

SHIFTING IDENTIFICATION IN LITERARY FORMS

(Rough Draft)

The stimulus for these thoughts came from reading a novel sent to me by my grandson Joshua. The novel is entitled The Master and Marguerita. The author is Mikhail Bulgakov translated from the Russian by Mirra Ginsberg, Grove Press, New York, 1967.

At best this book can be considered a farce or a romp. There is so much magic and nonsense, that the reader cannot become seriously involved, as far as making any identification with any of the characters with the situations. There are no central protagonists, no serious character development in any of the persons appearing in the tale. The time shifts from present to past and back again to the present. One of the several characters, the Devil of course, is not bound by time, nor, is any special feeling developed for any of the particular individuals in the fictional cast of players. What struck me as reading it, was that I could not empathize, i.e. identify, with any of the characters, and this led me to think about the role of identification as evoked by the writer, or the creative artist on one hand, and the responsiveness of the reader on the other. Accordingly, I felt that there were roughly four categories about this interaction.

1. The farce. The book just mentioned is an example of farce. The author makes no real effort to engage the reader to identify in any one specific character. The events, the motivations, the

significance of feelings are not only unimportant, they are not at all evocative. I would imagine that depending upon the character of the reading, one is either slightly bored, or slightly amused, but not really involved. Involved in this case means a certain measure of identification.

2. Adventure stories. Here, the problem is slightly different. It depends upon whether it is a true adventure, i.e., the record of a particular individual's experience, or a fantasized adventure, i.e., the product of the author's imagination, but not tied to any specific real person. The significant element in this category is the essential lack of conflict, i.e., inner conflict, with which one can identify. Where there is a true adventure the opportunity is richly afforded for the reader to identify with the central character to a certain degree, since he knows what the outcome will be or is. So a transient identification he can have a vicarious experience sharing the vicissitudes of the true adventurer. It is not quite simple in the case of the completely fantasized adventure story. One doesn't really care much how it will turn out since the characters are fictional. To an extent, one can imagine how it would be to be in a place of such a character, but it never has to be taken very seriously. The level of identification is higher than in the farce and lower than in the true adventure.

3. Comedy. In a certain sense comedy is a trick played by the

author on the reader or the observer. There is an invitation to identify with an important character who is seen as deceptive, and unreal from the beginning, or at a crucial moment changes his role from a character inviting identification suddenly dissociated at the crucial moment in the humor from a original character of identification. The point about the nature of identification is this, that it is transient, and comes to an end, either with the end of the performance, or a few moments later after the curtain is down or the book is closed when the central character has been put aside.

4. Tragedy. Not so in the case of tragedy. Tragedy is that it touches deeply upon universal fundamental conflicts that never have been fully mastered. The observer/reader shares in the moral and dilemmas of the central character, identifies with him, and in so doing, becomes deeply effected in a continuing way, even after the performance is over, or the book has been shut. Tragedy implies a theft of identification not possible in other forms of artistic expression. That is why it is more highly esteemed and its portrayals are lastingly influential.