

The Fourth Wall is Fallen: Tragedy and Reality in Richard Rodriguez's "Late Victorians"

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Whenver there is a wake in a soap opera or an American movie from the 1950s, the same woman—the angel of death, perhaps—appears in the front row of the funeral parlor. Her basic embodiment is Caucasian, old, and plump; her costume, a black pillbox hat and black driving gloves; her prop, effusive tears that erode the fortifications of mascara around her eyes. As she grieves loudly and sloppily, she will occasionally exclaim: “Oh, how terrible! How cruel and inconceivable! What a tragedy!” Though her protestations are otherwise curtailed by sighs and sobs, the word “tragedy” lingers on her tongue for an extra, uncomfortable instant. It is as if time itself slows to allow her to utter the word with its full force.

Such a woman would never be tolerated at a service for a person who had once been genuinely alive. Family and friends in attendance would begin suspiciously asking one another: “Who is she? How did she know the deceased?” In the melodrama, however, the other characters take little notice of her, not that it matters. She is not speaking either for them or to them. She is not, in fact, even a mourner at all. She is a funhouse-mirror reflection of the viewer’s own feelings about the dead, a melo-dramatized embodiment of a removed sense of grief.

Aristotle explained that tragedy “is an imitation of a serious and complete action of some magnitude” (Bambrough 471). In other words, something that is tragic is always theatric and never real; it is often affecting, but never permanent. Thus, despite popular usage of the word, tragedy suggests not closeness and empathy, but distance and sympathy. When someone we love dies, we rarely have the presence of mind to declare the event anything, much less something as weighty as “tragic.” Such an assessment requires time and space to process, to replay the events in the theater of our minds, to harden emotion into logic like water into ice.

If tragedy only exists in imitation, what do people mean when they discuss the tragic implications of real, immediate life? In “Late Victorians,” Richard Rodriguez says that his adopted city, San Francisco, is “a circus of final things” that “toys with the tragic conclusion” (494). He extends this characterization with descriptions of some “final things”: a woman committing suicide on a “brilliant spring afternoon” by “stepp[ing] onto the sky”; the rusting of the Golden Gate Bridge; the decimation of many of the city’s communities by the AIDS epidemic. Perhaps, then, tragedy in the real is best described as decay—the gradual eclipsing of the beautiful and the vibrant by the dead and the dying.

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Saint Augustine writes from his cope of dust that we are restless hearts, for earth is not our true home. Human unhappiness is evidence of our immortality. Intuition tells us that we are meant for some other city.

Elizabeth Taylor, quoted in a magazine article of twenty years ago, spoke of cerulean Richard Burton days on her yacht, days that were nevertheless undermined by the elemental private reflection: This must end. (493)

Rodriguez begins “Late Victorians” with two perspectives that express under very different circumstances the sentiment that human beings are intuitively aware of life’s pattern of constant disintegration. While Saint Augustine says, according to Rodriguez, that the idea of a decaying world should provide solace to unhappy mortals, Taylor believes the opposite: that the realization of beauty’s fleeting nature is ultimately the source of its ruination. Rodriguez, then, while governed by an “old man’s pessimism,” realizes that “there are things a young man knows that are true and are not yet in the old man’s power to recollect” (493). In other words, he is a “reader of Saint Augustine,” a “skeptic,” but one who acknowledges the truisms of Elizabeth Taylor and the youthful pilgrims to San Francisco (504).

The author’s moralistic, Saint Augustine-influenced sense of San Francisco as a city in inexorable decay is heightened by its reputation as an Eden, a fatally corrupted paradise, for “lonely teenagers” and members of oft-disparaged minority groups, particularly homosexuals (493). Gays who in other towns and cities had found public refuge for their lifestyle only in places stigmatized as seedy or unclean discovered in San Francisco a legitimate, fully fleshed-out community in which to thrive. Allen Ginsberg, the legendary Beat poet and San Francisco resident whose sexually explicit metaphors

forced the mechanics of homosexuality into the American psyche, described the actualization of the gay “scene” in San Francisco in a 1968 interview:

...I'd written a long poem exploring the anal slave-master sexual-drama fantasy...at first, I wasn't sure I could read the new poem in public, because it was so far-out and intimate and real. But I finally decided that this kind of fantasy is sufficiently universal to be of general interest, that it isn't a peculiar or private aberration, and that reading it wouldn't be an act of excessive exhibitionism. So I read it at the “Rolling Renaissance” poetry reading in San Francisco before a giant funny audience of squares, hippies, high school kids and old bohemian poetry lovers; they seemed to dig it. Later, I was in a gay bar on Grant Avenue—gay bars there are groovy now, all the kids have long hair and motorcycle jackets, they're friendly and first-rate and don't look like fairies but like strong young men—and I met this kid who said my poem had turned him on. So we made it. (Carter and Ginsberg 172)

As a poet, Ginsberg pushed not only for the legitimization of his lifestyle, but also emphasized the immediate capture of natural phenomena, sensory observations, and his own thoughts. This type of celerity, he believed, was the only means by which one could break down the barrier between firsthand and secondhand experience, capturing life's truths before they began to disintegrate. Additionally, the encounter he describes suggests that as his art was imitative of his life, his life was imitative of his art—an uncanny cycle of reflection that is ripe for the fermenting of tragedy. Ginsberg, the poet-activist-optimist, crowned Prague's King of May in 1965 (172) at the peak of spring's “sappy wisdom” (Rodriguez 493), is the quintessence of the Castro, the predominant “homosexual address” (498) in San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s. Constantly engaged in the creation of metaphors resilient enough to outlive their author, he bears obvious similarities to the barren homosexuals in “Late Victorians” who were quite aware of the fact that their “survival lay in artifice, in plumage, in lampshades,...lacquer, irony” (496)—for both, “no effect is too small or too ephemeral to be snatched away from nature, to be ushered toward the perfection of artificiality” (497).

Artificiality as a means of continuation is an idea Rodriguez struggles with intensely. He details the renovation of the Victorian house he shares with three other single men, saying that “the hallway and lobby are being repainted to resemble an eighteenth-century French foyer,” a “dollhouse...for libertines” (497). He has attempted to extend that theme into his bedroom, as well; a “nineteenth-century mirror” that was selected by a hired decorator hangs above his fireplace (500). It is a century too late for the rest of the house, however, and it hails from, at best, the fringes of the homosexual's

“mystical province” of taste (497). He thus doubly refutes the sentiments of his friend Enrique, who claims: “Queers don’t need decorators. They were born knowing how.” Rodriguez’s failed attempts to create a legacy, traditionally brought to fruition by the birth of children, through the creation of “small effect,” suggest that perhaps the loss of being is inevitable (496). In fact, Rodriguez lives in, and his flesh is part of, a world of decay. His home is full of antiques, their utility replaced by the grandeur of age; his house itself is a creaky Victorian mansion, which, as an erstwhile “architectural metaphor for family,” has degenerated into apartments for single men (495). Moreover, his AIDS-inflicted friends’ bodies are disintegrating even more quickly than his own, and by extension, their community, their “earthly paradise,” is falling gradually into a ruin of depopulation and fear (501).

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The idea that decay is a synonym for tragedy in “Late Victorians” is predicated on my sense of Aristotle’s sense of tragedy, but to be sure, other notions exist. The poet Wallace Stevens presents a modernized version of Aristotle’s classification in his 1950 poem “The Auroras of Autumn,” which, given its chronological proximity to the activism of Allen Ginsberg and the development of Rodriguez’s San Franciscan setting, is especially pertinent:

*What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?
These musicians dubbing at tragedy,
A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:
That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.
Or, the persons act one merely by being here.*

—Stevens 415-416, ll. 118-124

Stevens, playing on the Shakespearean idea that the world is a stage, explains that the full weight of tragedy is realized at the moment when a viewer realizes that dramatic events played out in the arts are, in fact, real. In “Late Victorians,” this moment occurs when Rodriguez attends a meeting of an AIDS support group—as an observer, not a participant—and bears witness to a tangible and diverse group of people who have coped, directly or indirectly, with the virus. The romantic, the effusive, the dramatic tragedy of archaic plays and artworks has been replaced by something far more raw and immediate. “So this is it,” he writes of the “tragic conclusion,” “this, what looks like a Christmas party in an insurance office and not as in Renaissance paintings, and not as we had always thought, not some flower-strewn, some sequined

curtain call of grease-painted heroes gesturing to the stalls” (494). It is as if Rodriguez, a season-ticket holder to the events of his own life, has suddenly been catapulted out of his seat in the audience and onto the stage.

Rodriguez’s world of theater in the real is one governed by two forces, the same forces that have governed theater in the abstract from Aristotle to Kushner: artifice and fate. For many homosexuals, whose preservation lies in the former and whose destruction lies in the latter, the tragic implications of such a relationship are especially present. Many of Stevens’ characters, too, are tragically beholden to artifice and fate—they are hopelessly bound by the wax and wane of the seasons. In “The Auroras of Autumn” they are also participants in one of the grandest natural spectacles, to borrow an Aristotlean element of drama—the world’s fleeting color change from green to bronze to grey. Their tragedy, then, lies also in decay, for their own evanescent lives are captured in the short-lived glory of falling leaves, harvests, and frosts that melt midday. Stevens wonders, in the spirit of Rodriguez and Elizabeth Taylor:

*Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the middle of summer stops
To imagine winter?*

—Stevens 417

He does not, however, stop there. Consciousness of the farcical, cyclical, and ephemeral nature of their lives does not prevent Stevens’ characters from enjoying temporary beauty; these can be, in fact, the “tenderest and truest” moments of life (420). More fundamentally, Stevens himself would hardly write not just a long poem but an entire book in praise of autumn if he did not find great value in momentary flashes of light, warmth, and color. Like Rodriguez’s friend Cesar, stricken with AIDS, for whom San Francisco was a “dreamscape” of limitless freedom and vibrancy, Stevens embraces the tragedy of decay as the most prized aspect of life (494). As part of his eulogy to Cesar, Rodriguez writes: “Cesar loved everything that ripened in time. Freshmen. Bordeaux...Yesterday it was not ready...Tomorrow will be too late...Today is perfect...We will eat it now”(501).

To realize that beauty is a seasonal fruit does not, then, destroy it: in fact, the value of beauty is realized when it is properly consumed. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy is perhaps more complex than it seems: in *Poetics*, he suggests that tragedy is an inherent quality of decisions born of incomplete

knowledge. And what is humanity without ignorance? Today, still, we call the native peoples of America “indians” because Columbus ran into an entire continent by accident as he sailed the ocean blue, or whatever. Now I hear that this account is not even true. Squanto, gentle indigent, savior of the pilgrims, did not really exist. By the time the English arrived in America, 90% of the native population had already found a new home in smallpox hell. Shakespeare is a lie, God is dead, and Rosa Parks worked for the NAACP. Or so I am told. We are taught incompletely; we act on half-lies. Our history is defined by incorrect maps, flat planets, healthy cigarettes, Medea killing her children, Oedipus gouging out his eyes.

The tragedy of all this is that despite our ignorance, we must still choose. Cesar opts to live freely; he dies slowly of a mysterious disease that he most likely caught from a sexual partner. Rodriguez, attempting to avoid tragedy altogether, eschews a life of active optimism, choosing instead to observe and remark, to remain inert. Who is better off: the man who loses no sleep over his poor decisions or the man who makes none? Rodriguez, left alone to mourn, is still alive. Cesar, in his short existence, is vibrant, thirsting for everything, willing to swallow the good with the bad. And as he wastes away slowly, gracefully, he offers his own tragic conclusion a defiant toast: *To the Castro, To imperfection.*

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