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The End of Boris

Contribution to an Aesthetics of Disorientation

Closure and the Grotesque

In this article I will consider the effects of two alternative endings of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godounov*, and the possible interactions of these endings with a solemn and a grotesque quality, respectively.¹

An early version (1869) ends with the scene of Boris' death. Mussorgsky later revised this version (1874) adding, among other things, a final scene in the Kromy Forest, shifting the focus away from Boris and giving the opera a powerful new shape. In this scene we witness a mob of vagabonds who get hold of one of Boris' boyars, deride him and threaten to tear him into pieces. They perform such mock-rituals as a mock-coronation, and a mock-wedding with the oldest woman in the mob. After Mussorgsky's death, Rimsky-Korsakov re-orchestrated and revised *Boris Godounov* "in a heroic endeavour to make the opera more audience-friendly". Among other changes, Rimsky-Korsakov reversed the order of the last two scenes, ending the opera, again, with Boris' death. For nearly a century, only Rimsky-Korsakov's version was performed, Mussorgsky's version was even lost, and only recently rediscovered by David Lloyd-Jones.

Why is one ending more "audience-friendly" than the other? And why do some of our contemporaries (musicians and audiences), and apparently Mussorgsky himself prefer precisely the ending that is supposed to be less "audience-friendly"? The last two scenes, the death scene and the Kromy Forest scene, display opposite stylistic modes. The former is in the high-mimetic, the latter in the low-mimetic mode. The former is characterized by majesty, "noble" feelings and acquiescence in death. The latter is comic and extremely frightening at the same time—in one word, grotesque. The grotesque is the co-presence of the laughable and what is incompatible with it: in this case, terror as to the imminent fate of the boyar, and disgust as to wedding a woman over one hundred years old. The second part of the scene is dominated by a pack of children who deride and abuse a "holy" simpleton.² At the end of the scene, the simpleton remains alone on stage, wailing for the desolate Russian people.

¹ The sound files for this article are available online at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/BorisNetfolder/Boris.html>

² In Pushkin's tragedy and in Mussorgsky's 1869 version the urchins' episode occurs in an earlier scene, during Boris' life. This enables the Simpleton to utter the following spine-chilling lines:

Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's notions of closure and anti-closure are relevant here.

Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design (Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 36).

Herrnstein-Smith is mainly concerned with devices of "structural closure". In the present instance, however, one powerful ingredient in this closural effect is what she calls "thematic closure", or "closural allusion". When a tragedy (or opera) ends with death, "it creates in the [audience] the expectation of nothing", "it announces and justifies the absence of further development"; it ends the great mental (and interpersonal) conflicts, generating a sense of "stability, resolution, or equilibrium". It inspires the audience not only with pity and awe, but also with certitude. Likewise, going away typically *ends* a scene, even may metaphorically allude to death ("passing away"). Again "it announces and justifies the absence of further development".

When the death scene is *followed* by the Kromy Forest scene, the effect is very different. The majestic effect of Boris' death, and the sense of equilibrium generated ("calm of mind, all passions spent", in Milton's phrase), are sabotaged by the grotesque mob of vagabonds and pack of unbridled children. The audience is shaken out from the "calm of mind" already achieved. Toward the end of this scene, the victorious pretender makes a short appearance and makes a royal statement, and then marches out of the stage, followed by the mob. This could, perhaps, serve as a second closure, making up for the violation of the previous closure. But Mussorgsky sabotages this too. The simpleton alone remains on stage, ending the opera with a monotonous, wailing chant, which doesn't *end* the opera—it *dies away*. In this final episode the music imitates a repeated plaintive, sobbing sound, with gradually decreasing tempo, loudness, as well as harmonic and melodic complexity.

The boys took away my kopeck,
Order them to be murdered
Like you murdered the little Tsarevich.

In the 1874 version Mussorgsky transfers the episode to the Kromy Forest scene, bringing the grotesque elements together, so as to enhance their effect. Since this takes place after Boris' death, these lines are, perforce, omitted. Mussorgsky also needs the Simpleton in this scene for the final wailing that generates an anti-closure. In Claudio Abado's recording this episode occurs in the earlier scene, reintroducing the Simpleton in the last scene for the final wailing only.

It does not come to a conclusive end—it rather “sobs itself out of existence”, so to speak. Boris’ death scene, by contrast, ends on a longish, stable, serene, chord.³

Let us have a closer look at the score.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera *Boris Godunov*. It features three systems of music. The top system is a vocal line with lyrics in Russian, French, and German. The middle system is a piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *pp*. The bottom system continues the piano accompaniment and ends with a *Fine.* marking. The score includes the following lyrics:

людь, го - лод - ный людь!
 frant toi qui vas mou - rir!
 Volk, du - hun - gernd Volk!

Занавѣсь медленно опускается.
 Rideau descend lentement.
 Vorhang fällt langsam.

W. 8118 B.
 (848)

Figure 1 The last thirteen bars of the opera *Boris Godunov*, beginning with the last two bars of the Simpleton’s lament

Figure 1 shows the last thirteen bars of the opera, beginning with the last two bars of the Simpleton’s lament, followed by the instrumental ending. Though the whole lament is in A minor, most of it is highly chromatic (that is, contains notes not belonging to a major or minor key; proceeds in half steps). Such music is usually perceived, on the one hand, as exceptionally emotional, and, on the other, is likely to generate an exceptionally weak closure, if at all. The little that is left from the A minor scale is exploited to generate an unstable, “dying away” quality. The Simpleton’s last sung note is a G sharp, which is the “leading tone” of the A key. A “leading tone” lies a semitone (half tone) below the tonic (the keynote) and “leads” towards it. Whereas the tonic is the most stable note of a melody to end with, the “leading tone” is the least stable one, requires continuation. In the present instance, harmonically, it is part of a so-called “augmented” chord, which, too, is exceptionally unstable (frequently associated with a frightening, mysterious, or grotesque feeling). This chord is preceded by a long series of modulations, that is, gradual changing from one key to another, (of which Figure 1 shows only the last two bars).⁴ In this series, the melody descends chromatically, each phrase ending with a

³ Listen online to the Simpleton’s wailing and Boris’ last speech. The discussion of the Simpleton’s lament was written with Netta Ladar.

⁴ Listen online to the sequence of modulations.

major chord in a different key: chromaticism is here the basis of modulation. Modulation consists of three stages: the source key, transition, and the new key; here a short period is required to establish the new key in the listener's perception. Now, in Mussorgsky's series of modulations only the first one is long enough to accomplish the establishing stage; in the rest, each new chord occurs before the preceding one could be established. Thus, if chromaticism and modulation usually undermine stability, in this case the sabotage is exceptionally strong.

When the Simpleton is finished, the orchestra resumes in the lower register the "sobbing" motive. After one bar of unaccompanied "sobbing", the theme of the instrumental prelude to the Simpleton's lament is repeated in the higher register (forming an enclosing frame, so as to prevent the fluid structure from falling apart), along with the obstinate "sobbing" notes ("ostinato").⁵ From the second bar of this instrumental section on, a three-quarter-long A-note accompanies this ostinato during three bars, further repeated an octave lower in the next four bars. This is an "organ point" (a low, sustained tone that remains steady in the bass of a composition while other voices move about above it). In the fifth bar this A is foreshortened, only one-eighth-note long. The A, as we have said, is the tonic, and lends some stability to this fluid structure. Now the successions of three bars and five bars, unlike, e.g., four bars, are asymmetric and thus less stable. What is more, after establishing a succession of three-quarter-long notes, the last item is only one-eighth-note long, arousing a feeling of deficiency and incompleteness. From here on we hear only the unaccompanied, obstinate "sobbing" sounds. In this way, an intense feeling of "dying away" is generated, further enhanced by the slowing down of the notes and the gradual toning down of the music. After the disappearance of the sustained A, which took care of the A minor scale, tonality becomes even vaguer, less perceptible, as the opera ends on a note that is not the tonic (the keynote).⁶

The series of "obstinate sobbing sounds" consists of endlessly-repeatable alternating F–E, F–E eighth notes. To generate a sense of ending, composers went to give, verbally, a general *Ritardando* directive to performers, that is, to gradually slow down the tempo. In the present instance, Mussorgsky actually *wrote out* the delay, so as to have control over its disruption as well. In the last-but-one bar we have a pair of quarter notes (that is, twice as long as the preceding pairs), followed by a half-note F, again doubling the duration. Having lost the ground of the tonic, we are left with this "trail" of the sobbing motive, giving the impression of an incomplete and open ending. According to Leonard B. Meyer (1956: 136), a prolonged tone may indicate at the end of a passage "lack of forward motion"—a sense of completeness. The sustained F could be perceived as the closing note of the work, but this too turns out to be deceptive: this half note is followed by an eighth-note E, sabotaging again this minute *pseudo* closure. This eighth-note E is expected and unexpected at the same time: on the one hand it sabotages the *pseudo* closure

⁵ Listen online to the "sobbing" motive

⁶ Listen online to the obstinate "sobbing" sounds accompanied by the sustained A, followed by the unaccompanied "sobbing" sounds.

achieved by the prolonged F; on the other, it returns to the tonality of the established key (but, being a fifth above the tonic, it still demands its resolution).

Such an ending arouses a “sense of combined continuity and stability” (Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 245)—closure and anti-closure at the same time. Such anti-closure is felt to be very modern. Indeed, Herrnstein-Smith points out that anti-closure is prevalent in much modern poetry and music. But she also elaborates on a point which suggests that the implications of such an ending reach far beyond the sense of modernism and the perceptual frustration generating it. This point may throw new light on the whole opera.

In terms of Wilson Knight’s conception of “Imaginative Interpretation”, the successive scenes of majestic death and grotesque mob in *Boris Godunov* constitute, “in the dramatic and visual consciousness”, a simple contrast of order and disorder, of stability and chaos, closure and anti-closure. Just as in *Julius Caesar* social anarchy after Caesar’s death is vividly visualized through the mob tearing to pieces Cinna the poet (the archetypal grotesque act), the unruly mob in *Boris* most vividly presents to the imagination the social chaos after the Tsar’s death. By the same token, it violates “the feeling of finality, completion, and composure” achieved by the solemn death scene. Closure is violated, then, on two levels. The Kromy scene violates the closure achieved through Boris’ death; and the Simpleton’s monotonous, wailing chant dies away rather than closes the final scene.

Such an ending of successive closure and anti-closure both in the macro- and micro-structure induces the audience to perceive human existence in a wider perspective in an immediate vision. To suggest the rationale of this, we must return to Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s notion of anti-closure in modern music and poetry. This musical and poetic practice is part of a “new aesthetics” which, in turn, reflects a particular view of human life. I have quoted Herrnstein-Smith saying that closure “gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader’s experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design”. Consequently, owing to its lack of closure, the opera leaves us with a sense of thwarted significance, a sense of “no goal toward which to move”. “Underlying this new aesthetic”, says Leonard B. Meyer, “is a conception of man and the universe”: “The denial of the reality of relationships and the relevance of purpose [...] rest[s] upon a less explicit but even more fundamental denial: a denial of the reality of cause and effect” (quoted by Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 178). Tragedy, with its closure indicated by the fall of the tragic hero, as conceived by Aristotle, reflects a meaningful universe governed by a logic of cause and effect; modern music and poetry, with their anti-closure, reflect an incoherent universe, in which the logic of cause and effect does not hold. This characterisation of the universe is not conveyed by some verbal message, but by presenting to immediate perception a structural failure comprising verbal, visual and musical elements simultaneously: “Where conviction is seen as self-delusion and all last words are lies, the only resolution may be in the affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but less stable than inconclusiveness” (Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 240–241). Such anti-closure does not *tell* about irresolu-

tion; it *shows* irresolution (“perceiving as” rather than “saying that”). Hamlet, Donne, and Yeats used *words* to convey a certain world feeling of disorientation: “The world is out of joint”; “Tis all in peeces, all cohaerance gone”; and

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ...

One cannot put on stage such a state of affairs concerning the world. “The dramatic and visual consciousness” cannot grasp such a state of affairs in a single act of immediate perception. The Kromy Forest scene does, perhaps, dramatise the statement “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. But it does much more than that: the grotesque on the one hand, anti-closure on the other, arouse what Thomson (1972) calls “a sense of confusion and emotional disorientation”. This feeling interacts with the closing words uttered by the Simpleton.

THE SIMPLETON

(Jumps up, looks around, then sits down on his stone and sings, rocking to and fro)

Flow, flow, O bitter tears,
weep, O Christian soul,
soon the enemy will come
and darkness will fall,
darkness, terrible darkness.
Woe unto Russia,
weep, weep, O Russian people.
Hungry people!

*(Offstage the dull toll of the alarm continues.
Seeing the light from the conflagration the
Simpleton shudders.)*

Some critics have commented on the basic incoherence of this long scene. In her admirable book on *Boris Godunov* Caryl Emerson writes:

From this perspective the incoherence of that scene begins to make another sort of sense. The tramps in Kromy respond to each new political threat by carnivalizing it. The mock coronation and mock wedding ceremony for the boyar Khrushchov—not to mention the very real threat of his torture unto death—are not consummated. Targets are forever changing, old victims are abandoned for new, and *all* victims (boyars, Jesuits, tramps) come together

in the great hope represented by the Returning Tsarevich. (Emerson, 1986: 203)⁷

The entrance of the “Tsarevich” might dramatize a new sense of stability achieved (just as in *Julius Caesar* through the emergence of Octavius Caesar as the new authority). But here, as I said, the Simpleton’s closing lament sabotages closure (and the sense of stability, as well as “the great hope”).

The Grotesque and the Apocalyptic

In Pushkin’s tragedy and in Mussorgsky’s 1869 version the mendicant monks Varlaam and Missail appear only once: in the Inn Scene, the scene at the end of which Grigory runs across the border to Lithuania, to become the pretender tsarevitch. In the 1874 version Mussorgsky reintroduces them in the Kromy Forest scene, generating the impression of a structural framework that contributes to a sense of integration of the dramatic action. Emerson comments on this reappearance as follows:

It is therefore appropriate that this Pretender be introduced to the Russian forest by Varlaam and Missail, carnivalized clowns who had assisted Grigory’s transformation into Dmitri during the Inn Scene with traditional carnival tools: wine, rhythmic puns, buffoonery, obscenity, and parody of the verbal formulas of both church and state. (Emerson, 1986: 203)

To be sure, the two monks are not aware in the Inn Scene what Grigory is up to; nor are they aware that Grigory and the alleged Dmitri are the same person. This is, rather, a kind of dramatic irony, perceived rather than stated.

Varlaam’s and Missail’s melody at their entrance in the Kromy Forest scene has a queer effect, to say the least. For decades I have been haunted by a strange feeling concerning this music. The nearest approximation to characterize this queer effect would be something between the “apocalyptic” and the “grotesque”. In recent years I have been trying to piece together an explanation for this impression. A grotesque effect is a sense of confusion and emotional disorientation generated, among other things, by some incongruity, such as the co-presence of the laughable and something that is incompatible with the laughable: what arouses pity or fear or disgust, for instance. The easiest way to account for such an effect would be by appealing to the contents. However, such a quality can be perceived in the music itself, before understanding the words sung. Nonetheless, the semantic elements and dramatic context too may contribute to this quality.

⁷ Emerson’s Bakhtinian “carnivalized” reading of the scene (following Likhachev) considerably overlaps with, and is certainly more elaborate than, my “grotesque” reading. Still, I believe, my reading has something new to offer too.

The co-presence of what is laughable and what is incompatible with it is suggested, for instance, by a letter that Mussorgsky wrote in November 1877 and in which he recalled how the two mendicant monks Varlaam and Missail had provoked “laughter” only until such time as they “appeared in the scene with the ‘vagabonds’ [i.e., the Kromy Forest Scene], for only then did people realise what dangerous animals these apparently ridiculous figures are”. Mussorgsky may have referred, e.g., to the episode in which the two monks incite the mob to hang the two Polish Jesuits, for being Poles and Roman Catholic.

There is, perhaps, a point when these two conflicting perceptions (the laughable and the dangerous) are balanced. Accordingly, the grotesque quality would be experienced only by those members of the audience who perceive those opposite qualities simultaneously. The text attached to the music is awe-inspiring, even apocalyptic. In this immediate context, it is the apocalyptic element that represents what is incompatible with the laughable.

VARLAAM and MISSAIL (to the right, offstage)

The sun and moon have gone dim,
 the stars from heaven have fallen,
 the universe hath trembled at Boris’s brutal sin.
 Strange beasts are abroad,
 begetting others just as horrid,
 eating human bodies,
 in praise of Boris’s sin.
 God’s people suffer and are tortured,
 tormented by Boris’s lackeys,
 prompted by Hell’s power,
 to the glory of a satanic throne.

Now Boris’ and his lackeys’ cruelty may be great. Nonetheless, this apocalyptic vision is out of keeping, and may have a comic element in it. But the music too does something to the text, reinforcing the transformation of awe to grotesque (at least, in some performances, such as the one conducted by André Cluytens [EMI CMS 567877 2]).

In his illuminating discussion of “Intonation and Music”, Fónagy (2000: 125–126) points out that a radically narrowed pitch range and a frozen melodic line may suggest anguish both in music and intonation, and mentions Varlaam’s and Missail’s entrance in the Kromy Forest scene of *Boris Godunov*.⁸ I suppose he refers to the repeated **tam-ta-ta, tam-ta-ta, tee-tee-tam** melody and rhythm, which display both a radically narrowed pitch range and a frozen melodic line. I would add that the discrete, emphatic, “steady-state” sounds generate a solemn, perhaps somber quality. The two are singing in unison for some time, further simplifying the effect. At the same time, the musical thread played by the strings (and later by the choir) displays

⁸ The Simpleton’s sobbing minor seconds could be another case in point.

“a lively pace, rapid changes, and sudden rises from low/mid to high level” which, according to Fónagy, may be typically associated with **Joy**.

Harai Golomb points out (personal communication) a diatonic effect too, that is, relating to a major or minor musical scale. The term “church mode” refers to one of eight scales prevalent in mediaeval music each utilizing a different pattern of intervals and beginning on a different tone. The major and minor scales (which, as we know, differ in the order of the whole steps and the half steps) are just two of them. In later Western music of the past few hundred years only the major and minor scales prevailed; we have mental schemata for handling only them. Departure from these scales is usually perceived as devious, out of the way. Varlaam’s and Missail’s frozen melodic formula “**tam-ta-ta, tam-ta-ta, tee-tee-tam**” provides an illuminating instance of this. It displays a conspicuous minor-scale tendency; but the two (slightly higher) **tee-tee** sounds belong to neither a major, nor a minor scale, but to one of the other “church modes” (the “Dorian”). The effect of such a departure is strikingly out of the ordinary, incongruous (though hardly exceptional in *Boris*), and reinforces whatever grotesque or apocalyptic elements present.

Though I am usually working within the Bartlett tradition which gives great priority to cognitive schemata, Cognitive Poetics as I understand it demanded to go one step further. I was wondering whether the effect discussed here is merely a matter of “past experience” producing schemata, or are there some inherent reasons for the unsettling effect discerned in Varlaam’s and Missail’s tune. In fact, I have been wondering for long whether it was merely an historical accident that only two of the eight church modes prevailed in Western musical tradition. Bill Benzon, who commented in some detail on my foregoing argument in this section, provided the missing information, without knowing of these musings of mine. The important point, he says, about the diatonic system of Western music -- which Meyer hammers on -- is that it is organized around the tonic, about the drive to the tonic. The tonic is more than simply the bottom note of the scale, it’s home base. Modal music isn’t like that. The sense of “home base” is not nearly so strong. In this way, I submit, the “modal lapse” may contribute both to the disorienting effect of the grotesque, and to the apocalyptic element in it (the element incompatible with the laughable). Given the apocalyptic nature of the lyrics, says Benzon, what better musical device to use than one that takes you outside the diatonic system, the system that provides the orientation grid of the mundane sonic world? At the same time, it may suggest some Mediaeval, ecclesiastic atmosphere to the modern listener.

This article explores emotional disorientation in *Boris Godunov*, not merely as an element of the explicit contents, but as a perceptual quality of the whole ending. Such quality is typically generated by a drastic interference with the smooth functioning of cognitive or psychodynamic processes. I have pointed out three different kinds of interference with the audience’s smooth responses both to the action and the music. A straightforward means to arouse emotional disorientation is the grotesque, by the co-presence of the laughable and what is incompatible with it (that is, by two defense mechanisms disrupting each other). In respect of melody, the solid

framework of diatonic scales is disrupted by a sudden exit to the Dorian or Phrygian scale or chromaticity. One of the most important conditions, according to gestalt psychology, for perceiving a stimulus pattern as unified and coherent is closure—in music, in the visual arts as well as in poetry. In *Boris Godunov*, closure is sabotaged on several levels: in the order of scenes (the Kromy-Forest scene following Boris' death scene); in the order of episodes in the last scene (the Simpleton's wailing that follows the royal entrance and exit of the new Tsar); and in the micro-structure of the Simpleton's wailing. These effects of emotional disorientation reinforce each other in the audience's perception, and interact with a reality run wild, which is "all in peeces, all cohaerance gone"—conveyed by the explicit contents.

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