

## A SOCIAL HERMENEUTIC OF JOPLIN'S "TREEMONISHA"

Anthony J Blasi, Mystic, Connecticut

## HERMENEUTIC STRATEGEMS

. Hermeneutics approaches social phenomena in terms of their meaningfulness. In modern scholarship it began with concern about understanding scripture, laws, and non-western civilizations. It extends to the study of modern behavioral sciences, with debates between hermeneutic scholars and those who would model the human sciences after physics (Blasi et al 1978; Giddens 1974; Radnitzky 1968; Truzzi 1974).

. Hermeneutics offers three alternative strategems. 1) One may seek to grasp textual meanings accurately, although mediated through the investigator's biography. Instead of entering the psychological state of the social actor, one grasps the actor's consensually interpretable symbols and their meaning. 2) One may interpret meanings in extrinsic contexts, systems, and concerns, once the textual meaning is grasped. 3) One may use the textual meanings as precedents which bear on contemplated actions. Such are the materials of legal and ethical studies (Gadamer 1975). The text to be studied need not be ideational. Poetry, crowd emotions, visual art and music are also appropriate.

. Hermeneutics is social when the sociologist's object of inquiry enters the problematic (Outhwaite 1976). Max Weber's social action, understood as an ideal type, comprises both the text to be investigated and the extrinsic context with which the analysis is made. Weber was concerned with the elective affinities between different orders of texts, such as religious and economic texts. However, a non-sociological text may be interpreted with an extrinsic sociological context. Such an approach applies in the sociology of knowledge, literature, and music.

FRAMEWORK By framework is intended a hermeneutic equivalent to the hypotheses which regularly

appear in positivist reports. From the notion of interpreting an extra-sociological text by means of a sociological context which is extrinsic to that text, we proceed to a more particular approach. What we call a framework is a subset, a derivation from the general problematic (Zetterberg 1965).

## SYMBOLISM &amp; FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

. A symbolic unity such as an opera does not occur in a social vacuum. It is an index to the social world which contributed to its creation in the productive life of its creator. It is a form of social knowledge. But symbolism, unlike concrete knowledge, only partially expresses its antecedent society. As a form of knowledge, it is limited. It reveals while veiling, and veils while revealing. It both promotes and inhibits practical participation in the symbolized content (Gurvitch 1972 40). Opera is an extremely symbolic form of expression because it is removed by a number of tacit phenomenological epoches from naturalist discourse (Blasi 1977).

. An adequate concrete analysis tries to interpret a phenomenon by discovering the total societal context, and seeks to determine why the social actor accepts as right a sensation which is inherently partial (Lukacs 1971 50). A symbolic creation which resonates with an actor's life experiences may be a false consciousness because it does not directly inform the actor of the essence of the social circumstance. But it is an improvement over a situation in which there is no consciousness at all. One could hope for a new cultural order where the subaltern classes see and understand the historical blocs which mask their true interests. Progress to such a mass insight must begin with the subaltern classes discovering their own personalities through such symbolic creations (Portelli 1972 142).

## SYMBOLISM: INFRASTRUCTURE

. Mannheim made it explicit that the interpretation of knowledge proceeds from a different vantage point from that of the knowledge being interpreted: "If I take .. a theoretical statement as an idea that is "from within", I am making the same assumptions that are prescribed in it; if I take it as an ideology .. "from without," I am suspending .. its assumptions." Mannheim 1971 119).

. An intelligent interpretation which goes beyond the simple relation between certain symbols, and social classes must take the meaning of the knowledge into account but the truth or falsity of the knowledge as determinable on its own terms must be suspended. After the appropriate epoche, the focus must shift to the knowledge pointing to realities beyond its direct referent, beyond itself. Interpreting doctrines of social Darwinism, thus requires going beyond the issue of whether the survivors are fit to their perpetuation of a knowledge system that enables them to believe they are fit.

. A social hermeneutic interpretation of a work of art goes beyond the standards of grammar of the art itself to the social realities which it reveals and veils. Goldmann approached exceptional works of art as embodiments of world views, and then sought their social infrastructure (Goldmann 1964; 1969). He believed that the infrastructures have been social classes since antiquity, but did not propose that this would always be the case.

. It remains to be determined how the social researcher is to decide what works of art express symbolically or indirectly. Goldmann proposed that works of art obtain as virtual collective consciousness in that what they express is not peculiar to the author, but is shared by others in the social group. (Goldmann 1969 129). One must see the artistic creator for what s/he is sociologically to develop an adequate interpretation of the work. The social location

of the creative artist is a key datum which varies in obviousness.

## THE POTENTIAL OF SYMBOLISM

. Gramsci noted that the southern Italian intellectual white collar worker provided a cultural linkage which tied the lower classes to the aristocracy. The serious culture, to the extent that the peasantry participated, made the peasant a subordinate actor in another class's cultural expression which forestalled any independent cultural expression by the peasant class. The peasant hoped to be included among the few, rather than to give body to experiences of the many. This constituted the monstrous agrarian bloc which enabled the southern Italian middle class to act as an agent of both northern capital and southern landownership (Gramsci 1957 45). If the southern peasant were provided with means to evolve an independent symbolic expression, the agrarian bloc would be undermined. This could lead to a class discovering its own personality and its own potential for action.

## SCOTT JOPLIN

. Joplin was born in the small town of Texarkana in 1868 to a working class family. His father, a railroad laborer, was an ex-slave from North Carolina, and his mother was a black American from Kentucky. The entire family earned extra money as musicians. Scott became fascinated with the piano, and showed talent with it. He so impressed a local German immigrant music teacher that he gave Scott free lessons in piano and harmony. He also roused Joplin's interest by playing the works of great composers. Joplin never forgot his benefactor, and sent gifts of money when the teacher became aged and ill (Gamond 1975 29).

. At 14, Joplin left home to be a wandering honky-tonk pianist. His mother had died, and his father wanted him to do regular work instead of being a black entertainer. He traveled through the Mississippi basin living on a meager

income in marginal establishments and finally gained a reputation in St. Louis and Sedalia, Missouri. There, he studied harmony and composition at the Smith School of Music, of the Smith College for black people.

. Joplin began to compose syncopated music with jagged melodies, as a serious undertaking, but could not get backing of music publishers. He did publish unremarkable pseudo-white music. Eventually, publisher Stark discovered him playing the now-famous Maple Leaf Rag in the Sedalia Maple Leaf Club. It created a sensation, and Stark published many other rag pieces. But he resisted publishing Joplin's ragtime ballet, and refused even to consider Joplin's ragtime opera, A Guest of Honor, which has since been lost.

. Joplin went to Chicago and later to New York, where he collaborated with less-known black composers. At the same time, he retained his ambition as a composer of serious music, and he disliked the term ragtime. But he never gained acceptance among the black musicians of New York. They associated him with the low class rag music, and avoided such provincial musical styles (Gamond 1975 83).

. After 1909 Joplin lived comfortably in New York. His second wife ran the building they owned as a theatrical boarding house, and he used it to compose many new ragtime pieces. But he devoted increasing time and money to his new opera, Treemonisha. He abandoned other concerns, but failed to interest anyone else in the opera, succeeding only in getting a laudatory review on the vocal score. Most reaction was simply incredulous: "Since syncopated music, better known as ragtime, has been in vogue, many Negro writers have gained considerable fame as composers of that style of music. From the white man's standpoint .. after writing ragtime, the Negro does not figure." (New York Age March 5 1908)

. Near the end of his resources,

Joplin rented a hall in Harlem and led a cast of vocalists through a concert audition, playing the piano himself. Without an orchestra, it was thin and unconvincing. He was crushed, and the failure of the work may have hastened his death. His opera failed because of prejudice of white people and lack of nerve of black people. His project was unthinkable in his time. The limited gains of black Americans were being lost. Black achievements had not yet developed the plausibility they deserved. A black person with too much talent and ambition would likely come to grief.

#### TREEMONISHA: OPERA AS ALLEGORY

. The setting of Treemonisha is rural Arkansas, September 1884, near Joplin's childhood home, at the time of his mother's death. The story is simple. Local black people decline to buy charms from a conjuror after the literate 18-year-old girl, Treemonisha discourages them. As a group begins to husk corn after a square dance, Treemonisha begins to collect leaves from an old tree for a wreath. Monisha, her assumed mother, tells her not to disturb the tree, for she first found Treemonisha there under that tree as an infant 18 years before. She and her husband raised Treemonisha as their own, and got a white lady to teach her to read and write. Treemonisha and a friend leave, while a parson preaches. The friend returns to report that the conjurors had kidnapped Treemonisha. The conjurors plot to push their captive into a wasp's nest, but Remus, who had been educated by Treemonisha, and despised superstition, shows up dressed as a scarecrow. The conjurors flee, thinking he is the Devil. On the way home the couple pass a group working in a field, and the group sings work songs. At home, Treemonisha dissuades the people from punishing the conjurors, who had been captured by Treemonisha's friends. The conjurors promise to abandon their Voodoo superstition,

while the people choose Treemonisha as their leader.

. Monisha's own story, The Sacred Tree is a lilting ballad. The work crew, which they meet on the way home, sings a barber-shop quartet. There is some ragtime, most notably, the concluding dance, A Real Slow Drag, which is powerful and stately. There are also choral/orchestral ensembles and a rolling basso aria. Treemonisha and Remus use standard English while the other characters use black dialect. The musical styles and language patterns bring the rural black ways and the black mastery of the white ways onto the same stage. And the ethnically black music and the small-town America music are as dignified as the ethnically white music of the metropolis. Musically, this work is not ragtime, but opera.

. Black hopes are dramatized. Education will dispel the ignorance which holds the black Americans down. Black forgiving black, and leaving the way open for the black's improvement is the thematic climax of the plot. There is an eloquent silence with respect to the role of the white.

. Moving to the indirect reflection of the larger society, one cannot miss Joplin's nostalgia for the social periphery. As a rural-to-urban migrant, Joplin brought forth picturesque scenes from his childhood. The small town flavor of much of the music strengthens this reminiscence, as it does in other operas like Cavaleria Rusticana and L'Elisir d'Amore. There is a reflection of the caste mentality of the black community. The black conjurers oppose the advancement represented by Treemonisha's education. This operates through the tacit assumptions shared by composer and audience.

. The allegory represents a third level of communication. The world was not yet ready for the talented tenth which made up the black population. And it was not ready for Joplin. The black and white communities' resistance to his entry into serious music is shown

in the libretto under the form of kidnapping. Like the captive heroine, Joplin was held captive in the music of his years as a wandering honky-tonk performer. His psychological adjustment to the dashing of his artistic hopes took the form of forgiveness, which is the reverse side of Joplin's self-destruction. One cannot miss the genuineness of the appeals for punishment in the opera's last act, but the appeals in the end give way to forgiveness. This mentality seems to presage the oft-heard appeals of black leaders after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. that King himself would not have wanted any retaliatory violence.

**CONCLUSION** The black musicians of New York who rejected Joplin's serious treatment of black and inner-American music were personally ambitious, but they did not sense the plausibility of the revolutionary ambition implicit in Treemonisha. A revolution which accorded high status to an expression of black and rural culture was still beyond the cognitive grasp of turn-of-the-Century black Americans. To desire a better life was only the first step out of a caste mentality. DuBois had already made the class analyses which provided the black leaders with the basis of a collective strategy, and from 1910 his influence was evident. But the abstraction of legal equality and the individualism of educational and economic improvement did not give full status to the collective black identity. Such could only be done through symbolic realms in which the medium is the major part of the message. The identifiably black medium must itself achieve status before its message can be taken at face value. Treemonisha was ahead of its time symbolically rather than intellectually.

. In neo-Marxist thought, social classes are thought to discover their personality in the symbolic realm, and then to articulate their interests in a more prosaic manner (Maduro 1976 176). But

the failure of Treemonisha after the black thinkers' analyses had become adequate, suggests a different sequence. What was needed now was a less intellectual message for the unphilosophic and the non-politically motivated. The black intellectuals had not been looking to the fine arts as a medium for their ideas. Perhaps Joplin was 40 years ahead of his time. By the 1950's black and rural music had been assimilated to such an extent that it was no longer ethnically black nor geographically rural. The multi-level message of cultural equality assumed a theological/hortatory form in which white legitimacy could be subjected to a critique on equal terms.

. There is irony in this. The stubborn critique which consigns the symbolic universe of discourse of opera and religion to insignificance with such loaded terms as false-consciousness, and mystification itself depends on such symbolic realms for its social efficacy. The critique itself becomes a material force only after it has gripped the masses through symbolism (Marx 1967 257).

. Finally, the example of Joplin's multi-level communication suggests the role of the artist in class dynamics. Every class holds a common world view, including that which it finds tempting, but which it is not ready to accept. Only a few members of the social collectivity express in their own consciousness the full world vision. The artist is the person who articulates the multi-level aspects of the collective world view through the multiple levels inherent in artistic expression.

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