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Starting from a somewhat one-sided interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the theory that theatrical performance (and tragedy in particular) should represent only one main action, take place in one location, and offer an event lasting twelve or twenty-four hours (the theory of the three unities, also called Aristotelian unities) became established in the Italian poetic treatises of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During the same period, this interpretation was accepted in cultured and literary-inspired theatrical compositions (the so-called "regular" dramas and tragedies), while popular theater, the minor or new genres, and the *commedia dell'arte*, remained mostly unaffected.

From Italy, the rule of three unities influenced both French theory and theater, partially in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but much more decisively in the second half, becoming one of tragic theater's most characteristic principles. The rule was strictly respected in the later works of Corneille and Racine, and widely theorized in François D'Aubignac's *Pratique du Théâtre* (1657) and other contemporary texts. While it also influenced Spanish and English theoretical treatises, theatrical works in these languages were left mostly untouched in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Widely prevailing in France, Italy, and Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the three unities closely characterized "classic" theaters. They were, however, to be radically targeted by romantic theorizing, especially in Italy and in France, the very countries where they had been most widely accepted, and where the polemic against the three unities constituted a significant part of the dispute between Classicism and Romanticism.

#### *Corroboration from the Aristotelian text.*

Although almost all the advocates of the three unities refer to Aristotle's *Poetics* (4th century BC), it must be said that his approach to ancient tragedy (which is the topic dealt with in the only extant part of *Poetics*) is profoundly different from that of its supposed modern followers. While in the latter, a prescriptive and normative attitude predominates, in Aristotle, a descriptive and analytical attitude, applied to the Attic tragedies of the previous century, prevails, i.e., to those of the great dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and those in the subsequent period. The passage in the *Poetics* that most clearly formulates the unity of time should be approached with this in mind. While the temporal duration of the actions narrated by the epic poem is indeterminate, tragedy «tries to remain within a single day [literally: a revolution of the sun]» (*Poetics*, 1449 b13-14). This temporal determination seems clear, but it should be noted that while Aristotle immediately eases its rigidity, adding «or slightly exceeding it», he does recognize that tragedies had only gradually come to respect this time limit, since they initially behaved like epic poems. Even ancient tragedies known to us, such as the Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or *Eumenides*, are not performed within the indicated time limit). Aristotle goes to observe that considerations relating to the actual duration of the staging lie beyond the *Poetics*: «the limit that refers to the representation and reception – we read in 1451 a6-9 – does not belong to art; if a hundred tragedies were to be staged, they would be staged with an hourglass». The fact remains that the length of the tragic plot must allow it to be memorized as a whole, and above all (and essential to the unfolding of the tragic plot), long enough to allow its development and completion from fortune to misfortune, or the reverse, to occur.

In another passage of the *Poetics* (1459 b23-27) modern interpreters have often seen a theorization of the unity of place: «while in the tragedy several parts cannot be reproduced contemporaneously, but only that which is staged and recited by the actors, the Epic, since it is a narrative, can simultaneously represent several parts». However, apart from the fact that Aristotle once again refers this observation to the "dimensions" of the tragedy, rather than to its duration, in this case reference to place can be inferred indirectly since the representation of actions, which often occurs at different times, also involves (though not

necessarily) their unfolding in different places, as happens precisely in the two Aeschylean tragedies mentioned above, or in the *Ajax* of Sophocles.

Concerning the unity of action, the reasoning is substantially different. Although, in this case too, Aristotle has no primarily prescriptive intent, in his eyes, the fact that a tragedy represents a substantially unified event is a requirement for it to produce its effects and be successful. That the plot must be «one» (*Poetics*, 1451 a16) means that it must be intrinsically unitary: it is not enough, for example, to talk about several events befalling the same person: the action must be «one and integral, and the parts that compose it must be connected in such a way that, by changing or removing a part, the whole is altered and disconnected» (*Poetics*, 1451 a32-34). The worst tragedies are “episodic” ones with multiple distinct actions. The main purpose of these observations of Aristotle is to indicate the difference between a tragedy and an epic poem which has a plural plot and which, thanks to its length, can represent a sequel of events: Euripides did not represent the entire Trojan War, but individual events (in the *Trojan Women* and the *Hecuba*). Aristotle also stresses that unity of action allows for the marking of distance with the way the historian presents the facts. In historiography, «there is exposure, not of an action, but of a period of time and events occurring to one or more people, each of whom is in a casual relationship with the other» (*Poetics*, 1459 a22-25). For Aristotle the concentration of action required by the tragedy represents an element of superiority of the drama over the epic poem, given that «the aim of imitation is accomplished in less time, and what is concentrated is more pleasant than that which is spread out over time» (*Poetics*, 1462 b1-2).

*The three unities in Italian 16<sup>th</sup> century treatises.*

Almost entirely unknown in the West during the Middle Ages, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was rediscovered during the advent of Humanism with Lorenzo Valla’s Latin translation in 1498. However, it took several decades as well as the first translations into modern languages (in particular, Bernardo Segni’s Italian translation in 1549), before it acquired a key role in the literary debate, influencing the rebirth of tragedy in forms strictly inspired by ancient drama. Besides applying to tragedy, Francesco Robortello’s Latin commentary on the *Poetics* in 1548 paved the way for many theoretical texts in which the Aristotelian principles were extended to genres not directly treated in the *Poetics*, the first being that of comedy.

It is precisely in Robortello’s *Explicationes* on comedy, contained in the second part of his commentary, that the unit of time is articulated prescriptively. Comedy has to imitate only a single action with no unexpected events («simplicem atque unam tantum actionem imitari»), and this action must be able to take place in a single round of the sun («unius soli periodum») (in Weinberg 1970, I, p. 522). Expecting endless discussions, he added that we should not understand this expression in the sense of a “natural” or astronomical day, nor twenty-four hours, but in the sense of an “artificial” twelve-hour day. This temporal term was also present in the *Poetics* of Gian Giorgio Trissino, and more precisely, in the parts published only in 1564, fourteen years after his death in 1550. Comparing tragedy and the epic poem, Trissino wrote: «They also differ in their length. Tragedy lasts one day, that is, during the daytime or a little longer; while epic poems have no set time limitations. As was custom in the tragedies and comedies in the past, so it is the case in the contemporary work of learned poets» («et ancora nella lunghezza sono differenti, perciò che la tragedia termina in un giorno, cioè un periodo di sole o poco più, ma gli eroici [cioè i poemi epici] non hanno tempo determinato, sì come ancora da principio nella tragedia e comedie si solea fare et ancora oggi dagli indotti poeti si fa») (in Weinberg 1970, II, pp. 13-14).

The generic term of “day” was taken up by Alessandro Lionardi in the *Dialoghi dell’invenzione poetica* (1554), arguing that tragedy and comedy are similar «because they contain the action in only one day», with the shorter twelve-hour day prevailing. In his *De re comica ex Aristotelis doctrina* (1579) Antonio Riccoboni, author in the second half of the 16th century of a new vernacular translation of *Poetics*, referred to the practical and we might say, physiological, needs of the spectators to limit the duration of a performance to

«alcune ore» (some hours), and that of the *fabula* to twelve: «illa [the comedy] unico sole circuitu comprehendebitur, haec [the epic] tempore indefinito est» (in Weinberg 1970, III, pp. 263-64). In Giason Denores, Aristotelianism merged with Platonic orientations with no consequences for the establishment of the unities: in his (1586) *Discorso intorno a que' principii, cause, et accrescimenti che la comedia, la tragedia et il poema eroico ricevono dalla filosofia morale e civile e da' governatori delle Repubbliche*, the Cyprian scholar referred to the need that literary works arouse wonder, wrote that «Surprise/wonderment “also increases as a result of the short time that [the action] is allotted, since it is necessary that the poet includes the plot twist [the peripety] within the 12 hours» («questa si accresce anco per lo piccolo spazio di tempo che le è prescritto, essendo necessario che il poeta faccia intervenir tal rivolgimento [la peripezia] entro il termine delle 12 ore» in Weinberg 1970, III, p. 390).

If commentators needed to strengthen the Aristotelian requirement for the unity of time, they found a simpler way for the unity of action, for which they could also rely on Horace's precept in the *Art of Poetry* (v. 23) «denique sit quod vis, simplex dumtaxat et unum». In his *Poetics* Trissino reiterated that the action had to be «one, completed, and great» («una compiuta e grande») and, in agreement with Aristotle, explained that «it does not mean the action only contains the doings of one individual» («essa non si intende una per contenere i fatti di un solo»). The man of letters from Vicenza believed in extending the principle to comedy, given that, «the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and the comedies of Aristophanes, Terentius, and Plautus are all composed of a single action» («le tragedie di Sofocle Euripide Eschilo, e le comedie di Aristofane Terenzio Plauto sono di una sola azione» in Weinberg 1970, II, pp. 17-18). Even Giulio Del Bene, in 1574, almost took Aristotle literally: «bad and detested poems are those that come from fairy tales, which have no unity and are filled with episodes» («sono chiamate le poesie cattive e detestate quelle che escono dalle favole, che non hanno unità in loro e che sono ripiene di episodi» in Weinberg 1970, III, p. 196). At the end of the 16th century Giovambattista Strozzi based an entire treatise on the unity of action, basing the need for unity on the requirements of likelihood and necessity: «A fable is not concerned with the focus on a single individual; nor does it consist in understanding what has taken place at a specific time. The fable, in fact, relies on two requirements: that the events of things depend, realistically and necessarily, on each other, and that they all work towards the same purpose» («l'esser una la favola non consiste nel trattar d'un solo; non consiste nel comprender quel che è fatto in un tempo medesimo; ma una è quando ha due condizioni, cioè il dependere le cose l'una dall'altra verosimilmente e necessariamente, e l'esser inditte al medesimo fine» (*Dell'unità della favola*, 1599, in Weinberg 1970, IV, p. 333-44).

In many cases, and in accordance with the Aristotelian text, the unity of action is seen as the distinguishing charactersitc between poetry and history. Thus in the aforementioned Leonardi: «The historian can narrate the virtues and vices of a single person at the same time, but the poet must follow a single course of action» («l'istorico può insieme narrare le virtù e i vizi di una persona sola, ma il poeta dee seguitare una sola azione» in Weinberg 1970, II, p. 273), in *Della vera poetica* (*On true poetry*) by Giovan Pietro Capriano (1574) «the historian can include many different things that tend towards different purposes. This the poet cannot do» («l'istorico può abbracciar più cose e dissimili in un tempo, che tendono a diversi fini e questi [the poet] no» in Weinberg 1970, II, p. 304) and even more widely in the *Discorso contra l'opera di Dante* by A. Carriero: «The second difference between the historian and the poet is that the former can, without incurring error or facing criticism, manage many courses of action. While the latter is better off adhering to a single, great course of action, without straying to far from the established story with episodes or digressions of any kind» («la seconda differenza è fra l'istorico e il poeta, che quelli senza errore e biasimo può trattare molte azioni, e questi una sola azion favolosa convien che sempre abbia proposta dinanzi agli occhi, non vagando molto lungi dal suo principal proponimento con episodi, o vero digressioni che dir si vogliano, che sien fuori della materia proposta» in Weinberg 1970, III, p. 286).

The large number of texts and comments that established the unities of action, place and time in the 16th century does not, however, prevent the precise identification of the works which contributed most to establishing the classic canon of three-unities, which are, essentially, the writings of Julius Caesar Scaliger and Lodovico Castelvetro. The first, the monumental *Poetices libri septem*, published posthumously in Lyon in 1561, and republished in a successful edition in 1617, codifies the unities and transmits them, so to speak, to French culture. Such was the influence of this study that, in the following century, reference would often be made to the three unities with the name of *unités scaligériennes*, even though, as has sometimes been noted, Scaliger attitude towards Aristotle is much less pedantic than that of other exegetes. The second, and probably the most influential of the 16th century treatises on poetics, was Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica di Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*, published in Vienna in 1570. In this study Castelvetro links the unity of action to the unity of time: «in both tragedy and comedy the fable contains only one or two actions, which, because of inter-dependence may be considered one. This is so not because the fable is incapable of containing multiple actions, but because the time limit, at most twelve hours, in which the action is presented, and the special restraints where the action is represented, do not allow multiple events» («nella tragedia e nella comedia la favola contiene un'azione sola, o due, le quali per dipendenza possono essere reputate una, non perché la favola non sia atta a contenere più azioni, ma perché lo spazio del tempo, al più di dodici ore, nel quale si appresenta l'azione, e la strettezza del luogo, dove si rappresenta l'azione, non permettono moltitudine di azioni» Castelvetro 1570, I, p. 240); the unity of time is in fact the first to be established, «this grandeur of the fable, which is appreciated through both sight and sound, must not go beyond the twelve-hour limit» («questa grandezza della favola, che si comprende per la vista e per l'udita insieme, non dee passare il termino di dodici ore» Castelvetro 1570, I, p. 220). Castelvetro was also the first to give the unity of place importance comparable to that of time «the tragedy cannot make us see action beyond the limits of the stage» («la tragedia non può far vedere azione fuori dal luogo del palco» Castelvetro 1570, II, p. 107), insisting on the “restraint” that both time and space place of stage representations. The concentration of the action can only constitute a gain: «what is more marvelous is that a great mutation is made in the opposite direction, in a shorter time and more limited space than in longer times and several, wide places» («cosa più maravigliosa è che si faccia una mutazione grandissima in contrario in uno e poco tempo e in uno e picciolo spazio di luogo, che si faccia in più lunghi tempi e in vari e larghi luoghi» Castelvetro 1570, II, p. 150) Unlike Aristotle, Castelvetro favors the represented work rather than the literary text and also pays careful attention to the spectators' prosaic and physiological needs. Based on a narrow sense of the verisimilitude of what happens on the scene, he ends up closely linking the time of the action represented to the actual time of the show: «In the same way that the place of action is limited by the narrowness of the stage, so there are limitations to the time that the spectators can spend comfortably seated in the theatre; this I can't see being more than “a turn of the sun”, as Aristotle said, that is, twelve hours. This amount of time cannot be surpassed by the theatre goers because of the bodily needs, such as eating, drinking, relieving weight from the stomach and bladder, sleeping, and other necessities» («ma così come il luogo stretto è il palco, così il tempo stretto è quello che i veditori possono a suo agio dimorare sedendo in teatro; il quale io non veggio che possa passare il giro del sole, come dice Aristotele, cioè ore dodici, concio sia cosa che per le necessità del corpo, come è mangiare, bere, diporre i superflui pesi del ventre e della vesica, dormire e per altre necessità, non possa il popolo continuare oltre il predetto termino così fatta dimora in teatro» Castelvetro 1570, I, p. 149).

We should remember that, besides the influence of the theoretical texts, we should also take into account the theatrical works, which, in the Italian 16th century, saw tragedy increasingly conform to the three unities. It is no coincidence that the first “regular” tragedy was the *Sophonisba*, a work of Giangiorgio Trissino written in 1514-1515 and published in 1524. However, it is significant for the development of the three unities, that it was only performed in 1556. Also, Giovan Battista Giraldi, an author relatively more

independent from the Aristotelian precepts in his theoretical works (*Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie* of 1554) was, not surprisingly, very interested in the “new” genres, for example, the fact that he was a theorist of the chivalric poem. His tragedy, *Orbecche*, written in 1541 and staged several times in Ferrara in the following years, refers to the unity of time, place and action.

*The three unities in theory and French theater of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.*

The first “regular” French tragedy, Jean de Mairet’s *Sophonisbe*, published in 1635, was also a Sophonisba and was not blind to the Trissinian model. However, it took several decades for the three unities to be definitively established in transalpine tragic theater. It is possible to note that while the poetic treatises welcomed the precepts set by the Italian theoretical writings fairly quickly, in theatrical writings the adoption of rules intended for the stage was slower, and their application to comedy was particularly resisted. In Spain, for example, Aristotelian manner was already fully present in Lopez Pinciano’s *Philosophia antigua poética* (1596), while the great Lope de Vega made fun of the three unities in his 1609 *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*: «quando hé de escribir una comedia / encierro los preceptos con seis llaves» (Lope de Vega 1609, vv. 40-42). And he explains: «no hay que advertir que pase en el período / de un sol, aunque es consejo de Aristóteles / porque ya le perdimos el respeto / quando mezclamos la sententia trágica / a la humildad de la bajeza cómica» (Lope de Vega 1609, vv. 180-210).

In England, Elizabethan dramaturgy and Shakespeare keep well away from the rules, but Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry* (1595) seems to have preemptively criticized them when he wrote «our tragedies and comedies not without cause cried out against, observing rules neither of honest civility. nor skillful poetry» (Sidney 1595, pp. 65-67).

In Pierre Corneille’s *Cid*, not surprisingly presented in 1637 as a Tragicomedy (and only later indexed as tragedy), the unities of time and place are not respected; nevertheless, it enjoyed significant success, provoking both envy and censorship. Jean de Mairet and Georg de Scudéry, in particular, accused Pierre Corneille of having violated the rules. The result was the *Querelle du Cid* controversy, which also saw Richelieu intervene, and culminated with an opinion from the *Académie française*, drawn up by Jean Chapelain, in which the merit of the work was acknowledged, but its failure to comply with the rules condemned.

Corneille ended up submitting to the rules, albeit with some resistance. He also expressed this in his theoretical writing *Discours des trois unités d’action, de jour et de lieu* of 1660. Taking compliance to the unity of action for granted, Corneille observed that the unit of time («unité de jour») often imposed great sacrifices «pour moi je trouve qu’il ya des sujets si malaisés à renfermer en si peu de temps que non seulement je leur accorderais vingt-quatre heures entières, mais je ne servais même de la license que donne ce philosophie d’excéder un peu, en passant sans scrupule jusqu’à trente» (*Discours des trois unités*) and added that his *Cid* and *Pompée* went against the unit of time much less than some ancient tragedies, such as the *Agamemnon* and the *Supplices*. But he also conceded that the rule was only apparently tyrannical as it was based, not on Aristotle’s authority, but on reason, in other words, on the very nature of dramatic imitation. Corneille was more critical of the unity of place, which, he underlined, is found in neither Aristotle nor in Horace, and which can therefore be admitted only because of the unity of time, and as such interpreted with a certain elasticity since it is very difficult to respect it for all subjects. It was precisely on the need to accept the rules in moderation that Corneille’s short essay closed, admitting that he had respected the unities in only three tragedies, while partially diverging from them in the others. But – he added, asking to be pardoned for his “heresies” – it is easy for theorists to be severe, but if they were to try their hand at theater writing they would soon realize that one must also distance oneself from the rules in order to not give up several beautiful things or unnecessarily create too many constraints.

Among these intransigent theorists, we must include François D’Aubignac in his *Pratique du théâtre* of 1657. Doubtlessly the most systematic theorist of the unity of action, place, and time, D’Aubignac knew that the rules had been disregarded for too long, and that it was

due time to give them priority. Like Corneille he acknowledged his regret for not having always respected them. The central argument to support the unities was their rational character: far from being founded on authority, they result from reason. Even some ancients, like Plautus for example, who did not respect them, should be condemned as we condemn the moderns.

If some regular ancient works failed on stage, while some irregular modern works achieved success, this does not justify an argument against the rules since their success or failure could depend on many other factors. Finally, it is not worth arguing that much beauty is lost by respecting the rules. In fact, by respecting them, both consolidation and efficacy, which are lacking in other cases, can be achieved without deviating from credibility (D'Aubignac 1657, I, chapter 4)

To achieve unity of action, the *Pratique du théâtre*, relying on the Oratian *ut pictura poësis*, used a painting analogy: if a painting wishes to avoid creating confusion it can only do so by representing a single action; similarly, «le poète doit toujours prendre son action la plus simple que lui est possible» (D'Aubignac 1657, II, chapter 3). Regarding the unity of place, D'Aubignac knew that Aristotle did not mention it, believing that this had happened only because, in his day, the rule was considered a truism. We understand that not respecting it would be tantamount to allowing an actor to impersonate two characters on stage; however, this somewhat shaky reasoning concluded by claiming that everyone now tended to accept it (D'Aubignac 1657, II, chapter 6).

As for the unit of time – and D'Aubignac noted, there was no more hotly debated issue in his time – it is necessary to distinguish between the real duration of the representation and the duration of the represented action. The real duration cannot exceed three hours by much: if a drama lasts longer, it risks becoming boring, if it lasts less, disappointing. As for the duration, it cannot exceed the day. However, a day must be understood, as in Aristotle, as an artificial twelve-hour day and not as a natural day of twenty-four. Failing to respect the twelve-hour limit means condemning oneself to produce “monstrous”, formless drama/epic poem hybrids.

Mocked by Molière in more than one of his works, the rules were not as successful in comedy. He confessed, in the preface to the comédie-ballet, *Les fâcheux* (*The Bores*), to not care whether he knew «tous ceux qui s'y sont divertis on ri selon les règles»; in the *Critique à l'école des femmes* it is said that those who know the rules and always talk about them produce comedies that nobody finds appealing (scene 6); he said he wanted to rely on the taste of the many, rather than the judgment of a few nitpickers. These attacks did not prevent the three unities from triumph in the 18<sup>th</sup> century tragic theater, in particular Voltaire after receiving the consecration in Boileau's *Art Poétique* (1674): «Mais nous, que la raison a ses règles engage / Nous voulons qu'avec art l'action se ménage / Qu'en un lieu, en un jour, un seul fait accompli / Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli» (Boileau 1674, canto 3).

#### *The controversy against the three unities in Romanticism.*

Given its opposition to rules, trust in artists' creative powers, its myth of genius and love for history, Romanticism could not fail to see the doctrine of the three unities, which had been handed down in an ossified form by the poetics and tragic writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century theater, as one of the major weaknesses of classicism; indeed, as underlying its mechanical, rigid, and unpoetic character. It, therefore, follows logically that Romanticism focused its most damning criticisms against the theory of unities, and, especially against the most extrinsic ones, place and time. It is also logical that this radical and merciless criticism occurred in Italy and France, the very countries where tragedy had followed the unities most slavishly. This criticism constitutes a good part of the anti-classical polemic of Romanticism, almost overshadowing other criticisms. However, the roots of anti-classical criticism were in Germany, where Friedrich Schlegel theorized the antithetical relationship between Classic and Romantic for the first time, and his brother, August Wilhelm's *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, became the veritable Bible of European

Romanticism. This publication, which was soon translated into Italian and other languages, contained lessons he had held 1812-1813. In these he set the classical theaters of Italy and France against the romantic theaters, with particular attention to English theatre, and managed to definitively reevaluate and consecrate Shakespearian theater as a model of the new theater. Before this, while it did create embarrassment to the classicists, romantic theatre had meandered along without direction in the 18<sup>th</sup> century without being able to be grounded in theory.

A document of particular importance for the controversy in Italy is the *Letter* that Alessandro Manzoni wrote in response to the French scholar Joseph Chauvet's criticisms of his tragedy, *Il conte di Carmagnola* (the theme of unity had already been raised previously by Ermes Visconti in an article of the *Conciliatore*, see Visconti 1819). While Chauvet did appreciate Manzoni's work, he criticized its failure to respect the unities of time (the events of *Il conte di Carmagnola* take place over four years) and place (the tragedy moves from Macclodio's camp in Venice). Although Manzoni replied almost immediately (the letter had already been written in July 1820), for various reasons it appeared only three years later, in a volume which also contained an essay by Goethe.

Chauvet did not defend the two unities of time and place with the usual argument, i.e., the fact that they are necessary for credibility but argued that failure to respect them inevitably harms action, the first and fundamental unit. Manzoni, however, wondered what the unity of action actually consisted of, and once again, the answer could only be found through a comparison between the historian and the poet. While the historian, in dealing with a chain of individual, discreet events, brings them together into a unity, the poet carefully isolates a part of this unity, considering it separately and applies himself «to grasping all the extension, all the depth of the relationship that unites them» (Manzoni 1823, p. 63). Thus, unity of action is independent of the other two unities, and therefore Voltaire (as well as Chauvet) mistakenly grounded the unity of place and time in that of action. Manzoni easily showed that even Greek dramatists sometimes avoided the prescriptions that the moderns insisted on ascribing to them (for example, in *Antigone* not all the characters appear from the beginning); neither was it difficult for him to show the difficulties respect of the unities had caused, even to the grand dramatists of the *Grand Siècle*, Racine and Corneille, nor to compare similar events in Voltaire's *Zaira* to Shakespeare's *Othello* to highlight the superiority of what he called «the historical system», which is to say, romantic theater.

Adhering to unity meant condemning the poet to a series of unmotivated sacrifices: reducing the background to pure storytelling, cramming too many events into a confined space, and, above all, eliminating precisely the most poetic and beautiful historic details. However, Manzoni concluded, by now the fate of this suffocating dogma had been sealed. The growing love for historical studies, the need for poets to draw their materials from history and increasing awareness of the absurdity of the unities of time and place, led to the drawbacks of the classic system becoming ever more evident. As with all mistakes, Manzoni argued, the theory of dramatic unities evolved from when it was held to be universally true, to when it was questioned, to a moment when soon nothing would be left.

The fulfillment of Manzoni's prophecy did not have to wait long, and it did so in the very homeland of classical theater. Within a few years, two of the greatest exponents of French Romanticism, Stendhal and Victor Hugo, were to make the theory of unity the object of their criticisms, perhaps with less sophisticated arguments than those of Manzoni, but certainly more bitterly polemical. Stendhal, in particular, radicalized the contrast between Racine and Shakespeare by reading it as the contrast between previous and contemporary art. The issue of unities also had to be collocated in this context, questioning whether respecting the unities could (still) allow for art suitable for the present time. The answer was obvious: while the two unities were deeply rooted in the French tradition and had become a habit that could not be easily shaken off, it was also true that «ces unités ne sont nullement nécessaires à produire l'émotion profonde et le véritable effet dramatique» (Stendhal 1823-1825, p. 10). Experience has shown that for two centuries England, and at least fifty years in

Germany, dramas that do not respect unity have been staged, yet the public appreciates them without any difficulty.

The name of Shakespeare became the banner in the struggle against unity, also in Victor Hugo's theoretical *preface* to his *Cromwell*, which was finished in 1827. Shakespeare was the "god of theater" on whom the talents of the prominent names of the French theater, both comic and tragic, converged: Corneille, Molière, Beaumarchais. Mixing comedy and tragedy and overcoming the separation of genres is the great principle of modernity, and the ideal of beauty must yield to the new ideal of the "grotesque": war on the unity of time and place (that of action, being a completely different principle, is irrelevant) was declared. Hugo's tone was strong and combative; the pseudo-Aristotelian code was shattered after the first shove, «tant était vermoulue cette solive de la vieille mesure scolastique» (Hugo 1827, p. 81). The old theorists claimed that the two unities were anchored in their correspondence to reality. At the same time, it was precisely this correspondence itself that dealt a death blow to their alleged plausibility: there was nothing more absurd than those vestibules, those antechambers, those peristyles, in which conspirators arrive, first to attack the tyrant, then the tyrant attacking the conspirators, as if they had all agreed to take turns. If it is indeed true that ridicule is the most irrefutable of arguments, it was apparent by now that the old theory of the unities of time and place no longer needed to be refuted. The clearest sign that it had now run its course, and with small likelihood of rebirth, was that it could now be turned into a caricature and mocked.

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