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Political Aesthetics: Carl Schmitt on Hamlet

David Pan

In “The Source of the Tragic,”¹ Carl Schmitt articulates a detailed critique of autonomy aesthetics in which he rearticulates principles of his political theory — the critique of liberalism, normativism and subjectivity: decisionism. His essay can thus be read as a sort of right-wing inversion of the critique of bourgeois aesthetics expressed in Adorno’s “Lyric Poetry and Society.”²

Schmitt belabors both the divisions characteristic of 19th century disciplines which prevented historical consideration of a work of art, and the attendant emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist and the sublimity of art. Unlike lyric poetry or even dramas written more for publication than performance, he contends that Shakespeare’s plays should neither be considered products of a free and isolated subjectivity nor artistic preserves untainted by the banalities of contemporary history. Shakespeare’s plays, written for immediate performance, presume “a public sphere which encompasses and incorporates the author, the director, the actors, and the audience itself.” Here Schmitt outlines a concept of the relation between art and society which breaks down traditional barriers between the two and allows the previously private realm of art to be redefined as existing within a public sphere. His argument, similar to various leftist critiques of autonomy aesthetics, seems to offer both the democratization of art an escape for art from the fetters of an elitist bourgeois subjectivity and a politicization in which art affects and is affected by political events. In Elizabethan England art presumably had not only to maintain a constant political consciousness in order to satisfy both the political powers and the London audience, it had also its own influence in contemporary political debates. As an example, Schmitt indicates how Shakespeare used certain lines in *Hamlet* to support James’ bid for the throne.

Before praising Schmitt for his progressiveness, however, one

1. See the preceding article in this issue.

2. Theodor Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” *Telos* 20 (Summer 1974), pp. 56-71.

should examine more closely the consequences of this particular critique of autonomy aesthetics. Schmitt's understanding of the relation between art and society necessitates a situation in which "Men of action . . . saw themselves on a rostrum before spectators, understood themselves and their activities in terms of the theatricality of their roles. . . . As rudimentary theater it was all the more intensely integral to its current reality, a part of the present in a society which largely perceived its own action as theater — a theater which did not for this reason oppose the situation of the play to the concrete contemporary situation. Society too was seated on the rostrum."

This description of a total dissolution of the boundary between theater and life calls to mind several related discussions. For one, Schmitt draws the same consequences as Adorno with respect to the breakdown of the autonomy of art. But while Adorno views art's opposition to the concrete contemporary situation as its primary, if not last remaining option for criticism, Schmitt denigrates such an opposition as a denial of history and the deterioration of art into mere "play" lacking any seriousness or meaning. He thereby suggests that any autonomy aesthetics is implicated in an escapism that will retard a serious response to the exigencies of real life and *Realpolitik*. While Adorno also recognizes the danger of a loss of reality and meaning inherent in an autonomous conception of art, he never succumbs to an unproblematic affirmation of empirical reality.³ On the contrary, Adorno evaluates the dialectic between art and reality immanently and with vague invocations of a utopian alternative.

In another related discussion, Peter Bürger describes the historical avant-garde's attempt to bring about a dissolution of the boundary between art and society similar to what Schmitt describes as "the intrusion of time into the play."⁴ The goal, however, is different, being based on art's resistance to the "means-ends rationality" of bourgeois society. Art's resistance is to be mobilized and integrated into society in order to break up this destructive rationality. The fact that the attempted integration of art and society succeeded, resulting in the destruction of art's resistance to the culture industry, provides us with an indication: first, of the similarity between Schmitt's aesthetics and that of the historical avant-garde (in Bürger's reconstruction); second, of

3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture, Criticism and Society," *Prisms* (Boston: MIT Press, 1967).

4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the socio-historical consequences of this aesthetics.⁵ Whereas Adorno attempts a critique of life in favor of a utopia as yet only possible in art, and Bürger's historical avant-garde attempts to realize in society this utopia first formulated in art, Schmitt attempts to harness the potential of art, first for the "man of action," then for an existing (heteronomous) social order. His attack on autonomy aesthetics politicizes art in the sense that it becomes functional for the political system and a field of action for the power of the sovereign.

Schmitt's model of the functioning of art in society derives from the France of Louis XIV: "In Shakespeare's Elizabethan England the baroque theatricization of life was still unfounded and elementary — not yet incorporated into the strict framework of the sovereign state and its establishment of public peace, security and order, as was the theater of Corneille and Racine . . ." In other words, the breakdown of the functional barrier between art and politics leads to the incorporation of art into a strict framework of state control. If the politicization of art depends upon its existence within a single public sphere in which art and politics overlap, then the only art possible is that which supports those in control of this public sphere, be it the sovereign state or the culture industry.

The very existence of art within a public sphere is an implicit affirmation of this sphere. All the examples Schmitt provides of the relation between Shakespeare's plays and English politics are cases in which Shakespeare exercised a kind of self-censorship to avoid offending James, or in which he encouraged and legitimized James' sovereign status. The point at which Shakespeare's plays lost their place in the public sphere of the London theater was when his troupe was banned by Elizabeth, owing to its alliance with the Earls of Southampton and Essex and the future King James. The troupe only regained its position after James became king and Shakespeare became again "politically correct." It seems clear that Schmitt is neither criticizing the subservience of art to political power, nor is he suggesting that Elizabethan England or absolutist France represented unique cases. On the contrary, his point is to cite *Hamlet* as a crown witness against an idealistic bourgeois aesthetics. What Schmitt is really intimating is that art is always political because politics is inescapable.

If Schmitt's view of the relation between history and art is one in which history forces its way into art and subjects it to the sovereignty of

5. Russell Berman, "Modern Art and Desublimation," *Telos* 62 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 31-57.

the state, then it is not difficult to understand the connection between Schmitt's aesthetics and his politics. As Habermas observes: "The space Hobbes left free for private religious scruples allows, in Schmitt's view, the entrance of the subjectivity of the bourgeois conscience and of private opinion, the subversive force of which unfolds gradually. This private sphere is turned inside out and extends itself into the bourgeois realm; thus bourgeois society renders itself valid as a rival political power, and ultimately topples Leviathan from his throne, with the authority to legislate through Parliament."⁶ In this same way, Schmitt rejects the establishment of the autonomy of art in the bourgeois private sphere, not because of its elitism but because both the autonomy of art and the bourgeois private sphere provide the haven for ideas to develop independent of institutional control. He attempts to reestablish this control through his description of art "raised to the level of myth." At first glance such a mythification of art bringing back its aura seems to be inconsistent with the disillusion of the autonomy of art. But this is true only if the autonomy of art is confused with its inaccessibility. The dissolution of the boundary between art and politics, the destruction of the *autonomy* of art, can be accompanied by a mythification of art — the destruction of the *accessibility* of art — only if politics also becomes inaccessible with "the idea of the state as myth."⁷ This combined myth of art and the state, which establishes a public sphere totally inaccessible to the public, becomes the basis for the complicity of the culture industry and totalitarian society.

At this point there is still the question of how to conceive a relation between history and art which neither automatically affirms history nor mythologizes art. If Schmitt does not provide an answer, at least his attempted revision of Benjamin's discussion in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* demonstrates how difficult it is to remain faithful to the answer. Schmitt leans heavily on Benjamin's book in constructing his argument. In so doing, however, he not only misinterprets many passages but also ignores Benjamin's methodology (without explicitly challenging it). The only argument he manages to raise against Benjamin is based on his misreading of a particular passage. Nevertheless, this misreading is instructive: "Walter Benjamin believes he recognizes in this passage something Christian in a special sense because Hamlet speaks shortly before his death of Christian providence 'in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed

6. Jürgen Habermas, "Sovereignty and the Führerdemokratie," *Times Literary Supplement* (September 26, 1986), p. 1053.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1054.

existence.' It is here that this age supposedly succeeded 'in conjuring up the human figure who corresponded to this dichotomy between the neo-antique and the medieval light in which the baroque saw the melancholic. But Germany was not the country which was able to do this. The figure is Hamlet.' This is a magnificent passage in Benjamin's book. But then it reads: 'For the *Trauerspiel* Hamlet alone is a spectator by the grace of God; but he cannot find satisfaction in what he sees enacted, only in his own fate.' I understand the opposition between play and fate which is related here, but I must admit that this sentence which directly precedes the reference to Christian providence is otherwise obscure to me."⁸

Schmitt proceeds to dispute Benjamin's characterization of Hamlet as "Christian" and his failure to differentiate the historical situation in England and in Germany. Schmitt's position is based on his reading of European history as a progression from the "barbaric" confessional civil war of the Middle Ages to the "political" sophistication of the nation-state.⁹ What he fails to glean from Benjamin's analysis, however, is the keen consciousness of what was lost in the process of baroque secularization: "Whereas the Middle Ages present the futility of world events and the transcendence of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition."¹⁰ This hopelessness, arising from the idea that salvation can only exist in heaven, manifests itself as "an icy disillusion" in which the concept of ethical political action with the goal of an earthly salvation is not even a possibility. Instead, "spirit — such was the thesis of the age — shows itself in power. . . . Such a conception of perfect conduct on the part of the man of the world awakens a mood of mourning in the creature stripped of all naive impulses."¹¹ Seeing the rule of power as cause for mourning, and faulting the German *Trauerspiel* for never reaching beyond this pragmatic conception of history, Benjamin singles out *Hamlet* as the only work to become conscious of the sadness of this pragmatic acceptance of the historically given, and to yearn for a Christian salvation enacted not in a heavenly but in an earthly fate. Such is the meaning of that passage Schmitt finds so obscure.

Schmitt's lack of understanding is not surprising, since he

8. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (Düsseldorf and Cologne: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1956), p. 63; Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Translated by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 157-158.

9. Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

10. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

wholeheartedly accepts the mournful “thesis of the age” and praises Shakespeare for submitting both to the power of a kind of state censorship and to the historically given: “The son of a king and the murder of a father are for Shakespeare and his public present and inescapable realities from which one shrinks out of timidity, out of moral and political considerations, out of a sense of tact and natural respect. This accounts for the two historical intrusions into the otherwise closed circle of the play — the two doors through which the tragic element of an actual event enters into the world of the play and transforms the *Trauerspiel* into a tragedy, historical reality into myth.” Schmitt’s insistence upon the inescapability of historical facts not only prevents him from conceiving history as anything other than a power struggle but also from understanding Benjamin’s project of redeeming facts in the world of ideas. For Benjamin, “it does not follow . . . that every primitive ‘fact’ should straightaway be considered a constitutive determinant. Indeed, this is where the task of the investigator begins, for he cannot regard such a fact as certain until its innermost structure appears to be so essential as to reveal it as an origin.”¹² It could be argued that Schmitt carefully selects only the “essential” facts, except that the way he uses these facts is not to guarantee the authenticity of an idea but rather to demonstrate how they intrude into the totality of the play. For Benjamin, such an intrusion would not be the point at which the play succeeds as tragedy, as it is for Schmitt, but at which it fails as an idea. Instead of affirming the play’s subservience to history, Benjamin recognizes that the dramatic genre demands closed form “in order to achieve that totality which is denied to all external temporal progression.”¹³ Schmitt rejects closed form as mere “play” because in seeking the “source” of the tragic he sees only the opposition between historical fact and free invention. He thus fails to recognize Benjamin’s option — either a redemption of facts in the idea or a redemption of history as a realization of utopian possibilities.

In contrast to Schmitt’s notion of “source” (*Quelle*), Benjamin’s notion of “origin” (*Ursprung*) “is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand, it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.”¹⁴ This dual insight is at once the reason for Benjamin’s insistence on closed form and

12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

tendentiousness, which allows the affirmation that “invention is incompatible with tragedy.”¹⁵ Schmitt not only fails to understand Benjamin’s commitment to closed form but also his conception of the relation between myth and tragedy. Whereas Schmitt explains tragedy as the reestablishment of myth through ambiguity, Benjamin recognizes in Attic tragedy the “tendentious re-shaping of the tradition”¹⁶ and thus the end of myth and ambiguity: “In all the paradoxes of tragedy . . . ambiguity, the stigma of the daimons, is in decline.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is the waning power of myth which lends significance to the tendentious purpose: “For the re-shaping of the legend is not motivated by the search for tragic situations, but it is undertaken with a tendentious purpose which would lose all of its significance if the tendency were not expressed in terms of the legend, the primordial history of the nation.”¹⁸ Although Benjamin considers Attic tragedy an historical form, the standards of which cannot be applied to other genres, he uses this idea of a “tendentious re-shaping of the tradition” — as a model for a productive relation between contemporary critics and their inherited traditions. He thus maintains a consistency which, considered from a leftist perspective, Schmitt loses by arguing both for an (albeit unsophisticated) accessibility of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to its contemporary audience and for its inaccessibility to later generations owing to its mythification. In terms of Schmitt’s goals, however, his thinking is very consistent. The submission to the historically given which he advocates is guaranteed by the mythification of art and politics. But this is a clever distortion of Benjamin’s commitment to the historically possible, whose relevance and significance is guaranteed by its tie to a mythic tradition not received as immutable and authoritative but as the tendentious re-shaping of myth.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 109

18. *Ibid.*, p. 106.