the pressures of civilization. «In the presence of the tree I find my spirit in sweetness and grace,» says Shakepierce, the old poet in Act I (141-142). Climbed up on its branches, Jim Lark lives in his own illusory space where he feels safer than in the real world, and Sweeny seeks refuge in the tree every time he senses that his freedom is in danger. Thematically conceived as «a statement on money, a report on life and an essay on art and religion» (Note to *Sweeny in the Trees*, 106), the play's decor operates as a microcosm where the mechanisms of the real world are momentarily suspended. Sweeny's unusual office –like Nick's honky tonk, *Jim Dandy*'s eggshell or the abandoned theater of *The Cave Dwellers*– is the last refuge where hopeless dreamers and losers, orchestrated by the atypical hero's magic wand, can recover the energy to start afresh and rebuild the old broken illusions once again. Whether this newly kindled interest in dreams can resist or not any potential obstacle is off the point. Neither teaching man how to move to practical action nor motivating him to reach success is part of Saroyan's objective. His recurrent message is no other than to inspire him to loftier ideals and give him back his human stature lost in the fretfulness of an absurd world and reduced to a mere non-entity.

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