All,

Here’s something of what’s happening in this presidential election, as I see it. A “breaking of a frame” of reference might be in the offing (*ATH* 102), “sectarian[ism]” a possibly unanticipated result of the Trump campaign, if not its conscious purpose (*ATH* 102-103). Trump’s burles que has forcefully caught hold, burlesque rhetoric the legal (or illegal---you decide) tender of such a restorationist/ resistence political effort. Burlesquers, or tragedians or comedians for that matter, are always with us as personality types, as Herb suggested to me a long time ago. The question to be asked: Does the dramatic genre resonate with a majority, or near majority, of voters? With Trump’s sudden climb in the polling to near parity with Clinton, posing a genuine threat to become the next President of the United States, the answer seems to be, “yes,” Trump’s pitch has seriously caught on.

With assists from Bostdorff (1987, 1991), Carlson (1988), and Moore (1992), I took Burke’s pre-paradigmatiic discussions of burlesque (*ATH* 52-56, 92-105) and gave them cookie-cutter application in my studies of William F. Buckley, Jr. (1996), and Rush Limbaugh (2003). This in-between genre, as I call it in the *Primer*, raises the intensities of the general stages of dramatic action (morally-disordered scene, guilt-obsessed actor, guilty opponent, sacrificial act, and redemptive purposes and means) to valences that split the difference between comedy and (factional) tragedy. We’re dealing here not with revolutionary upheaval (as per “frame transformation,” as languaged in “new” social movement theory), but rather with “frame amplification,” with near-frenzied rhetorical appeals exceeding considerably the come-now-let-us-reason-together modulations of comedic “frame bridging.”

Here’s just a sampling of Trump’s more-than-familiar constructions of each stage of the drama, political season 2015/2016, as Trump imagines it to be:

Disordered Scene: Black-and-White, Either/Or, “All or None” Schematization of Scenic Problems, in Terms of Gross Violations of Revered Traditional Principles of Life and Policy (not quite as onerous as the crimes and evils of factional tragedy, but more dire than the mere mistakes and impediments of comedy).

Note, like Limbaugh, Trump’s use of categorical modifiers like “totally.” Secretary Kerry’s a “total disaster,” drugs coming across the southern border are “totally poisoning our youth and others.” Our military is depleted. African-Americans live in poverty, have no jobs, their schools are no good, their neighborhoods are like war zones. They’re in the worst shape they’ve ever been in, “ever, ever, ever!” If we don’t deport illegals and build a wall, “we won’t have a country anymore.” Categorical. Black-and-white.

Guilt-Obsessed Agent: Egocentrism and Ostentatious Displays of “Logic” on the Part of an Intellectual Gulliver in a Land of Liliputian Opponents (not quite as awesome as the god-like, mythic hero of tragedy and the epic, but more estimable than the merely competent leader in Northrop Frye’s notion of “mimetic,” as opposed to “ironic,” comedy).

Trump’s mammoth egocentrism begins with the contrast between his unerring grasp of our foreign trade policies and the “stupidity” of our leaders, who have given away our industries to China and other countries. Even the Mexicans have totally outsmarted us. It’s not savvy, self-serving owners and CEOs who have made a mint by off-shoring to cheap labor nations across the seas. They’re all just dumb, compared to Trump, who is “the only one” who can fix it (the same way he “knows more than the generals” on ISIS). Similarly, Trump parlays his “great success” as a businessman, employer of “thousands and thousands,” builder of some of the “best” hotels and other properties in the world, philanthropist extraordinaire who’s given away “millions,” into an image that’s way larger than life. He opened his campaign, after all, with the words, “I’m really rich”

Guilty Counteragent: “Heartless,” “Hilarious,” “Humiliating” “Caricature” of Bumbling Idiotic Opponents, Driving Their Ideas, Proposals, and Actions to a “Logical” Conclusion that Becomes Their “Reduction to Absurdity,” Clowns in Extremis (not quite as evil as the diabolical villains of rhetorical tragedy, but more threatening by far than the loveable klutzes of comedy).

Let’s see, there’re “Crooked Hillary”; Kerry [etc.] the “Disaster”; “Losers” George Will and an entire CNN panel; the “Nervous Mess” of a clergywoman at the church in Flint, MI; “Lyin’ Ted” Cruz; “Weak” Jeb Bush, who showed “No Stamina”; “Little Marco” Rubio; the “Coward” Michael Bloomberg, afraid to run for president; that “Absolute Clown, Robert Gates”; “wacky,” “crazy” Maureen Dowd, a “neurotic dope”; and more “Failures” than I can remember. Everyone who even slightly crosses Trump gets the “Disaster”-type treatment. All those who speak favorably about Trump, or align themselves with something he approves of, are “Incredible People,” as in “Incredibly Great!”

On the *reductio ad absurdum* theme in Burkean burlesque, Trump can hardly argue without going there. Clinton wants to make a path to citizenship for the undocumented; therefore she will “abolish the country’s borders.” Clinton favors some forms of gun control, like checks on instability, longer waiting periods, and closing of the gun-show loophole. Therefore, she wants to take away not only all YOUR guns, but also those of law enforcement authorities, like, say, her presidential body guards.

Going even beyond such *reductio*, Trump can cut his *absurdum* out of whole cloth: Clinton doesn’t have a “childcare plan, and never will,” he asserts, when, in fact, Clinton’s plan has been posted on her website for a year and a half.

Sacrificial Act: Rejection and Limited Banishment of the Retrograde Opponents, Scapegoating of These Grossly Errant Adversaries in the Arena of Public Policy and Debate, but Acceptance, or Potential Acceptance, of and by Them in Social and Interpersonal Relationships (not the death sentence, literal or figurative, of factional tragedy, on the one hand, nor mere “slap-on-the-wrist” instruction and correction, the comic solution, on the other).

Here’s where Burke’s “sectarian” references, in respect to burlesque rhetorical drama, enter the equation in Trump’s appeals. Only, unlike the sectarian rhetoric of William F. Buckley, Jr., and Rush Limbaugh, Trump’s sharpened point of division between the “good” and the ‘bad” WITHIN HIS OWN ORIENTATION (the “sectarian” part) is implicit, not explicit. In effect, Trump expels from the fellowship of the righteous Republican globalizing free-traders. The Bushes, the Romney-types, the George Wills of Republican orthodoxy expel themselves, so to speak, from Trump’s version of Republicanism. Add to the Trumpster’s inward turn on trade, his stated call, at least at times, for withdrawal from international commitments on defense, and his trashing of G. W. Bush’s Iraq War, no-no’s for Party regulars. Much noted is a possible realignment of political forces in the U.S., as disaffected working class Democrats, stung by free trade, shift to Trump this political cycle, while leading Republican traditionalists desert their candidate, fearing the loss of their party if Trump wins.

A “breaking of a frame” of reference portends as a real possibility, as conservative columnist Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* opined half a year ago. Douthat detected a social movement transpiring within the Republican Party itself.

Trump does skirt the edge of factional tragedy with his allusions to the “Second Amendment people” taking care of Clinton’s perfidy in their own way, if she is elected, or by urging Clinton’s protective detail to disarm so we can “see what happens.” That’s implicit death to the enemy, suggestive of revolutionary, frame-transformative movement goals.

Trump’s reconciliation with the “idiots” he has maligned? All the goofs he lampooned during the primary season he later extolled as an extremely talented bunch, Ted Cruz was labeled such a worthy adversary the day after Trump charged that Cruz’s father had possibly aided in the assassination of JFK.

Redemptive Purposes and Means: Unbridled Self-Aggrandizement as Redemptive Goal, Perfected via Glittering Ideals like “Freedom,” “Family,” and “Achievement,” but Very Much Unperfected in Terms of What the Concrete Artifactual Results Will Be after the Dust Settles (a bit short of the “total salvation” of rhetorical tragedy, but way ahead of the “better”-but-hardly-“best” of Burke’s comic drama).

Trump’s self-aggrandizement is conspicuously on display, only again, unlike Buckley and Limbaugh, Trump does little to mask it with noble ideals. He seems to integrate promotion of his hotels, resorts, and sundry other products into his campaign for president, deftly or not so deftly. His proposed tax reductions, particularly the lower tax on inheritance, would further enrich himself and his family.

In addition, Trump’s burlesque redemptive vision appears elevated above the expected range in respect to the alacrity with which he will solve the nation’s problems, basically all by himself. ISIS will be dispatched quickly, home-grown terrorism will cease abruptly, African-Americans can expect safe streets soon after he takes the oath of office, Trump will curtail transfer of jobs to other nations by imposing a “:tax” or “tariff” seemingly all by himself (Trump does not allude to a route to such a denouement through the legislative branch).

Again, here, Trump’s burlesque rises rather closely, it would seem, to factional tragic dimensions.

As I say, this is a top-of-my-head summary of my take on a central aspect of what’s happening this political season. The Sanders phenomenon is part of the breaking-of-a-frame theme, as well, as I see it. To what extent our politics will be changed if Trump loses, but still comes close, remains to be seen. Hillary, I think, has been modified by Sanders. We’ll see to what extent when, and if, she is elected.

Ed

P.S. On alternate days, I’m a benign, charitable, patriotic American, or strive to be.