On Scopey in “The Pope’s Wedding”

16 Nov 12

Dear ------

Thanks for your letter. I’ll try to answer your questions about The Pope’s Wedding

Why did I write the play? I was writing my first play. At least, TPW was my first play that was worth staging. Like Scopey (in the play) I was starting out to find a meaning in life. I intended to find it by writing plays. Scopey and my purpose were one. He looks for someone to explain life to him, which would mean giving him the meaning or meaninglessness of life. No one among his family and friends can do that for him. But an eccentric old hermit lives on the edge of his village. Scopey thinks – or at first suspects or wonders -- that he has some hermetic knowledge that’s made him a hermit, a recluse who knows more about society than society knows about him. If Scopey asks him for his secrets he will not even listen, and he himself is still unsure if and why he needs to know. So he infiltrates into the hermit’s life to observe him closely and gain his confidence. In doing this he damages his own social life and begins to pay the cost of asking questions his society does not allow and could not answer meaningfully -- because society does not understand itself. The more he probes for an answer the more he is endangered. He crosses boundaries of social convention and of self-integration. His need for meaning consumes him. He finds that far from having arcane knowledge the hermit knows even less than the “normal” people outside. He kills the hermit probably with the rage in which he stamps on the cigarette — because the theft of his cigarette had been an act of betrayal by someone with whom he might have shared his life. Society destroys those who question it because it depends on conformity. It tolerates questioning only in a limited way, which is a sort of cultural game that in the end increases society’s intolerance.

Years before I wrote the play I read an account of the hermit in a magazine in a dentist’s waiting-room. If you think about that you can understand how dramatic imagination works. I was going to have a painful operation on my mouth, a “drilling.” The mouth opens to ask questions and its sometimes less painful not to ask them and keep your mouth shut – but not in the long run. Scopey – in reverse – drills/grills the hermit. If you don’t ask the questions your ignorance will diminish you. When I read the article I didn’t think of being a playwright. But the article waited in my mind for when I would use it. Writing my plays was my way of opening my mouth and asking the questions.

Your letter interests me for a particular reason. Scopey sets the basic text for all the plays – more than fifty – that I’ve since written. At the end he wears one of the hermit’s coats. A French friend recently pointed out to me that in my most recent finished play (The Edge) this is reversed: the old man puts on the young man’s clothes. And “Innocence,” the last of the Paris Pentad (my most important cycle of plays) ends with a stage empty except for a chair on which a coat, set alight the stage by a woman, slowly burns to ashes and debris. The journey of these plays uses these images to seal what they have said intellectually and enacted emotionally. If my plays have any value your need to understand Scopey or you will understand none of them.

Recently I read the draft of a book about my plays. The book said that Scopey wanted to turn into the old hermit and take his place. That’s the last thing Scopey wanted. I told the author this. A few days ago I was at a university seminar at which the same author read a paper in which he repeated the same thing: Scopey wanted to turn into the hermit and take his place. He said this publicly to a lecture room full of academics.

The dentist’s room has changed to a university lecture room. There are no young questioners
present. But there will be when the teacher is teaching. So imagine they are with him now in the lecture room. The young men and young women question the teacher about the meaning of the play. He answers their questions. And tells them Scopey wants to become the hermit. And that is a crystal-clear dramatic irony: the teacher turns into the hermit, an empty mystagogue who misleads the students just as the hermit misled Scopey. The hermit knew no better. The teacher has no such excuse. I had told him that what he is saying is untrue. Of course here it isn't a matter of solitude and murder. It is a matter of corruption.

Scopey does not want to take the hermit’s place. It is the last thing he wants. If he had wanted that I would to write a different play. IT would have been a social responsibility. The play would have been about a sick young man and not, as it is, about a sick society. Scopey hoped to take understanding back to his life in the community. When the teacher misleads students about Scopey he betrays not only the play – he betrays the meaning and possibilities of the young students’ futures. He might originally have misinterpreted the play because of his inability to read it. But his mis-reading brushes aside the whole social world of conflict, confusion, suffering and seeking that is the reality of drama. In its place he puts a shallow diagnosis that can be presented to arty cliques as a profound insight. That is academic irresponsibility. And it is obdurate.

When I returned home from this seminar I found your letter. The core of the play was present again. A young man asking an older man questions. I thought I should answer you in a way to show how drama is not just an academic or even only a stage subject but is the core reality of the street – and that teaching it is not just about drama but is an act of drama itself, and so is involved in the intellectual and moral responsibility that is generated in the core of drama. This is increasingly forgotten. Its one reason why so much theatre is either sententious or frivolous and in both cases destructive.

And I have another reason for writing this letter. Its the responsibility I owe to Scopey – or to the person I was when I wrote his play. As you grow older you must stay true to what you know when you are young. Respect your early honesty and determination. You will learn other things, to know what waits behind corners, to be tolerant and when to compromise and when not to compromise because it will damage those you compromise with. Society will seek to corrupt you. But you must never forget who you are – you already know that and you must always keep faith with your young self. Even in Scopey’s case unto death. The question is immortal because it is always young.

I hope your studies go well. Best wishes,