

**THE THIRTY-SIX
DRAMATIC
SITUATIONS**

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The thirty-six dramatic situations by Georges Polti & Lucille Ray

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GEORGES POLTI & LUCILLE RAY

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"Gozzi maintained that there can be but thirty-six tragic situations. Schiller took great pains to find more, but he was unable to find even so many as Gozzi."—Goethe.

The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations

GEORGES POLTI

Translated by Lucille Ray

With a Foreword by William R. Kane

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Franklin, Ohio

JAMES KNAPP REEVE

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FOREWORD

The prefaces of many books are more enduring than the letter-press they introduce. It is as if an author's after-thoughts more nearly express his real thoughts than his well-considered, neatly planned succession of chapters. The reason for this, though a natural one, came to me only as I read and re-read the proofs of "The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations": as an author's work is unrolled before him in the type of the galley-proofs, the first sight of the printed words induces a freshness of mind that is near relative to the fine frenzy of first conception; added to this mental freshness there is a maturity—for are not months of thought behind the chapters of the work?—that makes the author's thoughts as grandparents with the enthusiasms of youth. In the prefaces, then, the authors find outlets to express their own reactions to their own thoughts.

I have been step-father to Miss Lucile Ray's translation of George Polti's book. My own vague notions of the text, gained by awkward concentration and persistent use of Spiers and Surene, became clear ideas as I read page after page of Miss Ray's manuscript. As my understanding of Polti's analyses and classifications grew I thought I perceived the need for an introduction that might help to convince authors, and those other readers, not authors, who are likely to find Polti's work suggestive, of the practical value of the work, and the need to read it slowly, and contemplatively; if Situation is compared with Situation, as the reading progresses, I thought, the real value of the work will become evident. I had not finished the first reading of Miss Ray's translation, however, before I realized that Polti's book would need no recommendation. I must add, then, that I write this Foreword merely because these two pages, in the last section of the book to go to press, would look unseemly if not clothed in print!

Certain of my thoughts, as I read proof after proof of the book, may prove stimulating. Polti nowhere tells what he means by a Dramatic Situation. In the Conclusion of the book he makes it very clear, however, that he believes in the inven-

tion of plot, the building up of incident upon incident, to make a story, which, likely as not, serves only to enable the author to use his plot; Polti seems to scorn the artistic use of plot to interest readers in the expression of the author's outlook on or opinion of a certain aspect of a moral issue. I have tried to find words to express what I understand as a dramatic or story situation. Tentatively I offer it that a situation results, in the course of action of a story or a play, when the characters are brought together, as a logical outcome of preceding incidents of the story, so that their contrasting qualities are proved to readers, and the central character is faced with a decision to be made, or a change to be suffered, or an obstacle to be overcome, and an end that the reader or spectator desires, or anticipates, or dreads, is made imminent.

It also came to me as I pondered some of Polti's sub-classifications, that often the business of the story maker, and sometimes the art of the story artist, consists in making the inexplicable seem explicable! As a corollary I wondered if art in story writing and play writing does not consist in the arrangement of facts or incidents, which may or may not have any basis in actuality, in order to convey to readers a notion of the author's that either changes or emphasizes the moral attitude of the reader toward the universe.

I must offer a word of sympathy to the few readers who expect to find in this book a list of plots—such a list as would make needless the use of one's power of invention or one's imagination. Polti's work is more than the list of plots you hoped to find: it is a thought engine, an engine that even Goethe and Gozzi would have used to burnish their conceptions of life, and the possible complexities of human existence. If you came to "The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations" to find a story ready-made, I beg you stay to have your wits sharpened and your power of invention stimulated.

The work to which Polti refers in the Conclusion, "The Laws of Literary Invention," has not yet been published. I hope that when France has served civilization to the full, Polti may be living to finish this other book.

WILLIAM R. KANE.

December 1st, 1916.

INTRODUCTION

"Gozzi maintained that there can be but thirty-six tragic situations. Schiller took great pains to find more, but he was unable to find even so many as Gozzi."

Thirty-six situations only! There is, to me, something tantalizing about the assertion, unaccompanied as it is by any explanation either from Gozzi, or from Goethe or Schiller, and presenting a problem which it does not solve. For I remembered that he who declared by this limited number so strongly synthetic a law, had himself the most fantastic of imaginations. He was the author, this Gozzi, of "Turandot," and of the "Roi Cerf," two works almost without analogue, the one upon the situation of the "Enigma," the other upon phases of metempsychosis; he was the creator of a dramatic system, and the Arabesque spirit, through him transfused, has given us the work of Hoffmann, Jean-Paul Richter and Poe.

The Venetian's exuberance would have made me doubtful of him, since, having once launched at us this number 36, he kept silence. But Schiller, rigid and ardent Kantian, prince of modern aestheticians, master of true historic drama,—had he not in turn, before ac-

cepting this rule, "taken great pains" to verify it (and the pains of a Schiller!) thereby giving it the additional authority of his powerful criticism and his rich memory? And Goethe, his opposite in all things save a strong taste for the abstract,—Goethe, who throughout his life seems to have considered the subject, adds his testimony years after the death of Schiller, years after their fruitful conversations, at the very time when he was completing "Faust," that supreme combination of contrasting elements.

In France, Gérard de Nerval alone had grasped and presented briefly the ensemble of all dramatic production, in an article upon Soumet's "Jane Grey," in "L'Artiste,"—written, unfortunately, with what dandyism of style! Having early desired to know the exact number of actions possible to the theater, he found, he tells us, twenty-four. His basis, however, is far from satisfactory. Falling back upon the outworn classification of the seven capital sins, he finds himself obliged at the outset to eliminate two of them, gluttony and sloth, and very nearly a third, lust (this would be Don Juan, perhaps). It is not apparent what manner of tragic energy has ever been furnished by avarice, and the divergence between pride (presumably the spirit of tyranny) and anger, does not promise well for the contexture of drama, the manifestations of the latter being too easily confounded with those of envy. Furthermore, murder or homicide, which he indicates as a factor for obtaining several new situations, by uniting it in turn with each of the others, cannot be accepted as such, since it is but an accident common to all of them, possible in all, and one most frequently produced by all. And finally, the sole title mentioned by Nerval, "Rivalry of Queen and Subject," corresponds, it will be observed, only to a sub-class of one, not of his twenty-four, but of Gozzi's Thirty-six Situations.